9

Should We Take Time for War?

Moral Indeterminacy in Qohelet's Poem

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According to Ecclesiastes 3:8, there is "a time for war, and a time for peace."[1] This brief phrase, found within the well-known time poem of Ecclesiastes (3:1–8), is interpreted by many to mean that war, though horrific, is at certain times an appropriate, even divinely approved, course of action.[2] To justify such a thesis, I propose, would require establishing one or more of the following: divine determination, divine approval, or the author's commendation of the war element. I will argue that none of these three can be sustained, particularly due to the moral indeterminacy of elements within the poem.

TIME AS A WISDOM THEME

The quest among ancient Near Eastern sages to discern the right time for specific actions and events is well documented. Within the Bible, Prov 15:23 urges: "To make an apt answer is a joy to anyone, and a word in its time, how good it is!" and in 25:11, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a

1. Translations of biblical texts are the author's.

2. See, for example, Craigie, *Problem of War*, 93, 111–12; Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes*, 65; and Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 117. Many commentaries pass over the issue of contemporary relevance in regard to the poem's elements, including war, though some insist that the poem is not prescriptive (see discussion below).

setting of silver." The sages also addressed the importance of being prepared for challenging times (Prov 24:16; 27:10) and their disappointment with those who are not reliable in such circumstances (Prov 25:19). Not to know one's time might elicit divine discipline (Jer 8:7–10). Wisdom knows the outcome of seasons and times (Wis 8:8), and to know the appointed times is to be wise (Job 39:1–2; 1 Chr 12:33 [Eng. v. 32]). Such understanding included awareness that each person had a designated time for death (Job 15:32). For many of the ancient teachers, the "aim of wisdom instruction was, in large measure, the recognition of the right time, the right place, and the right extent for human activity."[3]

Into this intellectual milieu came Qohelet's poem.[4] Following the Teacher's royal investigation, with its gloomy assessment of pleasure, wisdom, and work (Eccl 1:16—2:23), and the only slightly more hopeful perspective of 2:24–26, the start of chapter 3 takes a new look at human existence through the dimension of time. Qohelet previously compared human activity to the cycles of the natural world (1:3–11) and acknowledged the mysterious and arbitrary actions of the Deity (1:13–15). He now examines God's relation to timing in the activities of life. Although there are connections to the previous unit, this section (3:1–15) is unified by its attention to the sovereignty of God in overseeing events. The theme is further developed in the area of judgment (3:16–22). The latter paragraph resumes the issue of fate raised in 2:12–17, and the conclusion regarding pleasure (in 3:22) both reinforces 3:13 and reaffirms 2:24–26.

THE TIME POEM ITSELF

The poem begins with the statement, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Eccl 3:1).[5] The terms *season* (*zĕmān*) and *time* (*ʿēt*) have received much attention.[6] To summarize the current consensus, these terms are roughly synonymous, particularly as Qohelet

3. H. H. Schmid quoted in Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 159. Cf. also Sir 1:23–24; 4:20, 23; Hos 13:13; and Pss 1:3; 37:13; 119:126.

4. The book's author, that is the first-person voice speaking from 1:2 through 12:8, will be referred to as Qohelet, the Teacher, and the Sage throughout.

5. With few exceptions, there is little debate concerning the translation of the poem. With their consistent rhythmic syntax, these verses share characteristics of both a poem and a list (Whybray, "Time to Be Born," 469–70). Some interpretations understand v. 1 to be a thematic prose introduction to the poem (RSV, NRSV, NJPS, NJB), while others read it as verse and part of the poem (T/NIV, NKJV, NLT, NCV, NAB). See the discussion in Linafelt and Dobbs-Allsopp, "Poetic Line Structure."

6. See Barr, *Words for Time*; Wilch, *Time and Event*; Brin, *Concept of Time*.

employs them.[7] They both indicate identifiable periods of time, more than the passing of time. The term *zĕmān* (only here in Ecclesiastes) can indicate an annual ritual or an appointment (cf. Esth 9:27; Neh 2:6). The term *ʿēt* (employed exclusively through the rest of the poem and book) is used more broadly of a segment of time (a king's reign), periodic events (winter), sporadic events (a time of famine), and potential events (circumstances best for harvest).[8] Wilch's summary is apt:

- Qohelet does not have moments of time in mind but *occasions* or *situations*.
- He does not mean critical or decisive occasions, but rather *all* occasions.
- He does not mean only situations for decision but *all* situations that are presented in the daily course of life, e.g., emotional reactions and passive experiences as well as decisions for a particular activity.[9]

To conclude verse 1, the word *ḥēpeṣ* (matter, pleasure, desire), in its later usage, is a general term indicating something that occurs.[10] All these occur "under heaven," that is, the realm of normal human existence.

