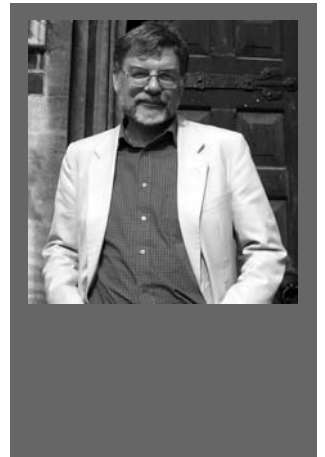


Work And Money In Ecclesiastes

■ by Richard Higginson



Does Ecclesiastes have a dismal view of work, echoed by many today, which sees work as futile and meaningless? Or is it full of positive and good advice on running a business and taking a relaxed attitude to problems? Does it gladden us with its short term enjoyment of work and leisure, or depress us with its long term prediction of the pointlessness of it all? How does it relate to the gospel commands about money or the hope of eternal significance for our work through the work of Christ?

What about Ecclesiastes? Readers who are familiar with my writings on faith and business will know that I follow a salvation history approach – seeking to show how every major episode in the biblical drama of salvation (creation, fall, the history of Israel, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the story of the church, our future hope) has something important to say about the realm of work and money. But



Ecclesiastes
Paul Gustave Doré (1866)

all along I've had a nagging feeling at the back of my mind about this book of the Bible. Ecclesiastes has plenty of teaching about work and money, but where does it fit in the great scheme of things? The fact is that the wisdom literature – of which Ecclesiastes is a prime example – makes few if any connections with salvation history. It seems to operate on a much more timeless, universal understanding of human existence. Hence my desire to take a closer look at Ecclesiastes and see how – if at all – it relates to an overall biblical understanding of work and money.

Puzzles

Ecclesiastes is a curious book which appears, on the surface, to be full of contradictions. On the fundamental issue of whether it is better to be dead or alive, it speaks with two voices: 'I thought the dead, who are already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive' (4:2); contrast that with 9:5, which says unlike the dead 'whoever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion'. On the crucial issue of wisdom, something you would expect to be praised above all in wisdom literature, Ecclesiastes is surprisingly ambivalent. True, we have verses such as 'Wisdom is as good as an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun' (7:11), which could have come from



- ▶▶ the book of Proverbs. But only four verses later we read ‘Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise: why should you destroy yourself? (7:15) which appears to advocate a lowering of moral standards – being too clever can work to your disadvantage!

The puzzle of Ecclesiastes extends to the question of its author. Traditionally, it has been ascribed to king Solomon, and that sounds plausible enough for the first couple of chapters. After all, 1:1 begins ‘The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem’; 1:16 says ‘I have acquired great wisdom’, and Solomon was renowned for his wisdom; 2:4-9 then reads like an accurate description of the Solomon we know from 1 Kings – a king who made great works, built houses, planted vineyards, bought male and female slaves, had great possessions, gathered for himself silver and gold and enjoyed the delights of the flesh including many concubines. But the subsequent chapters of Ecclesiastes do not read like something written by a king at all. When kingship is mentioned later there appears to be a large gap between the speaker and the institution:

- 4:1-3 where he describes oppression as something he is powerless to do anything about;
- 5:7-8 ‘If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, do not be amazed at the matter; for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them’ – a jaundiced comment on hierarchical bureaucracy;
- 10:20 ‘Do not curse the king, even in your thoughts, or curse the rich, even in your bedroom; for a bird of the air may carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter’.

These sound like the informed observations of someone much lower in the social hierarchy or government system.

Different views on authorship are possible. The view I favour is that of the commentator Tremper Longman III: that Qoheleth, the Teacher, assumes a Solomon persona in order to explore avenues of meaning in the world.¹



*Russian icon of King Solomon.
He is depicted holding a model of the Temple.
(18th century, iconostasis of Kizhi monastery, Russia)*

He pretends to be Solomon to argue that if Solomon cannot find satisfaction and meaning in wisdom, wealth, women and building projects, no one can. Once that search for meaning is shown to be unsuccessful, the Solomon persona is dropped, and then the distance between the Teacher and Solomon widens. In the final verses of chapter 12 we discover that the book was put together by an editor, who comments on the wise Teacher who has imparted knowledge in a careful, apt and pleasing way. The editor adds his own exhortation, to ‘fear God and keep his commandments.’

