

RUSSELL L. MEEK



ECCLESIASTES
AND THE SEARCH
FOR MEANING IN
AN UPSIDE-DOWN
WORLD

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Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
and **Spurgeon College**

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Ecclesiastes and the Search for Meaning in an Upside-Down World

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For my wife and sons: My goodness, I love y'all.

Ari, may God make you strong and brave like a lion.

*Abel, may God give you the courage and faithfulness
to always bring your best to God,
no matter what.*

*Elijah, may God give you the boldness and fortitude
to speak truth to power.*

*And Brittany, you convince me more every day that
“he who finds a wife finds a good thing,
and has obtained favor from Yahweh” (Prov 18:22).*

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1. The Genesis Shape of Ecclesiastes 1

Qohelet, the author of Ecclesiastes, is no skeptic or cynic. Rather, he a wise man trying to navigate a life that often doesn't make sense. To fully understand what this wise man is telling us, we have to see how he uses Genesis to frame his discussion of life, death, God, and humanity.

2. Abel and the Meaning of *Hebel* 29

Often translated “vanity” or “meaningless,” the key word *hebel* is actually the name “Abel” in Hebrew. Qohelet uses *hebel* as a metaphor to cause us to reflect on how the injustice and transience of Abel's life marks everything “under the sun.”

3. From Here, Where? Fear God and Enjoy His Gifts

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Qohelet doesn't shy away from the realities of living in a post-fall, sin-ridden, upside-down world marked by Abel-like experiences. Qohelet goes beyond acknowledging this reality to light a path through life for us. In short, we navigate the Abel-ness of life by living in relationship with God and enjoying the gifts he gives us.

PREFACE

Hi, I'm Russ. I'm a husband, a dad of three sons, and an Old Testament professor. This book is a small part of a bigger story of how God used the Old Testament to save my faith, and to save my life. I grew up in church, and I became a Christian when I was eighteen or so—shortly before my freshman year of college. I started using drugs when I was around twelve years old, just after my grandmother died, and that way of facing life stayed with me for a long, long time. I know a lot of people who became Christians and left behind a life of addiction, but it didn't happen that way for me. I had periods of sobriety, some lasting longer than others, but drugs remained my primary method for alleviating the pain and anxiety that you'll read about in this book. I've been drug-free for more than twelve years as of this writing, but I have no illusions about the darkness that lurks within me and still cries out to be fed from time to time.

This book isn't about addiction, but I think it's important for you to know this part of my story because that way of coping with the upside-downness of life

ran for a while in parallel with my study of Ecclesiastes. All through my master's degree, when I first started to study Ecclesiastes with a former mentor, I was high as a kite. Though God was starting to show me that Scripture offers a way of understanding suffering and seeing our way through it, I still clutched opiates to numb my heart and mind. So even though I don't talk about that part of my life in this book, it lingers there in the background.

I started to study Ecclesiastes because I thought I found in it a kindred spirit who, like me, had thrown up his hands and given up on faith and life, who had accepted the meaninglessness of these years on planet Earth and was simply waiting out the time until death would free him. What I found instead—with the help of that former mentor I mentioned—was a path through life that doesn't involve the bottom of a pill bottle. So, that's what this book is about: How Ecclesiastes taught me to navigate life, with all of its confusion and frustration and suffering, in a way that pleases God. I hope I can convince you to read Ecclesiastes in the same way.

RUSSELL L. MEEK
SANDPOINT, IDAHO
2021

Chapter 1

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THE GENESIS SHAPE OF ECCLESIASTES

My folks split when I was six years old. Dad, a serial adulterer, finally left my mom to make an honest woman of his mistress. My older brother took me on a drive just before my dad moved out of our house, and our paths crossed on the two-lane road that led out of town.

“Where’s Dad going?” I asked my brother.

“He’ll be back.”

He wouldn’t.

That sort of pain is hard to verbalize. If you’ve experienced it, then you know how I felt. I’m grateful if you don’t know. Half a decade later, my grandmother passed away. She’d stepped into the gaping hole my father left, which made her death all the more devastating. In those years of my life, I somehow missed a crucial lesson: It’s important to express your emotions, to give voice to your heartache and rage, to let it all out in some way. A year or so after my grandmother died, though, I found several voices I could relate to.

“Blacks aren’t like us,” my dad once told me, with a seriousness that only a deep-South racist could muster. He went on to tell me that, while it was fine to work alongside Black Americans, there must be a clear separation in all other areas of life. “We’re just different,” he would say. “We’re made different. We think different.”

So you can imagine my dad’s surprise upon learning that the only thing keeping his young son sane was some cassette tapes of N.W.A., Eazy-E, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, and later Jay-Z, Eminem, and Dr. Dre. Now, my students laugh when I tell them gangsta rap saved my life. But it did. It gave me the language I needed at the time to express the anger boiling inside of me.

In the years since I first passed money to my older brother so he could buy me the tapes labeled PARENTAL ADVISORY: EXPLICIT LYRICS, I’ve learned quite a bit more about the value of hip hop. One of its significant features is that it relies heavily on allusion to connect with listeners and to communicate a whole world of cultural context needed to really get what the artist is saying.

