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AMOS AND ECCLESIASTES:  
TOWARD DEVELOPING A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE  
TO OPPRESSION<sup>1</sup>

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INTRODUCTION

In his study on the theology of Ecclesiastes, Craig Bartholomew states that his aim is ‘to explore its message in the context of the canon as a whole and thereby relates its theology to contemporary theology.’<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, the present study aims to look at the theological responses to oppression from two different voices in Old Testament canon—Amos and Ecclesiastes—with the purpose of allowing these two voices to inform the church’s theological response to oppression. Liberation theologians have long recognized the importance of the Hebrew prophets’ voice for speaking against the unjust suffering and oppression that is common in the developing nations of the world, and for good reason.<sup>3</sup> Exemplified by the book of Amos, the prophetic voice of the Old Testament loudly decries the oppression of the poor and promises dire consequences for those who run rough shod over the ‘least of these’. There is, however, another voice in the Old Testament that speaks to oppression and, as a part of the canon, should also inform our response to oppression. Wisdom Literature is not well-known for its stance on oppression, yet it also broaches the subject, albeit from a different vantage point.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the book of Ecclesiastes-

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank David Reimer for his careful reading of an earlier draft of this manuscript and for his many insightful remarks. Any errors and shortcomings, of course, remain my own.

<sup>2</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew, ‘The Theology of Ecclesiastes’, in *The Words of the Wise are Like Goats: Qohelet for the 21st Century*, ed. by Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III, and Cristian Rata (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), p. 367.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología de la Liberación: Perspectivas* (Lima: Ediciones Sigueme, 1971) and Jose P. Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> However, see Duane Garrett, ‘Qoheleth on the Use and Abuse of Political Power’, *Trinity Journal* 8 (1987), 159-77.

tes, with its realistic (and yes, perhaps pessimistic) examination of life as it is, speaks to the oppressed in order to offer hope in the face of circumstances over which they have no power, a hope that is found in trusting God.

Amos and Ecclesiastes are not usually examined together and the present study may come under criticism for placing them side-by-side, but the justification for doing so lies in the fact that they speak to the same problem, from the same canon, but with different voices. The one, Amos, delivers a caustic invective against oppression that clearly condemns it. The book argues that the people of Israel have forsaken Yahweh and failed to fulfil their covenant obligation to care for the poor. The other, Ecclesiastes, virtually ignores the culpability of the powerful when it addresses oppression. Instead, it gives its readers a way to live in light of the daily reality of unjust suffering. In order to develop a theological response to oppression today, it is vital to determine how to respond both to oppressed and oppressor; the combination of these two texts allows the reader to do just that. Therefore, in what follows I explore the theological responses of both Amos and Ecclesiastes with an eye toward allowing them to inform a contemporary response to oppression. To accomplish such a task, this study will briefly outline the historical and cultural context of Amos and Ecclesiastes, examine relevant passages in each book, and then draw conclusions concerning how these two voices together should inform our own theological response to oppression.<sup>5</sup>

## AMOS

### *Historical and Cultural Context.*

The title of Amos (1:1) places his ministry during the reigns of Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam of Israel. There is considerable debate over the exact dates during which Amos prophesied, but one can be certain that his ministry occurred sometime during the overlap of these two kings'

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<sup>5</sup> Since this study is interested in what these books have to say about injustice and oppression, it treats Amos and Ecclesiastes in their canonical form. It will not address issues of authorship and redaction history unless they bear directly on the present argument. For a full treatment of these issues in Amos see Tchavdar Hadjiev, *The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009); for Ecclesiastes see Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009) and Daniel C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language: Re-Evaluating its Nature and Date* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1989).

reigns.<sup>6</sup> The significance for this study lies not in the specific dates of Amos's ministry, but in the wider cultural context in which the book is situated. Amos prophesied during a time of significant prosperity for the nation of Israel.<sup>7</sup> Wealth was considered 'a normal reward for righteous living', and not inherently immoral.<sup>8</sup> The problem for Amos was the disproportionate distribution of wealth that led to the oppression of the poor. Regarding the situation as Amos saw it, Joseph Blenkinsopp states:

