

was not foreign to ancient Roman and Greek cultures, it was a beneficence specifically directed toward the city and its citizens. Furthermore, the precepts of classical morality considered mercy and unearned aid to be immoral and unjust.

Into this world came the good news of a merciful, generous God whose followers witnessed to that God by means of opening their hands and communities generously to their neighbors; and not just to their own, but beyond family, tribe and city to include the stranger and the poor. Indeed, it has been said that Christianity invented "the poor" in the sense that its work of mercy not only brought visibility and recognition to a population that previously was marginalized and ignored, but insisted as well that such persons be integrated into community.

The extent and effect of Christian stewardship, of the use of our resources to love and welcome others into community, were such that the pagan emperor Julian complained in 362 CE that the withering of the pagan faith was connected to Christianity's benevolence to strangers and care for the poor, even pagan poor.

So it is that Christian stewardship is but an expression of the love of which Christ spoke in his farewell discourse. In our generous, lavish efforts to extend communion by giving of all that we have and are, we witness to the world of the God who gives far more abundantly than we could ever ask or imagine.

Therefore, let us be lavish in our care for one another, for our neighbors near and far. Let this be the tenor of our lives; let this be the character of our communities. And so we will be thought of as stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1) and, seeing our generosity, people will be moved to give glory to God and join us in communion.

Wisdom Literature and the "Center" of the Old Testament

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I. INTRODUCTION

"The professor was carefully examining every little fissure in the rocks. Wherever he saw a hole he always wanted to know the depth of it. To him this was important."¹ Such curiosity that fueled the professor in Jules Verne's classic has propelled biblical theologians for the past 85 years in their own journey to the center of the Old Testament (hereafter OT). The fruits of that curiosity have been manifold as scholars have delved into the depths of the rock in an attempt to reach its center. Yet in the decades since Eichrodt's watershed proposal that covenant is the fiery mass at the heart of the OT, scholarship has still not arrived at a single, agreed-upon center for the OT. Despite the abundance—and variety—of proposals, Gerhard Hasel pointed out in his essay thirty years ago that there is "a growing consensus among scholars that God as Yahweh is the intensely dynamic unifying center of the Old Testament."²

Given the passage of time since Hasel's survey, which has seen ever more proposals for a center to the OT, the current essay seeks to demonstrate that the developing agreement three decades ago was for good reason; however, it does not go far enough. It is not Yahweh alone that forms the center of the OT; rather it is Yahweh and his relationship with humanity that unifies it. In order to develop and defend this thesis,

¹Jules Verne, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Limited Editions, 1996), 150.

² Gerhard Hasel, "Major Recent Issues in Old Testament Theology 1978–1983," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31 (1985), 40.

we will briefly outline the reason a center is sought, contextualize the search for a center, examine two recent evangelical proposals for a center, and finally examine Ecclesiastes as a test case for the proposal that Yahweh and his relationship to humanity is the "dynamic unifying center" of the OT.

II. WHY A CENTER?

At the outset, one may ask whether we should even search for a center to the OT? Even though "evangelicals have assumed that there is a unifying theme in the OT," might it be time just to hang up our hats and admit that there are several competing voices in the OT, thus precluding the existence of a center?³ Many scholars have done just that. By arguing for a three-pronged battle of competing testimonies in the OT, Walter Bruegemann's recent theology demonstrates well the postmodern view of plurality of interpretation and multivalency of voices within a text.⁴ But even before Bruegemann's work, Jon Levenson averred that:

A tradition whose sacred texts are internally argumentative will have a far higher tolerance for theological polydoxy (within limits) and far less motivation to flatten the polyphony of the sources into a monotony. What Christians may perceive as a gain, Jews may perceive as a loss.⁵

Levenson's statement highlights the fact that he reads the biblical text in a way that values its diversity; furthermore, Levenson sees the concern with a center in the OT as a uniquely Christian endeavor that would in fact result in theological deficit from the Jewish perspective.