Futility and Frustration

Another apparent contradiction, which is the major focus of this article, is the two-sided nature of what Ecclesiastes says about work and wealth. We have already seen one side of this in the early verses of chapter 2. The rich king worked very hard, even if much of the legwork was doubtless done by those under his authority.

2:5-6: ‘I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.’ ▶▶

- ▶▶ Then vs.10-11: 'Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.'



The name of that town is Vanity; and at the town there is a fair kept, called Vanity Fair...

Vanity, vanity, all is vanity. That is the phrase for which the book of Ecclesiastes is best known. The word translated 'vanity' occurs 34 times, compared with an equal 34 times in the rest of the Old Testament put together. That is how the Hebrew word *hebel* was translated in the King James Version and it still is in the NRSV. But I am not convinced it is the best translation. Vanity for us means a state of being vain: the person looking in the mirror and admiring themselves. The NIV in contrast translates it 'meaningless'. Apparently *hebel* is an onomatopoeic word meaning 'breath' or 'vapour': it implies something transient and elusive. Futility might be a better translation than vanity. A sense of futility surrounds most of the things the Teacher describes as *hebel*.

On the subject of work, Ecclesiastes 2:18-23 explains why work, even the great works of King Solomon, is futile:

1. You die, and you have to leave your legacy to those who come after you – they did not toil for it (v.21) and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish (v19). They may waste your efforts.
2. Even in your lifetime, the reward for your efforts may be negligible: 'What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun?' (v22)
3. Work is tough and all-absorbing: 'For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest.' (v23)

The word for work generally used in Ecclesiastes is *amal*. It is often translated as 'toil', which has more negative connotations than 'work'. It recalls the sweat and toil, thorns and thistles of Genesis 3 that characterise work after the Fall.

We all know that work can be extremely frustrating. For a New Testament example, consider the story which took place after Jesus' resurrection when the disciples had returned to Galilee. Simon Peter persuades the other disciples to resume their old occupation of fishing. 'They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.' (John 21:3-4) We know the story ends with a spectacular haul of fish after Jesus' intervention, but let's consider how the disciples felt at that point in the story. ▶▶



That night they caught nothing

*Christ Appears on the Shore of Lake Tiberias (1886-1894)
by James Tissot, original in the Brooklyn Museum*

▶▶ These fishermen were experts. They knew what they were doing when it came to fish. That was why they went out at night: it was the most productive time. They probably had a strong sense of anticipation as they launched their boats that evening; it was the first time they'd been out on the lake for ages. But they fished with a complete lack of success. When morning came, their nets were as empty as when they'd begun. Imagine how they must have felt: tired, frustrated, tetchy, baffled, hungry.

I suspect that their feelings were somewhat similar to staff at the Prudential, whose 2010 planned takeover of AIA, Asia's arm of America's insurance rival AIG, was stopped at the last minute. This bid reportedly cost Prudential £377m, much of it in lawyers' and accountants' fees. Thousands of hours of work were rendered pointless. One wonders how the staff felt as they came in the next day to start work on a new project. Yet their exasperation may be trifling compared with the despair experienced by staff who work in research laboratories at pharmaceutical companies for seven or eight years on a particular drug, and then see this effort come to nothing when trials fail.²



Despair

The antidepressant drug TC-5214, made by AstraZeneca and Targacept, withdrawn in March after clinical trials failed after a decade of research with a loss of \$50m, resulting in the reduction of Targacept's workforce by 46%

Ecclesiastes 4 provides other snapshots of work in its fallen and negative aspects. 4:4: 'Then I saw that all toil and skill in work comes from one person's envy of another.' An exaggeration, perhaps, but there's something in it. Envy is a great competitive driver. This

is seen in the relationship of rivalry between Jacob and Laban, seeking to outwit each other in the breeding of animals in Genesis 30-31. 4:7 describes the sad state of solitary individuals working on their own, something a close acquaintance finds a challenge as he sets up his own carpentry business. Both these conditions the Teacher describes as *hebel*.

