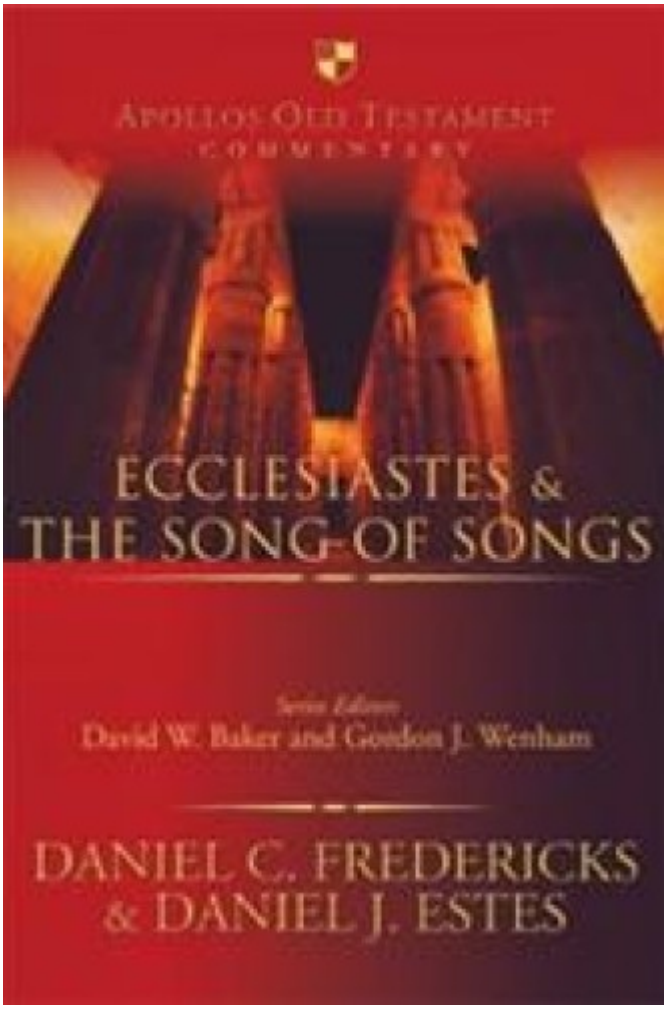
All is vanity

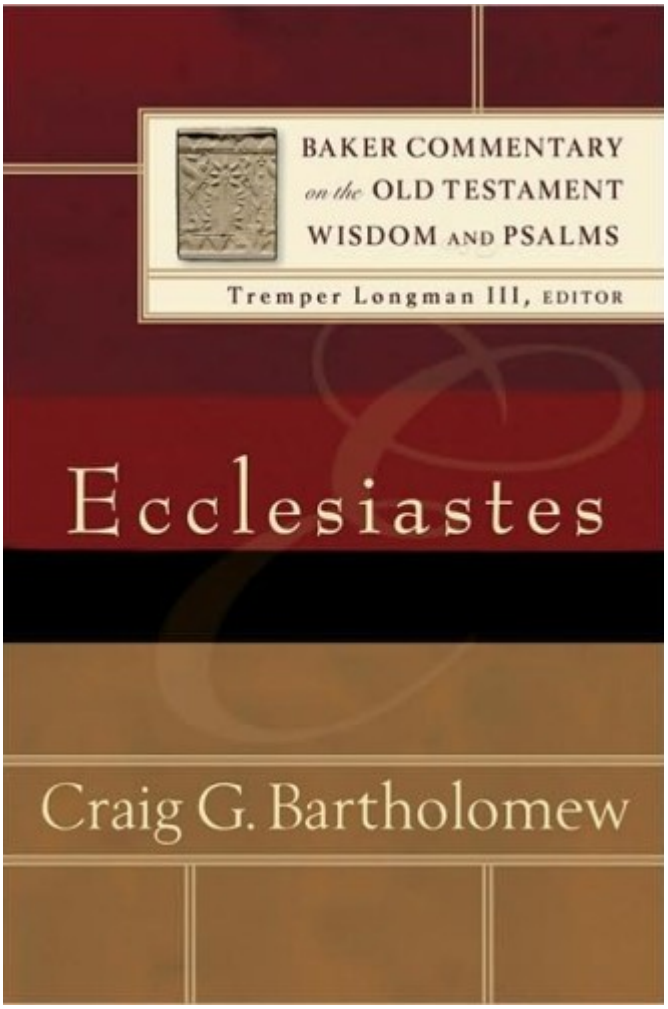
by J. Gerald Janzen in the May 31, 2011 issue