We would agree emphatically with Levenson and Bruegemann that great diversity exists in the OT; even the division of the books themselves (i.e., the Law, Prophets, and Writings) speaks to this. Indeed honoring the inherent diversity of the biblical witness means that we do not force a "static organizing principle for the systematic presentation of OT theology."⁶ Nevertheless, evangelicals affirm that there also exists an inherent *unity* among the great diversity; something other than leather must hold together these thirty-nine books we call the OT. In order to understand—and thus communicate—the message and meaning of the

³Elmer Martens, "Tackling Old Testament Theology," *Journal of the Evangelical Society* 20 (1977), 126.

⁴Walter Bruegemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

⁵Jon Levenson, "Why Jews are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed., Jacob Neusner, Baruch Levine, and Ernest Frerichs (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1987), 281–307. Also see Jon Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 56.

⁶Hasel, "Major Recent Issues," 40.

whole OT, we therefore search for that something which unifies the various voices, even if it does not organize them as neatly as Westerners would like. In short, evangelicals seek a center because we believe that God has sought to communicate something meaningful through his word, that the message he communicates is sensical, and that he has tasked Christians today with communicating that message to the world. And this message—namely that Yahweh is God and seeks relationship with his people—forms the unifying center, thereby enabling us to make sense of the multiple voices that we find in the Old Testament.

III. CONTEXTUALIZING THE SEARCH FOR A CENTER

The search for a center to OT revelation blossomed in full force with the publication of the first volume of Walther Eichrodt's theology in 1933, in which he argued for covenant as the center of the OT.⁷ Gerhard von Rad countered a few decades later with his own theory: that there is no center to the OT.⁸ These two represent the basic positions regarding the center; either there is one or there is not.⁹

1. There is Not a Center to the Old Testament

For von Rad, *Heilsgeschichte* is the guiding principle of the OT, whose primary aim is to recount the acts of God in history. Von Rad's methodology therefore precludes the idea of a center.¹⁰ Jon Levenson and Walter Bruegemann, follow suit. For Levenson, the idea of a center is unsupportable due to the multiplicity of the biblical witness. In fact, he states that the existence of so many proposals for a center in itself "offers ironic evidence for the diversity of theologies in that book."¹¹ Bruegemann likewise showcases the diversity of the OT by arguing that there are competing testimonies within it that vie for our attention. Though these scholars are but a minute sampling of the recent explosion of voices in the field of OT theology, they represent the basic reasons that many have moved away from a search for the center: those being

⁷Walther Eichrodt, *Theologie des Alten Testaments. Band I* (Leipzig: J. C. Heinrichs, 1933).

⁸Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments. Band I: Die Theologie der geschichtlichen Überlieferungen Israels* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1957).

⁹Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 4th ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 160.

¹⁰However, von Rad later softens his position to say that Yahweh can be considered the center of the OT. See "Offene Fragen im Umkreis einer Theologie des Alten Testaments," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 88, no. 6 (1963), 409.

¹¹Levenson, "Why Jews are Not Interested," 56. See also R. N. Whybry, "Old Testament Theology—A Non-Existent Beast?" in *Scripture and Method: Essays Presented to Anthony Tyrrell Hanson on His Seventieth Birthday*, ed., B. T. Thompson (Hull, UK: University Press, 1987), 168–180.

methodology and diversity. One need only peruse the shelves of the theology section in the library to see the vast array of methodologies that scholars are currently using to cull meaning from the biblical text, the common thread of which is their insistence that the OT refuses to be unified around a central principle or idea.¹²

Might there be something to these scholars' insistence that there is no center to the OT? Certainly, for there truly is great diversity within these thirty-nine books, as Leo Perdue has pointed out: "considerable diversity of beliefs and practices in the Hebrew Bible itself, because it was written and edited over a millennium . . . mitigates against finding a center or unity in the theology of the Hebrew Bible."¹³ Of course we should not try so hard to force a square peg into a round hole that we ultimately destroy the edges that just will not fit—a practice of which many searches for the center have been accused in regard to wisdom literature. But is this what all searches for the center have done?