The drive toward centralization, the need to subsidize a royal court and an elaborate cult, heavy taxation ('exactions of wheat', 5:11), frequent confiscation of patrimonial domain following on insolvency, military service, and forced labor were the major factors undermining the old order and leading to a kind of rent capitalism. The great expansion of trade, especially with the Phoenician cities, and the wealth confiscated during successful military campaigns brought about a new prosperity that, however, did not trickle down to the lower social levels.<sup>9</sup>

Amos thus spoke strongly against the civil and religious leaders who were abusing the very people they should have been protecting. Amos's voice represents the most well-known aspect of the Old Testament's stance against oppression.

### ***Amos's Response to Oppression***

#### *Amos 2:6-8*

Thus says the Yahweh: Concerning three transgressions of Israel, and concerning four, I will not turn back;

<sup>6</sup> For example, B. K. Smith and F. S. Page date his ministry to 783-46 B.C.E. in *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah* (NAC; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), p. 24; Douglas Stuart dates his ministry to 767-42 B.C.E. *Hosea-Jonah* (WBC 31; Waco, TX: Word, 1987), p. 297. C. H. Bullock argues for a smaller window, from 767 to 753 B.C.E. in *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books*, 2nd edn (Chicago: Moody, 2007), p. 72. See also Shalom Paul, *Amos* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), pp. 1-7.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Ellis, 'Amos Economics', *RE*, 107 (2010), 464-5. Abraham Heschel notes, 'During this entire period Assyria was weak, and Syria on the decline; Jeroboam took advantage of the weakness of both to extend his dominion, foster commerce, and accumulate wealth' *The Prophets*, Prince Press edn (Peabody, MA: Prince, 2004), p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> Ellis, 'Amos Economics', p. 466. See Deuteronomy 7:11-15, though also note the discussion of the relationship between blessing and obedience in Job.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, rev. edn (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), p. 81.

concerning their selling for silver the righteous,  
 and the poor for a pair of sandals—  
 those who trample upon the dust of the earth as the head of the poor,  
 and the way of the poor they turn aside;  
 and a man and his father and go to the same girl,  
 in order to profane my holy name;  
 and on garments pledged,  
 they lay beside every altar;  
 and wine of those fined  
 they drink in the house of their god.<sup>10</sup>

After gaining the applause of his audience by proclaiming Yahweh's displeasure with Israel's neighbours, Amos confronts those in Israel who have transgressed the Torah of Yahweh, specifically the community's civil and religious leaders. As Francis Andersen and David Noel Freedman note, Israel's crimes occur in four distinct locations—the market, the place where loans are certified, the courts, and the religious centres—the very places where the civil and religious leaders conducted their business.<sup>11</sup>

Amos lists three specific violations of Torah—selling the righteous for silver (Lev. 25:39),<sup>12</sup> having sexual relations with one's daughter-in-law (Lev 18:10), and refusing to return a garment taken in pledge (Exod. 22:26; Deut. 24:10-13). By juxtaposing transgressions that relate to oppression of the poor, sexuality, and the cult, Amos demonstrates that oppression and injustice are indeed a religious issue.<sup>13</sup> The way in which people and communities treat the less fortunate significantly impacts their relationship to Yahweh—a lesson that modern readers would do well to learn. Oppression is not simply a matter of economics or 'might makes right', but it is an affront to Torah, for which Yahweh will hold Israel accountable.

<sup>10</sup> All translations are the author's own.

<sup>11</sup> Francis I. Andersen and David N. Freedman, *Amos* (AB 24A; New York: Doubleday, 1989), pp. 321-2.

<sup>12</sup> Shalom Paul notes that two different issues may be in view here (*Amos*, p. 77). Either the indictment concerns the bribery of judges, for which textual evidence is scant, or it refers to selling innocent people into slavery for trivial debts.

<sup>13</sup> See R. Reed Lessing, *Amos* (Concordia Commentary; St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2009), p. 184. He points out that exploitation of the poor is condemned in the Book of the Covenant, the Holiness Code, and the re-ratification of the covenant in Moab.

