

**From text to sermon:**

*A comparative study of two evangelical approaches to the interpretation and contemporary application of the book of Ecclesiastes.*

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the routes from the text of the book of Ecclesiastes to applications to a contemporary Christian audience, for an evangelical preacher or teacher. This examination is carried out via interaction with two specific commentators. These are Tremper Longman III and Iain Provan.

The major interpretative issues which will influence the application process are identified and analysed. As well as issues in reading Ecclesiastes commonly discussed by critical scholarship such as its structure, the identity, outlooks and relationships of the speaker or speakers within the books, the meaning of *hebel*, the relationship between “optimistic” and “pessimistic” passages, the question of multiple levels of context is identified as a crucial one. In this regard, the narrative context of the account of creation and fall is identified as especially important. The question of the author's attitude to Israel's narrative has some significance for interpretation despite Ecclesiastes' lack of explicit focus upon it. Ecclesiastes' canonical context is found to generate applications which are not part of the outlook of the original author's discussion.

It is found that the effect of the canonical context is that a wide variety of interpretations of Qohelet's thought will result in similar applications of the book as a whole, though the balance of emphasis between different kinds of applications may differ. This conclusion is well illustrated by Longman and Provan. Furthermore, it is argued that the original author's discussion is deliberately narrowly focussed, and as a consequence that such applications are legitimate.

Overall, it is believed that the analysis and distinctions in this study will help the development both of a deeper understanding and of a greater confidence in applying this ancient book to contemporary hearers.

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## Introduction

This study is provoked by the crucial role of applied preaching within evangelicalism. Bebbington's well-known characterisation of the “special marks of Evangelical religion” identified four qualities, which he designated as “conversionism”, “activism”, “biblicism” and “crucicentrism.”<sup>1</sup> Neither preaching nor application are “special marks” that distinguish evangelicalism; nevertheless, Bebbington's exposition of the four qualities demonstrates the key role of applied preaching within evangelical practice, and in particular its function in holding the other qualities together. When aiming for converts, “Preaching the gospel was the chief method.”<sup>2</sup> When considering activism, the activities of preachers take the prominent place. This is an inevitable consequence of biblicism – the “belief that all spiritual truth is to be found in its pages.”<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, for an evangelical, preaching has a specific meaning: to declare the word of God as revealed in Scripture, including its implications.<sup>4</sup> The six-point summary of evangelical belief developed by Packer/McGrath/Stott is more effective than Bebbington in clarifying just how the move towards preaching becomes inevitable. It includes more description of the nature of conversion (“a direction encounter with God effected by God alone”) and the work of the Holy Spirit in applying Scripture both in conversion and throughout the lives of believers.<sup>5</sup>

Bringing teaching from the Bible, then, is approached by evangelicals as the ordinary means through which truth from the divine mind leads to transformation in the material realm. Hence, there arises an inevitable concern for applications to be derived properly.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 1989), 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 12. More precisely, evangelicals typically claim that the Bible contains all *necessary* spiritual truth; e.g. “Scripture is comprehensive, embodying all that is necessary to one’s spiritual life.” - John F MacArthur, “The Sufficiency of Scripture,” *TMSJ* 15 (2004): 168. Also see Greg K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008), 111, for an example of agreement on this point between two scholars who disagree substantially on the question of inerrancy.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. Haddon R. Robinson, *Expository Preaching: Principles and Practice* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1980; repr., Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1986), 18 - “Preaching in Paul's mind did not consist of a man discussing religion. Instead God Himself spoke through the personality and message of a preacher.” See also the approving quote from Gustaf Wingren in John R. W. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), 132.

<sup>5</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1999), 27. Alister E. McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1994), 49-79. James I. Packer, *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem: an Analysis* (Latimer Studies 1; Oxford: Latimer House, 1978), 20-23. McGrath states his dependence upon Packer in a note on p82-83.

<sup>6</sup> See the discussion in I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 26ff.

The teacher must both speak into peoples' ever-changing situations, and do so using God's never-changing word. Responsible interpretation and application is not expected to involve changing the meaning of the text, but drawing out its inherent relevance. Osbourne makes a classic statement of this aim: “Hermeneutics is important because it enables one to move from text to context, to allow the God-inspired meaning of the Word to speak today ... preachers or teachers must proclaim the Word of God rather than their own subjective opinions.”<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of this study is to analyse this move *from text to contemporary application* in the specific case of Ecclesiastes. With Ecclesiastes, evangelical preaching generally follows the following trajectory:<sup>8</sup> 1) The book shows us the emptiness of life lived “under the sun” (interpreted to mean “when unseen and divine realities are disregarded”).<sup>9</sup> It is finally and necessarily unsatisfying. 2) Therefore, another perspective is needed, in order to find true meaning in life. 3) Ultimately, this is only found through coming to know God, through Jesus Christ; an answer which the rest of the Bible supplies. This approach satisfies basic criteria for an evangelical preacher: it connects the text, read as part of canonical Scripture, to the hearer (though extending beyond its horizons), and draws the hearer's attention and hope to the work of Christ in the gospel. The book is thus read as a negative apologetic: it indicates the truth by exhibiting the insufficiency of an alternative. Eaton concludes thus: “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>10</sup>

The aim of this study is to examine how faithful this interpretation is to the text itself, as part of a general investigation of the movement from text to application for the book as a whole. Does this interpretation follow a trajectory which the text at least starts us off upon, or does it tend to obscure the book's actual message? This involves a wider question: how does Ecclesiastes function within the overall canon – what is its distinctive contribution? A full answer to that question is not within this study's scope.

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<sup>7</sup> Grant R. Osbourne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: a Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (2d ed.; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2006), 23. The whole introduction (21-33) is highly relevant.

<sup>8</sup> This is an anecdotal observation, but not one likely to be disputed.

<sup>9</sup> Longman provides a typical example of this: “the Teacher uses the phrase *under the sun* to describe life and perspective here on earth, apart from God. ... How do we move from an under-the-sun perspective to an above-the-sun viewpoint?” - Tremper Longman III and Dan B. Allender, *Bold Purpose: Exchanging Counterfeit Happiness for the Real Meaning of Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1998), 37-38. This book was subsequently re-published by InterVarsity in 2007 under the title “Breaking the Idols of Your Heart.”

<sup>10</sup> Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* (TOTC 16; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1983), 44.

Nevertheless, an adequate answer to its primary questions will indicate possible ways towards resolutions.

For many evangelicals, a group context, in which they hear a sermon or they are part of a study class, might be the most likely place for encountering such applications.

Nevertheless, this study should not be read as singling out applications received in sermons or any other oral means as a unique case. The point is more broadly to examine applications made in the context of a view of the whole book, and of a general audience. This is as opposed to specific applications which an individual might find in their particular life circumstances, perhaps without having a unified view of the whole book.

### **Tremper Longman III and Iain Provan**

The aims of this study will be pursued in conversation with two specific evangelical commentaries. Deciding whether either is basically right is not an aim, though discussion of such questions cannot be avoided. The commentaries are those of Tremper Longman III and Iain Provan.<sup>11</sup> Both write with the direct intention of applying the text to contemporary congregations. Both are sufficiently reflective and descriptive to allow analysis of how their presuppositions interact with the text (including in the making of specific applications). Both hold similar assumptions to those of evangelical teachers, being concerned to recognise and interpret Ecclesiastes as part of a wider canon. Furthermore, both are committed to application that is grounded in and arises naturally from the realities of the text. Neither has a simplistic view of the book. Moreover, as we shall see, they have significant differences, which hold out the potential for opening up the key issues fruitfully.

### **Clarifying relevant issues in this study**

The issues involved in interpreting Ecclesiastes are complex and many.<sup>12</sup> The choice of just two commentaries for closer examination is not an end in itself, but intended to generate sufficient discussion to help achieve the true ends. Other resources will be consulted freely. This study does not aim to resolve all of the questions raised in studying Ecclesiastes, but to consider them insofar as they impact the derivation of applications.

For example, the question of whether Solomon is the author of Ecclesiastes can be

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<sup>11</sup>Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998) and Iain W. Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2001).

<sup>12</sup>One guide to the history of interpretation is found in Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (ed. Tremper Longman III; BCOTWP; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2009), 21ff. Others will be noted later.

largely side-stepped because the book's quest and discussion remain the same either way. Similarly, any redactional pre-history of the text, or differing views which subsequent editors might theoretically have held, does not affect the final form which the evangelical preacher takes up to explain.<sup>13</sup> (It is worth noting Fredericks' conclusion that the textual history of Ecclesiastes “is one of the least controversial”, and his approval of Gordis' statement that “what we read is basically 'in the form in which it left its author's hands.'”)<sup>14</sup>

Conversely, as we shall see, interpretative questions about the meaning of *hebel*, or the structure of the book carry considerable significance. They are pivots upon which the discernment of the meaning of the book as a whole turns.

The question of reading a book as part of a context of canonical Scripture is highly relevant; but some of the issues involved in this can only be handled briefly. That is not intended to result in any particular sub-strand of evangelical thought being given unexamined privilege in the discussion. Rather, when such issues become relevant in this study, it is at a broad level.

In this study, the convention of referring to the main speaker as Qohelet will be followed, whilst the book will be referred to using its usual English title of Ecclesiastes.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>“... the present book... is the only Ecclesiastes we have... the task of expounding any lost original is futile and impossible. Our Ecclesiastes is a work of literature in its own right and demands to be studied as such.” – Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 43. An example of the sort of discussion generally beyond the radar of evangelical sermon-preparer is Crenshaw's comment on 11:9, “More probable is the explanation that the warning was added by an editor who adhered to traditional piety and sought to neutralize Qoheleth's heterodoxy.” Evangelical assumptions give little weight to suggestions unsupported by external evidence about possible voices prior to the text; an evangelical is primarily interested in the voice of the text itself. James L. Crenshaw, “Youth and Old Age in Qoheleth,” *HAR* 10 (1986): 10. Of course, such apparently clear distinctions often need nuancing; as will be seen when discussing Longman's position.

<sup>14</sup>Daniel C. Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes* (AOTC 16; Nottingham: Inter-Varsity, 2010), 61. The quotation can be found in Robert Gordis, *Koheleth - the Man and his World* (Text and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America 19; New York, N.Y.: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1951), 123. Fredericks lists the 1968 edition, and his quote has “hand” instead of “hands”.

<sup>15</sup>As is conventional in the literature, Qohelet will not be italicised. In quotations, whatever transliteration the writer has used will be reproduced without alteration. Where Bible verses are quoted, since Provan is using the NIV (and Longman his own translation), these are from the NIV unless otherwise specified.

## **Introduction to the approach of Iain Provan**

This chapter gives a broad and general introduction to Iain Provan's approach, prior to more close-up analysis in subsequent chapters. Provan's approach is examined in the light of various concerns and perspectives. The aim is to avoid, where possible, simply assuming hidden parameters which influence interpretation.

Provan writes as part of the NIVAC series, for which Longman is an Old Testament consulting editor. The commentators are not required to agree with particular NIV interpretations; for example, on the significant issue of the translation of *hebel*, Provan criticises the NIV's rendering as “meaningless” for causing “serious difficulties.”<sup>16</sup> Provan's NIVAC volume is, with a minor exception, his only published output on Ecclesiastes.<sup>17</sup>

The primary goal of this series, is to bring “an ancient message into a modern context,” not through popular exposition or devotional writing, but through a commentary that thinks through “the *process* of moving from the original meaning of a passage to its contemporary significance.”<sup>18</sup> The byline which appears on all title pages in the series is “From biblical text... to contemporary life.” The concluding statement from the series editors implies that preachers are an important part of NIVAC's audience: “The [NIVAC] series does not seek to provide ready-made sermon materials but rather tools, ideas, and insights that will help you communicate God's Word with power.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Interpretative method in NIVAC**

To achieve the primary goal stated in the previous paragraph, each passage is examined through three consecutive sections. The first is “Original Meaning,” and aims to address how the author intended to address issues within his original historical setting. The second is “Bridging Contexts,” which aims “to help you discern what is timeless in the timely pages of the Bible – and what is not,” including insight into how this judgment is made in relationship to any particular passage. Finally, the “Contemporary Significance” section aims to identify comparable contexts and situations in which the

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<sup>16</sup>Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 51.

<sup>17</sup>According to the bibliography linked at Iain W. Provan, “Research & Publications,” n.p. [cited 25 August 2014]. Online: <http://www.iainprovan.com/research-publications>. The sole exception is a version of a sermon preached on Eccl 1:1-11: Iain W. Provan, “The Circle of Life,” *Crux* 37 (2001): 2-6 – which is a useful summary of Provan's overall view of Ecclesiastes, and unsurprisingly (it has the same year of publication) nowhere varies from the viewpoint expressed in NIVAC.

<sup>18</sup>Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 11.

<sup>19</sup>Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 14.

text can be applied today, and problems which will arise in so doing.<sup>20</sup> Provan follows this three-fold division, passage-by-passage, throughout his consideration of Ecclesiastes (after a 20-page introduction, a brief outline of the book and select bibliography). No further sections follow the exposition of 12:9-14.

### **Relevant issues arising from Provan's general approach**

The question must be considered, as in which directions the three-fold division outlined, and the assumptions behind them, are pushing the expositor in the move from text to application. Then, it must be considered what angles may have been missed in doing so.

### **A historical-critical approach**

Obviously, the NIVAC method is primarily based upon the historical-critical method. This term covers a considerable amount of territory, and as Barton writes “its definition is almost as controversial as its desirability,” so this observation needs sharpening.<sup>21</sup> The first three aspects which Barton proceeds to highlight are most prominent in the NIVAC approach: “genetic questions” (and particularly authorship and original intended readership), “original meaning,” i.e. “what it had meant to its first readers,” and (though this comes into Provan's commentary on Ecclesiastes to a lesser extent) “historical reconstructions.”<sup>22</sup>

### **The move to contemporary application**

Thus NIVAC takes, as Alan Johnson does, the “literal meaning” of a biblical text to signify “the meaning it conveyed to its original readers.” i.e., where the interpreter considers meanings as organised into a taxonomy, this meaning will be privileged.<sup>23</sup> The root context in which to study the text is that of its historical setting. Other meanings are secondary.

Related to this, it should be noted that the three-fold division deployed in NIVAC is essentially a filtering mechanism. i.e. Contemporary meanings are basically a subset of the original meaning. The main goal for a contemporary preacher using the “Bridging Contexts” is to remove from consideration that which is bound to the original setting,

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<sup>20</sup> Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 11-14.

<sup>21</sup> John Barton, “Historical-Critical Approaches,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (ed. John Barton; CCR; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 9-20. Greidanus suggests speaking in the plural, of “historical-critical methods” – Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1988), 25.

<sup>22</sup> Barton, “Historical-Critical Approaches,” in Barton, *Companion*, 9-11.

<sup>23</sup> Alan F. Johnson, “The Historical-Critical Method: Egyptian Gold or Pagan Precipice,” *JETS* 26 (1983): 7. Cited 1 September 2014. Online: [http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/26/26-1/26-1-pp003-015\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/26/26-1/26-1-pp003-015_JETS.pdf).

rather than being “timeless”. The “timely / timeless” distinction, presented as it is (“to help you discern what is time-less in the timely pages of the Bible – and what is not”) poses an obvious danger of over-simplifying, and the brief example questions that the NIVAC editors chose to illustrate its use do not remove this concern.<sup>24</sup> The term “timeless” is not without baggage, and whilst focussing upon individual terms easily leads to unjustified criticism, the description of the third element, of “Contemporary Significance” further raises the issue. As described, “Contemporary Significance” is a question of identifying analogous contexts, into which the exegetical conclusions can be appropriately translated.<sup>25</sup> This is surely legitimate. The question arising is whether it is the whole of the matter.

Specifically, what if there are *additional* meanings that Ecclesiastes has which arise from its literary context within the canon of Christian Scripture and diachronic context within the accompanying historical flow, *as well* as meanings which arise from its historical setting?

It is not necessary to prefer one particular approach to biblical theology or canonical interpretation in order to find significance in this question. Nevertheless, Klein's summary of the methodology of Brevard Childs is useful in showing how these questions arise. Klein concludes “for this very reason a multi-level interpretation is required, in order to be able to handle the full range of the different functions and context of Scripture,” and crucially, when describing the relationship of those multiple levels, “there is no necessary linear order, even though Childs presents the 'steps' in a sequential fashion.”<sup>26</sup>

Similar questions would be raised by those within the movement within which Daniel Treier has become prominent, and in which Treier's book “Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture” is a flagship.<sup>27</sup> Treier himself is the author of the commentary upon Ecclesiastes (and Proverbs) within the related Brazos series, which aims “to read and interpret scripture creedally for the twenty-first century.”<sup>28</sup> In contrast to privileging the progressive approach to interpretation embedded in NIVAC's method,

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<sup>24</sup> Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 13-14.

<sup>26</sup> Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2012), 151.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity, 2008). Some of the problems involved in thinking about how biblical theology, canon and theological interpretation go together are discussed in 110-119.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel J. Treier, *Proverbs & Ecclesiastes* (BTCB; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2011), back cover.

Treier aims to write a theological commentary “by hearing Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as words from God and about God, within the one word of God.” This aim is stated within a section whose title is a key phrase for such interpreters, “Canon and Christ.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Avoiding atomism**

As a related concern, David Clines gives warnings that the dangers of an “atomistic” approach have been too infrequently avoided: writers must more self-consciously seek a “holistic” approach that deals with the message of entire books.<sup>30</sup> Nothing more will need to be said about this concern. Provan's introduction contains a lengthy analysis of the book's overall message, and any analysis of his passage-by-passage commentary (as it does in turn for Longman also) shows that he is concerned throughout to make sure that the parts and the whole are integrated.<sup>31</sup>

### **Pressures upon interpretation**

The purpose of raising these questions is not to argue that the NIVAC procedure, or approaches dominated by historical-criticism more generally, are sub-optimal. Rather the point is to become aware of the pressures which they will place upon the move towards application, as the study proceeds.