In Review



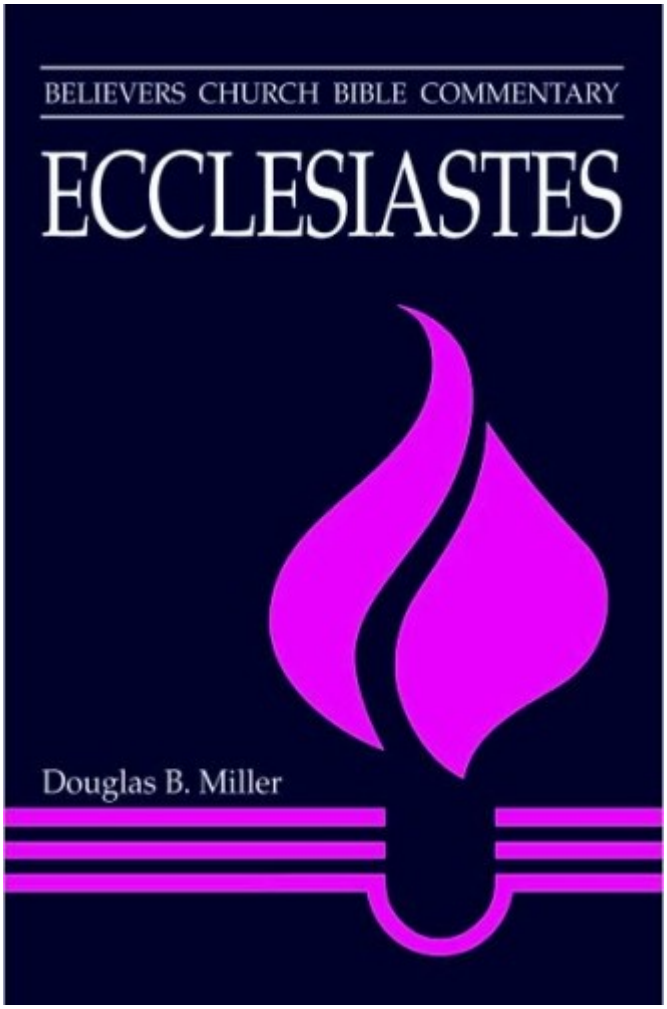
Ecclesiastes & the Song of Songs

by Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes
InterVarsity Press



Ecclesiastes

By Craig G. Bartholomew
Baker Academic



Ecclesiastes

By Douglas B. Miller
Herald Press

When Don Meredith, the Dallas Cowboys quarterback who became a well-known commentator on *Monday Night Football,* died last year, an obituary ended its account of what seems to have been an enviably full and varied life by quoting a comment he made to *Sports Illustrated:* "My deepest fear is that one day I'm going to find out that this is all there is to life, and it won't be enough."

Meredith voiced a sentiment sounded again and again by a biblical character known only by his title, *Qoheleth* (hereafter, Q), a man whose quoted words make up most of the book of Ecclesiastes (hereafter, E). He is a man who has undertaken to find out what there is to life, and whether—in the form of wealth, pleasure or the pursuit of wisdom—it will be enough. The question, in other words, "What is the point of it

all?" or "What does it all add up to?"

"I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven," he writes, and concludes, "It is an unhappy business that God has given to humankind to be busy with" (1:13). Repeatedly, after some specific experience or observation, he concludes, "*this* also is vanity [*hevel*]." So he frames the results of his search with the question (1:3), "What do people *gain* [Hebrew *yitron*; Greek *perisseia*] from all the toil ['*amal*] at which they toil under the sun?"—where *yitron,* like *perisseia,* means "surplus," something above and beyond mere subsistence as the fruit of one's efforts. Despite his acknowledgment of life's good things, and even occasions of genuine joy, this opening question seems to imply a negative answer. For in 2:11 he asserts, "I considered all that my hands had done and the toil ['*amal*] I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity [*hevel*] and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained [literally, "there was no *yitron*"] under the sun." What does it all add up to? "Vanity of vanities, says Qoheleth, vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (1:2; 12:8).