*Amos 4:1-3*

Hear this word, cows of Bashan,  
 who are on Mount Samaria,  
 oppressors the poor, crushers of the needy,  
 those who say to their husbands, 'Bring in, that we may drink!'  
 Adonai Yahweh has sworn by his holiness  
 that behold, days are coming upon you,  
 when they will take you away with hooks,  
 the last of you with fishhooks.  
 Through breaches you will leave,  
 a woman in front of her; and you will be thrown to Harmon,  
 declares Yahweh.

After Amos's first indictment against Israel, he goes on to condemn the 'cows of Bashan' (4:1), the 'uppity upper-class women of northern Israel, who, by their incessant demand upon their husbands to provide for their gluttonous needs to carouse and feast, are responsible for goading them on to impoverish even further the poor'.<sup>14</sup> In this text Amos broadens his indictment beyond those who actively oppress others (Amos 2:6-8) to include those who, by their voracious appetites for more, indirectly cause the oppression of the poor. He thus negates the argument that one must be actively involved in oppression to incur guilt, making it clear to those of us in the developing world that we must ask the question, 'Does our consumption cause oppression'?

*Amos 8:4-6*

Hear this, trampers of the needy  
 and destroyers of the poor of the land,  
 saying, 'When will the new moon pass,  
 that we may sell grain;  
 and the Sabbath,  
 that we may open grain?  
 To make the ephah small and to increase the shekel,  
 And to make balances deceitful,  
 to buy with silver the poor  
 and the needy for a pair of sandals  
 and to sell the refuse of wheat'.

<sup>14</sup> Paul, *Amos*, p. 128. Compare with Emmanuel Nwaoru, who argues that the term 'cows' refers both to males and females, 'A Fresh Look at Amos 4:1-3 and Its Imagery', *VT* 59 (2009), p. 465.

Here Amos addresses the ‘religious’ whose religion plays no role in their businesses—they are squirming in their seats, as it were, waiting for the New Moon and Sabbath to end so that they can exploit the poor through their unjust trade practices. Amos once again relies on Torah to indict his hearers, who rob the poor both ‘coming and going’.<sup>15</sup> The merchants give less to their customers than promised by making the ephah smaller, and they take more product from wholesaling farmers by making the shekel greater.<sup>16</sup> Amos goes on to condemn them with shockingly violent language, which highlights the seriousness with which Yahweh views exploitation and oppression. They sun will be darkened during the day (8:9), mourning will be heard everywhere (8:10), and a famine of the word of the Lord will engulf the land (8:11).

As in the aforementioned texts, this passage makes it clear that oppression is a matter of one’s relationship with Yahweh. Those who oppress others through unjust trade have broken the Torah of Yahweh, and will suffer greatly for it. Those who feast at the expense of the poor will now experience famine for lack of ‘hearing the words of the LORD’ (8:11).

These passages (2:6-8; 4:1-3; 8:4-6) highlight three important features of Amos’s view of oppression: (1) Oppression of the poor adversely affects one’s relationship with Yahweh; he will fiercely judge oppressors. (2) Both direct and indirect oppression are sinful. Alongside treating the poor equitably, one must also take care that one’s consumption of goods does not cause harm. (3) Amos’s invectives are directed at oppressors. Certainly the oppressed will find solace in Amos’s words, but his target audience is oppressors, not their victims. Amos’s fierce warning to those who would further their own lives at the cost of others thus forms the first aspect of the Old Testament’s view of oppression.

## ECCLESIASTES

### *Historical and Cultural Context.*

Placing the book of Ecclesiastes in its historical and cultural context proves to be much more difficult than the task with Amos.<sup>17</sup> The book itself claims to be the words of the ‘son of David, king in Jerusalem’ (1:1). If this refers to Solomon, then its composition would have occurred during

<sup>15</sup> Ellis, ‘Amos Economics’, p. 469.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> I will use ‘Qohelet’ to refer to the book’s author and ‘Ecclesiastes’ to refer to the book itself.