At this juncture, a significant differentiation must be stated. Specifically, our search is not for an organizational center around which everything else in the OT gravitates. Rather, the search is for an organizing principle that unites the diverse OT witness. As evangelicals we affirm that one God superintended the writing of his Scripture for the purpose of communicating with humanity. And while we may be accused of starting from our conclusion and working backward to find evidence, we must not abandon the faith we have in God's commitment to communicate with his people. Thus, we affirm the great diversity of the Scriptures without discarding hope that a unifying principle binds them together for God has chosen to reveal himself in diverse ways in diverse times to diverse people.

2. There is a Center to the Old Testament

The proposals for identifying a center to the OT are seemingly as vast as the proposals that avidly deny any such claims, and as Levenson and others have pointed out, the volume of views indicates that there may be something to the cry of the naysayers.¹⁴ For example, van Ruler posits that the kingdom of God—theocracy—as the center to the OT;¹⁵ Preuss

¹²For an overview, see Leo G. Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005).

¹³*Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴For extensive overviews of the search for a center, see Hasel, *Old Testament Theology*, 139–70; idem., "The Problem of the Center in the Old Testament," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 86, no. 1 (1974): 65–82; Rudolph Smend, *Die Mitte des Alten Testaments* (Zurich: EVZ, 1970); Smend, *Die Mitte des Alten Testaments: exegetische Aufsätze* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002); Walther Zimmerli, "Zum Problem der 'Mitte des Alten Testaments,'" *Evangelische Theologie* 35, no. 2 (1975), 97–118.

¹⁵A. A. van Ruler, *The Christian Church and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 26–29.

and Wildberger argue for election;¹⁶ Köhler thinks that God's lordship forms the center;¹⁷ Walter Kaiser proposes God's promise;¹⁸ Bruce Waltke believes that the irruption of God's kingdom forms the center;¹⁹ Samuel Terrien argues for God's presence;²⁰ and H. G. Reventlow, along with several others, affirm God, in some way or another, as the center of the OT.²¹

Yet while Levenson points out that the variety of proposals for a center indicates its absence, one may counter that the continuing search confirms that there in fact is a unifying principle which holds the OT together. Perhaps a better criticism regarding the diversity of proposals is that the search continues because they have been unable to overcome what is perhaps the primary obstacle to affirming a unifying principle, which is the integration of wisdom literature into their proposed schema. Elmer Martens raises this very criticism against the efforts of Eichrodt, Vos, Lehman, and Kaiser.²² It seems that the success of a person's quest for the center rises and falls on how well it can account for Israel's wisdom tradition. Thus it remains to be seen whether Israel's wisdom literature can submit to any sort of unifying principle, or will it always be the prodigal son who refuses to come home.

IV. RECENT EVANGELICAL PROPOSALS

Unbothered by the wide array of proposals that have come before them, evangelicals have charged ahead in the journey to the center of the OT. Walter Kaiser, for example, resurrected his thesis that promise is the center of with the publication of *The Promise-Plan of God* in 2008. Kaiser's latest treatment, which will no doubt prove to be influential in evangelical biblical theology, is based in large part on his 1978 work,

¹⁶H. D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols., trans. Leo G. Perdue (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995); H. Wildberger, "Auf dem Wege zu einer biblischen Theologie," *Evangelische Theologie* 19 (1959), 70–90.

¹⁷Ludwig Köhler, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1953), 12, 17.

¹⁸Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978); idem., *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

¹⁹Bruce Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007).

²⁰Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology*, Religious Perspectives (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

²¹See Henning Graf Reventlow, *Hauptprobleme der alttestamentlichen Theologie im 20. Jahrhundert* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982), 146; idem., "Basic Problems in Old Testament Theology," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 11 (1979), 8; Hasel, "Major Recent Issues," 40.

²²Elmer Martens, "Tackling Old Testament Theology," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20 (1977), 126–127.