According to his report in 1:12–2:26, he has seen it all, done it all, had it all; and nothing has satisfied his desire for something more, something that will endure. Above all, he is haunted by the way death spells the end of "all this." As one commentator puts it, Q's refrain is the memento mori of the Bible.

Where is this man coming from? What is he doing in the Bible? What can he offer us, when his mood and outlook seem so at odds with the rest of the Bible and in particular with the New Testament message of Jesus' resurrection from the dead and Jesus' assertion (according to John 10:10), "I came that they may have life, and have abundance [*perisson*]"?

A rich literature has grown up around this book, from scholarly commentaries to offerings for a general readership. For example, Rabbi Harold Kushner followed his study of Job, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1983), with *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough* (1986), and in a Christian vein, James Limburg wrote *Encountering Ecclesiastes: A Book for Our Time* (2006). Three recent hefty studies have been published not only for members of the scholarly guild but for anyone who wishes to engage Q unhurriedly and at some depth.

Challenging the tradition that for centuries has viewed E as lying "on the margins of biblical theology," Daniel C. Fredericks proposes to show E's "affinity with the

breadth of OT [Old Testament] legal, poetic, wisdom and prophetic writings as well as the teachings of Christ and the apostles." He pursues this aim through the following moves.

First, noting that the word *hevel* elsewhere in the Bible can mean either "emptiness, vanity, futility" or "transience, temporariness," Fredericks takes Q to mean by it simply "transience." Second, he takes the opening question in 1:3 concerning the *yitron* of one's toil not as despairing but as finding its positive answer in Q's repeated affirmations of joy in one's work and its fruits and in one's wife and children—all regarded as God's gifts. Acknowledging that these "advantages can be pursued and enjoyed only while alive," Fredericks nevertheless takes Q as "never implying nor denying an afterlife." In his judgment, it is not that Q "does not have a perspective on the afterlife; it is that he does not want his people to be distracted by it." One is to focus on life and its joys now, consoled that the transience of all things means at least that "our experience of a fallen world and the evil within it is soon to pass."

For Fredericks, Q's theological reference points are divine creation and God's continuing sovereignty in the world and the hardness of life as a result of the Fall and its resulting curse, including the judgment of death. Under these conditions, Q offers sober, realistic but encouraging counsel for the pursuit of a life whose payoff, though transitory, is to be embraced as something received from God. If one may hope for more than Q did—if, for the Christian, "eternal life is a further blessing"—he takes from Q that "it is not the main blessing for whose who are already walking with God and enjoying his presence and gifts."

Douglas B. Miller also thinks that Q stands firmly within the biblical tradition, albeit within its realist rather than its visionary currents. He regards Q's portrayals of life's hardships, injustices, disappointments and enigmas not as expressions of pessimism or cynicism but as a way of gaining "street cred" for the positive teaching he offers on how to live in such a world meaningfully and with joy. As Miller notes, the measure of Q's success in establishing his credibility is the book's popularity among "those outside the faith" for whom "ours is a cold, lonely, and silent world." (One thinks here of Ernest Hemingway, who titled one of his novels *The Sun Also Rises,* echoing 1:5.)

For Miller, E also provides a rich resource for positive teaching within the church. With its exemplary combination of technical scholarship, rich discussion of key

words and ideas, sober theological reflection, pastoral application and general user-friendliness, Miller's commentary is ideal for individual or group study.

Though Miller consistently translates *hevel* as "vapor" (its apparent root meaning), he emphasizes (unlike Fredericks) that, as elsewhere in the Bible, the term is multivalent in its connotations of transience, insubstantiality, foulness and futility. Indeed, commenting on 2:18–23—a passage which Q congests with the words *labor, work, pain, vexation, toil* (seven times) and "this also is *hevel*" (three times)—Miller interprets "I gave my heart up to despair" to mean that "the term *vapor* does not merely declare that toil is futile, but something more intense." This accords with his proposal that Q "speaks primarily to those for whom a sense of God's closeness and promise are not currently possible."