the 10th century B.C.E.<sup>18</sup> However, scholars contest the significance of this statement. Representing the classical interpretation of this verse, the Targum explicitly ascribes the book to Solomon, stating that it records Solomon's prophetic vision concerning the future division of Israel, the destruction of the Temple, and the Babylonian exile.<sup>19</sup> This traditional association with Solomon has come under scrutiny for some time. As early as the as the fourth century, Didymus the Blind argued that '[a]ctually the Spirit is the author of the divinely inspired Scriptures... Either the real author is Solomon, or some [other] wise men have written it. Maybe we should opt for the latter so that nobody may say that the speaker talks about himself'.<sup>20</sup> The Babylonian Talmud holds a similar view, attributing the book to Hezekiah (*b. Baba Bathra* 15a). Centuries later, Martin Luther cast doubt on Solomonic authorship,<sup>21</sup> and since the work of Grotius in the seventeenth century, scholars have been much more apt to attribute the book to someone other than Solomon.<sup>22</sup>

In his examination of narrative strategy in Ecclesiastes, Eric Christianson argues that the book's reference to Solomon is deliberately vague so that it could adopt the 'Solomonic Guise', a literary device used to critique kingship.<sup>23</sup> Tremper Longman similarly argues that the Solomonic

<sup>18</sup> John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th edn (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), p. 211.

<sup>19</sup> Peter S. Knobel, *The Targum of Qohelet* (Aramaic Bible, 15; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Didymus the Blind, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes 7.9*, in *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon* (ACCS IX; ed. J. Robert Wright; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005), p. 192.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke*, 1:207, cited by Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 44. However, note Eric Christianson (*Ecclesiastes through the Centuries*, p. 95), who follows Theodore Preston in arguing that Luther does not in fact deny Solomonic authorship in this text. *The Hebrew Text, and a Latin Version of the Book of Solomon Called Ecclesiastes; with Original Notes, Philological and Exegetical, and a Translation of the Commentary of Mendlessohn from the Rabbinic Hebrew; Also a Newly Arranged Version of Ecclesiastes* (London: John W. Parker, 1845), p. 12. See also the discussion by Al Wolters, 'Ecclesiastes and the Reformers', in *The Words of the Wise are Like Goats: Qohelet for the 21st Century*, ed. by Mark Boda, Tremper Longman, and Christian Rata (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, forthcoming), pp. 62-4.

<sup>22</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 44; citing C. D. Ginsburg, *Coheloth, Commonly Called the book of Ecclesiastes* (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1861), p. 146, who in turn cites H. Grotius, *Annotationes in Vetus Testamentum*, 1:434-5.

<sup>23</sup> Eric Christianson, *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes* (JSOTSS 280; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990), pp. 128-72. See also Jürgen van



persona is a fiction by pointing out parallels with the Akkadian genre of fictional autobiography.<sup>24</sup> Daniel Fredericks, among others, has responded to the current trend of denying Solomonic authorship in his recent commentary, stating that ‘the absence of Solomon’s name is hardly important, since everything short of that is announced—the editor simply chooses not to state the obvious’.<sup>25</sup>

The debate over the authorship, and consequently the date, of Ecclesiastes will continue, but its importance for this study lies in the fact that the book is clearly intended to be read as if it were the words of the ‘son of David, king in Jerusalem’ (1:1).<sup>26</sup> This is significant because the book approaches topics from the perspective of a king, one who ostensibly has the power to right wrongs and relieve oppression and suffering. The book

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Oorschot, ‘König und Mensch: Biografie und Autobiografie bei Kohelet und in der alttestamentlichen Literaturgeschichte’, in *Mensch und König: Studien zur Anthropologie des Alten Testaments: Rüdiger Luz zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. by Angelika Berlejung and Raik Heckl (Herders biblische Studien 53; Freiburg: Herder, 2008), pp. 109-22.