Toward an Old Testament Theology. In *Promise-Plan*, Kaiser begins by delineating exactly what he means by “promise”:

The promise-plan is God’s word of declaration, beginning with Eve and continuing on through history, especially in the patriarchs and the Davidic line, that God would continually *be* in his person and *do* in his deeds and works (in and through Israel, and later the church) his redemptive plan as his *means* of keeping that promised word alive for Israel, and thereby for all who subsequently believed. All in that promised seed were called to act as a light for all the nations so that all the families of the earth might come to faith and to new life in the Messiah.²³

Kaiser spends the rest of the book demonstrating how the promise of God forms the center for not just the OT, but the entire Bible. There is no question that God’s promise to Israel—and later the church—forms a central aspect of the biblical witness: God is continually present among and acting for the benefit of his people. Yet in what way is wisdom literature related to God’s promise?

Kaiser asserts that “the theological rubric or special term” that brings wisdom literature into the fold is the “fear of God/Lord.”²⁴ Interestingly, Kaiser notes that we find this concept in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and some wisdom psalms, though he neglects to mention Job and Song of Songs, both of which he asserts are wisdom texts. Kaiser argues that this concept of fearing God represents how his people are to live within the promise; namely, fearing God is the appropriate “response of faith to the divine word.”²⁵

The difficulty with how Kaiser has connected the wisdom literature—“life in the promise”—with his concept of “promise” is that he seems to understand “promise” primarily in terms of the Messianic promise that God will deliver his people. Kaiser’s reading of the OT is essentially Christological, which is by no means foolhardy or wrong-headed.²⁶ The OT very clearly points forward to a coming Messiah who will finally save his followers once and for all, and whom the New Testament teaches is none other than Jesus of Nazareth. However, Kaiser’s thesis that promise unites the entire OT breaks down at the wisdom literature because he fails to demonstrate a Messianic theme of redemption, going so far as to admit that there is “no direct relation to the redemptive process in Israel.”²⁷

Kaiser is spot-on with his assessment that wisdom literature is concerned with how to live life in relationship with Yahweh. In this

²³Kaiser, *Promise-Plan*, 19 (emphasis original).

²⁴*Ibid.*, 134.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 136.

²⁶See Kaiser’s “Ten Characteristics of the Promise Plan of God,” in *Promise-Plan*, 19–25.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 136.

regard, Kaiser helpfully demonstrates the relationship between Torah and wisdom literature, a relationship that bolsters his contention that fearing the Lord is wrapped up in obedience to the Lord.²⁸ God clearly expects his people to obey him, which indicates that there exists a connection between wisdom and the rest of the OT, but it is unclear how God’s expected obedience relates to the promised redemption. Kaiser fails to convince that living in obedience to Yahweh is connected significantly to the concept of God’s Messianic promise to rescue his people. Thus, while there is much to gain from Kaiser’s journey to the center of the OT, we must continue to search for a unifying principle that can account adequately for the voice of wisdom literature.

In contrast to Kaiser’s work is also the contribution of Bruce Waltke, who in his *magnum opus* proposes that the “irruption of the holy God’s merciful kingship” is the one theme that binds them all in the OT.²⁹ Waltke arrives at this unifying center through what he calls an exegetical, canonical, and thematic method. By that, Waltke means first of all that his theology of the OT is informed by engaged analysis of the biblical text itself. His exegetical method seeks to understand what the text meant in its original context to its original audience, an understanding that shapes his theology at each turn. Second, Waltke works from the text’s final form with the firm confession that the canon “has strict boundaries. For a confessing community, the basis of its confession cannot have fuzzy edges. A book is either authoritative for establishing doctrine and practice or it is not. A fuzzy edge is possible only for someone who has a fuzzy idea about any inspired writing.”³⁰ Thus, Waltke takes the confessional position that the biblical text as we have it—in its final form—is the text that is normative for life and faith today and works from the text’s final form rather than seeking what some see as competing theologies in the text’s supposed strata.³¹ Third, the thematic aspect of Waltke’s method takes into account that there are diverse themes that run throughout the Scriptures. This allows Waltke to trace themes through the OT while organizing them under his universal principle: the irruption of God’s kingdom.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 138. Kaiser draws on the work of Moshe Weinfeld to show wisdom’s connection to Deuteronomy. Cf., Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 244–274. For more on the relationship between Torah and wisdom, see Ryan O’Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah: Epistemology in Deuteronomy and the Wisdom Literature* (FRLANT 225; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2009).