Miller notes how Q places everything he has to say inside a double frame—(A) 1:2; (B) 1:3–11; (B') 12:1–7; (A') 12:8—where B and B' engage emergent apocalyptic themes. Contrary to apocalyptic expectation, 1:3–11 portrays a universe and a human story of everlasting ('*olam*) sameness in which "there is nothing new under the sun"; and 12:1–7 portrays not only human aging and death but (at another level of the symbolism) the everlasting ('*olam*) death of the cosmos. The latter outcome underscores Miller's observation that "the reality of death, for Q, affects everything else."

Miller observes that 3:11 is "considered by some to be the key verse of the entire book." That verse says, "He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put '*olam* into their hearts, yet [or, so that] they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." If this verse is key, it is also enigmatic. The meaning of '*olam* here (elsewhere in the OT, "forever" or "everlasting") continues to exercise interpreters, with four main proposals: "eternity," "obscurity," "world" and (emending to read '*amal*) "work, toil." And it is unclear whether the expression joining the last two clauses means "yet so that" or "so that."

While the majority of scholars date E to the Hellenistic period (third century), Miller finds persuasive (as I do) analyses that point to it being composed in the late fifth or early fourth century, when Persia ruled the Jewish world. The question arises as to whether this shift in dating, together with the recognition of apocalyptic themes in the book's beginning and end, may bear on the meaning of 3:11 and whether this in turn may shed light on Q's sense of life as *hevel*.

In a major commentary notable for its nuanced attention to philosophical and existential issues, ancient and contemporary, Craig G. Bartholomew notes how little attention scholars have paid to "the experience underlying" E. In his view, "some sense of its trauma is essential to grasping its structure." Although admitting that we can only guess at the origins of this trauma, he notes that there is also no consensus on other matters such as dating, structure, message and relation to OT traditions and international literature.

Acknowledging that dating the book's origin "depends on one's interpretation of E as a whole and of its social setting," Bartholomew settles on the Hellenistic period, mainly on the basis of what he takes to be the evident influence of Greek currents of thought. The trauma is a crisis of meaning resulting from "the demise of the great Israelite experiment" of national origins and destiny under God, which left Israelites living "in a period when Yahweh's promises seemed to have come to nothing." The temptation among educated Jews was to embrace Greek modes of thought that emphasized autonomous human experience, observation and reason over traditional stories of the gods. He sees Q agonizing over the tension between the appeal of such an approach to truth and traditional biblical convictions affirming the meaningfulness of life amid a divinely created cosmos that, for all its enigmas (Bartholomew translates *hevel* consistently as "enigma, enigmatic") and transitoriness, offers genuine if modest joys. The book is, then, "about the struggle to live with and resolve the agonized tension between" these two points of view.

The back-and-forth structure of the book tracks Q's own spiral movement between these two poles until, for Bartholomew, Q's unqualified affirmation in 11:7 of life's sweetness, and his counsel in 12:1 to "remember your creator in the days of your youth," signal a resolution to his quandary in favor of his Israelite heritage. The epilogist's celebration of "the sayings of the wise" in 12:11 refers, then, to Israel's wisdom tradition while the warning concerning the "many books" whose "study is a weariness of the flesh" is directed against "outside" wisdom such as that of the Greeks.

Bartholomew's discussion of "The Mystery of Time" in 3:1–15 is especially thought-provoking. Observing that "in vv. 1–8 time signifies the right occasion for things to take place in a creation ordered by God," he goes on to identify the human existential quandary: "In a timed world, humans recognize that 'there is a time and a place' and that in order to discern this they need a sense of the larger picture, what philosophers might call origin and telos. However, Q's problem is that they cannot

get access to this larger sense of 'duration.'"

So this passage presents us with "two contradictory approaches to the mystery of time. The one despairs of being able to discern the time and the place, whereas the other celebrates time as the context within which to rejoice, do good, eat and drink, and enjoy one's labor." Given his recognition of apocalyptic death-of-the-cosmos motifs in 12:1–7, one gathers that for him the mystery of time is eventually resolved by its annihilation in an '*olam* followed by—what? Nothingness apart from God?