The poem then lays out fourteen pairs of elements: birth and death, breaking down and building up, weeping and laughing, and so on. The exact nature of the polarities is debated. Some call them *merism*, a pairing by which a totality is expressed through contrasting parts (e.g., near and far, old and young). Birth and death seem to qualify (= all of life) but not the others (does weeping and laughing = all emotions?). Another approach is to label these as *opposites,* because the elements cannot be done simultaneously (e.g., embracing and not embracing). Yet a mother can die giving birth (v. 2), and in a conversation, some are silent while others speak (v. 7). It is best, with Fox, to understand the list to imply totality by giving

7. This is also the consensus concerning their translation equivalents in the LXX, *chronos* and *kairos* respectively. Wordplay and synonymity are part of Qohelet's literary style. See Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric*, 15–18; Sasson, "Wordplay in the OT."

8. As Fox explains, "'*ēt* does not in itself indicate the notion of 'appointment,' of the designation of a certain moment or period in advance" (Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 198n12).

9. Wilch, *Time and Event*, 122.

10. Most scholars date the book to either the fifth or the third centuries BCE. Those favoring a preexilic provenance for the book incline toward a meaning of "wish" or "choice" in 3:1 (Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 108), based on the meaning of the root *ḥēpeṣ* ("to choose or delight in") as evident in Eccl 8:3. The noun occurs elsewhere in Eccl to mean "pleasure" (5:3 [Eng. v. 4]; 12:1) but in late Hebrew may also mean "matter, business" (as in 3:1, 17; 5:7 [Eng. v. 8]; 8:6; 12:10). The former meaning of the noun does not fit well in 3:1, 17: Qohelet is not addressing only pleasures, nor are all elements in the time poem a matter of choice.

a broad range of examples, all of which are in some sense opposite to the other though not all in the same way.[11] Completeness is also indicated by the number of elements: *seven* double pairs.

The syntactic pattern in verses 2–8 is the noun *ʿēt* (time) plus verbs in the infinitive construct. In all but three cases, these infinitives are preceded by the preposition *lĕ*.[12] Considering that the final two elements are nouns (war and peace), it is best to consider the infinitives as gerunds, and to translate "a time for mourning" rather than "a time to mourn," and so on. This is analogous to the use of *lĕ* in verse 1: "a time *for* every matter."[13] Even so, we are left with five different possibilities for the meaning of *ʿēt* plus infinitive construct. They are:

1. Actual: something that regularly happens apart from human involvement: "the time of evening" (Gen 24:11); "at the (seasonal) time for the mating of the flock" (Gen 31:10).
2. Actual: something involving humans that happens apart from human choice: "the time for her delivery (of a child)" (Gen 38:27).
3. Potential: time for something that *should* happen, a *moral or religious obligation*: "the time for seeking the Lord" (Hos 10:12); "the time for building the house of the Lord" (Hag 1:2; cf. 2 Kgs 5:26).
4. Potential: time for something that *should* happen, a *socially appropriate or strategic choice*: "the time when women go out to draw water" (Gen 24:11; cf. 29:7); "the time for the giving of Merab . . . to David" (1 Sam 18:19); "the spring of the year, the time of the going forth of kings (to battle)" (2 Sam 11:1; 1 Chron 20:1).
5. Actual: God's actions, past or future: "the time for the coming of [the Lord's] word" (Ps 105:19; cf. Ps 102:14 [Eng. v. 13]; Zeph 3:20).

In the time poem, there are no events from category 1; all concern human activity. Category 2 items include those in verse 2a (dying and giving birth),[14] but also healing (v. 3) and losing (v. 6). Nothing clearly connects with category 3, something with a moral or religious obligation; however, relevant poem elements could include building (v. 3, e.g., God's house, Hag 1:2), and seeking (v. 6, e.g., the Lord, Jer 29:13; Hos 3:5) or keeping (v. 6, e.g., a religious feast, Exod 12:17; God's covenant, Exod 19:5). Category 4,

11. Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 194.