²⁹Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 147.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 37.

³¹E.g., Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, trans. B. W. Anderson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972). For further justification of canonical methodology, see Rolf Rendtorff, *Canon and theology: Overtures to an Old Testament Theology*, trans. and ed. Margaret Kohl, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 46–56; James A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972); G. W. Coats and B. O. Long, eds., *Canon and Authority: Essays on Old Testament Religion and Authority* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); and Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

A final aspect worthy of mention is that Waltke arranges and examines the OT according to "blocks of writing": Primary History (Pentateuch and Former Prophets), Prophetic Literature, Hymnic Literature (Psalms), and Wisdom Literature (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job).³² The remaining three books —Ruth, Esther, and Song of Songs— remain unclassified, though Waltke connects them to the Primary History either through thematic elements (Ruth and Esther) or ascription (Song of Songs). Waltke's division into blocks of writing allows him to utilize narrative criticism, poetics, and intertextuality to demonstrate the connections between the various genres.³³

Like Kaiser, Waltke also discusses wisdom literature in terms of the fear of Yahweh, stating that "the holy and merciful King stoops to bring his subjects life by giving them his rule through inspired sages."³⁴ He further posits that the book of Proverbs seeks to establish God's rule over his kingdom through the fear of Yahweh. However, Waltke makes an interesting distinction between the fear of Yahweh in Proverbs and the fear of God in other ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature to argue for the distinctiveness of Proverbs in regard to Israel's covenant relationship with the Lord. Waltke is certainly correct to point out this distinction, but his emphasis on the name "Yahweh" weakens his point about the overall relationship of wisdom literature to the rest of the OT. Since Ecclesiastes encourages the fear of *God* rather than the fear of *Yahweh*, does this mean that its concern is not with Israel's covenant God?

Waltke also notes that the difficulty with integrating wisdom literature into his schema is that "whereas the rest of the Bible pertains to the irruption of the kingdom of God through God's calling of Israel to be his holy people and his covenants with her, the biblical wisdom never mentions Israel's elections and covenants culminating in the Messianic age."³⁵ Even still, this does not deter Waltke because he instead seeks to integrate wisdom literature through its emphasis on obedience to Yahweh's covenant stipulations, not unlike Kaiser. Waltke is correct to emphasize the importance of obedience to God in wisdom literature, but it appears that wisdom literature is not so much concerned with the irruption of God's kingdom as it is concerned with how to live in relationship to Yahweh given that his kingdom has already irrupted. So wisdom literature does not seek to *establish* God's rule; rather, it *presupposes* God's rule.

In sum then, both Kaiser and Waltke fail to demonstrate how wisdom literature is integrated into their proposed centers. They are both correct to focus on the unique nature of Israelite wisdom over against the broader context of ancient Near Eastern wisdom. They are also both correct to emphasize the value that wisdom literature places on obedience to

³²Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 55–59.

³³*Ibid.*, 93–142.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 162.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 901.

Yahweh. However, Kaiser's proposal fails because there is no clear Messianic, forward-looking promise discernible in the OT wisdom literature. Additionally, Waltke's own proposal fails because wisdom literature is concerned with living in relationship to Yahweh as king rather than defending or demonstrating his kingship. Yet both Waltke and Kaiser argue forcefully that wisdom literature relates to their proposed center through the fear of/obedience to God. Would it not then be preferable to say that the center of the OT is Yahweh's relationship to humanity, which wisdom literature demonstrates by teaching its hearers how to live out that relationship through obedience?

