

Ecclesiastes as a one-man show

In *Meaningless*, Rodney Brazil brings Qoheleth to life.

by [Lisa M. Wolfe](#) in the [March 2023](#) issue



Actor and writer Rodney Brazil on stage as Qoheleth in *Meaningless*, a one-man show about the book of Ecclesiastes. (Photo by Dennis Spielman)

I have always wanted to see the look on Qoheleth's face. An innovative thespian on a spiritual quest recently gave me that chance.

A colleague from the theater department at my university had told me that someone was doing a monologue of Ecclesiastes at a local fringe festival. I was excited in a way that betrays my particular nerdiness about this topic. I bought a ticket to *Meaningless* and sat up front, eagerly waiting to finally meet the sage, whom I had been studying for so many years, in person.

As a scholar of Ecclesiastes, I tend to refer to the book by its Hebrew title, which comes from the name of its purported speaker and author, Qoheleth, and means something like "assembler," "teacher," or "philosopher." I can talk to you for a

whole semester about text-critical issues, historical context, translation dilemmas, literary analysis, and debates over dating. That's not what this show was about. Instead, it immersed me in the mysterious beauty of this harshly realistic book.

Over more than 30 years of researching Ecclesiastes, I have engaged the obligatory scholarly methodologies of biblical studies. But I have also wondered how Qoheleth would have delivered these verses. I've asked myself what tone of voice this ancient sage might have used in saying, "There are righteous ones who are treated according to the acts of the wicked, and there are wicked ones treated according to the acts of the righteous" (8:14). Did this statement come with a sarcastic chuckle, a pounding fist, or pure indignance? Those were the kinds of questions that undergirded *Meaningless*, which was performed and produced by Oklahoma City-based Rodney Brazil and directed by Emily Etherton.

Brazil had me from the classic opening line: "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless," which he delivered with dryly comic resolve. His fedora and duffel bag indicated the journey he had taken to that moment onstage and invited us to join him in Qoheleth's often daunting thought experiment. Brazil took a velvet touch with this tricky text, but without dodging its difficulties. His performance was full of heart and sincerity. It struck me as the most comforting way I've ever engaged this book which my colleague Harold Washington has described as "astringent."

Apparently, what this book needs for proper interpretation is for its author to look right at you: with a smirk, with slightly teary eyes, with resignation, with a chalkboard to explain a situation, with solidarity for our shared human suffering and frailties. At one point Brazil as Qoheleth read out of a small notebook with pencil in hand, as though inviting communal reflection on some saying he'd recently composed; later he delivered lines out of a book, as though reflecting on someone else's aphorisms. In both cases, Brazil inhabited scholarly speculations about the book's background.

When I was in seminary, Tom Boomershine introduced me to biblical storytelling and its guild, the Network of Biblical Storytellers International, which returns the texts to their oral and community-based settings. It's a reminder of the ways our sibling religions, other "people of the book," engage with scripture, by memorizing it for recitation and chanting. While Jews and Muslims notably do this in the original languages, participants in NBSI learn passages by heart in the vernacular and then retell them from the heart.

The performances tend to be church-focused. A good biblical storyteller adds nuance and meaning to Bible readings that too often have come to us as dry, monotone, unpracticed presentations from someone looking down at a lectern. Biblical storytelling is as difficult as it sounds, a humbling exercise for one who calls herself a scholar of the text. I've tried it, but it is challenging in many ways, not least because of the memorization. The practice pays off, however. It forces engagement with the details of a passage in a way no other research strategy provides. When I really want to dig into a text, I work to memorize it.

Being exposed to such performative interpretation decades ago prompted me to add a whole new chapter of methodology to my typical Bible scholar questions, one concerned with gestures, vocal inflections, and audience interactions. While Brazil's *Meaningless* does essentially the same thing as the NBSI tellings—present a memorized biblical text—his piece falls into a different category of biblical storytelling by virtue of its context. This is Bible as theater, performed by a trained actor, in secular settings that highlight experimental drama, not worship. And given the content of Ecclesiastes, this is no *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. It's more *Waiting for Godot*.

The questions of biblical storytelling are relevant for almost every part of the Bible, but they nag at me with unique intensity when it comes to Ecclesiastes because this book offers so much room for interpretation. We fill in textual gaps for all the biblical books using our own speculations. But Ecclesiastes could win a prize for most textual gaps in the Bible, which leaves ample room for us to insert our own assumptions. Hence one scholar has dubbed Qoheleth “Pessimist” while another called the sage “Preacher of Joy.” My teacher Julie Duncan expressed this conundrum by describing Ecclesiastes as a Rorschach test for the interpreter.

When I bring the insights of biblical storytelling to the massive ambiguities in Qoheleth, I have to look up from the text and stare into the distance to imagine how Qoheleth's presentation might have resolved its problem passages. Did the philosopher use any props when musing about “handfuls” in 4:6? Where did the sage point when referring to the places of justice and righteousness in 3:16? How did the audience react when Qoheleth said the dead were better off than the living in 4:2? Brazil's show was the best opportunity I have had to enliven these kinds of questions.

One of the biggest scholarly debates about Ecclesiastes in the past 40 years has been the translation of Qoheleth's theme word *hevel*. Ever since Jerome translated the book in the fourth century, the predominant rendering of *hevel* has been *vanitas* (Latin) and its derivative "vanity" (English). But what does this mean in 21st-century English? Many of us will internally cue Carly Simon's hilariously biting lyric, "You're so vain / You probably think this song is about you." Or perhaps we'll envision that piece of furniture called a vanity, with drawers and a mirror. While vanity in these senses is relevant for Qoheleth, neither comes close to the nuances of *hevel* in the book. Brazil's play, with its title *Meaningless* taken directly from the New Living Translation, unwittingly joins this scholarly discussion about how best to translate *hevel*.