12. The exceptions are at v. 4b and v. 5aβ.

13. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 160.

14. Contra NRSV, NIV, and many others, the phrase does not mean "being born" but "giving birth" (Blenkinsopp, "Another Interpretation," 56–57; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 160).

appropriate or strategic actions, seemingly involves the majority of the items: planting, weeping/laughing, mourning/dancing, silence/speaking, and many more.

For present purposes, two important considerations remain: (1) whether war (and peace) should be included in categories 3 or 4, and (2) whether any or all of the list fits into category 5, divine action. On these two matters the poem itself is completely ambiguous. Despite a common assumption, the poem does not declare divine direction or prescription of the elements. Perhaps in reference to the phrase "under heaven," the Targum inserts the word *bḥyr* (chosen) to signify that each time is divinely appointed.[15] Supplementation is also necessary to resolve the moral ambiguity of the elements. One cannot assess love, hate, tearing down, and building up without more information. Loving the *good* is ethical, but loving the *wrong* is unethical, similarly for hating evil as opposed to hating one's neighbor. Breaking down someone's home or building a pagan shrine would be wrong, but tearing down an unsafe structure or building something useful could be good. The Targum and the midrash resolve the moral uncertainty by additions and explanations. Examples from the Targum include "kill *in battle*," "rend *a garment over a dead person*," and "hate *the guilty*"; from the midrash, embracing *the righteous*, keeping silent *during a time of mourning*, and applying the whole poem to God's actions on behalf of Israel.[16]

We note in passing that several proposals have been made for the poem's stand-alone message as well as for subthemes within the poem. None has won consensus, and none is determinative for addressing our concern for Qohelet's comment about war.[17] The variety of interpretations given the time poem further testify to its ambiguity apart from a larger literary context. We consider now the significance of the context in which we find the poem.[18]

15. "A time chosen to embrace," etc. Levine assesses the Targum as permeated with the influence of astrology, reflected in its use of the term *mazal*, a kind of fate influenced by the Deity. See his discussion of determinism in the Qohelet Targum (Levine, *Aramaic Version of Qohelet*, 75–76, as cited in Knobel, *Targum of Qohelet*, 29). Translations of the Targum in this essay are from Knobel.

16. Cohen, *Midrash Rabbah: Ecclesiastes*.

17. Plausible themes for the poem as a whole include war and sexuality. On the latter, and esp. the treatment of 3:5, see Brenner, "M Text Authority." See also A. Wright, "For Everything There is a Season"; Loader, "Qohelet 3,2–8."

18. On the distinction between the poem as an isolated piece and Qohelet's use of it, see Gordis, *Koheleth*, 228.

QOHELET'S USE OF THE POEM

When we turn to the question of how Qohelet employs the poem in the book, what we find suggests that the poem was likely borrowed or adapted by the Teacher rather than composed by him.[19] Terms and phrases found in verse 1 and in the question of verse 9 are found elsewhere.[20] But half of the twenty-eight elements are never mentioned again in the book, and six more just once or twice. Only eight are mentioned outside the poem three times or more.[21] Even when Qohelet mentions the poem elements elsewhere, he typically does not evaluate them. For example, though death receives a negative assessment, especially because it conspires against justice (e.g., 2:14–16; 8:10–15), war is recounted twice elsewhere without comment (8:8; 9:11).[22] On the question of war, then, the function of the poem within the book is crucial.

In this regard, we need to pay close attention to Qohelet's style. As for other sages, ambiguity is an important part of the Teacher's rhetoric through which he challenges his audience to discern the true from the false, the wise from the unwise. As Wilson explains,

> the purposeful use of ambiguity is a way of reminding the reader that wisdom observations usually reflect part, not all, of the truth. In other words, what is being asserted from one viewpoint might need to be qualified by other perspectives. . . . Deliberate ambiguity does not mean uncertainty of meaning. Rather, it is simply to identify a feature of the text that invites the reader to re-read the text in order to arrive at the final meaning. The meaning is, in fact, richer when it affirms two aspects which

19. Whybray, "Time to Be Born," 480. Other sections where this may be the case include 7:5–6; 10:2–3; 10:12–15; and 12:1–7.