In Ecclesiastes, futility is often associated with the fact that things don't last. So what's the point of all this effort? 'What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation



comes, but the earth remains for ever.' (1:3-4) Death renders every human achievement and status useless. 'The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost.' (9:5) For the Teacher death is the end of the story: 'All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again' (5:20). There is just the slightest hint that there might be something beyond in the following verse ('Who knows whether the human spirit goes upwards and the spirit of animals goes downwards to the earth', 5:21) but certainly no confidence in an after-life. Life is full of trouble, and then you die: that is a major theme of Ecclesiastes.

Enjoyment and Satisfaction

But it is not the whole story. We see another side to the Teacher's message in the verses which end chapter 2 (24-26): ▶▶

►► ‘There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy...’

Remarkably, these are sentiments repeated in very similar language no less than five times in the remainder of the book:

■ 3:12-13 ‘I know that there is nothing better for them (i.e. workers) than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.’

■ 3:22 ‘So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot...’

■ 5:18-19 ‘This is what I have seen to be good; it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil – this is the gift of God.’

■ 8:15 ‘So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them through the days of life that God gives them under the sun.’

■ 9: 7-9 ‘Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because this is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.’

Notice that in this last passage life is still described as vain and work is still hard (toil under the sun) but there is satisfaction to be derived from it. Indeed, the pleasure one has in eating and drinking is generally the greater after doing a solid day’s work or a solid week’s work. It is interesting how closely Ecclesiastes associates enjoyment in eating and drinking on the one hand and working on the other.



Ecclesiastes style

Celebration of the completion of a new factory to make large ducting in Pikou City, Liaoning, China

The message is not a simple hedonistic ‘eat, drink and be merry’ but ‘eat, drink and enjoy your work’.

These may appear simple pleasures but we should not despise them. Christians must beware of being so spiritually minded that we fail to appreciate the material things of life that are an intrinsic part of God’s creation. Indeed, enjoyment of these things is described again and again in these passages as a *gift of God*. When work takes on a more positive aspect in Ecclesiastes, it is always God-given. Do you enjoy your work? Then thank God for that – don’t take it for granted!

Most of us at the week-end after a hard week’s work probably have a special meal where we relax and maybe open a bottle of wine with family and friends. This definitely has the support of Ecclesiastes. I encourage you as you do that to look back over the week and take satisfaction in some part of your work that has gone well. Usually there will be something! In doing so we are emulating God – no less - who surveyed his work of creation at the end of the sixth day in Genesis 1 and pronounced it very good. We are made in God’s image; why shouldn’t we do the same? ►►

▶▶ So there are these contrasting motifs about work in Ecclesiastes: futility and frustration on the one hand, contentment and enjoyment on the other. The attitude the Teacher takes seems to depend on whether he looks at work in the long term or the short term. When he analyses the long-term consequences of his work, he gets frustrated: the work doesn't last, or he won't live to perpetuate it. When he simply concentrates on work in its immediacy and the temporal pleasures he associates with it, he experiences enjoyment. Perhaps there's a surprising lesson here. We can worry too much about the future value of our work. Such an attitude usually leads to over-work. Focus on enjoying your work in the present, and let the future take care of itself. As Ecclesiastes repeatedly reminds us, there's a great deal in life we can't control:

■ 9:11-12 '...the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the skilful; but time and chance happen to them all. For no one can anticipate the time of disaster'

■ 10:14 'No one knows what is to happen, and who can tell anyone what the future holds?'

Money – Enabler and Snare

So the Teacher has this distinctive view of life - an intriguing mixture of pessimism and optimism. Within the parameters of this view he has some very shrewd observations about money. On the one hand he says that 'money meets every need' (10:19). The plain fact is that you can get things done with money that you cannot do without it. You can provide a city or country with access to clean water or proper sanitation. You can build schools and pay the teachers to work in them; build hospitals and pay the doctors and nurses to work in them. Money is a great enabler. It's important as Christians that we're real about money, not so spiritually minded that we think we can manage without it.