This is better appreciated if the concerns of authors writing under different assumptions are considered. Greidanus, for example, like NIVAC begins his preaching study of Ecclesiastes with a consideration of the original author and his world, recipients and purpose.<sup>32</sup> He does not, though, advance his study with a series of filters in moving from a timely text through timeless meanings to our timely situations; rather, he begins with the prior understanding (as many evangelical preachers will do) that Ecclesiastes is ultimately intended to direct people to Jesus the Messiah, and analyses the book in the light of a number of angles, fetched from outside of the book, in which he *a priori* understands that Old Testament texts are capable of achieving this.<sup>33</sup>

Another set of related, valid questions are those raised by narrativial and world-view approaches to biblical theology. In recent decades, Wright and Bauckham, amongst others, have done much to emphasise the inter-relationships between beliefs, world-

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<sup>29</sup>Treier, *Ecclesiastes*, xxv.

<sup>30</sup>David J. Clines, “Methods in Old Testament Study,” in *Beginning Old Testament Study* (ed. John Rogerson et al.; London: SPCK, 1998), 35-36; Greidanus, *Modern Preacher*, 48ff.

<sup>31</sup>Provan, “Circle,” provides, as mentioned, an excellent summary of Provan's approach to the whole.

<sup>32</sup>Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010), Greidanus, *Ecclesiastes*, 6-11.

<sup>33</sup>Greidanus, *Ecclesiastes*, 24-29.

views and history in Jewish thought.<sup>34</sup> For Wright in particular, “timeless” is almost a theological swear-word – likely, in his writings to be found in quotation marks as part of a witty dismissal of the interpreter's over-loading of the text with modernistic assumptions.<sup>35</sup> What Wright would wish to emphasise is the “story”: the grand narrative of YHWH's dealings in history within which particular events and assertions find their meaning.

Wright is a New Testament scholar with a strong background in inter-testamental literature, and has not directly addressed how the biblical wisdom literature relates to his scheme. This is a relevant question, as the wisdom literature is precisely where Wright's distinctive concerns appear to be furthest from the world of the text: as LaSor summarises, “The great themes of Israel's faith – election from Egypt, the covenant with Yahweh, public worship, the day of the Lord – play little part in wisdom writings.” Rather, wisdom “tends to emphasize the success and well-being of individuals, their families, and their community.”<sup>36</sup>

In practice, it appears that little needs adding to a statement like LaSor's. Scholars might wish to nuance its expression, but the literature does not reveal any who radically disagree with its heart, or who have pursued a Wright-like approach in a detailed study of Ecclesiastes.<sup>37</sup>

### **Concluding observations**

This study cannot weigh up the competing merits of all the approaches mentioned above, or analyse their connections to different presuppositions about the meaning of history and Scripture. Michael Fox, in reviewing Bartholomew, gives an impassioned plea against Bartholomew's call for scholarship to accept commentaries based upon differing (and in Bartholomew's case, Christian-canonical) assumptions.<sup>38</sup> Whatever the merits of Fox's position, in relationship to the various issues of modernity and the

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<sup>34</sup>e.g. Richard J. Bauckham, “Apocalypses,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (ed. Donald A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2001); Nicholas T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (COQG 1; London: SPCK, 1992), 31ff.

<sup>35</sup>e.g. Nicholas T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (QOQG 2; London: SPCK, 1996), 251. Related is the critique of Enlightenment conceptions of “religion”, e.g. in Nicholas T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (COQG 4; London: SPCK, 2013), 1323ff and Nicholas T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (COQG 3; London: SPCK, 2003), 17ff.

<sup>36</sup>William S. LaSor, David A. Hubbard, and Frederic W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 158.

<sup>37</sup>i.e. The literature reviewed as part of this study.

<sup>38</sup>Michael V. Fox, review of Craig G. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory*. *Interpretation* 54 (2000): 196-198.

possibility of the “neutral” territory which he sees as both his own position and universally adequate, the fact is that differing territories are already defined and occupied.

Within this range of approaches existing amongst scholars towards important issues potentially affecting the final application of a book like Ecclesiastes, both Provan and Longman have their own specific positions. Accordingly, subsequent analysis will need to be sensitive to how these positions shape their interpretive trajectories.

### **Introduction to the approach of Tremper Longman III**

Several of the observations made with reference to Provan apply without significant modification to Longman. In particular, Longman's use of a historical-critical approach is very similar to Provan's. Thus, the accompanying set of issues regarding interpretative pressures identified when considering Provan applies with Longman also. Such issues will only be touched upon again when additional comment is called for.

### **The New International Commentary on the Old Testament series (NICOT)**

The general editor's preface to the NICOT series states that its commentaries aim to “publish biblical scholarship of the highest quality.” Furthermore, the series “speaks from within that interpretative tradition known as evangelicalism.” At the heart of this tradition is a conviction about the unity and authorship of the Bible; it “is God's inspired Word” and as such has a message and purpose.<sup>39</sup>

The primary purpose is stated in terms which might raise a response from some evangelical scholars (e.g. Wright): through the Bible, “God calls humanity to enjoy a loving personal relationship with its Creator and Savior.”<sup>40</sup> However, there is no evidence that NICOT intended to endorse a specific position on the kinds of questions that Wright would raise. As the introduction continues, the reader is informed that NICOT authors “[pay] particular attention to” (amongst other things) “implications for the life of faith today.” Readers are expected to consult NICOT volumes “in their ongoing preaching, teaching and research.”<sup>41</sup>

In terms of the approaches discussed in the previous chapter, the approach within NICOT is eclectic. Volumes draw “on recent methodological innovations in biblical scholarship, e.g. canon criticism, the so-called 'new literary criticism,' reader-response theories, and sensitivity to gender-based and ethnic readings”; the contributors chosen were diverse and given “freedom to draw on all relevant methodologies.”<sup>42</sup>

In the specific case of Ecclesiastes the approach of Longman sticks very closely to mainstream historical-critical practices. If any of the previously mentioned methodologies are given prominence, then it is in a fairly trivial way, such as the

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<sup>39</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, xi-xii.

<sup>40</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, xii. e.g. “I'm not even sure how Paul would express, in Greek, our notion of 'relationship with God'” - Nicholas T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2014), 141.

<sup>41</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, xii.

<sup>42</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, xi-xii.

discussion in 7:25ff concerning whether Qohelet was a misogynist.<sup>43</sup> An observation like this about Longman's approach has to be gathered by inference, as Longman's commentary includes fewer self-reflective statements than the NIVAC introduction. Nonetheless, his choices remain clear.

### **Preliminaries**

Introductory sections in Longman's NICOT commentary successively considering Ecclesiastes' title, authorship, date, language, genre, structure, literary style, text and its canonical reception culminate in four brief sections concerning its theology.<sup>44</sup> The first section, "theological message," deals with the history of interpretation, and ultimately argues for viewing the book's structure as being an extended quotation of Qohelet framed by a second speaker's introduction and conclusion. Accordingly, in two ensuing sections Longman considers firstly Qohelet's theology (essentially an Israelite form of scepticism) and secondly that of the second speaker (whose essential posture towards Qohelet is disagreement). This will be considered in due course.

The final one-page section considers Ecclesiastes from a New Testament perspective, stating that it is never quoted, but is possibly alluded to in Rom 8:18-21, where Paul states that "the creation was subjected to frustration (*mataiotes*)."<sup>45</sup> The term *mataiotes* is that which is used in the Septuagint to render Ecclesiastes' key term, *hebel*.

(Interestingly, Provan considers that there are many places in which the concept of *hebel* is invoked throughout the New Testament).<sup>46</sup> Longman then makes the following key move: life without God is meaningless, and death ends it all; but "as we turn to the NT, we see that Jesus Christ is the one who redeems us from the vanity, the meaninglessness under which Qohelet suffered. Jesus redeemed us from Qohelet's meaningless world by subjecting himself to it."<sup>47</sup> Qohelet has a negative message; the truth about Jesus that is found elsewhere provides the answers that he did not have and which readers need.

### **Procedure**

The commentary itself proceeds passage by passage with a brief summary following the

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<sup>43</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 202ff.

<sup>44</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 1-39.

<sup>45</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 39. It appears that this statement is not absolute; for one, on p199 Longman finds another possible allusion in 7:20, to Rom 3:10-18.

<sup>46</sup> Provan, "Circle," 5-6. Longman's claim is subtly different; he is looking for self-conscious invocation; but an examination of his claims about Rom 8 and Provan's about other passages reveals no substantial difference; Longman does not explain his criteria for identifying self-conscious allusions, and so the question cannot be pursued further.

<sup>47</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 40.

end of each chapter.<sup>48</sup> There are no distinct sections discussing contemporary application. The commentary itself focuses strongly upon the interpretation of the text as handled in NIVAC under “Original Meaning,” with attempts at contemporary application being very rare.<sup>49</sup> One additional paragraph, “A Final Word” closes the book. This paragraph urges the importance of a reading in the light of “the full context of the canon,” and for this reason the reader is urged to return to the introductory sections considering the book's theological meaning.<sup>50</sup>

Longman makes little reference to the New Testament in this commentary. The index lists more cross-references to extra-canonical literature (33 under the heading “extra-canonical,” then a further 20, 4 and 4 under the headings “Akkadian and Sumerian Texts,” “Egyptian Texts” and “Aramaic Texts”) than to the New Testament (22). Of these twenty-two, as documented in Appendix A, six are illustrative and inconsequential to the exegesis, four are references to other interpretations which Longman disagrees with, and two note that the situation under the New Covenant has changed and rendered Qohelet's thought obsolete.<sup>51</sup> This leaves ten references. Seven (in five separate citations) note that the New Testament resolves a problem which Qohelet could not; two passingly note a similarity; and one indicates a possible allusion.

In a three-line summary of his NICOT volume, Longman writes that it “takes a canonical-christological approach to the meaning of the book.” As has been seen, this statement (one of only three lines in the summary) leads one to expect rather more direct discussion than is actually found.<sup>52</sup>

In summary, Longman's view of how Ecclesiastes should be preached today is fairly simple: it provides a negative backdrop to the positive message found in the New Testament, but has few (if any) other direct links.

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<sup>48</sup>With minor variation where appropriate – e.g. in chapters 5-7, only one division, with the second section starting at 6:9, is used – Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 175 & 208.

<sup>49</sup>e.g. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 150 - “The distinction between holy and common space is abolished only with the death and resurrection of Christ”; this is a very modest and very rare (as can be seen in Appendix A) attempt to relate Qohelet's world to the reader's. Another is found on p199, with the statement about universal sinfulness supported by Rom 3:10-18.

<sup>50</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 284.

<sup>51</sup>Including one reference which the NICOT index omits, and one which it includes, but apparently erroneously (see Appendix A). The total given here of 22 takes this, and duplicate references, into account.

<sup>52</sup>Tremper Longman III, *Old Testament Commentary Survey* (5th ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2013), 85. Another interesting feature of this survey is that Longman grades other Ecclesiastes commentaries using one to five stars; Provan's commentary (which includes the Song of Songs) is given four stars, and called “one of the most interesting” commentaries on these two books.

## **Bold Purpose**

Longman's silence in NICOT concerning any specifics about the move from text to contemporary application is remedied by a more popular-level volume outside the NICOT series, entitled “*Bold Purpose: Exchanging Counterfeit Happiness for the Real Meaning of Life.*” This book was published in the same year as the NICOT commentary and co-authored with Longman's life-long friend Dan Allender, to whom Longman dedicated the NICOT volume.<sup>53</sup> It weaves application from Ecclesiastes around the foil of a fictional narrative about the lives of a group of contemporary characters, who all attend a Bible study upon Ecclesiastes. Allender is the primary author of the narrative, whilst Longman is the primary author of the teaching sections.<sup>54</sup> Longman's exposition of the essential points concerning Ecclesiastes' historical interpretation consistently reproduces and reflects the positions taken in NICOT.

## **Text to application**

The exposition in *Bold Purpose* moves towards applications in the same manner as NIVAC. That is, it seeks to demonstrate the relevance of key insights to contemporary context (NIVAC's “bridging”), and then to make the corresponding applications.<sup>55</sup>

In fact, there is more to the picture than this; there is a second interpretative move that Longman makes which becomes a central and repeated feature of his application. He writes, “as Phyllis Trible, an Old Testament scholar, and others have observed, when the Song of Songs is read in the context of the whole Bible, one cannot miss the allusion to the Garden of Eden.”<sup>56</sup> It is implicit, and evident in the applications made, that Longman has essentially the same view in reference to Ecclesiastes. Not just Eden, but the whole Eden-fall-exile narrative is a backdrop for a right approach by a Christian reader to the book. e.g. “We are made for Eden, but live in a fallen world. We yearn to experience the

<sup>53</sup> Longman and Allender, *Bold Purpose & Longman, Ecclesiastes*, vi & xiv.

<sup>54</sup> Longman and Allender, *Bold Purpose*, 9. It is implicit, though, that that their understanding of the book's meaning is shared – but this is moot for our purposes, since it is Longman who is the primary author of the non-fiction component.

<sup>55</sup> That Ecclesiastes' observations on life have timeless significance, which can, with discernment, be brought into the situations of the contemporary characters in the fictional story is fundamental to the book's approach. “Much of this book will follow the lives of eight people as they confront the chaos of their lives and learn from their Bible study of Ecclesiastes. ... [Interspersed chapters] comment on the fiction explore the question of meaning and the major subthemes of Ecclesiastes.” - Longman and Allender, *Bold Purpose*, 9. The successive headings for the book's major sections are each of the format “Chasing after...”. Successively, they are: chasing after power, relationships, work and money, pleasure, wisdom, spirituality and immortality.

<sup>56</sup> Longman and Allender, *Bold Purpose*, 70. No reference is supplied by Longman, but Trible's argument can be found in Phyllis Trible, “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation,” *J. Am. Acad. Relig.* 41:1 (1973): 42ff. “This poetry contains many parallels to the Yahwist narrative. Perhaps the Paradise described in Genesis 2 and destroyed in Genesis 3 has been regained, expanded, and improved upon in the Song of Songs.”

pleasures of the Garden and find it difficult to live in a world of trouble and pain”; and “We know, after all, that we will once again return to the Garden (Rev. 22), indeed something even better than the garden.”<sup>57</sup>

In his “New Testament Perspective” section in NICOT, Longman endorses an article by Clemens which provides an argument for reading Ecclesiastes against the backdrop of Gen 1-3.<sup>58</sup> This reference, as well as the reference to Tribble in *Bold Purpose* are intriguing, because in NICOT, a “whole Bible” (or even “whole Old Testament”) contextual reading is not carried out.<sup>59</sup> Clearly Longman is aware of scholars looking at wisdom literature in this setting, and the NICOT series is introduced by its general editor as encouraging a variety of approaches.<sup>60</sup>

### **Explaining the move from text to application**

Thus, Longman has left his reader a significant explanatory gap. How does he understand this second context for interpretation, in which Ecclesiastes is read and applied against a “whole Bible” background? Is the meaning of Ecclesiastes sufficiently explained without them? He plainly holds them to cohere; but is this simply a “fortunate” outcome, or is there anything in the text of Ecclesiastes itself which leads the reader towards the consideration of issues in the light of the concepts of creation and fall? Is it an option, or is it necessary, and for what reasons? Did the writer of Ecclesiastes leave us any textual clues that indicate at least some sort of approval of this way of reading, or is it a step made entirely by the reader? This issue will need returning to in a subsequent chapter.

### **Conclusion**

Some of Provan and Longman's general approach to the interpretation of Ecclesiastes has now been seen. It is now necessary to focus more closely upon the major exegetical decisions affecting their interpretation (and hence application) of Ecclesiastes.

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<sup>57</sup> Longman and Allender, *Bold Purpose*, 147 & 149. There are many other examples, e.g. pages 70, 95, 110, 135.

<sup>58</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 39.

<sup>59</sup> The minor nuancing needed for this claim is discussed in a subsequent chapter. David M. Clemens, “The Law of Sin and Death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1-3,” *Themelios* 19 (1994): 5-8. Cited 20 September 2014. Online: [https://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/journal-issues/19.3\\_Clemens.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/journal-issues/19.3_Clemens.pdf). No subsequent use of this article or Tribble's is made again in the volume; see Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 288-291.

<sup>60</sup> Robert L Hubbard Jr.'s introduction in Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, xii.

## Key issues in the interpretation of Ecclesiastes – literature review

Before looking more closely at Longman or Provan's interpretations, it would be helpful to identify whether there are any relevant and substantial issues in the overall interpretation of the book beyond those considered hitherto.