One of the first academic monographs I read was Michael V. Fox's 1989 *Qohelet and His Contradictions*. As someone only beginning to engage with biblical scholarship, I found it fascinating and influential, to say the least. Fox's central thesis is that the book's contradictions are internal to one author, not the result of multiple voices—something Brazil personifies in his one-man show. Beyond that, Fox makes a case to translate *hevel* as "absurd" or "absurdity," depending on the context. He relates this translation to Albert Camus's idea that the absurd involves disjunction between what should be logically joined. For me, this accurately reflects how Qoheleth uses *hevel*: to describe work that produces no gain, unsatisfied longing to know the right times of life, a failed test of pleasure, an unfulfilled need for justice.

In the pages of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, the preeminent publication of biblical scholarship, a heated debate has played out in the past five years between Fox and Mark Sneed over the best translation of *hevel*. Sneed counters Fox's decades-old translation "absurd," arguing that it relies on an "anachronistic" use of modern existentialism to understand an ancient thinker. Sneed also makes the case that "absurd" lies outside other canonical uses of *hevel*, and it does not align with Qoheleth's sevenfold carpe diem theme through the rest of the book. Sneed proposes "worthless" instead, indicating the opposite of what matters. He relates "worthless" to its frequent association with the phrase "chasing after wind," which appears in the book nine times—it's an action that Brazil mimes memorably throughout his show.

But I think that Qoheleth is referring to the presence of something, not only the absence of meaning and worth and the like. These translations only point to the absence. While intrigued by these translation debates, I have instead long

advocated for reading Ecclesiastes by simply using the original Hebrew *hevel* all 38 times through the book. That way, an English reader can let the book fill in the meaning for the term.

I found Brazil's performance the most useful method thus far for considering a particular translation of *hevel*. In the end, I felt that "absurd" would have fit better than "meaningless." One of Brazil's audience members commented on the show's website, "My experience in watching 'meaningless' was anything but." And this contradiction seems worthy of attention. I'll have to see the show again to reconsider Sneed's "worthless." Whether "absurd," "worthless," or "meaningless," we still must remember the Rorschach test quality of Ecclesiastes: everyone should test this for themselves. I'd like to see Brazil do the play using *hevel* throughout, and then maybe we could decide what Qoheleth meant by it.

Translation issues aside, Ecclesiastes can be unsettling to those who expect the Bible to resolve their existential crises or guide them along spiritual journeys. Brazil opened his show by saying that the sudden death of his father had prompted him to search for meaning, and Ecclesiastes helped him ultimately settle on this *Meaningless* project. I asked him later whether he felt satisfied by Qoheleth's persistent questions, challenges, and contradictions. He replied,

This is exactly what resonates with me. The world is a mystery, and accepting that it's a mystery is so freeing, and for me, comforting. It's not my job to figure all this out. People have been trying to do that for thousands of years, and this spiritual text gives us some things to think about, but ultimately, it's all an enigma. Or vapor. Or "meaningless." One of my favorite passages is, "In my search for wisdom and in my observation of people's burdens here on earth, I discovered that there is ceaseless activity, day and night. I realized that no one can discover everything God is doing under the sun. Not even the wisest people discover everything, no matter what they claim" [8:16-17]. Every time I get to this part of the show, it hits me in my soul.

And while Brazil does not present this text in a particularly religious way—nor in religious settings—it strikes me that one thing that makes a text scripture is that it hits you in your soul.

One of the audience reactions on Brazil's website reads, "I was totally transfixed. It is possible that once you have seen this show you will never look at the Bible in the same way again." There's the transformative power of Qoheleth as theater! This

also aligns with my belief that many people misunderstand, love, or hate the Bible because they have not actually read it, and that Ecclesiastes is a model book for reconsidering one's view of the Bible. In other words, state your understanding of the Bible, and then read Ecclesiastes. Now, do you need to go back and change your overall understanding of the Bible? *Meaningless* makes us do that.

I've found myself reflecting on other ways I might edit Brazil's command performance. I would have added to Brazil's bag of props a beer stein or growler. He does have a wine bottle, as is fitting based on the carpe diem saying that mentions wine in 9:7. But beer would relate to my interpretation of the puzzling verse 11:1, "Send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back." I argue that this verse is about beer-making. It describes the process for brewing ale in biblical times, which—in simplified terms—involved putting bread in water and letting it ferment. This reference fits with the sevenfold carpe diem in the book, where Qoheleth recommends eating, drinking, and enjoying life. Beer was a staple and surely was a part of Qoheleth's repertoire!

As a feminist interpreter of Ecclesiastes, this interests me because it spotlights the women who were the brewmasters in the ancient world. Maybe this would be one place to bring in a side character, a woman tavern keeper akin to Siduri in *Gilgamesh*. Her advice to that ancient superhero was much like the carpe diem Qoheleth advocated; her wisdom was served alongside the week's brew.

That brings me to one more request, with apologies to Brazil: I want to see *Meaningless* performed by a woman. In my recent book I practiced the discipline of not gendering Qoheleth, as seemed fitting for a feminist commentary, especially given some intriguing instances of gender-bending in Ecclesiastes. Now that I have seen how effective a monologue can be for considering the meaning of this book, I wonder how a female Qoheleth would deliver the line, "I found more bitter than death the woman who is a trap" (7:26). Would she offer this as a serious analysis of the literary personification of Wisdom as a woman, familiar from Proverbs 1–9, or would she do it in drag, as a way of angrily ridiculing the patriarchy?

Rodney Brazil's *Meaningless* is still touring (see meaningless.live), so if you're lucky, you might be able to catch it somewhere near you or work it into your travel plans. Rorschach test or not, Brazil has rightly inhabited Qoheleth.