20. According to Krüger, the structure of 3:1–9 mirrors that of 1:3–9 (Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 75).

21. Eight items mentioned three times or more: birth, death, planting, seeking, losing, keeping, speaking, and loving. Six mentioned once or twice: breaking down, building up, laughing, mourning, hating, and war. Fourteen items not found elsewhere in the book: plucking up, killing, healing, weeping, dancing, throwing and gathering stones, embracing and refraining from embracing, throwing, tearing, sewing, keeping silent, and peace. Other matters for which Qohelet states approval (community, 4:9–12) or *dis*approval (oppression, 4:1–3) are missing from the poem.

22. In 8:8, "no discharge from the battle," Qohelet does not speak of the inevitability of war but uses an analogy to claim that wicked oppressors will not escape judgment in the same way that the wealthy can escape war by hiring someone to take their place (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 282–83). The anecdote recounted in 9:11–18 celebrates the power of wisdom over weapons of war to overcome a besieging enemy, though we are not told how (negotiation?).

> may be in tension with each other, but which are both equally true to life.[23]

For this reason, we should not be surprised that the poem (taken on its own) is susceptible to more than one interpretation.[24]

Qohelet has more than one thing to say about time: God has ordered the world, and it is best to comply with that order; yet God has also ordained that humans only partially understand. He introduces the topic with a poem that, by itself, may be interpreted in a variety of ways.[25] The discussion of time raises other points concerning God, humanity, and their relationship.

Another of Qohelet's strategies is to introduce a poem or event and then to comment on it (e.g., 1:3–8, followed by 1:9–11; also 4:1–3 with 4:4–12; and 6:1–2 with 6:3–6). Thus we must stay alert to possible reflections on the poem—as well as thematically related material—elsewhere in the book. In the case of the time poem, there is double commentary. In the first (3:9–15), Qohelet calls into question the value of the human activity represented in the poem. He affirms that God has arranged appropriate times for things, but then has hidden the plan from mortals by placing a sense of eternity or perpetuity (*ʿôlām*) within them. Qohelet counsels enjoyment and doing good, while stating that God acts to motivate awe of the divine. The second commentary (3:16–22) takes up the theme of human wickedness with the consolation that God will judge at the appropriate time. God tests humans to demonstrate that they are dust. The Sage declares existence after death to be unknowable and counsels enjoyment of work.

A brief overview will need to suffice concerning Qohelet's other teachings about time.[26] In 7:17, he counsels not to be wicked or a fool, lest one's time of death arrive prematurely. Section 8:1–9 employs *ʿēt* three times. In 8:5–6, it is twice combined with *mišpāṭ* to indicate that judgment will come at an appropriate time. One can be encouraged that unjust rulers cannot

23. Wilson, "Artful Ambiguity," 364.

24. For my understanding of the rhetorical strategy in the book—credibility, critique, and counsel—see Miller, "What the Preacher Forgot." Elements employed with ambiguity include the symbolic use of *hebel* (vapor, "vanity"), his use of questions, and his use of double entendre. See Wilson, "Artful Ambiguity"; Johnson, *Rhetorical Question*; and, for a very different understanding of the book's rhetoric from my own, Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, esp. chap. 3.

25. Wilson demonstrates this in regard to the opening poem in Ecclesiastes: "The same words can indicate both the regularity of nature and the apparent pointlessness of human activity. Both interpretations pass the wisdom test of ringing true to the sage's experiences and observations of the world" (Wilson, "Artful Ambiguity"). Similarly, Fox, "Indeterminacy," 175.

26. A total of forty occurrences for Qohelet's preferred word for time, *ʿēt*, twenty-nine of these in the time poem itself.

circumvent the day of death, though oppression is a present reality (8:9). Qohelet's strong commendation of enjoyment in 9:7–10 urges for it "in every time." This is best understood not as a challenge to the time poem at 3:4–5 (times for weeping/laughing, mourning/dancing); rather, Qohelet cites coming death to provide urgency to his counsel. In 9:11–12, Qohelet thrice refers to time as part of his concern for death: "no one can know their time" (v. 12) and all have the same fate. Finally, in 10:17, Qohelet congratulates those whose rulers feast at the right time, for "strength and not for drunkenness."