- <sup>24</sup> Tremper Longman, *Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 15-20. See also, idem, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography: A Generic and Comparative Study* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990).
- <sup>25</sup> Daniel C. Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (AOTC 16; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity 2010), p. 31. See also Gleeson L. Archer, ‘The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of “Ecclesiastes”’, *JETS* 12 (1969), pp. 167-81; Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (NAC 14; Nashville, TN: B & H, 1993); Walter Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life* (EBC; Chicago: Moody, 1979); James Bollhagen, *Ecclesiastes* (Concordia Commentary; St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2011). Regarding the linguistic argument for dating Ecclesiastes late, see Martin Shields, *The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), p. 23. Cf. Ian Young, *Diversity in Pre-exilic Hebrew* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1993), pp. 145-55; idem, ‘Concluding Reflections’, in *Biblical Hebrew: Chronology and Typology*, ed. Ian Young, JSOTSS 369 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2003), pp. 276-311 in which Young ‘constructs a history of the Hebrew language in which Qoheleth’s language could plausibly be preexilic’ (cited by Shields, *End of Wisdom*, p. 23 n.6). However, note Oswald Loretz, who argues that the language of Qoheleth is the *only* aspect of the book that provides any basis for dating (*Qohelet und der Alte Orient: Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des Buches Qohelet* [Herder: Freiburg, 1964], pp. 23-9, esp. p. 29)].
- <sup>26</sup> See C. L. Seow, who states that Eccl. 2 ‘call[s] to mind the activities and fabulous wealth of Solomon in 1 Kgs 3–11. Indeed it is difficult not to think of Solomon when the author concludes in 2:9 that he ‘became great and surpassed’ all who preceded him in Jerusalem’ (*Ecclesiastes* [AB 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997], p. 150).

does not, however, speak out against oppression as one would perhaps expect. Some scholars argue that the absence of a voice against oppression indicates that its author was powerless to stop it.<sup>27</sup> This may very well be the case, but it is at least clear that the author understood that his readers themselves were powerless against oppression by the powerful. For this reason, he offers his readers a coping mechanism: in light of a world turned upside-down, in which people cannot control anything, their only recourse is to trust God and to enjoy his gifts: eating, drinking, working, and companionship.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, while Amos addressed oppression from a position that could possibly effect change, or at the least announce Yahweh's judgment, Ecclesiastes broaches the issue from a place of realism—or perhaps resignation—concerning what the oppressed could actually do.

## ECCLESIASTES'S RESPONSE TO OPPRESSION

### *Ecclesiastes 3:16-17*

And again I saw under the sun, in the place of justice there was wickedness, and in the place and in the place of righteousness there was wickedness. I said to myself in my heart, 'the righteous and the wicked God will judge, for a there is a time for every matter and for every deed'.

The first mention of injustice in Ecclesiastes concerns the reversal of the normal order of wickedness and righteousness. Where one would expect justice, namely the city gates, instead one finds wickedness and injustice.<sup>29</sup> Qohelet speaks here about the same issues seen earlier in Amos: the people obligated to protect society's underclass—the elders—are the very ones causing the oppression. James Crenshaw, who argues that Ecclesiastes represents a strain of pessimism in Israel, states that Qohelet's cynicism is explicit in 3:16: God does not help the oppressed.<sup>30</sup> However, this

<sup>27</sup> E.g., Longman, who argues that these verses indicate that Solomon could not have been the book's author (*Ecclesiastes*, pp. 4-6).

<sup>28</sup> See Eccles. 2:24-26; 3:10-15; 3:16-22; 5:18-20 [EVV 17-19]; 9:7-10; 11:7-10. The significance of these passages for the meaning of Ecclesiastes is certain, though they are interpreted in vastly different ways depending on one's view of the book as a whole. For an overview of interpretive options, see Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 150-3. Regarding the coping strategy offered by Ecclesiastes, see Daniel C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on the Brevity of Life* (The Biblical Seminar 18; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 177.

<sup>30</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 101-2.

is not a foregone conclusion. It is true that Qohelet does not condemn the oppressors or offer to end the suffering, as one would expect of a king such as Solomon, but the following verse (Eccles. 3:17) offers comfort for the oppressed: there is a time for judgment, a time in which all will be made right. Ecclesiastes does not offer an *immediate* solution to the problem, but it does give hope of a time in which injustice is righted and suffering alleviated, not unlike the New Testament.<sup>31</sup> Qohelet points the oppressed to God—the ultimate deliverer—rather than encouraging trust in leaders who have already evidenced corruption.