V. YAHWEH AND HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH HUMANITY AS THE CENTER: ECCLESIASTES AS A TEST CASE

This idea of Yahweh's relationship to humanity recurs throughout the OT in such a way that it binds together texts from divergent genres and time periods. For instance, the Torah chronicles Yahweh's creation of humanity, his calling of Abraham, his dramatic rescue of Israel from Egypt, and his outlining of the Mosaic covenant stipulations with Israel. The Prophets then chronicle Yahweh's waging war on behalf of his people, his theocratic rule, the establishment of his co-regent, the people's decline into sin, and the incessant cries for them to return. Likewise, the Writings focus on God's relationship to humanity, detailing how God acts for his people and examining how to live life in relationship with this God who has acted so graciously on behalf of his people. Thus it seems viable to argue that this motif —Yahweh's relationship with humanity— is the principle that unifies the entire OT. But to test this thesis more critically, we will look at how this theme operates in the book of Ecclesiastes.

1. Introducing Ecclesiastes

The theology of Ecclesiastes is notoriously difficult to nail down, a task made no easier by its ever elusive literary structure.³⁶ Craig Bartholomew has made important headway in this direction by emphasizing that the book should be read performatively; that is, the

³⁶Multiple attempts have been made to outline the book's structure. See, e.g. Stephen G. Brown, "The Structure of Ecclesiastes," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 14 (1990), 195–208; Joseph Coppens, "La structure de l'Ecclesiaste," in *La Sagesse de l'Ancien Testament*, ed., Maurice Gilbert (Paris: Gembloux, 1979), 288–292; Addison G. Wright, "Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968), 313–334; Michael V. Fox, "The Inner Structure of Qoheleth's Thought," in *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom*, ed., Antoon Schoors (Leeuven: Leeuven University Press, 1998), 225–238; James S. Reitman, "The Structure and Unity of Ecclesiastes," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (1997), 297–319; David J. H. Beldman, "Framed! Structure in Ecclesiastes," in *The Words of the Wise are Like Goats: Engaging Qoheleth in the 21st Century*, ed., Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III, and Cristian Rata (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 137–161.

reader should realize that the book unfolds as the man Qoheleth journeys through his own life.³⁷ Just as we experience life in no real organized fashion, so does Qoheleth tell us his story.³⁸ With this in mind, I do not purport to have developed the theology of Ecclesiastes, for the book is a meandering beast that explores many aspects of life, or as Bartholomew puts it, "Trying to grasp Ecclesiastes feels like trying to pin down a large resistant octopus; just when you think you have the tentacles under control, there is one sticking out again!" Despite the book's tortuous nature, though, it deals significantly at many turns with the idea of how to get along in a world turned upside-down, and Qoheleth's states his conclusion in terms of one's relationship to God. These two aspects — honest reflection on life and submission to God in spite of that reflection— indicate that Qoheleth is concerned with living life in relationship with God when the evidence seems to point to the conclusion that he has somehow left the scene.

Likewise, methodologically, we read the text in its final canonical form. So while there is much to be learned from scholars who read Ecclesiastes through different lenses, there is no mistaking the benefit of reading Ecclesiastes as our churches read it—in its final form. This presupposition becomes especially important in our treatment of the theology of Ecclesiastes because we argue that the book is a unity and that Ecclesiastes 12:13 is the hermeneutical lens through which the author intends his work to be read.³⁹

Still, while our assessment of the book's theology does not depend exclusively on this one verse, those who hold that the several other "orthodox" verses throughout the book are later interpolations by a pious redactor will no doubt disagree with our treatment here.⁴⁰ We also presuppose that God superintended the writing of Scripture and that the Bible we now hold in our hands is the one he intended to be transmitted through the ages. Finally, we hold that the Bible itself is a unity that contains a unified message, a presupposition that opens us to the charge of circular reasoning ("the parts must fit with the whole, therefore how do we make that happen?"). Yet despite the methodological criticism that

³⁷Craig Bartholomew, "The Theology of Ecclesiastes," in *The Words of the Wise are Like Goats: Engaging Qoheleth in the 21st Century*, ed., Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III, and Cristian Rata; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 368.