As Schultz notes, each occurrence of *ʿēt* subsequent to the time poem seems to refer back to the poem: 3:11, to express frustration that humans are not clued in to God's activities; 3:17, to be encouraged that justice will happen at the right time; 7:17, to show that the time of death is not completely predestined; 8:5, 6, 9, again concerning the time of judgment (as in 3:17); 9:8, showing that some things transcend specific times; 9:11–12, again concerning death; and 10:17, of rulers alert to appropriate times.[27] There is no reason to doubt that Qohelet has a consistent approach to time. It remains to determine how that is best described.

FOUR QUESTIONS, FIVE ANSWERS

The poem in chapter 3 has become a focal point concerning major philosophical questions addressed to the book. Scholars agree that Qohelet insists on God's control to some extent and that this involves complications for human beings. The extent of that control is debated. The intersection of God's oversight with human choice and their relationship to the twenty-eight elements of the time poem raises key questions:

1. *Is God's oversight a strong or a weak determinism*? *Weak* means that God allows for human choice to some extent.
2. If it is weak determinism, *are these actual events or potential events*? *Potential* means that God does not impose them, but allows them and may invite some or all to happen.
3. *Is there strong, medium, or weak human agency?*
4. *Does God approve of all these events or not?*

These questions have led to five major positions for interpreting Qohelet's use of the poem.

27. Schultz, "Sense of Timing," 260–62.

Position 1. Strong determinism, actual events, God-approved

All twenty-eight poem elements are parts of God's plan for the universe. Humans cannot change anything. Humans are puppets "appointed" for activities; they do not make their own choices.[28]

Problems: For Qohelet, God is capable of operating this way (1:15; 7:13; cf. Prov 16:1, 9, 33; 19:21; 20:24; 21:31). Yet his rejection of strong determinism is evident in fifty direct instructions (imperatives and jussives with the negative particle) in addition to less direct instructions, e.g., his use of "better than" sayings to counsel enjoyment of God's good gifts (2:24–26; 8:15, et al.). Humans have some choice and can expect to be held accountable for these choices (3:17; 5:5 [Eng. v. 6]). The tension between divine sovereignty and human choice is not a problem to which Qohelet devotes much space: it is part of life's reality for which he gives counsel, assuming that humans can choose some ways that are better than others. Qohelet's confidence that God will sovereignly judge the wicked is even a source of encouragement in the midst of experiences that suggest otherwise (e.g., 3:17; 8:10–14).

Position 2. Weak determinism, actual events, God-approved, weak human agency

All elements are parts of God's plan for the universe. Humans have only the ability to cooperate with events and circumstances in order to help make them happen. From this perspective, the question of 1:3/3:9 urges mortals to consider how few choices they have in face of a controlling Deity.[29]

Problems: This allows for some human choice, but not enough. Qohelet conducts experiments and explorations (notably in 1:12—2:26) that seem unhindered by divine orchestration. Other indicators are that humans have sought out *many schemes* (7:29) and are capable of dying before their *time* (7:17), suggesting that both God and humans can cause a change in the

28. "All events have a time when they will occur . . . God determines when this is. . . . man cannot change the course of events," the early position of Fox (Fox, *Contradictions*, 191), cf. also Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 39; Kaiser, "Determination und Freiheit." Schoors claims to embrace Fox's early position, yet insists this does not mean absolute predetermination or exclusion of a limited human freedom for action, represented by my option 2 (Schoors, *Preacher Sought*, 115).

29. Fox's more tempered view (Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 197). One version of this approach is to assess Qohelet as a wealthy sage, depressed and resigned to the inequities of life but conveniently so because of his own relative comfort; Qohelet sees injustice but is impotent, even though the poem itself actually allows for a call to struggle against injustice (Song, "Asian Perspective").

time.[30] More positively, humans are capable of making their relationships and work better (4:1–12).[31] Schultz addresses the question of determinism in the poem by showing how Qohelet elsewhere encourages his readers to make the most of their time. After 3:11, which affirms God's role in the times announced in 3:1, all subsequent occurrences of the term *ʿēt* (time) involve Qohelet's admonitions to his readers: the call to enjoy life (3:16–22); warning of premature death (7:17); astute decisions to make at a time of injustice (8:1–9, *ʿēt* 3x); preferred ways to live in light of death (9:7–12, *ʿēt* 4x); and the call for a nation to rejoice when it has leaders who feast at the appropriate time (10:17).[32]