That Ecclesiastes addresses the powerless is further demonstrated by the passage's surrounding context. Ecclesiastes 3:16-18 comes after the poem that details the proper time for life experiences (Eccles. 3:1-8), laying the foundation for verse 17 in which Qohelet states assuredly that God will judge the wicked because 'he has appointed a time for every matter' (Eccles. 3:17). Just as humans can take comfort in creation's order—even though it lies beyond their control—they can trust that God has appointed a time for the punishment of oppressors.<sup>32</sup>

Ecclesiastes 3 also contains two explicit admonitions to enjoy God's gifts, both before and after its discussion of oppression (Eccles. 3:12-13, 22). In the first instance, Qohelet states that the ways of God are hidden (Eccles. 3:11), which leads him to encourage his readers to 'to rejoice and to do good' and 'eat, drink, and see good in all their toil' (Eccles. 3:12-13). The second admonition comes on the heels of a discussion concerning the difference between humans and animals, in which Qohelet concludes that both suffer the same fate—death. In light of this fact, the book advises that every person should enjoy their work (Eccles. 3:22). Both of these admonitions concern how humans should respond to things over which they have no control. Instead of clamouring for control, they should trust in God's timing and enjoy what can be enjoyed—food, drink, and work.

#### *Ecclesiastes 4:1-3*

Again I turned and I saw all the oppression that is done under the sun, and behold, the tears of the oppressed, and there was none to comfort them. And in the hand of their oppressors was power, and there was none to comfort them. So I praised the dead, who already died more than those who are yet living. But better than both is the one who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Rev. 21:3-4.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: Norton, 2010), p. 355. See also Ogden, *Qoheleth*, p. 64.

The tenor of Qohelet's pain at oppression reaches its highest pitch in this passage. Abuse of the poor is so overwhelming that he advocates death over life, and never having been born over both. Again, one would expect a text consciously written from a king's perspective to advocate for the oppressed in at least some small way. Nevertheless, as Longman points out, Qohelet 'does not personally engage the subject or enjoin others to resist the oppressors'.<sup>33</sup> Longman and Bartholomew both indicate that Qohelet's silence at this juncture is a further indication that the Solomonic language in the early chapters of Ecclesiastes is a rhetorical device.<sup>34</sup> However, is it possible that Qohelet remains silent because his intent is not to rectify unjust situations, but to provide a way to endure those situations? Qohelet provides that way by emphasizing the extreme distress oppression causes him and by implying that suffering will cease, even if it is death that brings relief.<sup>35</sup> The oppressed can thus take solace in the certainty that God will judge evil (Eccles. 3:17) and that their affliction will not always be.

#### *Ecclesiastes 5:8-9*

If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight, for one official watches another, and an official is over both of them. But profit from the land is taken by all; a king is served by the field.

Duane Garrett has pointed out the difficulties of translating these verses, particularly verse 8.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the reader can be certain that Qohelet knows that oppression is alive and well, ostensibly due to the corruption he sees as inherent in bureaucracy. C. L. Seow rightly states that the issue for Qohelet here, as in 3:16-17, is not so much *where* ('in the province') injustice occurs geographically, but that it occurs in places where justice should reign.<sup>37</sup> Despite Qohelet's concern for the oppressed, it once again becomes apparent that the book is not interested in condemning oppressors; rather, it advises the oppressed not to be shocked at injustice.

This admonition, combined with Qohelet's insistence that God will judge wickedness and ultimately end oppression, gives readers a pro-

<sup>33</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 132.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 187.

<sup>35</sup> Garrett is careful to note that Ecclesiastes is not advocating suicide as a means of escape. Rather, he is expressing personal turmoil caused by seeing oppression in the world ('Qoheleth', p. 163).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165-6. Compare with Graham Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 2nd edn (Readings: A New Biblical Commentary; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), pp. 84-6.

<sup>37</sup> Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 202.

gram of coping with injustice. They are to trust in God's sovereignty, wait patiently, and not be surprised when they experience unjust suffering. Qohelet's advice makes it apparent that the book forms the Old Testament's other perspective on oppression by offering those who are suffering a way to persevere under oppression.