I believe Bartholomew rightly diagnoses Q's existential trauma as arising over the apparent demise of the Israelite experiment in that Yahweh's promises seem to have come to nothing. But in my view he misidentifies Q's historical situation, and therefore the precise form of the promises over which Q despairs.

Like Miller, I take E to originate in the Persian and not the Hellenistic period—in which case the issue of Greek thought becomes less plausible. If 1:3–11 and 12:1–7 frame the whole of Q's discourse, the presence in them of apocalyptic motifs suggests that his agony of soul somehow turns on apocalyptic questions. The trauma over the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile is registered already in the wisdom tradition. In "A Note on Apocalyptic Origins" (in his *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*), Frank M. Cross sees Job and Second Isaiah as a Janus pair, Job looking back at that devastation and Isaiah 40–66 looking forward in a vision of a redeemed and restored Israel and, indeed, the creation of a new heaven and new earth. In and through this vision, the exilic community is invited to "see" (Isa. 42:18, 52:8, etc.) the new reality already springing forth (Isa. 43:19). It is a vision that encompasses the "beginning" and the "end" of human and cosmic history (40:21; 41:4, 26; 36:10; 48:16) as purposed (46:10, 55:11) and meaningful.

If servant Israel appears to have labored ('*amal*) "for nothing and vanity [*hevel*]" (Isa. 49:4; compare E 1:3), the Lord has given this same servant a tongue to "sustain with a word anyone that is weary" (Isa. 50:4; compare 40:31). Through such eschatological visions (as also in Ezekiel and Zechariah), Israel's "great experiment" is revived so that (in the words of Bildad to Job) "though your beginning was small, your latter days will be very great" (Job 8:7; compare 42:12). The theme is one of end-time "abundance" or "surplus" fulfillment (e.g., Isa. 65:17–25).

But Q finds himself living "under the sun" of Persia's imperial rule, whose symbol (after the god Ahura Mazda) is the sun disk emblazoned above a throne seat, a

symbol as ubiquitous throughout the empire as public representations of Saddam during his time. Under such a seemingly unending rule, Q finds the visionary words (1:8) of the apocalyptists "full of weariness." For, despite the cries of Second Isaiah's herald to "see" the new thing, Q complains that "the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing"; for all his searching, he can find "nothing new under the sun" (1:9–10). All things are everlastingly ('*olam*) the "same old same old."

Here we may have the clue to what Q means by '*olam* in 3:11: "God has put '*olam* in human hearts, so that they cannot find out what God is doing from beginning to end." The everlastingness of the present, without prospect of renewal, until it ends in everlasting nothingness, renders history opaque to human understanding; so one labors without hope of "surplus" satisfaction (1:3).

Yet as all three commentators underscore, Q somehow is able to affirm those modest, sweet joys that, while not enough to satisfy one's ultimate longings, nevertheless may be enjoyed before the darkness falls. If Q exhibits the truth of the first part of Proverbs 13:12—"Hope deferred makes the heart sick; but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life"—he is willing to nibble on such leaves as fall from the tree of life whose fruit seems out of reach.

Under the sway of the Enlightenment, which turned to autonomous reason and away from the rule of religious tradition, Western culture has lost its conviction as to the truth of the Christian narrative concerning the meaning and destiny of history. The vision of a cosmos that evolves with no apparent purpose and may well return to fiery or icy chaos (as Bertrand Russell envisions in his essay "A Free Man's Worship") leaves many people with a sense of life as *hevel.* For them (as for the father in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*), Q may serve as a biblical companion and encouragement. As Bartholomew says, "It is a sign of the richness and depth of Scripture that we have such a book in the canon, and of God's desire to meet us where we are . . ."

Bartholomew continues by saying that God's desire is "to lead us to full life in Christ amid the brokenness of the world." But there he may move too quickly, failing to appreciate that God may not only *meet* us where we are but also *stay with us* there, in our long eschatological confusion or despair, being present to us in life's more modest joys, however long it takes for the ultimate vision to reclaim our conviction.