### Insights from the history of interpretation

Older, but still relevant, discussions of the interpretation of Ecclesiastes are found in Green (1857) and Wright (1946).<sup>61</sup> A useful recent brief survey of interpretative approaches is by Bartholomew (1999).<sup>62</sup> He begins with a historical review, which highlights the twin dangers of an atomistic approach which some forms of criticism have fallen into (and whose results thus make a limited contribution to a study of the process of applying the final text), and conversely of imposing an artificial unity.<sup>63</sup> This leads into discussion of a canonical interpretation, in which the text is read in the light of the wider Old Testament or the whole Bible. Bartholomew highlights the importance in interpreting Ecclesiastes of coming to a view of the book's structure, and surveys a number of approaches. In turn, he recognises the importance of identifying multiple voices within the book and their relationship, and as a key part of this, the interpretation of the epilogue (12:9-14): "it is important that we read Ecclesiastes and not just 'Qoheleth.'"<sup>64</sup> Bartholomew credits Fox with key work in this area, and Fox is a key influence upon Longman (a matter which will be returned to).<sup>65</sup>

Bartholomew's review ventures only implicitly beyond the question of literary interpretation. Whilst doing so, he notices the structural importance of "the vanity

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<sup>61</sup> William H. Green, "The Scope and Plan of the Book of Ecclesiastes," *The Biblical Repository and Princeton Review* 29 (1857): 419-440. Cited 7 July 2014. Online: <http://journals.ptsem.edu/id/BR1857293/dmd005>. J Stafford Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," *EvQ* 18 (1946): 18-34. Cited 7 July 2014. Online: <http://rediscoveringthebible.com/InterpretationOfEcclesiastes.pdf>.

<sup>62</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew, "Qoheleth in the Canon?: Current Trends in the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," *Them* 24 (1999): 4-20. Cited 7 July 2014. Online: [https://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/journal-issues/24.3\\_Bartholomew.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/journal-issues/24.3_Bartholomew.pdf). A book-length overview, including passage-by-passage analysis, of the history of interpretation can be found in Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

<sup>63</sup> For some historical examples and analysis, see John Jarick, "Theodora of Mopsuestia and the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible in Human Society: Essays in Honour of John Rogerson* (ed. M. Daniel Carroll; JSOTSup 200; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 306ff.

<sup>64</sup> Bartholomew, "Trends," 14.

<sup>65</sup> Analysis of Longman's list of references to other authors shows that he interacts with a number of major commentators (especially Crenshaw, Fox, Fredericks, Gordis, Ginsberg, Isaksson, Jarick, Lauha, Murphy, Ogden, Whitley and Whybray); but this list does not indicate whether the interactions are mostly sympathetic or critical. It is the crucial distinguishing between the voice of Qoheleth and the voice of Ecclesiastes in which Longman leans most heavily on Fox (which will be commented upon later).

phrase,” i.e. *hebel*, but does not discuss the importance of determining *hebel*'s meaning.<sup>66</sup> Whilst noting that the extent of scholarly disagreement on the book is vast, Bartholomew makes four recommendations for progress on the interpretation: to read the book as a whole (and not to try to get “behind the text” to access other (theoretical) books or motives of prior editors), to take the epilogue seriously in doing so, to read the book within the context of canon, especially OT wisdom literature, and to consider the book's poetics, in particular how the *hebel* passages relate to the “joy” passages.<sup>67</sup>

### **Roland Murphy**

Another recent summary of the history of interpretation is by Murphy.<sup>68</sup> Murphy highlights the role of the commentator's presuppositions, a term which he uses broadly. From the viewpoint of usefulness to this study, Murphy identifies questions concerning how interpretation can be shaped by considerations about Solomon, asceticism, tensions within the book and the relationship to the Torah.

These issues will now be considered briefly in turn. It will be seen that the concerns which they raise largely replicate those identified by Bartholomew.

Firstly, the association with Solomon (though Murphy does not raise this specific point) has some influence if the book is viewed as a post-repentance account of Solomon's apostasy and penitence (which is not a necessary consequence of Solomonic authorship).<sup>69</sup> In practice, even if the book is so read, then the act of repentance itself (rather than the conclusions drawn about his pre-repentance experience) are only tangential to the book's message and thus its application. Supposing that repentance moved Solomon to write, yet it is evident that the argument's logical force and structure nowhere depends upon any unrepeatable events from his life.<sup>70</sup> He aims at universal conclusions, illustrated from universally-available observations. The preacher who

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<sup>66</sup> Bartholomew, “Trends,” 8-10.

<sup>67</sup> Bartholomew lists the “joy passages” as 2:24-26, 3:12-13, 3:22, 5:18-20, 8:15, 9:7-10, 11:8-10. Bartholomew, “Canon,” 13, 15 & 20. Fox's strong disagreement with Bartholomew's proposal has already been mentioned – Fox, review of Bartholomew, 196-198.

<sup>68</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC 23A; Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1992), xlviii-lvi. This summary extends Roland Murphy, “Qohelet Interpreted: The Bearing of the Past on the Present,” *VT* (1982): 331-336. A much more detailed summary is available in Craig G. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1998), 42-51. The most comprehensive resource is the previously-mentioned Christianson, *Centuries*.

<sup>69</sup> Fredericks argues in his introduction that Qohelet was Solomon, but makes no reference to events in Solomon's life that should direct the interpretation. Nor does he use such an approach in the commentary itself: Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 31-36.

<sup>70</sup> This conclusion stands even if Solomon is also the writer of 12:9-14, commenting on himself: the same basic range of interpretative options as to how the older Solomon viewed his younger self shadows the range of interpretative options as to how a framing editor viewed the words of a distinct Qohelet.

spends much time upon harmonising Ecclesiastes with *any* individual's life in any amount of detail would be deviating from the task of unfolding the book's message.<sup>71</sup>

Secondly, the question of “tensions within the book” has to be considered by all commentators; indeed, Crenshaw (in 1983) wrote that “the essential issue for more than fifty years has been the search for an adequate means of explaining inconsistencies within the book.”<sup>72</sup> How are emphases which *prima facie* point in different directions to be harmonised? Broadly speaking, this comes down to Qohelet's overall attitude. Is he generally optimistic or pessimistic, and is one class of statements to be given priority over the other (and if so, which)?<sup>73</sup> Obviously, this issue is a fundamental one. Murphy highlights one sub-issue, which is the choice of some interpreters to read some statements as having been introduced by Qohelet as counter-points which he wishes to refute.<sup>74</sup> This continues the same theme, that of the need to understand the available options for making one set of statements relative to another.<sup>75</sup>

Thirdly, the issue of asceticism (i.e. denial or denigration of the world's intrinsic goodness, and God's intention for man to enjoy it) raises the wider issue of the book's general attitude to creation, and the attitude of wisdom literature to creation more broadly. This issue can also be seen as a sub-issue of the question of harmonisation of “optimistic” and “pessimistic” elements: if Qohelet preaches the enjoyment of this world's blessings, then he cannot be an ascetic. Thus, the issue of asceticism appears to

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<sup>71</sup>This is not to say that such deviations have no value or interest; questions related to apologetics and historical harmonisation, etcetera, are valid. Accordingly, consideration of the question is more likely to be found in more devotionally-oriented commentaries, e.g. Henry M. Morris, *The Remarkable Wisdom of Solomon: Ancient Insights from the Song of Solomon, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Green Forest, Ark.: Master Books, 2001), 29-32. Christianson, *Centuries*, 97ff, chronicles how “Reading 'Solomonically' does make a difference in the pre-modern period,” and that many did so. The point here is that such questions have only tangential relevance to this study.

<sup>72</sup>James L. Crenshaw, “Qoheleth in Current Research,” *HAR* 7 (1983): 43. Cited 9 September 2014. Online: [https://kb.osu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/1811/58664/HAR\\_v7\\_041.pdf](https://kb.osu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/1811/58664/HAR_v7_041.pdf). From the viewpoint that Qohelet's essential commendation is that of the life of joy, Whybray writes “Qoheleth is generally regarded as having taken a very sombre view of life. The seven passages where he recommends a whole-hearted pursuit of enjoyment, therefore, constitute a problem” - Roger N. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *JSOT* 23 (1982): 87; Longman's view of Qohelet's optimism or pessimism is essentially the opposite, and he writes “Qohelet is filled with tensions and contradictions since he is a confused wise man” (Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 204).

<sup>73</sup>The “positive” passages in Ecclesiastes which describe where to find good in life, or commend some good thing, etc., are: 2:24, 3:12-14, 3:22, 5:18-20, 8:15, 9:7-10, 11:7-12:1. Longman's list in Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 106, omits the last, but his exposition of it indicates that this was a simple oversight.

<sup>74</sup>Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xxxvii.

<sup>75</sup>Crenshaw has the rather gloomy conclusion, “It may be that in the last resort Qoheleth is a mirror which reflects the soul of the interpreter” - Crenshaw, “Current Research,” 51. One thorough investigation of the “patterns of tension created by the counterposition of two elements to one another” in the book is James A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979) (quote from p1).

be covered by the overlap of the wider issues of creation and of harmonisation, if those issues are considered then nothing more will need to be added.

Finally, the relationship with the Torah is raised by Murphy whilst discussing interpretations of Jewish provenance. Just like the issue of creation, it is raised in reading the book itself, in 12:13.<sup>76</sup> However, unlike with the continually-present question of creation, the introduction of the exhortation to “keep his commandments” in 12:13 can appear unexpected. The prior references to binding divine commandments are implicit, by logical inference from the book's observations upon injustice and references to God's judgments. However, as Krüger points out, neither is it incongruous.<sup>77</sup> From the point of view of application, the preacher must consider what kind of obedience Ecclesiastes is urging its readers towards.

### **Conclusion**

This brief review has been sufficient to fulfil the purpose of identifying key issues that may particularly shape the interpretation of Ecclesiastes in relation to preaching. Several of the issues have already been identified by previous chapters, and thus the conclusion that they are significant is strengthened. Thus the next section will look more closely at the influence of Provan and Longman's decisions about such questions.

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<sup>76</sup>Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, liv. By saying that the issue is invoked by the book itself, no specific interpretation of 12:13 is intended to be implied. One who finds the mention to be incongruous is Katherine J. Dell, *Get Wisdom, Get Insight: an Introduction to Israel's Wisdom Literature* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 51.

<sup>77</sup>The discussion in Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2004), 212-215, is a useful summary of interpretive options for the final verses.

## The structure, speakers and thesis of Ecclesiastes (I)

The significance of Ecclesiastes' structure and the identification of the main voices within it has already been recognised.<sup>78</sup> Now it is necessary to look more closely at how Longman and Provan handle these questions. It is illuminating to do so by focussing upon Longman. Provan's approach can be described fairly briefly at appropriate points, by way of contrast.

Longman leans heavily on Fox's differentiation between Qohelet and a separate author, whose words in the book's opening and conclusion sandwich those of Qohelet.<sup>79</sup> Fox calls this figure the "frame narrator."<sup>80</sup> This is a view that Provan accepts; indeed, the idea that there is a "outer" editor who comments on the book is accepted very widely.<sup>81</sup> The important factor in reading Longman is how much weight he places upon this idea. In weighing up the significance of the existence of this "frame narrator" in the earlier section, it must be noted that Longman's exposition of the inter-relationship between the two authors in the opening of the book (which for Longman is 1:1-11, compared to 1:2 for Provan) is ambiguous.<sup>82</sup> Longman introduces his commentary upon this section by stating that "the frame narrator introduces the words of Qohelet with a brief, ten-verse introduction," and says that "[it is] certain that we are not hearing Qohelet's voice yet." For this, two reasons are given: firstly, the phrase "Qohelet said" in 1:2 which refers to Qohelet in the third person, and secondly the similarity between 1:12 and the opening phrase in the genre of Akkadian autobiography.<sup>83</sup> To make his conclusion clear,

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<sup>78</sup>In the section "Insights from the history of interpretation."

<sup>79</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 31 (footnote 123). Longman notes that, under the (historically popular) "repentance of Solomon" thesis for the book as a whole, the outer "frame" was interpreted as the words of the aged Solomon reflecting on his youth. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 274.

<sup>80</sup>The key article is Michael V Fox, "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," *HUCA* 48 (1977): 83-106.

<sup>81</sup>"All of Qohelet's words are to be understood in the context of this beginning in 1:2 and this end in 12:8." Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 218. The term "frame narrator" itself appears to have become separated from Fox's particular understanding of their relationship; e.g. Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 4ff. Whybray says that the difference in identity between the outer editor (or editors) and Qohelet is "universally agreed"; Roger N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (NCenBC 31; London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1989); a comment which is harshly criticised by Longman (Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 274) for "critical myopia."

<sup>82</sup>Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 218.

<sup>83</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 58-59. In a separate essay, Longman expands on his first argument: the identified opening and closing sections prefer the third person, whereas the intervening discussion prefers (with exceptions, e.g. 7:27), the first: "While it is conceivable that the same person lies behind these two voices and changes narrative voice for rhetorical purposes, I find this extremely unlikely and odd, since I cannot determine what the rhetorical purpose would be." Tremper Longman III, "Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People? A Biblical-Theological Approach," in *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: Essays in Memory of J. Alan Groves* (ed. Peter E. Enns, Douglas J. Green, and Michael B. Kelly; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2010), 9. Cited 7 August 2014. Online:

[http://www.westminster.coresense.com/common/pdf\\_links/9781596381223.pdf](http://www.westminster.coresense.com/common/pdf_links/9781596381223.pdf)

Longman then briefly discusses his disagreement with commentators who view Qohelet as beginning to talk in 1:4.<sup>84</sup>

As Longman examines these verses in detail, though, the situation appears less clear; he states that 1:2 is Qohelet's "motto (or *Leitwort*)"; 1:3, with the words "what profit is there?" includes "another key expression of Qohelet"; and Longman introduces his comment on 1:4 with the words "Qohelet now hints at."<sup>85</sup> This pattern continues; "Qohelet sees" (1:5) and "Qohelet uses" (1:6) are typical expressions.<sup>86</sup> Though the subsequent exposition of 1:12 begins with "A new narrative voice is heard... Qohelet himself speaks for the first time," it is reasonable to conclude that the distinction between Qohelet and the frame narrator before this point is merely technical. Throughout this introduction, Longman's view of the content is that the frame narrator summarises Qohelet, without additional comment.<sup>87</sup>

What, then, drives Longman in ascribing this section to another writer? It appears to be important for Longman not to begin the speech proper of Qohelet until 1:12 in order to make the genre identification of the book as "Akkadian literary/fictional autobiography." However, given firstly his own ambiguity in working this out, and secondly the very limited use made of the "Akkadian" identification in the ensuing commentary, and complete absence of the concept at all in *Bold Purpose*, the effort appears redundant.<sup>88</sup> The part of this identification which Longman uses is "fictional," which is referenced when Qohelet appears to take up different vantage points during his investigation (most prominently, a Solomonic persona in the first three chapters, which is subsequently set aside).<sup>89</sup> Thus, the difference with Provan in identifying where Qohelet begins speaking makes no discernible difference in application.<sup>90</sup>

### **The frame narrator's major contribution**

So much for the introduction. It is in the closing section of the book that the distinction between the frame narrator and Qohelet takes effect. For Longman, the conclusion

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<sup>84</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 59.

<sup>85</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 65-66.

<sup>86</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 68-69.

<sup>87</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 75.

<sup>88</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 15-20. All ensuing references to Akkadian are mentions of linguistic features (e.g. p114, 143, 145). Fredericks comes to a similar conclusion: "Form criticism groups its sources by genre and categories that are either too obvious or too elaborate for what is clearly just a speech or a portion of a speech ... this includes... Longman's 'fictional autobiography' category" - Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 44.

<sup>89</sup> "... careful readers notice that the association between Qohelet and the king/Solomon only lasts for the first three chapters, after which no more is made of it." - Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 5.

<sup>90</sup> Provan sees Qohelet as beginning to speak in 1:2, as noted at the beginning of this chapter.

added by the narrator in 12:9-14 expresses deep disagreement with Qohelet's viewpoint. (By contrast, Provan takes it that “it is not likely” that the editor would have bothered to pass on Qohelet's words at all, unless he essentially agreed with them).<sup>91</sup> Longman's Qohelet sees life as meaningless, self-contradictory and hopeless; he wavers between having no particular convictions about whether anything better awaits afterwards and being sure that there doesn't.<sup>92</sup> Such a viewpoint is obviously unorthodox from either a faithful Israelite's viewpoint or a canonical viewpoint. For Longman, the book's overall orthodoxy is maintained by the contrary position of the book as a whole: “another voice stands behind Qohelet's, the normative voice of the book ... heard in the prologue and the epilogue”; and “[Qohelet is] a confused wise man whose voice is not to be identified with the teaching of the canonical book.”<sup>93</sup>

### **Erroneous perspectives in the canon**

An analogy with Job suggests itself here, and Longman makes it. Longman's Qohelet functions rather like Job's friends, being allowed to elaborate wrong-headed views at length, whilst the final reader knows better.<sup>94</sup> Longman simply states this argument without developing it. It is open to criticism. The reader of Job is enlightened about the erroneousness of the friends' perspectives from the outset (1:6-2:10), whereas Longman's frame narrator produces a final surprise. Longman never discusses why this particular narrative strategy was chosen. What effects is it intended to have upon the reader, and how? Moreover, Job's friends take part in a dialogue, in which different positions are taken up until God clarifies the matter. Longman's Qohelet is hardly in a dialogue, and the narrator's correction is terse in the extreme; he “does not elaborate on his advice.” This is quite unlike the lengthy divine corrective in Job 38-41.<sup>95</sup>

Given the significance of the interpretative decision and given these difficulties, it is worth analysing Longman's exegesis of 12:9-14 (12:8 is simply a statement summarising Qohelet's speech).<sup>96</sup> To what extent does the narrator distance himself from

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<sup>91</sup> Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 226.

<sup>92</sup> e.g. Longman's comments on 1:2, 7:25-29, 8:13, 9:10, 10:17 & 12:7, amongst many others.