Position 3. Weak determinism, potential events, God-approved, strong or medium human agency

An appropriate time is "appointed" by God for mourning, dancing, and so on. All poem elements are part of the way God made the universe operate and are desirable from God's perspective. Strong human agency says that mortals should astutely take advantage of this awareness: to make one's life as successful as possible, recognize the appointed times and act in complementarity with them. Even times of giving birth, dying, and healing, though not chosen by the immediate participants,[33] may require appropriate responses from others who are involved. Alternately (medium human agency), the poem challenges its audience to comply correctly with the occasions to the extent that they are able, though not all may happen appropriately because of human ignorance or failure. Though some have argued that emotions (weeping, laughing, mourning, loving, hating) are not under one's control, these have an actional dimension (subject to choice)

30. Frydrych, *Living under the Sun*, 120–21.

31. Rudman argues that Qohelet resolves the problem of evil and human freedom as did Cleanthes, the Greek Stoic: "the righteous are stated to be under God's deterministic control, while the wicked are said to act outside it" (Rudman, *Determinism*, 198). However, Qohelet's struggle with the Deity has more to do with making sense of the divine plan than with solving the problem of evil and human freedom (6:12; 8:17; cf. 7:20, 29).

32. Schultz, "Sense of Timing," 260–62. Note also in the Psalms how God can be praised for being a refuge in a *time* (*ʿēt*) of trouble, without assuming that the Deity was somehow also the source of the trouble (Pss 37:19; 62:8). It is true that elsewhere God is given credit for both good and ill (e.g., Exod 4:11).

33. Though see Hos 13:13.

and likely involve the educational agenda of training to respond to situations with emotional appropriateness.[34]

Problems: The strong human agency version of this approach falls within the traditional wisdom perspective on time and is plausibly the message of an original poem borrowed or adapted by Qohelet. However, in its extant form the items listed do not emphasize human initiative. It seems odd to include matters over which people have little control (birth, death, healing, losing) if the poem concerns human initiative for success; in fact, very few of the elements (planting, building, gathering stones, seeking, speaking) lend themselves to such strategizing. Externally, Qohelet's commentaries following the poem (3:9–15; 3:16–22) suggest that his use of the poem is parody-like. In the first, (1) he raises the question whether humans actually accomplish much of value, even if they do the right things at the right time (3:9; cf. 1:3),[35] and (2) he insists that God has arranged matters so that mortals cannot be consistently sure what God is doing in this world (3:11; cf. 9:11–12). Human agency is restricted. However, even the "medium human agency" version of this approach falters because it is not clear that all elements are to be embraced as part of a divine plan.

To pause for a moment, positions 1, 2, and 3 argue that all twenty-eight items in the poem align with divine approval.[36] But several factors call this into question. The terms for time in the thesis statement of 3:1, *ʿēt* and *zĕmān*, do not in themselves require that the elements in the poem be matters of divine approval.[37] Elsewhere Qohelet commends certain actions

34. Contra Eaton, "Events and characteristic seasons of time are imposed upon men: no-one chooses a time to weep" (Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 77). See also Rudman, *Determinism*, especially chaps. 5 and 6. This excessively affective approach to emotion seems inconsistent with the more actional nature of Hebrew terms such as *love* (e.g., Deut 6:5) and *hate* (e.g., Exod 20:5), esp. in the wisdom literature (Prov 8:36; 28:16; 29:3).

35. In 3:9–15, Qohelet uses the Hebrew word *ʿāsāh* (to do) seven times. Verse 9 asks rhetorically what the human gains for all that the human *does* (*ʿāsāh*). The next verses emphasize that *God* is the primary actor, the one who *does* various things. The concern for futility after a detailed list of polarized events aligns with the ancient Mesopotamian *Dialogue of Pessimism* in which a servant and his master ponder the positive and negative entailments of diametrically opposite actions (Pritchard, *ANET*, 437–38).

36. Translations often promote this assumption, translating the infinitives as "to kill," "to seek," and so on, implying purposes with which humans are expected to comply. The NET of the LXX translates *kairos*, the LXX term corresponding to *ʿēt*, as "right time," so that there is a "right time to kill" and a "right time for war."