#### TOWARD A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO OPPRESSION

A theological response to oppression must be fully informed by the entire canon. In this regard the thoughts of Walter Brueggemann may prove helpful. In two essays in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* he outlined 'a shape for Old Testament Theology' that included what he calls 'structure legitimation' and 'embrace of pain'.<sup>38</sup> The 'structure legitimation' aspect of the Old Testament is that with which we are perhaps most familiar: simply put, the idea that certain actions result in certain consequences. Thus, when Amos decries the oppression of the poor by the ruling class, he presents what Brueggemann calls the 'common theology' of the Old Testament.<sup>39</sup> The ruling class has sinned against both God and people and must therefore pay the appropriate price. Such an indictment upholds God's justice, and it is not an indictment away from which we should shy. Thus, while Amos's voice is very much 'bottom-up' in the sense that he speaks truth to power, it also is 'top-down' in the sense that he pronounces the well-known Deuteronomic curses against those who have broken covenant with Yahweh.

Amos's voice is one that believers today must be willing to heed. We must speak and act clearly and loudly against oppression. We must also realize that we are often not quite as innocent as we would like to believe. As Amos shows us, the insatiable appetites of these 'cows of Bashan' cemented their guilt. Yet, we must not allow Amos alone to inform our theological response to oppression, for he gives only one side of the story. Amos confirms for us that Yahweh is a God who judges, a God who acts, a God who does not look lightly upon those who would break his covenant by their actions against others. This is all appropriate and very much true.

Nevertheless, there is another voice that we must hear as well, a voice that embraces the pain, to use Brueggemann's characterization, of those who do in fact follow Yahweh, and yet who still suffer unjustly under the heavy burden of oppression thrust upon them by others. To that end, we have engaged Ecclesiastes as a conversation partner in the attempt to

<sup>38</sup> See Walter Brueggemann, 'A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation', *CBQ* 47 (1985), 28-46; idem, 'A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain', *CBQ* 47 (1985), 395-415.

<sup>39</sup> Brueggemann, 'Structure Legitimation'.

develop a fitting response to oppression. Ecclesiastes comes to us as the words of 'the son of David, king in Jerusalem' and thus we rightly expect a 'top-down' perspective on oppression. In this expectation we certainly are not disappointed, though why a king of Israel would not end oppression remains a thread to be fully unravelled. We also find that Ecclesiastes presents a 'bottom-up' perspective on oppression in that he seeks embrace the pain of the sufferer, thus upending our expectation that the royal class would stand against the oppressed. Qohelet is bold enough to broach the question of why the righteous suffer while the wicked live pleasant lives. In his questioning, the author of Ecclesiastes presents a much-needed second viewpoint.

Whereas Amos cried out forcefully against oppression, Qohelet accepts it as a given, though lamenting its existence. Whereas Amos condemns the oppressor, thus upholding the 'common theology' of the Old Testament, Qohelet questions the apparent failure of this theology when he observes the unjust suffering of the righteous. While the king of Israel could possibly have ended oppression, we know that this end to injustice would last at the most until his own death. Thus, instead of decrying oppression, in the end Qohelet plots a way forward that offers a way for the oppressed to cope with their lot in life: they must fear God, enjoy his gifts, and trust that he will one day set things aright.

For followers of Christ today, a full response to oppression will have to integrate other Scriptures that address it, such as those passages found in Deuteronomy and the Gospels. In an effort to come closer that aim, this study has sought to bring together two Old Testament voices that we are not accustomed to hearing side-by-side so that we might move closer to a fully informed theological response to oppressed and oppressor. With Amos, we must stand against the oppressor both in speech and in deed. With Qohelet, we must comfort the oppressed. And yet, we must also realize that there is nothing we can physically do to end *all* oppression, so we must therefore consent to God's sovereignty. After having done our part, we must entrust the care of the oppressed to him, and in turn ask them to do the same, just as the Israelite sage did so many centuries ago. The church's theological response to oppression must therefore combine these two Old Testament voices to decry oppression and to comfort the oppressed, and finally to point them to the gospel of Jesus Christ, who will finally wipe away every tear and end all suffering.