<sup>93</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 205 & 207. See also p38-39. The same position is taken in *Bold Purpose*; e.g. “the Teacher does not reflect normative teaching” - Longman and Allender, *Bold Purpose*, 67.

<sup>94</sup> e.g. “... it must also be remembered that the views of Qohelet are not the teachings of the book of Ecclesiastes any more than the speeches of the three friends constitute the normative teaching of the book of Job.” - Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 204.

<sup>95</sup> Longman, “Bad Things,” in Enns, Green, and Kelly, *Eyes to See*, 15. Qohelet can be read as carrying on some kind of dialogue, of course – the point is that he is not in a dialogue about his main thesis in which alternative any conclusion is argued for, as in Job.

<sup>96</sup> “After summarizing Qohelet's teaching in v. 8, the frame narrator begins his evaluation.” - Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 277.

Qohelet in this postscript? Conversely, to the extent that Longman's case is dubious, the “default” position that the book is harmonious is strengthened.<sup>97</sup>

### **The frame narrator's conclusion in 12:9-14**

Longman notes that historical-critical analyses (e.g. Crenshaw's) have typically identified multiple voices in the epilogue: at the simplest, one in v9-11 which is sympathetic to Qohelet, and a critical one in v12-14; at its most complex, at least six.<sup>98</sup> For Longman, this hypothesis lacks textual evidence and is unnecessarily complicated; he sees the same writer as moving from qualified appreciation to criticism – but verse 11 is to be bracketed with the criticism, not the approbation.<sup>99</sup>

The positive statements of v9-10 are taken by Longman as largely neutral, and on the whole a kind of damning with faint praise. Longman compares it with a mediocre student's report lauding his work-rate, and says that the description “lacks any honorifics or terms of respect.”<sup>100</sup> A response might note that the narrator's intention appears to be to appraise Qohelet's work rather than his person; an argument that the silence regarding his person or social status should be considered significant is hard to accept without further explanation.

### **Wise man – an office?**

Longman takes issue with the translation of *yoter* as an adverb (“Qohelet was wise”), and argues that the ascription of being a “wise man” is neutral, without moral overtones. To do so, he appeals to Fox's observations that there are “good sages as well as evil ones (Jonadab [2 Sam. 13:3]; Ahithophel [2 Sam. 16:15-17:29]).”<sup>101</sup> This observation is

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<sup>97</sup>i.e. Harmony functions as a null hypothesis, whose likelihood is strengthened if the alternative is shown to be unlikely. The following paragraph, above, refers to Longman using such an argument, where it is noted that he concludes that alternatives to his suggestion are “unnecessarily complicated.”

<sup>98</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 274. James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (OTL; London: SCM, 1988), 189-90. Crenshaw's position partly depends upon the existence of a separate professional class of wise men, for which as Garrett notes, “no consistent evidence” exists – Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (The New American Commentary 14; Nashville, Tenn.: B & H, 1993), 14. Morris Jastrow Jr., *A Gentle Cynic: Being a Translation of the Book of Koheleth, Commonly Known as Ecclesiastes, Stripped of Later Additions; also its Origin, Growth and Interpretation* (London: J. B. Lippincott, 1919), 240-242 (footnote 192). Precisely how many Jastrow intended beyond six is not clear. Gerald T. Sheppard, “Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary,” *CBQ* 39:2 (1977): 182 says that Jastrow identified eight. Jastrow adds further comments in his appendix, in 255. The startlingly specific appendix, as a whole, could be read as an ironic *reductio ad absurdum* upon the whole claim that it is possible to de-construct the book in such a way, to “strip it of its later additions.”

<sup>99</sup>And as previously noted, discussion of possible editorial histories does not advance the purpose of considering the application of the book as a whole.

<sup>100</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 277.

<sup>101</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 277. Longman refers to Fox, “Frame-Narrative,” 97; however, no such material is found on this or the surrounding pages. Whichever page he intended to refer to, Fox's article nowhere references the characters or verse that Longman cites as examples, so these appear to be

problematic. It is unclear in what sense either the political advisor Ahithophel or Amnon's scheming friend Jonadab could be described as “wise men,” unless the term is meaninglessly broad, simply referring to someone who uses critical thought. The choice of Jonadab as an example suggests that a teaching office is not in view for Longman; but the following paragraph argues that “he taught the people knowledge” can be read as neutral description because it may be “simply a description of his role as a wisdom teacher.”<sup>102</sup> Longman is brief, but his overall view is that the label affirms nothing positive; essentially, it is redundant.

In verse 10, the undertone of faint praise continues. Qohelet “sought”; but for Longman this echoes earlier uses of the same verb, where it is clear that he sought without finding (e.g. 7:24-29, 8:17). Qohelet firstly sought “words of delight”; if this refers to the book's literary qualities, then Longman believes he failed: the book “is better characterized as difficult and problematic,” a judgment which he admits is subjective. If it refers to “words that evoke delight,” then (for Longman) Qohelet's words again clearly fail. Secondly, he sought to write “words of truth” - but Longman's frame narrator would not admit that Qohelet did so, because he has actually described “the world as it really is under covenant curse” from an “under the sun” perspective, which is not “a normative OT perspective.”<sup>103</sup> The reasoning here appears excessively subtle; in another context in *Bold Purpose*, Longman speaks of the frame narrator and says “The interesting thing is that the second wise man actually affirms many of the Teacher's observations. ... the second wise man does not reject any conclusions the Teacher reaches. ... don't reject the mad wisdom gained by looking under the sun.”<sup>104</sup> Longman strengthens his argument by appealing to 12:13-14, which (for him) attempt to turn the narrator's son's attention away from Qohelet towards the faith's foundational truths – but this is somewhat circular, relying upon the conclusion (that the shift in perspective is real) which it is offered in support of.

### **Goads and nails**

Thus far, much uncertain conjecture has been involved, which Longman has been prepared to admit. The real load-bearing verses for Longman's view are 12:11-12. The key issue is as to whether the “goads” and “nails” in v11 are to be taken positively (the

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Longman's own examples.

<sup>102</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 277.

<sup>103</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 277.

<sup>104</sup>Longman and Allender, *Bold Purpose*, 21-22. As seen within those pages, Longman does not use the label “frame narrator” in *Bold Purpose*; instead, he is simply described as “the wise man” or “the second wise man.”

words of the wise are useful tools), or negatively (they are troublesome).<sup>105</sup> (There is also the question about whether “these” (books) in v12 is intended to include Qohelet's writings or not, but this is completely dependent upon the understanding of verse 11).

Longman makes two arguments for the negative view. Firstly, he refers to Fox's argument that the two images of goads and nails find their point of unity in the fact that when applied, they sting.<sup>106</sup> It is not clear, though, that this is their only relevant point of unity. Earlier, Longman himself noted a different one which appears sufficient: “goads that prod cattle into line and nails that are firmly fixed in their place” - i.e. both direct towards the right outcome. Furthermore, Longman glosses over the obvious question concerning how and when in his work a shepherd applies nails to his sheep, as his exposition of the connection requires. Plainly, this is absurd.<sup>107</sup>

Secondly, Longman passes immediately on to his second argument, which is the claim that if the narrator had intended “to focus on the positive aspects of the shepherd's function, he would have more likely written of the rod and staff.”<sup>108</sup> It is hard to know how this argument from silence could be verified. It may also over-rely upon modern ideas about painful discipline. Whatever a shepherd might have been doing with his goads or nails, it was ultimately for the sheep's good, rather than for harm – as Longman understands the narrator to see Qohelet's views as causing.

These being the two arguments proffered, it is fair to ask whether they suffice. It is also worth noting that whilst Longman relies heavily upon Fox in his analysis of the structure, Fox does not go nearly as far in finding disagreement between the two voices, and has explicitly stated his disagreement with Longman in a recent work.<sup>109</sup> Jarick supplies a final relevant observation: one good reason to doubt that the intention of the frame narrator was to turn readers against Qohelet's wisdom is that the readers have

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<sup>105</sup> i.e. They assist in guiding their objects into right paths; or they apply the painful consequences for failing to do so.

<sup>106</sup> Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions* (JSOTSup 71; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 325.

<sup>107</sup> Fox says, “In either case the *tertium comparationis* of the words of the sages and goads/nails is not that they are immovable but that they both sting.” Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions* (JSOTSup 71; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 325. Yet, in his answer to the query raised concerning what the shepherd is envisaged as doing to his sheep with these to cause pain he has to resort to saying that they have a “metaphoric function” (324), a concession which surely undermines the point.

<sup>108</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 280. That Longman does understand the nails as being applied by the shepherd in some unidentified situation, and not just the goads, is further confirmed by his next sentence, which speaks of “the image of the shepherd and his tools.”

<sup>109</sup> Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: a Re-Reading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), xiii; also on p373, “Nor is there an ideological conflict between Qohelet's teaching and the epilogue.”

generally remained unaware, and the outcome for many of them has been far otherwise.<sup>110</sup>

Beyond these specific arguments, as with any piece of exegesis, the weight about the overall interpretation is carried by the demonstration that one's exegesis consistently makes good sense of the text, and preferably a demonstration that it makes a better sense than competing theories. Attention must now be turned to this.

### **Consistency and persuasion in interpretation**

Longman's consequent interpretative decisions are self-consistent. His basic interpretative decisions imply, or at least reinforce, other choices.<sup>111</sup> For Longman, Qohelet's voice is one which the book's normative voice wishes us to reject. As such, it is an easy step for him to conclude that Qohelet often contradicts himself, and possesses not merely a limited, but a substantially mistaken view of reality. Longman's general approach to Qohelet's more positive statements, is to see their impact as minimal; they are only token consolations amongst the general meaninglessness.<sup>112</sup>

Thus, a number of thorny knots which other positions face in interpretation can be quickly cut by Longman. In any difficult case where Qohelet appears to point in a different direction to another case, his confusion can be appealed to. Hence, it may not be possible to harmonise Qohelet with himself, but the overall understanding of Qohelet (that he is confused) can always be harmonised with any particular passage within Longman's approach. This question will be returned to after reviewing another of the crucial interpretative decisions, that of the question of *hebel*.

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<sup>110</sup>“One wonders if that really was the purpose of Ecclesiastes, a work that has in fact won so many fans for 'the wisdom movement' over the years” - John Jarick, review of Martin A. Shields, *The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes*, *JSOT* 31 (2007): 57.

<sup>111</sup>A typical example of how the overall negative view influences the reading of potentially contrary evidence is Longman's explanation of why Qohelet's exhortations to “fear God” should not be read as conventional piety: “commentators who read this sentence as an expression of a right attitude with God do not take into account the overwhelmingly negative context that surrounds the verse.” - Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 123.

<sup>112</sup>e.g. On 3:12 - “The context ... of the verse indicate[s] that this conclusion is a statement of resignation, not enthusiasm” - Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 312.

## The structure, speakers and thesis of Ecclesiastes (II)

### Everything is *hebel* – but what is *hebel*?

*Hebel* is identified as a key term in Ecclesiastes by its occurrence in the summary statements in the book's opening and conclusion (each time in superlative form), and its occurrence in intermediary conclusions throughout the intervening discussion. This gives the book a basic unity (though there is as yet no convincing thesis for a detailed sub-structure).<sup>113</sup> In Qohelet's thesis, *hebel* is a quality predicated of everything considered, to the uttermost extent.

The literal significance of *hebel* is breath, as can be seen in passages like Isa 57:13 and Ps 144:4.<sup>114</sup> The majority of English versions of Ecclesiastes have retained the KJV translation “vanity,” influenced by the Vulgate's *vanitas*.<sup>115</sup> Consequently, “vanity” has come to take on something of the nature of a technical term, having its meaning coloured by this choice. For this reason, Longman's comment that it is a problematic translation “because the English term 'vanity' is primarily used in reference to self-pride” has less force than he supposes, except for a first-time reader of Ecclesiastes. For those within a Christian context, “vanity” is more likely to be problematic because its definition is tending towards the circular one of “that state of affairs which Ecclesiastes describes.”<sup>116</sup>

At this point it is simplest to turn to Miller, whose 2002 study is comprehensive.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Eccl 1:2, 1:14 & 12:8; and during the book at 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26, 3:19, 4:4, 7, 8, 16, 5:7, 10, 6:1, 9, 12, 7:6, 15, 8:10, 14, 9:9, 11:8, & 10. See Loader, *Polar*, 8-9 and Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 61-62 - “It is the goal of every commentator to retain and reveal any and all strains of linear thought in a text. When it comes to Ecclesiastes, this is apparently impossible.... the structure is ... elusive.” The most detailed attempt to find a structure based upon units indicated by the position of *hebel* is in Addison G. Wright, “Riddle of the Sphinx : the Structure of the Book of Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 30 (1968): 313-334 and followed up 12 years later in Addison G. Wright, “The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited : Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 42 (1980): 38-51 and then Addison G. Wright, “Additional Numerical Patterns in Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 45 (1983): 32-43. Longman's comments are sufficient: Wright's “views are rather idiosyncratic,” and “his numerical patterns depend in part on the number of verses in the book” (whose originality is uncertain) – Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 21.

<sup>114</sup> This literal significance is accepted by all; e.g. four commentators who each have different views about the translation in Ecclesiastes: Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 62; Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 51; Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 23 & Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia, Pa.: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004), xix.

<sup>115</sup> “Compare Translations for Ecclesiastes 1-2,” n.p. [cited 8 July 2014]. Online: <http://www.biblestudytools.com/ecclesiastes/1-2-compare.html>

<sup>116</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 61. On 64, Longman notes that the Vulgate's *vanitas* shaped the English rendering of *hebel*, but does not note that *hebel* also ultimately shaped the English meaning of “vanity.” Some interesting related comments can be found in John Jarick, “The Enigma that is Ecclesiastes,” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 41 (2007): 104.

<sup>117</sup> Douglas B. Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet's Work* (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002). Miller states on page xi that this study is a version of his PhD thesis.

Miller divides the existing schools of thought concerning *hebel* into three:

1) That it has an abstract sense, for which there are various options (e.g. “meaningless,” “absurd”), which make a judgment about the value to be found in life; Fredericks states that the majority of commentators chose this option.<sup>118</sup>

2) That it has multiple senses during the book, and should have varying English translations according to the context. The problem for this approach is that it leaves unresolved the crucial question of the meaning of *hebel* in the book's summaries.

3) That it is a metaphor with a single primary sense; specifically, transience.<sup>119</sup>

Miller's own conclusion is that *hebel* “is used as a symbol with the concrete meaning of 'vapor,' which has three distinct and correlative metaphorical senses: insubstantiality, transience and foulness. Sometimes, Qohelet's usage may involve more than one sense” - and in the case of the opening and conclusion, it involves them all.<sup>120</sup>

Miller's splitting of the interpretation into two separate levels (*hebel* means vapour, and vapour has multiple senses) well illustrates part of the question's complexity, even before questions of translation and equivalence are raised. This complexity is not reflected in all treatments of the issue. For example, Longman appears to consider “meaningless” as an English term so straightforward that it needs no further clarification as to what nuances are involved or excluded. The resultant impression is that we have an exact synonym for a term of obvious meaning. However, even in the space of two pages, Longman himself employs a number of subtly shifting explanations of what the “meaning” searched for is; whether “ultimate satisfaction,” an advantage that is not “short lived,” a life with ability “to control and know the appropriate time”; a life in which death does not “[render] every human achievement and status useless.”

Longman's argument for “meaningless” is portrayed as a clear alternative to the idea of transience, or impermanence (preferred by Fredericks – i.e. the third of Miller's options), but the list of Longman's own descriptions given above and subsequent

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<sup>118</sup>Daniel C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 15. Miller, *Hebel*, 2-15. “Absurd” is the preference of Fox, and to be understood in the sense it is used in Camus' essay on Sisyphus: there is an essential and unbridgeable gap between what we find in life, and our rational intuitions about what we should find. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin, 2000). Another commentator who prefers “absurd” is Peter E. Enns, *Ecclesiastes* (Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011), 6.

<sup>119</sup>This is Fredericks' preference, *Ecclesiastes*, 21ff.

<sup>120</sup>A useful summary (from which this quote comes) can be found in Mark R. Sneed, review of Douglas B. Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet's Work*, *CBQ* 65 (2003): 446-447.

comments indicate that a tight separation is exceedingly difficult to maintain.<sup>121</sup>

Provan makes the point that Qohelet did not see life as completely meaningless; had he done so, then we can make little rational sense of his decision to include scattered advice upon how to approach it, or even his decision to discuss the matter at all.<sup>122</sup> Our ultimate conclusion would then have to be that it was Qohelet, rather than creation, who made no sense. Provan's own preference is not explained with great technical detail, as in Miller, but amounts to the same outcome: the term covers a wide range, but it refers to multiple phenomena associated with vapour.<sup>123</sup> This approach has the benefit of allowing the meaning of the term to be filled in as the book progresses, rather than risk being restricted artificially by linguistics.

Furthermore, it may be suggested that the attempt to identify a single term results from overly technical assumptions about language, which perhaps unwittingly lead to approaching exegesis as if it were akin to mathematical science. Sophisticated works of literature are rarely rightly interpreted this way. Arguably, the sheer quantity of terms that have been suggested with similar apparent plausibility is the result of this approach.