37. Contra Rudman, the opening statement in Eccl 3:1—"a time for"—does not declare that "God's deterministic control extended over every aspect of existence" (Rudman, *Determinism*, 124). Examples in the five categories of syntax identical to 3:1 illustrate a variety of options (above), and Rudman's attempts to establish this claim from elsewhere in the book do not convince.

(so they must be in some sense "good," e.g., 2:24–26; 3:13, 22; 11:1–6) and warns against others (5:5–6 [Eng. 5:6–7]; 7:17). Yet the Teacher does not presume to know all that is desirable from God's perspective (6:12). His statement of human ignorance in 3:11 does not affirm divine approval of the poem's elements; rather, it expresses confidence in God's ultimate plan, whatever that might be.[38]

The author, as part of the book's rhetoric, has presented a text that can legitimately be interpreted in more than one direction or from more than one perspective. In recognition of this, the final two positions posit that the poem's elements are things that happen, yet not all are desirable, even from God's perspective, though they may ultimately serve God's purposes.[39]

Before looking at the final two positions, it is helpful to consider briefly the impact of several distinct approaches to Ecclesiastes. In general, it is striking how little these "lenses" affect the interpretation of a given pericope.[40] Certainly, for those who understand the author to be a cynic, the places where Qohelet gives advice are taken as ironic or otherwise diminished (such as in Eccl 4:9–12). But in most places the subunit itself is not so drastically affected. Thus, all readers hear a weariness and futility in the opening poem (1:4–11) and discern a strong assertion that human knowledge has severe limits, especially in portions of the book's second half (e.g., 6:10–12; 7:23–29; 8:16–17).

But the time poem *is* one of the sections treated differently according to one's perspective on the book as a whole. The earlier, and more pious, approaches (Qohelet is perceived as piously apologizing for bad behavior) admonish obedience to God's will and ways as the message of the poem.[41] Those who hear the author as a bitter cynic (Qohelet is complaining about how God made the world) tend to hear the poem stating that humans have little or no productive opportunities in the face of a deity who controls the

38. Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 210; cf. Sir 39:33.

39. "Since the author does not present these details from a moral point of view, the time here is not that which is morally right, but that which, be it morally right or not, has been determined by God, the Governor of the world and Former of history, who makes even that which is evil subservient to His plan" (Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 684).

40. For a description of five major approaches, and the significance for each of the term *hebel* (vapor, traditionally "vanity"), see Miller, "What the Preacher Forgot," 115–21. For present purposes, the two precritical approaches are collapsed and referred to as "pious," the third as "cynic," and the fourth and fifth together as "recent," the latter being those who espouse an instructive rhetoric for Qohelet's work rather than primarily a venting of frustration (cynic approach), yet which also reject the simple piety and other-worldly spirituality of the precritical approaches.

41. See the examples cited in Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 217–28.

listed options.[42] More recently, interpreters have credited Qohelet with espousing some relative advantage—namely, that opportunities for pleasure or for avoiding some of life's problems may be accomplished by astute decisions.[43] Within this perspective lies the potential for recognizing the moral indeterminacy of the poem's list. The pietist and cynic approaches rule this out by their attitude toward Qohelet's work overall.

Position 4. Weak determinism, potential events, not all God-approved, strong human agency[44]

God places limits on human choice, yet God calls mortals to distinguish good from evil. *Humans do God's work* as they counter the wrong things and do the right things.[45]

Problems: Although the basic analysis regarding the uncertainty of God's approval of the time poem's elements is correct, and although Qohelet is concerned about injustice *and* has something to commend in that regard (e.g., 4:1–12),[46] Qohelet's counsel is primarily focused on helping people navigate a frustrating and tragic world.[47] He is not a prophet and does not call people to accomplish divine work, which is profoundly mysterious (8:17). The emphasis Qohelet places on the power, immutability, and mystery of divine ways (e.g., 1:13–15; 3:14; 5:1–6) makes it awkward to consider that the Teacher is inviting his readers to join with the Deity to accomplish God's plans.

Position 5. Weak determinism, potential events, not all God-approved, medium human agency

God places limits on human choice. Yet, by being alert to what is happening, *humans can respond* so that their lives are more likely to be better. Ecclesiastes

42. See, e.g., Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 92; Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 97.

43. See, e.g., Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 172; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 206.

44. Provan insists—though without explanation—that the list is descriptive of human existence in general and not prescriptive (Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs*, 89). Similarly, see Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 118.