³⁸I use "Qoheleth" to refer to the author of Ecclesiastes, and "Ecclesiastes" to refer to the book itself.

³⁹On Ecclesiastes as a literary unity, see esp. Michael V. Fox, "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qoheleth," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 48 (1977): 83–106; idem., *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, JSOT Supplement 71 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989).

⁴⁰E.g., K. Siegfried, *Prediger und Hoheslied übersetzt und erklärt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1898); George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, International Critical Commentary Series (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 1908; Kurt Gallinger, "Kohelet-studien," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 50 (1932), 276–299; Martin Rose, *Rien de nouveau: Nouvelles approches du livre de Qohélet* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires, 1999).

this position invites, we insist on seeking to discover how Ecclesiastes relates to the rest of the Bible given our position that it presents a unified message. This position precludes us from reading Ecclesiastes as the work of a disillusioned and critical sage railing against the machine whose work less-critical redactors modified and reinterpreted to make it more palatable.⁴¹ Rather, we propose that Qoheleth writes under the assumption that he (and his readers) has a relationship with God that allows them to expect certain outcomes—such as justice and righteousness—and yet he observes just the opposite over and over again. An important theological message results from the observations of this godly sage: in light of the difficulties and injustices experienced in life, people must fear God, enjoy what he has allowed them to enjoy, and trust him.

2. Ecclesiastes' Honest Reflection on Life

Throughout Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth reflects on several aspects of life that are inherently unjust. His *modus operandi* is to describe various situations that he observes, then to label them with term *hebel*. Scholars disagree widely concerning the meaning of this term, but it likely points to Abel, whose life exemplifies the injustices that Qoheleth laments.⁴² Qoheleth includes in his discussion such things as the sometimes failed relationship between a person's work and the benefit received from that work (2:11–21), the failure of society to remember the wise (4:13–16), the inability of people to enjoy the benefits of God's blessings such as wealth and progeny (6:1–6), the fact that humans die just like animals (3:16–22), that foolish and wise alike share this same fate (2:12–17), and that the righteous often experience the just deserts of the wicked while the wicked continue in prosperity (7:15).

These issues cause Qoheleth great concern because he has been raised to believe that God doles out reward and punishment according to a person's faithfulness to him. After all, did not Moses, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob live long, full lives? Does not Deuteronomy and Proverbs teach that obedience to Yahweh is of utmost importance and that God will reward those who faithfully follow him?⁴³ While we must be careful not

⁴¹So e.g., James Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1987). Robert Gordis also argues that Ecclesiastes cites "pious sentiments" to deconstruct them. See *Koheleth—The Man and His World* (3rd ed.; New York: Schocken, 1968).

⁴²See Russell L. Meek, "The Meaning of הֶבֶל in Ecclesiastes: An Intertextual Suggestion," in *The Words of the Wise*, 241–256. Other suggestions for the word's meaning include "meaningless," "absurd," "nothingness," "transient," and "vanity." For overview and discussion, see Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 98–155; J. J. Lavoie, "Habel habalim hakol habel: Histoire de l'interprétation d'une formule célèbre et enjeux culturels," *Science et Esprit* 53 (2006), 219–249; as well as the major commentaries.

⁴³On retributive justice in the OT, see John G. Gammie, "Theology of Retribution in the Book of Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32 (1970), 1–12; K. Koch, "Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?" *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 52 (1955), 1–

to force a strict deed-consequence retribution theology onto Proverbs and Deuteronomy, the fact remains that they at least teach a long-term *character-consequence* theology.⁴⁴ Qoheleth's discussion of injustice makes it clear that he presupposes that he and his readers live in relationship to God, for why else would these inconsistencies bother him or his audience? He therefore goes on to offer his readers a way to cope with the reality of life and navigate their relationship with God in a world turned upside-down.