### **Provan's contrary position**

Provan's interpretative decisions on the questions of structure, speakers and *hebel* provide a helpful (for this study) contrast with Longman's, and do not raise the same number of issues at this point. For Provan, the narrator and Qohelet agree, and Qohelet is essentially orthodox. Provan's Qohelet focuses upon a perspective which is present throughout Scripture, but only emphasised in Ecclesiastes. Qohelet addresses, in the terms of wisdom literature, how to live realistically in relationship to creation in its present form, as creatures ourselves, and the dangers of ignoring these limitations.<sup>124</sup>

The following table summarises the two positions.<sup>125</sup> Provan's essential position is simple; that sufficiently plausible harmonies are available, and so more complex

<sup>121</sup>e.g. "... that enjoyment is superficial, temporary, and restricted to a very few"; "In short, wisdom may bring a king temporary success, but it cannot guarantee him his greatest wish"; "Wisdom is fine in the short run, but meaningless in the long run"; and "This may, however, be the one verse where the temporal aspect of the root is emphasized" - Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 35, 147, 235 & 261-262.

<sup>122</sup>Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 51. Of course, Longman always has the recourse to Qohelet's self-inconsistency; but as earlier noted, "In the end, the theory that presents the most cohesive picture of Ecclesiastes will gain assent" - Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 4.

<sup>123</sup>"Both [Qohelet and his editor] wish us to understand, as the foundational truth on which Qohelet premises all his words, that life is 'like a breath'" - Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 52; this is subsequently explained in terms of "ephemerality" and elusiveness.

<sup>124</sup>Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 41-42.

<sup>125</sup>The preceding discussion has been mostly of Longman; to redress this imbalance, the descriptions of Provan's position are referenced, whereas doing so for Longman would be redundant. Beyond the supplied references, verifying the table's accuracy is mostly a matter of reading Provan's introduction.

theories are unnecessary. Thus, Provan's exposition's plausibility rests mostly upon the reader's assessment of how straightforward his solutions are, and whether they are strongest at the most important places (as well, of course, as arguments when necessary that an asserted distinction or contradiction has not been proven):<sup>126</sup>

	<b>Longman</b>	<b>Provan</b>
<b>FN's view of Q</b>	Essential disagreement	Essential agreement <sup>127</sup>
<b>Q's basic attitude</b>	Sceptical, despairing	Realistic, God-fearing <sup>128</sup>
<b>Q's investigation</b>	“Under the sun” = all that Q was aware that it was possible to know.	“Under the sun” = the (limited) sphere of his investigation. <sup>129</sup>
<b>Q's orthodoxy</b>	Unorthodox	Orthodox (though incomplete) <sup>130</sup>
<b>Q's conclusion</b> <sup>131</sup>	Existence is meaningless: the world we live in makes no sense.	This life is like breath: we cannot accumulate “gain” from it. <sup>132</sup>
<b>Q's consistency</b>	Self-contradictory due to mistaken “under the sun” approach.	Open to harmony in principle (some specific solutions may elude us).
<b>Harmonising Q</b>	Positive statements are relativised by the overall negative context.	Overall outlook is realistic; positive statements apply within this context. <sup>133</sup>
<b>FN's conclusion</b>	Sceptical wisdom is dangerous, so fear God instead.	Qohelet gives us useful wisdom to navigate this broken world. <sup>134</sup>

<sup>126</sup>In the table, “FN” is short-hand for “the frame narrator,” and “Q” is Qohelet.

<sup>127</sup>“We may paraphrase verse [12:]9a in the following way: ‘I want to add my own perspective on all this: I consider Qohelet a wise man and someone who taught knowledge to the people.’ This is presumably the very reason why he has passed on Qohelet’s words at all. It is not likely that he would otherwise have done so” and “He has simply been commending Qohelet’s words, not adding to them” - Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 226 & 228. See also Provan’s comments on p50-51.

<sup>128</sup>“Qohelet’s consistent advice throughout the book has been to live joyfully and reverently before God in the midst of what is often a complex world, believing that God himself will judge every human work” - Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 228.

<sup>129</sup>This cell’s wording is intended to not assert one way or the other what else Provan thinks Qohelet might have known. This reflects Provan’s position that whilst Qohelet may not have known any better, whether he did or not does not affect the reader’s interaction with him: Qohelet is not sharing errors or contradictions, but valid observations on real limitations when life is approached from a certain perspective; e.g. Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 226-229.

<sup>130</sup>See the comment on what Qohelet did and did not know and the lengthy quote from Bartholomew introduced with the words “I cannot offer a better summary of the end of the book of Ecclesiastes”, in Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 40-41 & 229.

<sup>131</sup>This row is concerned with Longman and Provan’s interpretations of *hebel*.

<sup>132</sup>“... to translate *hebel* as ‘meaningless,’ as the NIV does, causes serious difficulties for the interpretation of the book as a unified work, for even a cursory reading of Ecclesiastes demonstrates that Qohelet does not consider everything ‘meaningless.’” - Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 51.

<sup>133</sup>The references for the entry on “Qohelet’s orthodoxy” apply here also.

<sup>134</sup>“Qohelet’s world is not so different from our world; this means it is not a difficult task on the whole to apply his message to ourselves.” - Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 41.

	<b>Longman</b>	<b>Provan</b>
<b>Canonical conclusion</b> <sup>135</sup>	Single: The gospel of Christ redeems us into the meaningful life that Qohelet could not find.	Two-fold: 1) Ecclesiastes helps us to see this world realistically whilst we await for our final redemption. 2) The New Testament gives us an additional (not contradictory) vantage point which takes us significantly further. <sup>136</sup>

### **From text to application**

It ought to be clear, that the routes to an application from these two positions will be different. If the most important thing to know about Qohelet is that he is fundamentally mistaken, then obviously the most common recourse will be to contrast – whether with Qohelet's erroneous starting position, or his mistakes along the way. The actual substance of his observations will only be useful at times; and the preacher will have to go outside of Ecclesiastes to discern when. Contrariwise, for a preacher following Provan, all of Qohelet's teaching is potentially directly applicable, once the change in the historical circumstances has been factored in.

### **Consistency and harmonisation**

The question of the consistency and coherence of Longman's Qohelet needs to be considered further. This raises the issue of how logic is applied in theology. John Frame is one theologian who makes a protest for giving logic more prominence in theological method.<sup>137</sup> Within his argument, he is careful to state the limitations of logic; and of particular relevance presently are his statements about merely apparent contradictions, and the limitations of the principle of non-contradiction.<sup>138</sup>

Final incoherence is a serious matter; if someone teaches both an idea and its opposite, then ultimately he teaches nothing. His teachings cannot be evaluated or applied,

<sup>135</sup>This row anticipates material in subsequent chapters of this study.

<sup>136</sup>Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 41-42; the whole section explains this perspective; e.g. “the more extensive truth that Christians have on this topic ... although it expands on Qohelet's message, does not undermine it or make it less important that we listen to it”; and “this book contributes to the correction of an all-too-frequent imbalance throughout the ages in Christian thinking.”

<sup>137</sup>e.g. “Yet (and this point is often overlooked) accuracy of interpretation and comprehensiveness of scholarship are not sufficient to establish a case. The logic of the matter must be considered as well.” - John M. Frame, review of Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, *WTJ* 34 (1972): 189. Cited 21 August 2014. Online: <http://www.frame-poythress.org/review-of-armstrongs-calvinism-and-the-amyraut-heresy/>. Frame makes his extended case in John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (A Theology of Lordship 1; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987), 242-301.

<sup>138</sup>Frame, *Knowledge*, 257-258.

because he does not have any.<sup>139</sup> Longman sees a consistent, coherent overall thesis for Qohelet: the events of life are inexplicable; they have no meaning. This conclusion, though, is supported by supporting theses, and to an important extent each of these theses (e.g. that pleasure is meaningless, or that there is no justice) is part of Qohelet's teaching. Furthermore, each thesis is supported in turn by a chain of reasoning, and where the reasoning is invalid, the thesis must fall. As such it would be unnecessary for Longman's narrator or any other commentator to say "Qohelet went wrong because his initial 'under the sun' assumptions were wrong." Rather, he could stop with "Qohelet's discussion is incoherent," and the question of the validity of Qohelet's initial assumptions would be left unresolved.<sup>140</sup> Obviously, this radically affects the application. At the best, Qohelet's discussion could then only function as a backdrop to a discussion of the issues which he raises. Is this a serious issue for applying an interpretative approach like Longman's?

The two main types of inconsistencies in Qohelet for Longman are as follows. Firstly, he gives contradictory advice. He advises a *carpe diem*, "make the best of it each day" approach – yet also counsels that this is the policy of the fool. In another place, he both recommends and reproves anger.<sup>141</sup> Secondly, Qohelet holds to confused or contradictory theology; e.g. concerning death and divine judgment; the wicked both are punished and are not; he leaves open the possibility of an after-life; "Qohelet is uncertain about the afterlife," and yet in another place "he denies the existence of an afterlife."<sup>142</sup>

To provide a comprehensible exposition, Longman employs more than one device. One time, he summarises what he had earlier described as clear self-contradiction as a "tension." Another time, he attributes it to a sense of loyalty in Qohelet towards the traditional wisdom. At another, the contradictions raise "serious questions."<sup>143</sup>

Ultimately, these confusions arise because Qohelet is still a man on a journey:

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<sup>139</sup>In analytical logic, it can be proven that if both a proposition and its converse are admitted as premises, then any and all conclusions can then be proven; e.g. Robert G. Brown, "Fun with Logic: Contradictions and Null Results," n.p. [cited 21 August 2014]. Online: <http://www.phy.duke.edu/~rgb/Philosophy/axioms/axioms/node30.html>.

<sup>140</sup>e.g. In the statement "Today is Wednesday; and so red is a tortoise, and consequently it is raining in Belgium," the supporting statements are both irrelevant to the final conclusion. The premise and the final conclusion may be true or false and the intermediate term is nonsense; but all these facts are unrelated, and so no rational discussion about them can result.

<sup>141</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 183 & 188. Note that Longman himself presents these as contradictions: i.e. he holds that the same assertion, in the same sense, is both asserted and denied; they are not harmonisable.

<sup>142</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 219-220, 131 & 261.

<sup>143</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 184 & 223.

“Qohelet ... vacillates between the traditional doctrine in which he was trained and the harsh realities of life.”<sup>144</sup>

This position leaves problems for the preacher. If Qohelet is writing whilst on a journey, then critiquing his position involves a moving target. Again, the use of the text of Ecclesiastes is then going to be in terms of providing fuel for discussion. In practice, in *Bold Purpose*, this is what happens. Technical discussions of how Qohelet's premises and argumentation are structured in the journey towards his final conclusion are bypassed, and the details of his case are not emphasised. The discussion about life without God sticks to the main issues raised by Qohelet's observations, and places them in a wider context.

No argument is being offered here that the path that Longman follows is invalid or sub-optimal. The point is in the demonstration of how his interpretative choices fit in with how the book is then applied – in which he is consistent. Moreover, this point should not be pressed too far. The inconsistency which Longman perceives is not all-pervasive throughout Qohelet's discussion, but occasional, and mainly associated with areas where he finds some limited consolation, rather than the centre (as Longman sees it) of his case, where he finds none.

In the case of Provan, as previously indicated, the questions of proper interpretation will come at a lower level, on a passage-by-passage basis, as the text is examined. In principle, Provan holds Ecclesiastes to be self-consistent, and consistent with the rest of the canon. The question of interpretation is then one of how effectively each passage can in turn be explained without this overall view. A closer look at specific passages will be attempted in a subsequent chapter.

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<sup>144</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 261.

## **Ecclesiastes, creation and the narrative of redemption**

This issue was first identified in the chapter upon Longman's general approach, where the explanatory gap between Longman's willingness to use creation and fall as a backdrop to his applications, and his exegesis of Ecclesiastes itself, was identified. The discussion can be resumed from that point.

A review of Longman's references to Gen 1-3 (see Appendix B) shows that they do not comprise a significant part of the commentary. His Qohelet makes brief allusions to concepts from Gen 1-3, and perhaps even the (not uncritical) assumption of concepts found in the creation account; but it is not clear that what can be said about his views beyond this. Longman makes only slight references to the fall as a fundamental backdrop for interpretation in Ecclesiastes.<sup>145</sup> The closest approaches occur when Qohelet is found to have alluded to a feature of the text Gen 3, the chapter which records the fall; and perhaps where he says that Qohelet has described the world as it is “under covenant curse.” As to what extent Qohelet himself had a creation/fall framework, and as to whether this should direct interpretation generally, Longman ranges from ambiguous at best to simply silent.<sup>146</sup> The comment on 3:12 (“I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live”) stands out as an exception: “Again, it is significant to point out that the expression admits that what follows is not the highest, best imaginable good but life in a fallen world, which is the best humans can do under the circumstances.”<sup>147</sup>

These questions are complex. Nevertheless, the question of in what ways Ecclesiastes should or should not be read in the light of Gen 1-3 and the concepts of creation and fall deserves to be explicitly addressed. Tribble wrote, “In many ways, then, Song of Songs is a midrash on Genesis 2-3,” explaining that “I use midrash here to designate a type of exegesis.”<sup>148</sup> Longman may see the relationship in Ecclesiastes in those terms, or in others. Either way, he has left it largely unexplained, which is unsatisfactory. A broader view of the question will now be attempted.

## **Wisdom, creation and redemption**

The topic of how wisdom literature is related to creation has generated considerable

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<sup>145</sup>This is despite the approving reference to Clemens' article, *Longman, Ecclesiastes*, 39. i.e. Longman does not do what Clemens recommends doing.

<sup>146</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 273 & 277.

<sup>147</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 122.

<sup>148</sup>Tribble, “Depatriarchalizing,” 47.

interest. Different authors have identified various ways in which they see the question of creation as being related to the preaching of Ecclesiastes. Some of these will now be listed (without pursuing technical discussion of the points they raise).

Firstly, there is a general one: creation is both the temporal and the logical beginning of the biblical narrative, providing the backdrop to all that subsequently unfolds. e.g. in one writer's terminology, "the main structure of the Biblical narrative essentially consists of two CSER (Creation-Sin-Exile-Restoration) structures, with the second one (a national CSER structure) embedded within the first (a global CSER structure) and serving as the key to resolution of the plot conflict of that global CSER structure."<sup>149</sup> Or, for Wright and in terms of his construction of the narrative, "When we read Genesis 1-2, we read it as the first act in a play of which we live in the fifth."<sup>150</sup>

Secondly, wisdom theology, with its concern to understand and adapt to how the world works, is accordingly generally recognised to be closely linked to creation theology. Various scholars quote Zimmerli: "The wisdom of the OT stays quite determinedly within the horizon of creation. Its theology is creation theology."<sup>151</sup> Hermisson's widely cited article states that these lines "formulate in an almost classical way a generally accepted conviction."<sup>152</sup>

Thirdly, wisdom theology in general, and Ecclesiastes in particular contain various deductions related to observations made of the workings of the non-human creation.<sup>153</sup>

Fourthly, the brokenness of the world that Qohelet observed strongly raises broad issues related to the fall (corresponding to the S in a "CSER" structure, or the second act in Wright's construction).

Fifthly, scholars have identified "return to Eden" imagery in the biblical wisdom literature.<sup>154</sup>

Finally, as already seen, both of our authors consider the context of a fallen creation to

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<sup>149</sup>Roy E. Ciampa, "The History of Redemption," in *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity* (ed. Scott J. Hafemann and Paul R. House; Nottingham: Inter-Varsity, 2007), 257.

<sup>150</sup>Nicholas T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (London: SPCK, 2005), 91. Wright's proposal is detailed more fully in Wright, *NTPG*, 121-144.

<sup>151</sup>e.g. Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 118, who says that this is "practically an axiom in biblical studies."

<sup>152</sup>Hans-Jürgen Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," in *Creation in the Old Testament* (ed. Bernhard W. Anderson; IRT 6; London: SPCK, 1984), 118.

<sup>153</sup>e.g. Job 38-41, Prov 6:6, 24:30-34, Eccl 1:5-7, 3:19-20, 9:4, 9:12, 10:1, 10:11, 11:5, 12:2. This is not to say that creation itself reveals wisdom; see Waltke's response to von Rad on this question in Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1-15* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 53-54.

<sup>154</sup>e.g. Trible, "Depatriarchalizing," 42ff.

be a primary context for the contemporary application of Ecclesiastes.

This evidence indicates that creation is one of the contexts in which Ecclesiastes' message will be heard by reasonable listeners, and like other contexts, will influence its interpretation. To not do so would violate another fundamental observation for which we can quote Zimmerli: “The faith of the Old Testament has its origin in the fundamental fact that God encountered Israel in the midst of history.”<sup>155</sup>

However, there are considerable differences in scholars' approaches to these questions, on basic points. For example, for von Rad, Israel's “creation faith” was a later addition to its historical faith; whereas for Schmid, “just the opposite” was true.<sup>156</sup> When discussing the connection with wisdom, for Westermann, “wisdom has no place within the basic framework of OT theology,” whilst for Schmid, “wisdom is part of the basic order of this world,” and thus is connected at a fundamental level because “the belief that God has created and is sustaining the order of the world in all its complexities, is not a peripheral theme of biblical theology but is plainly the fundamental theme.”<sup>157</sup>

Some of these issues, particularly those about the text's possible pre-history, will lie beyond the horizon of the preacher who is seeking to apply the meaning of the final text to contemporary believers. The evangelical preacher will broadly share something like the interpretation of Schmid, that creation, history, salvation and eschaton are all tied together by the concept of God actualising an intended order for the world which he made. Moreover, this study concerns the move from the canonical text to the contemporary application. Thus, the major questions concerning creation must focus upon the connections that arise when Ecclesiastes is read as part of the overall biblical story – i.e., as part of God's actions in bringing redemption to a fallen world.