45. Tamez, *When the Horizons Close*, 61.

46. See esp. Miller, "Power in Wisdom."

47. Qohelet urges his audience (1) to acknowledge and accept the nature of human existence, (2) to reject bad assumptions and strategies in regard to these realities, and (3) to adopt better ways of responding to them. See specific descriptions of each of these categories in Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 32.

11:6 is especially telling: because one cannot be sure of the times, one should show initiative both morning and evening to make prosperity more likely. I believe this position to be most faithful to Qohelet's work. God has crafted a world in which certain things are allowed to happen, but Qohelet does not indicate that God directs or prescribes all of the poem elements. Qohelet has a discernible set of values toward which he seeks to motivate his audience, and a set of practices that he hopes his audience will avoid. But a comparison of poem topics to themes in the book overall makes it evident that the poem elements were not chosen to align either with Qohelet's values or with his criticisms. Qohelet's assessment of each element must be considered on its own.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We have seen that the time poem by itself is ambiguous on the concerns of this essay: whether the poem's elements are divinely directed, divinely prescribed, or commended by the author. On the latter, we discovered that the author does not typically evaluate or commend the poem elements.

Regarding divine involvement, we considered five models for the role of the poem in Qohelet's work. The diversity is due in part to Qohelet's artful ambiguity, and in part to different perspectives concerning the book as a whole. Though there is consensus that Qohelet presents God as having significant control over human existence, there is not agreement on its extent. Divine direction is only sustainable in the first two positions. Divine prescription requires a demonstration that each of the elements is divinely approved, a perspective assumed by the third position. Since we have seen that this is not demonstrable for more than a few elements, nor are more than a few even commended by Qohelet, I argued (also in view of the problems of position 4) for the fifth position.

In a tragic and paradoxical world, Qohelet presents his own version of a wisdom ethic. He takes on problematic understandings, such as superficial naturalism (1:4–11), workaholism (4:1–8), naïve political optimism (4:13–16), and religious triumphalism (7:15–18). In the time poem (3:1–8), he rejects the excessive optimism of the traditional sagely vision for time. Yet he still believes that there are appropriate times for certain things, including God's judgment (3:17).[48] He also contends that part of the human

48. Similarly, Treier concludes (regarding the time poem) that "a moderately prescriptive interpretation is best: the Sage favors an ordered life in which, when possible, one acts at the time made clear by divine wisdom. On the occasions when discernment is difficult, we must rest in the times being established 'under heaven'—even, perhaps,

dilemma is that we cannot know what God is up to, and thus wisdom itself is limited (3:11).

Although he evaluates some issues and makes reference to war among other aspects of human experience, Qohelet's assessment of war is uncertain. Perhaps he decided that war was too far removed from the choices of the ordinary person to warrant counsel. At any rate, the simplistic truism, "Ecclesiastes says that there are appropriate, God-approved occasions for war," must be rejected. The book never says this, and a sustainable interpretation to this effect is only possible within certain contested perspectives on the book and the poem.

This does not mean, however, that the Teacher has nothing constructive to offer in regard to the question of war or issues related to war. He astutely addresses injustice, power, and oppression. He acknowledges the human contribution to injustice (3:16; 4:1–3; 5:7–11 [Eng. vv. 8–12]; 10:16–17) and counsels those on the bottom of society to practice prudence when dealing with royalty (8:1–9; 10:20). The wise person uses tools such as calmness in the face of anger (10:4) and speech that is cautious and ambiguous (10:16–20). Qohelet does not counsel those at the higher end of society about how to gain and hold on to power, though he seems disturbed at the prospect of the poor and ruling classes switching roles (10:5–7, revolution?). In chapter 4, he identifies individualism and materialism as roots of oppression, and advocates for simplicity and community. Though any confidence Qohelet has for the resolution of oppression lies within the middle classes who are his audience, he expects few to embrace his cause. The wise, however, will commit to these values, even though wisdom is vulnerable and there is no guarantee of success against the abuse of power (4:13–16; 9:13–18). They will practice generosity (11:1–2) and take a right stance toward righteousness, wisdom, and the fear of God (7:15–18).[49]

the times to be confused as well as the times to act with conviction" (Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 155).

49. On Qohelet as both conservative and radical when it comes to issues of power and oppression, see Miller, "Power in Wisdom," 170–73.