Take the Jay-Z song “Moment of Clarity,” for example. It’s filled with clever wordplay, rhymes, and allusions to Jay-Z’s previous work, other hip-hop artists, his own life story, the war on drugs, prison culture, and music industry awards. It’s a masterpiece of songwriting and cultural commentary. When I play the song for students in my classes, they are familiar enough with popular culture that they have no problem pointing out the song’s allusions and describing

the backstory, which is necessary for fully understanding what Jay-Z is getting at in the song. Can I listen to and appreciate the song without knowing who Common or Biggie Smalls are, or what “platinum” refers to, or even what “four scores and seven years ago” evokes, or noticing that in one stanza he moves from squares to circles to triangles? Sure. But my understanding will be severely truncated, and I definitely won’t appreciate the songwriting genius that went into those four minutes and twenty-four seconds.

Some years after I discovered rap, I was introduced to Ecclesiastes. That book, more than gangsta rap ever could, showed me how to navigate the grief and anguish life brings. And the author of that book, Qohelet (rendered “Teacher” or “Preacher” by some English translations), does the very same thing as Jay-Z, or rather Jay-Z does the same thing as Qohelet. Ecclesiastes (from the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word Qohelet, both of which seem to mean “member of an assembly” or “assembly,” respectively) is filled with allusions—specifically, to the book of Genesis—and if we don’t pick up on those allusions, then we’ll miss what Qohelet is trying to do with what he is saying. Just as my students are so steeped in popular culture that they can’t help but notice the allusions in Jay-Z’s “Moment of Clarity,” Qohelet’s original readers were so steeped in their own culture—a large part of which included the Torah (the Pentateuch), or first five books of the Old Testament—that they couldn’t help but pick up on the connections he was making to Genesis. So,

in order for us to be ideal readers, we must likewise spend time in the book of Genesis.

In this chapter, I'm going to talk about several of the allusions to Genesis in Ecclesiastes so that we can better understand the book and its application to our modern lives. But don't just take my word for it: open up your Bible and come along with me (especially since I'm using my own translation of the Hebrew text to highlight repeated terms that English translations often obscure). Keep an eye out for repeated vocabulary and themes. These are the breadcrumbs that Qohelet has dropped along the way to let us know where he's been.

TREES AND WATER AND PARKS, OH MY!

In Ecclesiastes 2, Qohelet is in the midst of describing the various things he tried in order to determine what “was good for humans to do under heaven during the few days of their life” (v. 3). These verses are nestled in what scholar James Crenshaw has called Qohelet's “Royal Experiment.”¹ It's this passage (Eccl 2:1–12) that has made many readers throughout history think that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, even though the book itself contains no overt claim to authorship.² Qohelet has already experimented with

1. James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 68.

2. See the discussion in Russell L. Meek, “‘I Was King over Israel in Jerusalem’: Inerrancy and Authorial Ambiguity in Eccle-

pleasure and laughter and folly and wine, and now he comes to a grand building project that evokes images of God's work in the garden of Eden:

I made great works for myself. I built for myself houses, I planted for myself vineyards. I made for myself gardens and parks, and I planted in them trees of every kind. I made for myself ponds of water from which to water the forest of sprouting trees.

(Eccl 2:4–6)

Now let's look at a few verses from the narrative where God creates the garden of Eden:

And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done. And he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. . . . And Yahweh God planted a garden from east in Eden, and he put there the man whom he had formed. And Yahweh God caused to sprout from the ground every tree desirable to sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, as was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

And a river went out from Eden to water the garden, and from there it divided and became four heads.

(Gen 2:2, 8–10)

siastes," *Journal for the Evangelical Study of the Old Testament* 4 (2015): 63–85.

In the span of only a few verses, Qohelet uses eight terms taken from Genesis to describe the garden he made for himself.³ Qohelet “plants” a vineyard and a “garden” with trees “of every kind” (see also Gen 1:11–12, 29; 2:9, 16–17). In both Genesis and Ecclesiastes, the planted trees “sprout,” and Qohelet “watered” his gardens and vineyards with a system of pools just as God “watered” Eden (Gen 2:10). Finally, Qohelet “made” all of this, just as God “made” his garden in Genesis.⁴

	Ecclesiastes 2:4–6	Genesis 2:2, 8–10
Repeated terms	“to plant” (2x)	“to plant”
	“to make” (2x)	“to make” (2x)
	gardens	garden (3x)
	trees of every kind of fruit	trees of every kind
	“to water”	“to water”
	“to sprout”	“to sprout”
Repeated themes	creation of a garden by a ruler	creation of a garden by a ruler

TABLE 1.1. Allusion in Ecclesiastes 2:4–6 to Genesis 2:2, 8–10

3. Arian Verheij (“Paradise Retried: On Qohelet 2:4–6,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 50 [1991]: 113–15) outlines the linguistic similarities and thematic parallels between this passage and the first chapters of Genesis.

4. The verb is also repeated in Gen 1:7, 16, 25–26, 31; 2:3–4, 18.