With this narrower focus, the variety within scholarship remains striking. For example, Roland Murphy has written a book with the intriguing title, “The Tree of Life,” subtitled “An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature.” Despite the title, Murphy has essentially nothing to say about Eden, or how it may form part of the interpretative context for the biblical wisdom books. The sole direct reference to the garden is to explain that the book takes its title from Prov 3:18, which says that wisdom “is a tree of

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<sup>155</sup>Walther Zimmerli, “The Place and Limit of Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology,” *STJ* 17 (1964): 146. Zimmerli goes on to state “Wisdom has no relation to the history between God and Israel,” (p147) an issue which will be turned to.

<sup>156</sup>Hans H. Schmid, “Creation, Righteousness and Salvation,” in *Creation in the Old Testament* (ed. Bernhard W. Anderson; IRT 6; London: SPCK, 1984), 111.

<sup>157</sup>Schmid, “Creation, righteousness and salvation,” in Anderson, *Creation*, 108.

life to those who lay hold of her; fortunate are they who embrace her.” Murphy states “This image was well known from its appearance in Genesis: the first dwellers in the garden were kept from that tree lest they live forever (Gen 2:9, 3:22-24). In a vivid turn of metaphor, wisdom has become the tree of life and is personified as a woman” - and thenceforth, discussion turns to lady wisdom as a lady, and the garden is no more mentioned. The main significance of creation is that “the world is the showcase for divine activity.”<sup>158</sup> Wisdom teaching, then, is not embedded with a history; rather, it is “the human experience of the world [which] is so important.”

Arguably, there are two opposing tendencies to be avoided here. One is to ignore the fact that the wisdom books take a much less direct interest in the development of God's historical purposes, his covenant with Israel, and so on. The reader of Ecclesiastes can learn nothing direct from it about Abraham and Isaac, about the temple, the Mosaic law, the promises of a Messiah or of a new creation, etcetera. Nevertheless, to then conclude that these concepts must form no part of the interpreter's approach would also be unwarranted. On the contrary, Qohelet both existed and presents himself within a particular historical setting.<sup>159</sup>

If Proverbs is investigated, then it is found that it is YHWH who made the world, and whose fear is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7, 8:22ff, 22:2). In Ecclesiastes, we find the following elements:

a son of David who is king in Jerusalem (1:1, 12)

a God who has appointed man's labour (3:10, 8:15), and who gives pleasure in man's toil and the short respite given from it (2:24, 5:18-19, 9:7)

a God who is the sovereign creator and ruler (3:14, 5:18, 7:13-14, 9:1, 11:5, 12:1, 12:7), whose wisdom is beyond man's ability to search out (8:17, 11:5), and who sovereignly redistributes man's wealth as he pleases (2:25, 6:2), who makes moral judgments about all of man's activities and who will judge all mankind for everything (3:17, 7:26, 11:9, 12:14), and whose fear is a fundamental of right living (8:12)

sacrificial worship and vows in the “house” of God (5:1-6)

The point of this list is not to argue that Ecclesiastes reproduces the perspective of the rest of the Old Testament. Rather, the purpose is to show that there are sufficient points

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<sup>158</sup>Murphy, *Tree*, 119.

<sup>159</sup>This point stands independently of how Qohelet's invocation of Solomon is interpreted: it only depends on the fact that he does invoke him. This issue will be returned to in a subsequent chapter.

of correspondence and harmony to indicate that to read Ecclesiastes as if it were written by a theist who believed only in a generic, unbranded supreme deity, rather than in the God who created the world as recorded in Genesis, and covenanted at Sinai with Israel as recorded in Exodus, carries a considerable burden of proof. Conversely, the lack of *focus* on these historical elements also needs proper accounting for.

These questions appear to be given little consideration, generally, in commentaries upon wisdom books.<sup>160</sup> Longman, for example, whilst arguing that Qohelet is a frustrated quasi-sceptic within Israel who could find no meaning in life, does not explicitly discuss the sort of questions that these considerations raise. Did it not occur to Qohelet to seek enlightenment in the law? To consult the priesthood? To worship at the temple (the one built by the son of David, in Jerusalem)? How could he have overlooked such angles? Longman does not evaluate whether such issues do not favour the view that Qohelet self-consciously and intentionally limited the scope of his investigation, with a deliberate purpose, rather than simply knowing no better than he wrote.

### **The journey to application in Provan**

In the earlier discussion of the context of creation, the fact that meaning is influenced by context was identified – including the context created by other biblical books. This is an aspect of interpretation which Provan has recognised in his essay, “Literary Competence and Biblical Authority.”<sup>161</sup> As he states, “Many of our biblical books evidently have a history to them, in the course of which the way individual texts were read undoubtedly changed; and the true meaning of individual texts is certainly bound up with their context.”<sup>162</sup> This is then illustrated with the example of Ps 1:3, which states that the righteous prosper in all they do. Provan says that it would be a reasonable suggestion to posit that the original author held this as a universally applicable statement; but that for the compilers of the Psalter, such a statement could not be seen as expressing the whole matter – it must be read in a sense that is modified by Ps 37 and 73, for example.<sup>163</sup>

If we go beyond the Psalter, then an ever wider context, that of the Old Testament as a whole, exists. Provan judges that we have sufficient justification to conclude that “literary competence” requires us to read against this context too: “There is considerable evidence within our Old Testament, secondly, that as our biblical texts were coming into

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<sup>160</sup>Waltke's introduction to his NICOT volume upon Proverbs is a welcome exception, discussing not only Proverbs but Job and Ecclesiastes too: Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 51ff.

<sup>161</sup>Iain W. Provan, “Literary Competence and Biblical Authority,” *Word & World* 26 (2006): 371-382.

<sup>162</sup>Provan, “Competence,” 379.

<sup>163</sup>Provan, “Competence,” 380.

being, they were already being reflected upon and shaped in such a way as to encourage cross-referencing by future readers.”<sup>164</sup> He continues: “we find in the Old Testament a pronounced and obvious intertextuality – one text speaking to another and filling out another's meaning and thus drawing the entire Old Testament story together into one cohesive unity.” This leads to the conclusion that reading within this context is not just helpful, but necessary: “we must constantly be giving attention to the larger context—the Old Testament context—in which the texts and books are found.”

Finally, there is a larger context still: “The Old Testament, thirdly, is not for the Christian reader the largest biblical context in which reading must be competently carried out. Christian reading must read the Old Testament and the New Testament together.”<sup>165</sup> Provan's exposition of this aspect is very brief. He uses two examples, from the stories of Jonah and of Elijah. The former's significance for the modern reader (he says) is not substantially modified from the significance for the ancient one by reading it in the light of the New Testament; whereas for the latter, the changes from Elijah's time to ours rule out the inference that we should execute our enemies (1 Kgs 19).

There does appear to be some elision of distinct questions in Provan's analysis in this article. The most fundamental is the distinction between meaning and significance – or from a different vantage point, between the locutionary and implied perlocutionary acts.<sup>166</sup> In Provan's example from Ps 1:3, the *meaning* of the line is modified by its wider context: what is being indicated about when the reader can expect prosperity is adjusted. In the example deployed to illustrate reading in the light of the New Testament, it is the *significance* which is being discussed: whereas a later Old Testament figure, if he were of sufficient rank in the nation, might justly conclude that being faithful to God like Elijah might mean issuing some capital punishments, it does not signify that for any modern reader. But both ancient and modern reader alike would be unjustified in concluding anything other than that Elijah actually did so.<sup>167</sup> Provan does

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<sup>164</sup>Provan, “Competence,” 380.

<sup>165</sup>Provan, “Competence,” 381.

<sup>166</sup>John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 100ff. A relevant discussion of different levels of meaning, approached in a different way (in terms of authorial meaning, textual meaning and readerly meaning), is found in Doug Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes* (LHBOTS 431; N.Y.: T & T Clark, 2006), 5-36.

<sup>167</sup>Which is not to say that nobody has justified similar exegesis; e.g. Origen's assertion that God deliberately inserted impossibilities and absurdities into historical narrative in order to force the interpreter to make a spiritualised application. See: Michael W. Holmes, “Origen and the Inerrancy of Scripture,” *JETS* 24 (1981): 221-231. Cited 21 August 2014. Online: [http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/24/24-3/24-3-pp221-231\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/24/24-3/24-3-pp221-231_JETS.pdf). The relevant section in Origen is: Origen, *On First Principles, Book IV*, ANF 4:357ff, and especially from 4:364 onwards.

not discuss this distinction, or how it bears upon the reading of a text within different contexts. It is worth remarking that the Jonah/Elijah example is another example of a filtering move – and hence does not provide any insight into Provan's view of what other possibilities may exist. Nevertheless, the case made in this article does indicate that Provan's view of the move from text to application takes more into account, especially concerning wider contexts, than the NIVAC introduction implies.

### **Applying Ecclesiastes**

Returning to the NIVAC volume, Provan, like Longman, does see the historical-redemptive context of creation and fall as an essential backdrop and makes this more explicit in his move to application (though his discussion of the fall is more implicit).<sup>168</sup> New creation is also significant for Provan; but Provan's Qohelet has nothing to say about it (and possibly did not know of such a thing).<sup>169</sup> On the other hand, Provan is like Longman, in that he does not explicitly address questions about why Qohelet has nothing to say about whether one might find answers to his questions by visiting the temple (c.f. Ps 73:17ff), or consulting the priests or the law, or more generally, asking what Israel knew about redemption or a Messiah. Provan's views on context make these legitimate questions. They will be returned to in a subsequent chapter when we ask more directly what Ecclesiastes has to say to the Christian.

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<sup>168</sup>See Appendix B for a tabulation of Longman and Provan's references to creation and fall.

<sup>169</sup>Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 61.

## A sampling of interpretations

Now that underlying issues in Longman and Provan's approaches have been discussed, it is time to look more closely at their work upon particular passages. New issues may be identified at this level. Additionally, it may indicate what level and kind of nuancing the previous analysis of their approaches needs, and to what extent previously raised concerns apply.

To make the analysis achievable within this dissertation's limits, two passages have been selected. No two chosen could be comprehensive, but those chosen do cover a number of the issues identified in previous chapters, e.g. *carpe diem*, questions of orthodoxy and consistency, and Qohelet's overall quest and attitude towards God. The two passages are 8:10-15 and 5:1-7.

### 8:10-15 – The punishment of the wicked

10 Then too, I saw the wicked buried—those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless. 11 When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, people's hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong. 12 Although a wicked person who commits a hundred crimes may live a long time, I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before him. 13 Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow. 14 There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: the righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless. 15 So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun.<sup>170</sup> (Eccl 8:10-15)

Longman sub-divides the main section (1:12-12:7) of the book into four main sections, or into twenty-three if descending a further level, whereas Provan has twelve. Little should be read into this variation. Provan makes no direct remarks about his choices for the divisions, whilst Longman states that the book resists attempts to discover an underlying structure after the highest level.<sup>171</sup> Longman entitles the section 6:10-12:7 as “Qohelet's Wise Advice,” and 8:10-15 as “Are the Wicked Really Punished?”<sup>172</sup> In his summary of the meaning of chapter 8, he writes “Qohelet seriously questions some of

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<sup>170</sup>NIV translation, as used in NIVAC. Longman uses his own translation, but refers to the NIV more than any other version. This passage is included for convenience and has been excluded from the word count.

<sup>171</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, xiii-ix & 21-22.

<sup>172</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, viii & ix.

the assumed tenets of wisdom theology.”<sup>173</sup> Provan deals with the whole of chapter 8 in a single section, entitled “Dealing with an Unjust World”, and introduced without further summarising remarks.<sup>174</sup> His exposition makes clear that the question of “dealing” is being addressed from the point of view of wisdom; thus, at a broad level, both authors identify similar questions as being addressed in this section.<sup>175</sup>

Longman spends six pages on these verses. The overall issue is justice, particularly in regard of whether the wicked are properly punished – an issue previously raised in 3:16-22. Longman sub-divides the verses into four sections: 1) Qohelet's answer to the question is negative: they are not (v10-12a); “wickedness thrives because there is no apparent punishment for it.” 2) Qohelet gives expression to a contrary “orthodox” sentiment, for reasons that are unclear (v12b-13). 3) Justice is again questioned (v14). 4) Advice, given in resignation; “another expression of the *carpe diem* theme” (v15).<sup>176</sup>

This summary agrees with and expresses elements already identified in Longman's exposition: 1) Qohelet contradicts himself.<sup>177</sup> 2) Qohelet is frustrated because he does not find the features that he hopes to find in the world. 3) Qohelet consequently expresses scepticism concerning God and the goodness of his ways and 4) The apparently “positive” advice that he does give is to be understood by the reader as limited by his overall outlook (or possibly he is just quoting traditional wisdom); it functions as a consolation that leaves the overall picture intact.<sup>178</sup>

What might a preacher take from this discussion? In Longman's chapter summary, the chapter as a whole “seriously questions some of the assumed tenets of wisdom theology”; and in these specific verses, Qohelet “questions whether the wicked are really punished.”<sup>179</sup> This suggests that for the contemporary reader, the main application will be by way of contrast: the light brought by the New Testament will resolve questions and save us from Qohelet's confusion and despondency. Indeed, Longman's comments on the closing verses of the chapter take this route.

When *Bold Purpose* is consulted, the answer to the question of how Longman would apply this section follows the above. Contrast generates discussion. The approach of

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<sup>173</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 223.

<sup>174</sup>Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 43.

<sup>175</sup>Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 162ff.

<sup>176</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 215-216.

<sup>177</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 220.

<sup>178</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 221.

<sup>179</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 223.

*Bold Purpose* as a whole is organised around chasing after power, relationships, work and money, etcetera, as ways to make life work for the individual. This certainly reflects key interests of Qohelet, particularly in the question of getting “gain”; but the focus upon the individual also appears to be a slight narrowing in outlook. Questions of God's overall moral government, and whether the wicked will be judged, move to the periphery (the characters in the narrative of *Bold Purpose* are not rulers, or deliberately wicked). Possibly, this shift may be in order to secure the reader's interest, or to reflect and then address the questions being asked in a Western society.<sup>180</sup> Nevertheless, the general thrust is represented: life does not make sense, and is ultimately disappointing. There is some limited relief in “seizing the day” (and 8:15, the *carpe diem* passage, is the only verse from this section explicitly reference in *Bold Purpose*); but it is very limited: the only real resolution is through an “above the sun” perspective.<sup>181</sup>

### **Provan**

Provan's comment upon this section is part of a section on 8:1-17. In keeping with his overall approach, his understanding is that the section's meaning is orthodox and can in principle be harmonised with the rest of the book and with the rest of the canon. Nevertheless, Qohelet's view may be incomplete, and in a specific case – including this one – the details of a complete harmonisation may be beyond our reach. The wicked will be judged righteously by God, though it is unclear how and when Qohelet envisages this happening; the final position is that Qohelet “advocates that the reader get on with life and not worry too much about the details, which lie with God.”<sup>182</sup> The admonition to “fear God” and enjoy life in 8:15 is the application of this move, and is not (as for Longman) a token consolation, but positive, trusting advice about what to do in the light of our limitations.

The “Bridging Contexts” section also deals with the whole of 8:1-17, and identifies the issue of contemporary Christians attempting to live in the light of the dual realities of a just God and injustice in the world.<sup>183</sup> As such, it suggests that this section is basically all “timely” (to use the earlier terminology).<sup>184</sup> Little translation is needed, and various biblical texts concerning this “fundamental contrast ... between two kingdoms” are invoked; Eccl 8 addresses our current situation; though attention also needs to be given

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<sup>180</sup> There is some reflection on life's cruelty, but only within other contexts where the question of God's long-range justice is not discussed – e.g. Longman and Allender, *Bold Purpose*, 86-88 & 98-99.

<sup>181</sup> Longman and Allender, *Bold Purpose*, 136 & 243.

<sup>182</sup> Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 167-168.

<sup>183</sup> Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 169ff.

<sup>184</sup> i.e. The terminology of “timely” and “timeless” – see the chapter of this study introducing Provan.

to the revelation of the Kingdom of God in the New Testament and Christ's final coming (texts from Daniel and Revelation are referenced). Application begins then, before the “Contemporary Significance” section, as we are counselled to have caution, patience and integrity.<sup>185</sup> Daniel takes us beyond what Qohelet advises, and adds loyalty that issues in boldness.<sup>186</sup> In the “Contemporary Significance” section this material is largely repeated, with references made to contemporary politics, which then expands into a critique of each of statism, social conservatism and American nationalism, insofar as those concepts are defined, understood or practised erroneously. Provan advocates being an “internationalist,” rightly understood. A comforting application is then made for others whose only real choice is to suffer or to depart from the faith.

The journey to this destination is traced step by step, but the final destination is obviously far from Qohelet's world, and derives from the text only as the text is read within a biblical progression; moreover, at the end it involves a number of complex judgments about the present state of the world. It fits into the category of “redemptive trajectory,” as described by Vanhoozer.<sup>187</sup> This is clearly quite a different kind of application to Longman's. Moreover, it clarifies (if not more) that the privileging of the original meaning, which was discussed in the chapter introducing Provan, does not lead to the amount of restriction in practice that was there suspected.<sup>188</sup> Once the “original meaning” has been identified, and filtered through the process of identifying what is “timely” or “timeless,” Provan is more than happy for it to then grow in quite unanticipated directions, as long as he judges those directions to be faithful ones. Looked at another way, the threshold for Provan for what is “analogous” in the identification of legitimate “analogous contexts” is low.

