

Eunny P. Lee
The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet's Theological Rhetoric

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For my parents

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Eunny P. Lee, June 2005

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Abbreviations

ÄAT	Ägypten und Altes Testament
AB	Anchor Bible Commentary
ABR	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
AEL	M. Lichtheim, ed. <i>Ancient Egyptian Literature</i> . 3 vols. Berkeley: University of California, 1971–80.
AJBI	Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute, Tokyo
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
ArbT	<i>Arbeiten zur Theologie</i> , Stuttgart
ASTI	<i>Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute</i>
ATD	Das Alte Testament Deutsch
BBB	Bonner biblische Beiträge
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium
Bib	<i>Biblica</i> , Rome
BK	<i>Bibel und Kirche</i> , Stuttgart
BKAT	Biblicher Kommentar: Altes Testament
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BV	Biblical Viewpoint
BWL	W. G. Lambert, ed. <i>Babylonian Wisdom Literature</i> . Oxford: Clarendon, 1960.
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i> , Washington, D. C.
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CBSC	Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges
CD	Karl Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> . 4 vols. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936–1977.
CJT	<i>Canadian Journal of Theology</i>
CTM	<i>Concordia Theological Monthly</i>
DJD	Discoveries in the Judean Desert
EBib	Études bibliques
ERT	<i>Evangelical Review of Theology</i>
ETL	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</i> , Louvain
EvT	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
FO	<i>Folia Orientalia</i>
GKC	E. Kautzsch, ed. <i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> . Translated by A. E. Cowley. 2d ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1980.

HAR	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
HAT	Handbuch zum Alten Testament
HKAT	Handkommentar zum Alten Testament
HR	<i>History of Religions</i> , Chicago
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i> , Cincinnati
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching.
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IDB	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i> , Jerusalem
Int	<i>Interpretation</i> , Richmond, VA
IRT	Issues in Religion and Theology
ISBL	Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature
ITC	International Theological Commentary
ITQ	<i>Irish Theological Quarterly</i> , Maynooth
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i> , Chicago
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JRE	<i>Journal of Religious Ethics</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i> , Sheffield
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i> , Manchester
KAT	Kommentar zum Alten Testament
KTU	M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartin. <i>The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places</i> (KTU, 2d ed.).
LBH	Late Biblical Hebrew
LD	Lectio divina
LXX	Septuagint
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NEchtB	Die Neue Echter Bibel
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
OBO	Orbis biblicus et orientalis
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta
OLP	<i>Orientalia lovaniensia periodica</i>
Or	<i>Orientalia</i>
OTE	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
PSB	<i>Princeton Seminary Bulletin</i> , Princeton, NJ

<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i> , Paris
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i> , Louisville, KY
<i>RHPR</i>	<i>Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses</i>
<i>SBLDS</i>	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
<i>SBTh</i>	<i>Studia Biblica et Theologica</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i> , Edinburgh
<i>SubBi</i>	<i>Subsidia Biblica</i>
<i>TAD</i>	B. Porten and A. Yardeni. <i>Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt</i> . Jerusalem, 1986.
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
<i>ThQ</i>	<i>Theologische Quartalschrift</i>
<i>ThViat</i>	<i>Theologia Viatorum</i> , Berlin
<i>TTZ</i>	<i>Trierer theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i> , Basel, Switzerland
<i>VS</i>	<i>Verbum Salutis</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i> , Leiden
<i>VTSup</i>	Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>WBC</i>	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i> , Philadelphia
<i>WW</i>	<i>Word & World</i> , Fort Lee, NJ
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i> , Berlin
<i>ZTK</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

Introduction

Ecclesiastes is a book of contradictions. That is a truism as far as its content is concerned; Ecclesiastes seems to hold at once contradictory perspectives on life. Indeed, it was in no small part because of its apparent contradictions that the early rabbis considered consigning the book to oblivion: "The sages sought to suppress the book of Qohelet because its words are mutually contradictory" (*b. Shab.* 30b). At the same time, Ecclesiastes may be called a book of contradictions for the polar positions it has generated among interpreters from antiquity to the present. Today, a majority of commentators regard the author as a consummate pessimist who relentlessly announces that "all is vanity," while others herald him as an indefatigable optimist, even a "preacher of joy," who maintains that "there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat and drink and enjoy themselves" (8:15). But that is, of course, only the most obvious instance of interpretive disagreement. Indeed, on virtually every critical issue, one may readily cite scholars holding not just variant positions but diametrically opposite ones. Even where one might reasonably expect near unanimity, one finds only contradictions.