On the other hand, Ecclesiastes says 'The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain.' (5:10) That is equally true! Making money is an addictive pastime. The rich American oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller was once asked 'how much money was enough?' He replied 'Always a little bit more'. We are naïve if we think of money simply as a neutral means of exchange which we can use for good or evil. Money is a powerful force which threatens to overwhelm us. So the other side of the coin is that we *do* need to be spiritually minded so that we're always heedful of Jesus' words: 'You



Sweet is the sleep of labourers

cannot serve two masters: God and money'. The following verse in Ecclesiastes, 5:11, is an accurate description of contemporary consumerist society: 'When goods increase, those who eat them increase', while 5:12 contrasts the sleep patterns associated with a simple or extravagant lifestyle: 'Sweet is the sleep of labourers, whether they eat little or much, but the surfeit of the rich will not let them sleep.' Whether that's because they are suffering from indigestion after eating too much or from worry about how to keep their riches intact, the end result is the same.

Again there's a tension here that it's important to keep in balance. Although the pursuit of money leads to vanity, precisely because money *can* meet so many needs some people at least need to put concentrated effort into acquiring it. In 5:13-14 Ecclesiastes recognises the 'grievous ill' that accrues when riches are lost in a 'bad venture'. But that doesn't lead the Teacher to recommend not venturing anything at all. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Be committed! 'Whatever ▶▶

▶▶ your hand finds to do, do with [all] your might' (9:10). 'Whoever observes the wind will not sow; and whoever regards the clouds will not reap'. (11:4) Over-analysis can lead to paralysis; if we let the weather forecast govern our lives we could easily end up not doing anything.

The opening verses of chapter 11 contain some balanced advice about investment. 'Send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back' (11:1). This is probably a reference to the grain trade in the



Maritime trade risks

*Antonio: My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,
Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate
Upon the fortune of this present year:
Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad*

Merchant of Venice, Act 1, Scene 1

ancient world. Go ahead and engage in maritime trade, says the Teacher; profits will eventually flow back to you. But spread your risk – don't put all your eggs in one basket! 'Divide your means seven ways, or even eight, for you do not know what disasters may happen on earth.' (11:2) If one or two projects prove unsuccessful, there are other investments that will prove lucrative. All sound advice for budding entrepreneurs...

1 Longman's commentary was published in 1997 by Eerdmans in the New International Commentary series.

Conclusion

My exploration of Ecclesiastes leads me to the conclusion that this fascinating book does have a useful contribution to make to a biblical theology of work. It is certainly not the last word on the subject. It lacks the eternal dimension found elsewhere in the Bible. In Ecclesiastes there is no eschatological vision which gives lasting significance to our work such as we find in Isaiah 65, where the chosen people enjoying the work of their hands is part of God's long-term plan, or Revelation 21, where people bring into the heavenly city 'the glory and honour of the nations'. St Paul uses the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *hebel* when he speaks of futility in Romans 8:20 – 'for the creation was subjected to futility'. But he then speaks of the hope that the creation will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God'. The reconciliation of all things that Paul describes in Colossians 1:20 lies well outside the Teacher's vision.

Despite its limitations, however, Ecclesiastes does strike chords with our experience. Even from our status as redeemed children of God we still find much to connect with on an existential level. We recognise our own situations, moods and questions in the plethora of perspectives the Teacher describes. Like him we see that everything has its time – a key theme that I haven't had time to explore but it's all there in chapter 3. Like him we often find life frustrating; we often find *work* frustrating. Like him there are also times when we find work satisfying. Like him there are times when we lay aside our worries and find pleasure in accepting the good things of life as God-given. Like him we wrestle with the phenomenon of money, its power both to bring good and to hold us in its thrall. Like him we observe the complexity of life, but discover some simple rules of thumb that hold us in good stead. For all his quirky eccentricities, my final word about Qoheleth is this: I like him! ■

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2 I have here reproduced some material from my book *Faith, Hope & the Global Economy*, IVP, 2012, pp.65-66.