### **Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 – Going to the house of God**

1 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. 2 Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. 3 A dream comes when there are many cares, and many words mark the speech of a fool. 4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfil it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfil your vow. 5 It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfil it. 6 Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, “My

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<sup>185</sup>Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 171-172.

<sup>186</sup>Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 172-173.

<sup>187</sup>Marshall, *Beyond*, 90. (Vanhoozer's response to Marshall begins on p81).

<sup>188</sup>See the section with heading “The move to contemporary application” in the chapter “Introduction to Iain Provan.”

vow was a mistake.” Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? 7 Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore fear God.<sup>189</sup> (Eccl 5:1-7)

This portion is useful for analysis, because in it Qohelet is not primarily describing, but advising. He is not here discovering that anything is *hebel*, but counselling the reader how to live, applying prior discussion. Moreover, Longman explicitly quotes and applies this section in *Bold Purpose*.<sup>190</sup>

A sufficiently clear view of both commentators' exegesis of this passage can be gained from the following table:

	<b>Longman (NICOT)</b>	<b>Provan</b>
Connection with context	None mentioned; a new topic.	The worship of God, contrasting with that of Mammon. <sup>191</sup>
The sacrifice of fools	Unclear; religious formalism. <sup>192</sup>	Religious formalism.
Reason for using few words	Divine distance (not power); perhaps even divine indifference.	A reverential, heart-felt awe for God.
The danger of much work	It causes one to lose touch with reality.	Much work comes from a wrong attitude and desire for “gain.”
Qohelet's view of vows	Agrees with the canon elsewhere.	Agrees with the canon elsewhere.
The danger of foolish vows	God will be angered; one's work, where one might find some joy in life, will be destroyed.	God will be angered, and one's work will be destroyed sooner or later.
Qohelet's advice to fear God	An encouragement “away from familiarity with God” in favour of “fright before a powerful and dangerous being,” not “respect or awe.” <sup>193</sup>	Hold on to reality (i.e. understand the correct attitude to a holy God and our lives in his world); “stand in awe of God.”

<sup>189</sup>NIV translation.

<sup>190</sup>Longman and Allender, *Bold Purpose*, 213ff. Furthermore, Provan handles it as a self-contained section, whereas many other shorter passages are included within longer sections (he deals with the book in only 14 sections – Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 43).

<sup>191</sup>As well as the exegesis in the “Original Meaning” section, the comment in the “Bridging Contexts” section also clarifies that Provan sees this contrast as intended: Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 120.

<sup>192</sup>Unclear, because Longman offers a contrast between what Qohelet is deprecating depending on whether Qohelet is orthodox or (as Longman holds) unorthodox; but Longman's brief description of the two possibilities gives no clear indication of the distinction he intended between them.

<sup>193</sup>The second quote is from Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 36 – in the section on Qohelet's theology, which Longman's comments on 5:7 urge the reader to consult for an understanding of Qohelet's exhortations to

	<b>Longman (NICOT)</b>	<b>Provan</b>
Qohelet's overall attitude to the cult	Unclear. Clearly not wholeheartedly affirmed; neither abandoned.	Orthodox; Qohelet is concerned to see God worshipped correctly.

In his application, Provan analyses the passage in terms of Qohelet seeking to uphold orthodox worship. Longman, in *Bold Purpose*, at first appears to have a different approach from his explanation in NICOT (that Qohelet is giving advice) and from Provan's, taking it as another part of the failed quest: “the Teacher looked to religion in the hope that meaning could be found there, but ... he was soon disappointed.”<sup>194</sup> So, perhaps religion too is *hebel*? However, as this statement is unpacked, the outcome looks very like Provan's: it is not religion, but false religion, which is deprecated. Longman views the target of Qohelet's ire as proto-Pharisees, whose religion was “a matter of 'dos' and 'don'ts,’” indulging in empty “public display that merely went through the motions.”<sup>195</sup> Qohelet saw their motives, and despised their attempts to “manipulate God by ... religious actions.” The ensuing discussion then seeks to exhort the reader to a sincere, whole-hearted pursuit of God for his own sake, and is essentially interchangeable with Provan's comments on the same issue in the “Bridging Contexts” and “Contemporary Significance.”<sup>196</sup> This apparent exegetical shift makes the move from text to application hard to analyse. Regardless of the explanation for this, it is clear that the view imputed to Qohelet in NICOT, that he recommends withdrawing from a frightening, arbitrary God, is not one that is being commended! The overall view of Qohelet and Ecclesiastes has informed this outcome: the correct view comes from elsewhere in Scripture (and both Provan and Longman liberally cite both OT and NT texts in making their eventual applications).

Having arrived at a similar point, both Longman and Provan extend their applications in further directions. Longman expounds the necessity for an ongoing “emptiness” in our own self-assessment, about the “passion” of God for his people which is the foundation for the passion they should have for him, and about how true spirituality will focus upon Christ.<sup>197</sup> Provan bemoans the ever-present background “noise” of modern life and expounds upon its ill-fittingness for Christian and church, and the trends of

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fear God.

<sup>194</sup> Longman and Allender, *Bold Purpose*, 213.

<sup>195</sup> Longman and Allender, *Bold Purpose*, 214.

<sup>196</sup> Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 118-123.

<sup>197</sup> Longman and Allender, *Bold Purpose*, 215-223.

professionalisation and secularisation in contemporary church activity and leadership. It is not suggested that any of these applications arise in any other way than as legitimate extensions of Qohelet's thought, translated into a different context.

### **Conclusions**

The closer analysis of these two passages has confirmed and clarified a number of features previously identified. The main additional point of clarification is that both authors are, in different ways, happy to use the text as a launching point for discussion of issues, guided and informed by the whole canon of Scripture, which bring in concerns far from Qohelet's mind (and for Longman, in keeping with his overall view, contradictory to it). For both authors, the text does make points that are directly applicable today (e.g. principles of how to approach God – though in Longman's case, he is open to the charge of inconsistency in his derivation of this point), but it routinely requires the full canonical context to guide its interpretation, and to suggest how these points can be developed for contemporary hearers. Provan in particular is content to travel a great distance beyond the thoughts of the text in doing so.

What remains now is for all the lines of investigation to be drawn together, in the next chapter.

## **Ecclesiastes interpreted and applied in the light of the New Testament**

The foundation has now been laid to more directly consider the issue of what connection the book of Ecclesiastes, when read as part of the Christian Bible, has with New Testament teachings and applications. Prior to this point, focus has been upon the mechanics of moving from text to application, with particular reference to Longman and Provan. An evangelical preacher will also have the reverse angle in mind; are New Testament teachings supported by Ecclesiastes, and if so how? Does Ecclesiastes give us a richer appreciation of them? The question of how Ecclesiastes is read as part of the Bible should not be simply reduced to “does Qohelet preach the gospel?” on one hand, nor on the other to “is Qohelet's viewpoint now superseded?”. This chapter will address this general area, and then proceed to offer its own suggestions about reading the book.

This question invokes issues mentioned at an earlier stage – especially those of history and redemption.<sup>198</sup> When considering the text of Ecclesiastes, one significant piece of data is so obvious that many commentators appear to consider it unnecessary to mention. That datum is that Ecclesiastes has nothing explicit to say about the history of redemption. One writer says, “There are no prophecies, theophanies or types of Christ found in the book of Ecclesiastes.”<sup>199</sup> To this list we can add others: the covenant with Abraham and the election of Israel, forgiveness, historical atonement, the temple (especially significant when we consider the connections to Solomon), the relationships between Israel and other nations; in fact, no consideration of future hopes that Israel might have whatsoever. The book appears to be, in some sense, “timeless.”<sup>200</sup>

This observation is not modified either by the book's references to sacrifice (5:1, 9:2), or to future judgment (3:7, 11:9, 12:14), but rather strengthened. Whatever Qohelet's own distinctive beliefs, the descriptions of religion deployed in Ecclesiastes are distinctly personal and generic: people acknowledge God as creator and providential sustainer, they pray, they visit the “house of God” and offer sacrifices, and they live in the expectation of a final judgment.<sup>201</sup> The feature is consistent, and the corporate, the nationalistic and the redemptive-historical are apparently absent. Many contemporary

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<sup>198</sup> See the chapter, “Ecclesiastes, creation and the narrative of redemption.”

<sup>199</sup> Gareth Crossley, *The Old Testament Explained and Applied* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2002), 490.

<sup>200</sup> The observation regarding Solomon stands independently of the question of the relationship between Qohelet and Solomon; a minimal recognition that Qohelet at some points and in some ways personates a king of Israel in Jerusalem is all that is required to make it work.

<sup>201</sup> Here “religion” is being used broadly, and is not intended to invoke anachronistic post-Enlightenment concepts.

interpreters skip over discussing what this might mean; yet, they are surely relevant to the broader questions.<sup>202</sup> The question is seen to be especially pointed for Longman's position. How could someone, later than Solomon, who adopts a Solomonic persona in order to discuss whether life has meaning, apparently never even consider whether Israel, the divine covenants, and the temple which Solomon built should be brought into the discussion? The problem is not diminished by Longman's interpretation of the frame narrator, who "turns his son toward the central truths of revealed religion: the fear of God, obedience to his commandments, and an awareness of the coming judgment."<sup>203</sup> This is plainly a very selective and deficient description of what a flesh-and-blood Israelite would consider the contents of "revealed religion" to be. It is not far from what a certain later Israelite considered could be known without any revelation beyond that broadcast through the medium of creation.<sup>204</sup>

So, what does Qohelet believe? He does not appear to be in doubt about monotheism, about Israelite views of cosmology (the basic heaven-earth duality and distinction) or creation, or that the God of Israel is the true God, the one who is present and active, the giver of life and its judge, sovereign and holy; the claims made for deities found in other nations likewise form no part of his consideration.<sup>205</sup> Those who argue that Qohelet is unorthodox question his orthodoxy only within these parameters.<sup>206</sup> Surely to take all this for granted when Qohelet is discussing so many aspects of existence is a significant oversight. Thus, the following proposal is suggested: Ecclesiastes' selective references (to be specific, its distinctive non-references) to religion are deliberate. i.e. The reason for the silence is the simplest possible one. Qohelet is not ignorant of the specific claims of Israel, but by deliberate design omits to discuss whether something substantial can be found within them.

This leads to the question: why? It cannot be because doing so is essential to the nature of wisdom literature. Proverbs, whilst also bypassing redemptive-historical issues, shows no inhibitions about explicitly identifying the God of Israel as the true one.<sup>207</sup> If

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<sup>202</sup>One who has addressed these questions explicitly is Waltke in Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 51ff.

<sup>203</sup>Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 284.

<sup>204</sup>Rom 1:18-32. See Douglas J. Moo, "Romans," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (ed. Donald A. Carson et al.; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1994), 1122-1123.

<sup>205</sup>e.g. Eccl 1:13, 2:3, 3:1, 3:17, 5:2, 5:4-6, 5:18, 12:7 and many others. Clemens article on the links between Gen 1-3 and Ecclesiastes is highly relevant here: Clemens, "Sin and Death," 5-8.

<sup>206</sup>e.g. see Murphy struggling with the question of Qohelet's theology proper, and the question of whether Qohelet's emphases in Ecclesiastes can be absolutised, or not: Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lxvii ff.

<sup>207</sup>Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 51-55.

wisdom literature is primarily concerned with questions of daily living in the light of the reality and nature of YHWH, then identifying the need to fear him is a pre-requisite. Proverbs briefly states this necessity, but its intention is to concentrate upon the practical details of the outworking. Ecclesiastes is much less interested in details of that outworking. Its advice about how to live is more broad and superficial. What it is interested in is persuading the reader of the necessity of fearing YHWH to begin with, as will be explained below.

i.e. The following situation exists:

	<b>Proverbs</b>	<b>Ecclesiastes</b>
<b>Matters discussed</b>	Questions of daily living.	Questions of daily living.
<b>Approach to historical-redemptive issues</b>	Not in scope.	Not in scope.
<b>Approach to YHWH</b>	1) You must fear YHWH before you can learn the teaching of this book. 2) That YHWH (and not one of his rivals) is the true God is assumed, and not argued for.	1) This book aims to persuade you to fear YHWH. 2) That YHWH (and not one of his rivals) is the true God is assumed and not argued for.

Waltke essentially reaches the same conclusion: “[In Proverbs] Solomon and King Lemuel's mother never take off the lens of Israel's world-and-life view when reflecting on the creation. By contrast, Qoheleth and Job temporarily remove it but replace it when what they observe is too troubling, as Asaph also confesses.”<sup>208</sup>

Arguably, this is a much more straightforward thesis than one which attempts to reconstruct Qohelet's life experiences and world-view based only upon his emphases – a procedure which, if applied to other literature, would produce no end of absurd results.<sup>209</sup> For comparison, one could imagine an attempt to reconstruct C S Lewis' life history and outlook armed only with a copy of *The Screwtape Letters*, and upon the assumption that *Screwtape* representatively captured these things. Then, by comparison, there is the thesis that since *Screwtape* for a particular purpose imaginatively portrays and explores basically orthodox theology and demonology, that therefore it could be

<sup>208</sup>Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 55.

<sup>209</sup>One example of doing so is Gordis, *Koheleth*, 112ff; another is Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lvi-lxix. Murphy concludes that the God of Ecclesiastes is YHWH, but along the way makes many statements that imply that the “part” written or emphasised in Ecclesiastes can be taken as the “whole” of Qohelet's theology.

supposed that Lewis' general outlook was probably orthodox. The results would surely be radically different: and the latter thesis would be much more accurate.<sup>210</sup>

If this is accepted, then the following ensues:<sup>211</sup>

<b>The broad aim of the book</b>	Didactic, for those who are already worshippers of YHWH.	Apologetic, for those who are weighing up the value of worshipping YHWH.
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The word “apologetic” is chosen carefully. “Evangelistic” would be too strong, and would violate observations made above.<sup>212</sup> Ecclesiastes does not offer forgiveness or preach other redemptive themes. It makes no declarations about any historical events which, in any kind of parallel to (for example) Acts 2, vindicate any claims about Israel or its role in the world and its salvation. “Apologetic” does not pre-suppose that the audience is addressed as currently outside the covenant.<sup>213</sup>

The selection of elements used in argument within Ecclesiastes – i.e. the components of religion, and the selection of universally observable elements in creation and human life – supports the idea of an argument that is intended to be accessible to anyone. It is not necessary to enter deep discussion about any nuances in the concepts of “natural theology” or “general revelation” to go this far.

As an apologetic, Ecclesiastes is clearly a negative one. It does not expound upon the benefits of fearing God (as Proverbs does, e.g. 3:2, 3:13ff, 11:11, 19:23), but the futility of not doing so. The construal as an apologetic makes sense of and is built upon the repeated structural elements in Ecclesiastes. The points to which Qohelet keeps returning are precisely the ones which he wishes to make: that the attempt to “toil” for “gain” which is extracted as something to keep from this life “under the sun” is futile; instead, we should fear God – and this means to live daily in contentment, understanding our limitations and that the sovereign God will do what he sees best

<sup>210</sup>“Human acts of communication are like icebergs. Statements are cast out and retrieved 'at the surface' ... but there is a vast expanse which supports them invisibly” - Trevor A. Hart, “Imagination and Responsible Reading,” in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, Colin J. D. Greene, and Karl Möller; Scripture and Hermeneutics 1; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 313. The whole chapter is worth reading, in regard of the point being made.

<sup>211</sup>It is interesting to note that if we are speaking of “the book” rather than of Qohelet, then Longman could still be content with this summary.

<sup>212</sup>e.g. Eaton, “Ecclesiastes,” in Carson et al., *NBC*, 610 – though Eaton appears to be using the term only loosely, saying “an evangelistic tract, calling secular people to face the implications of their secularism.”

<sup>213</sup>Eaton agrees in seeing both those inside and those outside as covered: “both an evangelistic tract... and a call to realism, summoning faithful Israelites to take seriously the 'futility', the 'enigma' of life in this world” - Eaton, “Ecclesiastes,” in Carson et al., *NBC*, 610.

when he sees fit. There is no need, under this proposal, to minimise or relativise any of these elements – e.g. treating the *carpe diem* passages as lacking enthusiasm, or as being empty concessions, or seeing Qohelet's advice to fear God as implying significantly less than the frame narrator's. The book makes sense as it stands, when understood in terms of its own by-design limitations, and against the right background. This feature then becomes a significant part of the evidence commending the proposal.

### **From reading to application**

After all this has been said, what does this mean for application? The conclusion is surprising. It is difficult to avoid noting that, in an interpretation which basically makes contrary conclusions to those above, the same result can be and often is arrived at. Longman is an example of this. Longman also takes the book as a negative apologetic, and it is this common factor that generates many of the applications. As such, it may be suggested that in a canonical context, similar applications are likely to be arrived at, even in the presence of substantial interpretative differences; because as Fox says, those differences mask a substantial amount of ultimate agreement. After giving his own summary, he writes that the message of Ecclesiastes as a negative apologetic with compensating positive advice “emerges with fair consistency ... all substantial variations from the above interpretation entail the attribution of parts of the book to someone other than the original author.”<sup>214</sup>

An ultimately compatible interpretation as a negative apologetic leads to finally similar applications. These applications come via the book's overall canonical context, rather than (if one holds them to be different) Qohelet's intention as recorded in the text. This has been illustrated already as the applications of Longman and Provan have been considered. It will now be considered further.

### **In what sense does Ecclesiastes preach Christ?**

The previous table uses the phrase “worshipping YHWH” to describe the desired response, as a partial unfolding of the book's terminology of “fearing God.” As a negative apologetic, it is not its purpose to expand upon what “fearing God” involves, though it is made sufficiently clear that it involves recognising and ordering one's life around his sovereignty, keeping his commandments and living in recognition of his judgment; whilst negatively avoiding a life of seeking to get “gain” by exploiting the fallen creation as a tool and means for personal pleasure and profit.