The thematic word *hebel* is a case in point in this regard. No one disputes the importance of this *leitmotif* for the interpretation of the book. Not only does the term recur throughout the book and at key junctures, it occurs in the memorable epigram that frames Qohelet's reflections (1:2; 12:8). Yet, while all agree on the importance of the term, the question of its precise translation, meaning, and function in the book continues to be disputed vigorously. The traditional understanding of *hebel* is still the dominant one, as is evident in the prevalence of the rendering "vanity" or some equivalent term in the standard English translations.¹ The negative overtones associated with this ubiquitous refrain have undergirded the pessimistic reading of the book. Others who highlight the positive dimensions of the book, however, have proposed alternative ways of understanding this key word. The term *hebel*, they contend, connotes not "vanity," "futility," or

1 Note "vanity" in NRSV, NAB, and NJB; "futility" in NJPS and REB; "emptiness" in NEB; and "meaninglessness" in NIV.

“meaninglessness,” but that which is “transient,”² “enigmatic,”³ “incomprehensible,”⁴ or “ironic.”⁵ In disagreement with all of these, Fox maintains that *hebel* signifies something like Camus’s notion of the “absurd.”⁶ Yet, Lohfink would return to the question again, claiming that the term approximates its literal meaning of “vapor” or “breath.”⁷ Even within the same school of thought, there is often a divergence of opinion concerning the meaning of *hebel*. Seow, for example, contends that the term in Ecclesiastes functions as metaphor for that which is, like the literal referent of *hebel* (“vapor” or “breath”), “beyond mortal grasp.”⁸ His student Douglas Miller shares his methodology but takes his interpretation in a more negative direction by arguing that “foulness,” in addition to insubstantiality and transience, is a key trait of *hebel*.⁹ To that argument Seow demurs, maintaining that “foulness” is not really a trait of *hebel*, for “[w]hereas *hebel* is always transient and always substantial, it is not always foul.”¹⁰ The term *hebel* itself, it seems, is like a breath—eluding scholarly attempts to grasp and fix its meaning determinately.

Apart from the meaning of *hebel*, interpretive antinomies are evident in scholarly discussions of two of the most prominent motifs in the book: the enjoyment of life and fear of God. As in the case of *hebel*, these two themes are widely recognized to be critical to the book’s

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- 2 D. C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life* (The Biblical Seminar 18; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993); Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); D. B. Macdonald, *The Hebrew Philosophical Genius: A Vindication* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936), 70–85.
 - 3 Graham Ogden, *Qoheleth: Readings—A New Bible Commentary* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987); idem, “‘Vanity’ It Certainly is Not,” *TBT* 38 (1987): 301–307.
 - 4 William Ewart Staples, “The ‘Vanity’ of Ecclesiastes,” *JNES* 4 (1943): 95–104; idem, “Vanity of Vanities,” *Canadian Journal of Theology* 1 (1955): 141–56.
 - 5 Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1965; repr. Sheffield: Almond, 1981), 176–83; Timothy K. Polk, “The Wisdom of Irony: A Study of *Hebel* and Its Relation to Joy and Fear of God in Ecclesiastes,” *SBT* 6, no. 1 (1976): 3–17.
 - 6 Michael V. Fox, “The Meaning of HEBEL for Qohelet,” *JBL* 105, no. 3 (1986): 409–27.
 - 7 Norbert Lohfink, “Koh 1,2 ‘alles ist Windhauch’ — universale oder anthropologische Aussage?” in *Der Weg zum Menschen* (ed. R. Mosis and L. Ruppert; Freiberg: Herder, 1989), 201–16.
 - 8 Choon Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 102; idem, “Beyond Mortal Grasp: The Usage of *Hebel* in Ecclesiastes,” *ABR* 48 (2000): 1–16.
 - 9 Douglas B. Miller, “Qohelet’s Symbolic Use of *lbh*,” *JBL* 117 (1998): 437–54; idem, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet’s Work* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2002).
 - 10 Seow, “Beyond Mortal Grasp,” 13.

teachings. Yet, again, there are conflicting views on the meaning and function of these motifs in Qohelet's discourse. The proponents of optimism handle them in one way, the proponents of pessimism in an entirely different way.

The more prominent of the two is the commendation of enjoyment. Eight times in his discourse, Qohelet counsels the enjoyment of life (2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:17–19; 7:14; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:7–12:1).¹¹ These “joy passages” are remarkable for the commonality of their language, and the persistent and emphatic quality of the exhortation. This is all the more so when one moves beyond the explicit language of joy (*šimhâ* and *šāmē^{ah}*) to other metaphors and idioms for joy: eating, drinking, donning bright garments, anointing one's head with oil, and being with one's beloved, as well as the expressions “see good” (2:1, 24; 3:13; 5:17), “do well” (3:12), “be in good” (7:14), and “see life” (9:9). Joy appears in virtually every literary unit of the book—with other sobering elements, to be sure, but nonetheless present everywhere. It is notable also that this repetition does not occur at random, but in strategic places in the movement of the book, often marking the climactic moment of a literary unit where Qohelet engages in explicit and sustained theological reflections. Accordingly, many have commented on the pivotal role of the joy passages in Qohelet's rhetoric,¹² some even opting for this refrain over against the more prevalent *hebel* refrain, as the primary structuring principle of the book.¹³ Their analysis demonstrates how emphatically the refrain functions for many readers.

Advocates of the optimistic view find here the most compelling support for their sanguine assessment of the book's message. According to these scholars, this unrelenting counsel conveys the book's central message, demonstrating unequivocally that “Qohelet's focus is upon an affirmative rather than a negative view of human

11 Most scholars do not include 7:14 in this category. However, this study will contend that the author employs not only the explicit vocabulary of *šmh* but also various other metaphors and idioms to communicate his commendation of enjoyment. The expression “be in good” in 7:14 functions precisely in this manner; it therefore appropriately qualifies as a “joy passage.”

12 Martin A. Klopfenstein, “Die Skepsis des Qoheleth,” *TZ* 28 (1972): 97–109; R. K. Johnston, “Confession of a Workaholic: A Reappraisal of Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 38 (1976): 14–28; T. Polk, “The Wisdom of Irony,” 3–17; R. N. Whybray, “Qoheleth Preacher of Joy,” *JST* 23 (1982): 87–98; N. Lohfink, “Qoheleth 5:17–19—Revelation by Joy,” *CBQ* 52 (1990): 625–635.

13 F. Rousseau, “Structure de Qohélet I 4–11 et plan du livre,” *VT* 31 (1981): 200–17. See also J. F. Genung, *The Words of Qoheleth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904); A. F. Rainey, “A Study of Ecclesiastes,” *CTM* 35 (1964): 148–57.

life."¹⁴ All other observations in the book pale in comparison, serving only as a backdrop against which he teaches the preeminent value of joy. Indeed, the calls to enjoyment are said to be "theological statements of faith in a just and loving God, despite many signs which might appear contrary."¹⁵ For Whybray, the "Preacher" proclaims the gospel of joy: enjoyment is what enables a person to transcend the troublesome realities of human existence.¹⁶ Lohfink makes an even more daring theological claim when he asserts that joy is nothing less than "revelation," the means by which God "answers" humanity.¹⁷