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<sup>214</sup>Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions* (JSOTSup 71; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 9.

Is it possible to go further from the text? What about the covenantal and gospel issues of relationship to God, incorporation into the body of God's people and forgiveness of sins and enjoyment of the fulness of life in fellowship with the creator – whether this is viewed from an old or new covenant angle? Ultimately, how are these kinds of issues preached from this book?

For both Longman and Provan, distinctly Christian applications can only be made as the book is read as part of the whole canon. For Longman, the darkness and endless riddles of the confused sceptic Qohelet are resolved through the redemption accomplished by Christ – which then casts the questions of daily life in a new light. Provan tends to stay in the territory of wisdom: the book is full of useful guidance for Christians still living today in a fallen world; it describes realities that remain for us, and helps us to live realistically as all people throughout the ages will need to do before Christ's return; the full, New Testament perspective helps us to go beyond mere daily contentment to solid future hope.

Has anything significant been missed in this analysis? Are there possibilities which Longman, Provan and the previous analysis have overlooked? To address this question, one final writer, who makes it his aim to explicitly address these questions, will be considered.

### **Sidney Greidanus<sup>215</sup>**

Sidney Greidanus is professor emeritus of preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary, and author of a series of books with titles such as the relevant one for this thesis, “Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes,” with the sub-title showing his concern to be text-based: “Foundations for Expository Sermons.”<sup>216</sup> Greidanus' approach is presented as distinct from the previously-discussed three-step approach explained in NIVAC, and is explained in his volume “Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method.”<sup>217</sup> Therein, he clarifies the distinction made in, and argues for the statement, that “sermons based on Old Testament passages cannot merely be theocentric sermons but must be Christocentric.”<sup>218</sup> At length, he identifies (through the study of the New Testament and church history) “seven legitimate ways to move from

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<sup>215</sup> Greidanus was previously mentioned in the chapter introducing Provan.

<sup>216</sup> Greidanus, *Ecclesiastes* (the full reference appears previously).

<sup>217</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>218</sup> Greidanus, *Ecclesiastes*, x. The clarification and justification of what Greidanus means is found especially in Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 111ff.

an Old Testament passage to Jesus Christ in the New Testament.” They are, “redemptive-historical progression, promise-fulfillment, typology, analogy, longitudinal themes, New Testament references, and contrast.”<sup>219</sup> Greidanus does not claim that all seven of these “routes” have the same significance. It is not the purpose here to evaluate Greidanus' methodology or conclusions, but rather to see what issues his analysis raises for the work undertaken in this study to this point.

Greidanus' attempt to provide an overarching theme for the whole book leads him to familiar territory, as discussed in this chapter; his suggestion is essentially an apologetic one: “Fear God in order to turn a vain, empty life into a meaningful life which will enjoy God's gifts.”<sup>220</sup> He then provides a six-page summary of the potential of each of the seven-fold routes mentioned above, which can be further summarised as follows:<sup>221</sup>

<b>Method</b>	<b>Summary</b>
Redemptive-Historical Progression	The resurrection of Christ casts a whole new light over the darkness that Qohelet saw.
Promise-Fulfillment	Ecclesiastes contains no Messianic promises.
Typology	Wisdom teaching is not expected to contain typology, and Ecclesiastes contains nothing that must be so interpreted.
Analogy	Various parallels with New Testament teachings exist (e.g. Eccl 2:18-19 / Matt 6:19 & Luke 12:19-12).
Longitudinal Themes	Some long-running biblical themes can be traced through into the New Testament, e.g. the fear of God.
New Testament References	Twelve indirect quotes or allusions exist. <sup>222</sup>
Contrast	The progress of redemptive history casts the value of our toil in a significantly different light (c.f. 1 Cor 15:58).

These seven routes are then applied to successive portions of the book, and material for sermons is suggested.<sup>223</sup>

It is striking that where positive potential is identified, the above table could be reduced to only two categories: matters of daily life where the New Testament is basically

<sup>219</sup> Greidanus, *Ecclesiastes*, xi-xii. Greidanus' American spelling has been retained here and in the subsequent table.

<sup>220</sup> Greidanus, *Ecclesiastes*, 22.

<sup>221</sup> Greidanus, *Ecclesiastes*, 24-29.

<sup>222</sup> Greidanus is ambiguous about the directness of the quotations.

<sup>223</sup> Greidanus, *Ecclesiastes*, 30-310.

consistent with Ecclesiastes, and larger issues of reality where the progress of redemptive history has brought subsequent development. Secondly, it appears at this point that Greidanus does not challenge the existing conclusions of this study. The longer-range connections made by the preacher from Ecclesiastes do not come from the text in itself, but require the text to be placed within its canonical context before they are visible.

Greidanus' detailed work on 8:10-15 and 5:1-7 strengthens this assessment.<sup>224</sup> After analysing the essence of the text's message, these suggestions for ways to preach Christ are offered:<sup>225</sup>

	5:1-7	8:10-15 (8:1-17) <sup>226</sup>
Redemptive-Historical Progression	Worship can now be offered anywhere.	The coming of Jesus, and his teaching about judgment, resolves the unsolvable (for Qohelet) question of the judgment of the wicked.
Analogy	The NT teaches analogously (and often identically) about care in approaching God, fulfilling vows (though Jesus taught to avoid making them), unnecessary verbiage in prayer, and fearing God.	The NT also stresses the impossibility of human wisdom comprehending all of God's works, with specific reference to dealing with the fickle and powerful, the new birth, and generally.
Longitudinal Themes	Hearing God is continually necessary.	Human ability to comprehend all of God's works runs through Scripture.
NT References	Various references are relevant (but not apparently claimed as direct references).	Various references are relevant (but not apparently claimed as direct references). Luke 12:19 is not a reference.
Contrast	Only those noted under "Redemptive-Historical Progression".	Only those noted under "Redemptive-Historical Progression".
Sermon Goal/Theme	Worship in the church should be with reverence. Jesus also taught this. <sup>227</sup>	Wisdom is good, but it cannot find out all of God's works; to find the answers, we need

<sup>224</sup>Greidanus, *Ecclesiastes*, 122ff & 200ff. The relevance of these two passages is, of course, that they were analysed in relation to Longman and Provan in a previous chapter.

<sup>225</sup>No "Promise-Fulfillment" or "Typology" sections exist, in keeping with Greidanus' earlier assessment that Ecclesiastes contains no such material.

<sup>226</sup>Greidanus handles 8:10-15 as part of a longer section, 8:1-17.

<sup>227</sup>It cannot escape comment that, despite Greidanus' explicit pleas for Christo-centric preaching, his references to Christ in the suggested sermon on this section are simply as one who corroborates Qohelet's teaching – rather than, as might appear an obvious preacher's move, the one mediator without whom

		Christ.
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Despite Greidanus' structure, method and terminology, the applications arrived at have no obvious differences to those of Longman and Provan. Practically, his methodology appears to have equivalent outcomes to their procedures.

It appears to be safe to conclude that if this study were continued, then it would be unlikely to turn up radically different ways in which the text of Ecclesiastes gives rise to contemporary application beyond those already seen, unless there was a correspondingly radical shift in presuppositions. It now remains only to draw final conclusions.

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ultimately nobody can approach God acceptably.

## **Conclusions: text to sermon in Ecclesiastes**

This conclusion will not repeat all the findings made during this study, but summarise the central findings which correspond to the study's principle aims.

Many substantially differing interpretations of Ecclesiastes exist, as illustrated by the two authors in this study. However, the main conclusion of this study is that the interpretation of Ecclesiastes as a negative apologetic, within a canonical context, can result for evangelical interpreters in surprisingly similar applications. The routes differ, but the destinations are much alike.

For those who see Qohelet as essentially orthodox (e.g. Provan), and especially those who agree with this study that Qohelet deliberately intended a apologetic for serving YHWH, the text does not merely ask the reader to consider the life of devotion to YHWH as part of his covenant people as a short afterthought, but has this as a primary intention. Nevertheless, for those who read Qohelet as unorthodox (like Longman), the book as a whole still states the alternative. The rest of the canon that it is read as part of then explains the alternative looks like. In both approaches, the text of Ecclesiastes only gives minimal attention to the details of this alternative, and expects the reader to find it elsewhere (especially anything specifically redemptive).

Though the route may not affect the destination, it will affect the emphasis. If Qohelet is essentially unorthodox, then all of his advice must be filtered through the rest of the canon. His advice, then, will mainly be a foil, rather than being applied directly. But if Qohelet is orthodox, then (as with Provan), much more discussion of how to apply his advice will result.

The main conclusion be repeated in another way. At its beginning, this study mentioned the three-part trajectory common in evangelical applications of Ecclesiastes.<sup>228</sup> How is this trajectory related to the text? This depends upon how Ecclesiastes' intention is construed. The first (the emptiness of life “under the sun”) is part of Qohelet's thought for both Longman and Provan. The second (the need for another perspective) is part of Qohelet's thought only for Provan, but remains part of Ecclesiastes' outlook for Longman, via the frame narrator. The third (the supply of that perspective) is suggested by the book without much elaboration: the fear of the Lord. The rest of the canon explains what this means. Thus the question “what part does Ecclesiastes play within

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<sup>228</sup> See the chapter, “Introduction.”

the wider canon” is answered, and again is likely to be basically shared by evangelical interpreters despite varying interpretations of the book itself.

It has been seen in this study that particular interpreters may not necessarily fulfil their promises to demonstrate how their move from the text to application works. Or, where a methodology is elaborated, they may not stick particularly closely to it. This study has identified the theological/narrative context of creation and fall as a particularly important context for readers, and one which both Longman and Provan rely upon, though with differing levels of consistency and fulness or clarity of explanation. The reader's attitude to creation and fall is a main driver in determining the kinds of applications likely to result, and as such deserves explicit discussion as part of commentators' methodology.

*(16421 words)*<sup>229</sup>

\* \* \*

Of all the misappropriations of the Bible that are possible, however, there can scarcely be one that is more grievous than that which the scholar commits when he or she takes the words of Holy Scripture and uses them for self-promotion and self-worship, multiplying these words endlessly ... Never have been so many books and articles touching on biblical texts been written... Yet this explosion of literature has had little to do with genuinely new and worthwhile insights as to how God is addressing us through his Word. Much learning does not necessarily teach understanding, and it cannot absolve us from accountability before the truth. ... It is certainly the case that my work can only be justified if it has indeed enabled the reader to hear Qohelet more clearly and through him to hear God more clearly. ... Nor is there any defense of the act of reading the commentary if it does not result in obedience to the Word of God as it is heard in the Scriptures.<sup>230</sup>  
(Iain Provan)

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. (Eccl 12:13-14)

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<sup>229</sup>As counted by my word processor (which includes hyphens), and not including abstract, acknowledgements, tables, appendices, footnotes or subtitles. The individual chapter counts, ordered in the same order as in the table of contents, are: 1178, 1622, 1504, 997, 2106, 1742, 2481, 1894, 2376 and 521.

<sup>230</sup>Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 232-233.

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## Appendix A: References in Longman (NICOT) to New Testament verses

References found before page 57 are found in Longman's introduction; subsequent ones are part of his commentary.

NT Reference	Page	Content
Matt 4:6 & 10	29	Examples of the authority implied by the formula "it is written".
6:7-8	151	Critique of an interpretation which finds a NT parallel (rejected).
6:17 & 26:7	182	Proof-texts that oil was highly regarded during the biblical period.
15:26	228	Quoting Podechard, who illustrates the eastern attitude to dogs.
16:17	223	Approves Lauha's citation of this verse as indicating the NT answer to Qohelet's problem (see Rom 1:19-20, 1 Cor 1:21).
23:16-22	154	Noting similarity between Qohelet's thought and a saying of Jesus.
27:45-46	40	(Not listed in NICOT index). Proof-text that on the cross, Jesus was abandoned by his father (to redeem us from this meaningless world).
27:51	150	Proof-text that Christ's death and resurrection abolished the distinction between holy and common space assumed in Eccl 5:1.
John 9:4	231	Rejects suggestion that this verse parallels Eccl 9:10.
Rom 1:19-20	223	Approves Lauha's citation of this verse as indicating the NT answer to Qohelet's problem (see Matt 16:17, 1 Cor 1:21).
3:10-18	199	Proof-text to support the view that righteous people still sin is found throughout the OT and NT. Possible allusion to Eccl 7:20.
8:18-21 (& 8:18 again)	39, 40 64	An allusion to the message of the book of Ecclesiastes. An allusion to the concept of <i>hebel</i> in Ecclesiastes.
8:21-27	284	(The commentary's concluding paragraph). Christ subjected himself to the fallen world in order to free us from its chaos (also Gal 3:3).
9:16	232	Quotes approvingly Lauha's contrast between Paul's outlook compared with Qohelet's in Eccl 9:11.
1 Cor 1:21	223	Approves Lauha's citation of this verse as indicating the NT answer to Qohelet's problem (see Matt 16:17, Rom 1:19-20).
15:55	260	Example of a passage read by Gregory Thaumaturgos which he found troublesome when trying to interpret Eccl 11:8 pietistically.

Gal 3:3	284	As Rom 8:21-27.
3:13	40	Invoked to support the idea that Christ “experienced the frustration of the world under curse in a way that Qohelet could not even imagine.”
2 Pet 3:3-5	72	NT-era sceptics, as quoted by Peter, thought similarly to Qohelet.
3:9	219	Linked with how pietistic interpreters like Thaumaturgos came to wrongly interpret Eccl 8:11 as a reference to God's saving patience.
Rev 22:15	?	Page reference omitted; nor found using a search with Amazon / Google Books.

## Appendix B: References in Longman (NICOT) to Genesis 1-3, and in Provan (NIVAC) to creation and fall

### Longman

Genesis Reference	Page	Content
1	119	Eccl 3:11 has significant allusions to Genesis 1; even reminiscent (but not identical) vocabulary. The significance is hard to assess, but Longman favours the view that Qohelet lacks enthusiasm about God's creation.
1 & 2:19-20	177	Illustrates principle that naming indicated capturing the essential nature of something.
	268	The supposition that Gen 1 gives a chronological account of creation is tenuous.
1:3-5	268	Possible, but rejected, analogy with Eccl 12:2.
1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 26-27, 31	119	Creation pronounced good, as in Eccl 3:11.
1:11, 1:29, 2:9	91	Qohelet's building projects invoke the creation of Eden; he is attempting to build his own approximation to paradise.
2 & 2:7	130	The relationship between man and the rest of creation; Qohelet's agreement in 3:20.
2:7 & 3:19	34, 273	Allusion to the constitution of man at creation

### Provan - Creation

*N.B. Provan (NIVAC) contains a subject index; thus these specifically listed subject references have been pursued, rather than the task of pursuing every Gen 1-3 reference. The key to the "Section" column, which indicates which section a particular reference is found in, is OM/BC/CS = Original Meaning, Bridging Context, Contemporary Significance, respectively.*

Page	Section	Content
38	Intro	Qohelet understands and affirms the goodness of the physicality of the divine creation.
54-56	OM	The nature of creation renders futile human attempts to control it for their own gain.
59-62	BC/CS	Christians need to give a proper place to creation in their thinking, as they anticipate the new creation.
67	OM	Wisdom can help us to understand the world, but cannot help us to control and profit from the world as it has been created.
90	OM	There is a Creator who controls the times and seasons in his creation.

94	OM	Death renders pointless the quest for “gain” or “advantage” over the rest of creation.
96	BC	Our calling is to look after creation as the Creator's agents, not to exploit it for our own ends.
99	CS	A biblical <i>carpe diem</i> means “a worshipful response to the God of creation, who is also the God of new creation and resurrection.”
105	OM	We are not to “get ahead” of creation, but to live in harmony with it.
109-10	BC	Gen 1-11 is a foundational section of Scripture in explaining the spread of alienation and the breakdown of community. The original creation vision is fundamental to the rest of the biblical story.
112	CS	A biblical understanding of humanity must see him in relationship to God and to other human beings, contra Western individualism.
135	CS	The Christian view of creation is one of responsible stewardship.
144	BC	Those who served in the earth instead of seeking to control it, will inherit it.
156	BC	Humanity must accepted its position in the created order, not seeking to rise above it and control creation. Christ is the true Lord of creation.
161	CS	God has made an amazing creation.
169	BC	The true Lord of creation's claims to sovereignty are in conflict with counterfeits; there is a spiritual conflict in which creation is the stage.
185	BC	The world and God's ways in it are not ours to control, but to submit to.
213	OM	Choose joy early: “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.”
219	BC	God's goodness and generosity run throughout the whole creation. So, we should live in joy, not in a defensive fear.
228	OM	We should live joyfully in a complex world. The task is not purely intellectual, but right living.

### **Provan – Fall**

All of the indexed references to the fall, and exile, are to the commentary on Song of Songs. However, an analysis of the content of the creation references above shows that it is (where relevant) creation in its current, problematic state that is generally in view, rather than creation in its original state. Provan rarely gives explicit attention to the event of the fall itself, but continually presupposes such an event. Comments on “paradise” on p82 also suggest that an illegitimate “lusting after paradise” drives human beings; the implication being that paradise has (in the present mode of the world's existence) been lost. The comments on p231-232 contrasting Gen 3 with Gen 1-2, and their connection with interpretation of the Bible's message for the contemporary church,

should also be noted.