This approach to the joy texts, however, has not carried the day. The majority of scholars highlight instead the book's thoroughgoing pessimism, insisting that Qohelet's probing skepticism is what characterizes the book from start to finish. Hence, Crenshaw introduces his commentary to Ecclesiastes with this overview of the book's message: "Life is profitless; totally absurd ... Enjoy life if you can ... And even as you enjoy, know that the world is meaningless."¹⁸ According to his reading of the book, *hebel* ultimately trumps joy. In a similar vein, W. H. U. Anderson states even more explicitly that the joy passages are ultimately "invalidated" by the decisive pronouncement of *hebel*.¹⁹ For these interpreters, Qohelet's commendation of enjoyment is merely a concession to the absurd circumstances of life, communicating an attitude of jaded resignation, not resilient faith. Fox likens the persistent endorsement of enjoyment to the "gesticulations of a lunatic," a senseless activity that is meaningful only in a crazed person's private world.²⁰ Another scholar suggests that the counsels of joy are a reflex of the author's conflicted psychological make-up that arose as a result of his troubled childhood and marital experiences.²¹ Qohelet's notion of enjoyment, at best, points to "little pleasures to

14 Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 14, 22. See also Robert Gordis, *Koheleth—the Man and His World* (3rd ed.; New York: Schocken, 1968), 131; E. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, 176–83; Hagia Hildegard Witzentrath, *Süss ist das Licht: eine literaturwissenschaftliche Untersuchung zu Koh 11,7–12,7* (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1979); Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," 87–98.

15 Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 22.

16 Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," 91.

17 Lohfink, "Qoheleth 5:17–19—Revelation by Joy," 625–635.

18 James Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 23.

19 W. H. U. Anderson, *Qoheleth and Its Pessimistic Theology: Hermeneutical Struggles in Wisdom Literature* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: Mellen Biblical Press, 1997), 74.

20 Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 130.

21 Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qohelet* (New York: KTAV, 1973).

soothe the troubled spirit,"²² or "wishful thinking" that provides "psychological relief."²³ In one way or another, then, the joy texts are dismissed as a peripheral strain in the book, a far cry from the lofty "revelation of joy" envisioned by Lohfink.

The other prominent theme in the book is the fear of God. Despite the fact that there are only seven references to the fear of God in the book, virtually all interpreters of Ecclesiastes acknowledge its importance.²⁴ Indeed, it has been argued that "the interpretation of this phrase in Ecclesiastes is of the greatest importance for the assessment of Qohelet's thought."²⁵ This consensus is due in part, no doubt, to the recognition that the fear of God is a well-established wisdom principle; indeed, one may say that it is the critical starting place for the wisdom enterprise (see Prov 1:7; 2:5; 9:10; 15:33; Job 28:28; cf. Ps 111:10). The theme plays a key role in both Proverbs and Job, appearing prominently in the important introductory verses of those books (Prov 1:7; Job 1:1, 8–9). Interpreters, therefore, are compelled to attend to the way it is featured in Ecclesiastes as well, all the more so because Ecclesiastes ends by calling attention once more to this important theme: "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God ..." (12:13). Whether or not one believes this to be a legitimate conclusion to Qohelet's discourse,²⁶ the final form of the book reserves the privileged position at the very end for this counsel; it is the last word with which the reader is left. Some have therefore argued on this basis that the closing admonition to fear God functions as an important hermeneutical key for reading the book.²⁷

Here, again, scholarly opinion concerning the meaning and function of this theme is sharply divided. For Franz Delitzsch, this subject matter is so important that the book is characterized by it—Ecclesiastes is the "supreme song of the fear of God," and by virtue of

22 Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 27. See also Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 129–131, 239–241; Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 35, 121–22, 168.

23 W. H. U. Anderson, *Qoheleth and Its Pessimistic Theology*, 73.

24 See especially Toshiaki Nishimura, "Quelques Reflexions Semiologiques A Propos de 'La Crainte de Dieu' de Qohelet," in *AJBI* 5 (1979): 67–87.

25 Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 25.

26 To be discussed in chapter 3.

27 Gerald T. Sheppard, "The Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary," *CBQ* 39 (1977): 182–89; Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 585–588; Longman, *Book of Ecclesiastes*.