3. Enjoyment in Ecclesiastes

In response to the observations he makes, Qoheleth first encourages his readers to enjoy God's ephemeral gifts—food, drink, work, and a spouse—that is, of course, if God allows such enjoyment. In no less than six places throughout his treatise, Qoheleth implores his readers to take pleasure in life. These so-called *carpe diem* passages (2:24–26; 3:10–15, 16–22; 5:18–20 [ET 17–19]; 8:10–15; 9:7–10; 11:7–10) are for Qoheleth “the vision evoked with Eden in Gen. 2 and in the promises to the Israelites about the good land of Israel”; indeed, they are “an alternative vision” that Qoheleth sets forth in response to the evil and injustice he sees all around.⁴⁵

Verbal parallels and thematic echoes between the *carpe diem* passages and the Garden of Eden narrative provide further evidence that Qoheleth is seeking consciously to make a parallel with the time and place where humans last enjoyed perfect relationship with God. Verbal parallels include the repetition of the key terms טוב (“good”), אדם (“man”), and אכל (“eat”).⁴⁶ The thematic parallels are even more striking, as Qoheleth tells his readers to enjoy work, eating, drinking, and spending time with one's spouse, activities that typify life in the Garden of Eden so many years ago.⁴⁷ Thus, the “alternative vision” set out by Qoheleth is a return to paradise, to the place where humans and God enjoyed perfect communion with God.⁴⁸

42; and Bernd Janowski, “Die Tat kehrt zum Täter zurück: offene Fragen im Umkreis des ‘Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhangs,’” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 91 (1994), 247–271.

⁴⁴Bartholomew's terms; see Bartholomew, “Theology,” 376. See also Raymond van Leeuwen, “Wealth and Poverty: System and Contradiction in Proverbs,” *Hebrew Studies* 33 (1992), 25–36.

⁴⁵Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 152.

⁴⁶See Meek, “The Meaning of הָבֵל,” 251.

⁴⁷Graham Ogden, *Qoheleth*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary, 2nd ed.; (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 52–53.

⁴⁸Meek, “The Meaning of הָבֵל,” 251–252.

4. God's Sovereignty and the Limits of Pleasure

It seems to be no accident that after speaking about the great burden that life can sometimes become, Qoheleth states in no uncertain terms that the way to go about in life is to take pleasure in its routine, fleeting pleasures. For these pleasures reflect life as it should be lived—in perfect relationship with the Creator. Furthermore, Qoheleth couches his calls to enjoyment in terms of what God will allow while warning his readers to take care to stay within the boundaries that God established as they go about enjoying life. These two limiting factors point to a fundamental aspect of humanity's relationship with God: he is sovereign and demands obedience for the continuance of relationship with him.

Qoheleth also reveals his concern for a proper relationship between God and humanity in several passages throughout the book. For example, he notes in 3:14 that God has set all things in order so that people will fear him. Reflecting on this passage, Crenshaw argues that Qoheleth's concept of fear differs significantly from Proverbs, where fear is “the correct attitude of a religious person.”⁴⁹ For Qoheleth, the fear is terror induced by “an unpredictable despot . . . jealously guarding divine prerogatives.”⁵⁰ Likewise, Longman sees a negative connotation in Qoheleth's concept of fear, arguing that “Qoheleth believes that God acts the way that he does to frighten people into submission, not to arouse a sense of respectful awe of his power and might.”⁵¹ The preceding verses outline the proper times for various activities in life (3:1–8), which turns into a discussion of work (3:9–10), God's sovereignty (3:11), and the proper human response in uncontrollable situations (enjoyment of God's gifts; 3:12–13).

Despite their objections to the contrary, nothing in the immediate context demands that the text be read negatively.⁵² And this is where one's presuppositions and understanding of the entire context of Ecclesiastes comes to bear in full force. For if we hold that the book as a whole is a pessimistic departure from biblical faith, then it is no wonder that Qoheleth's concept of fearing God reflects something unlike the fear towards God found throughout the Old Testament. The context of this particular passage demands nothing of the sort.

Qoheleth then returns to the importance of relating to God in 5:1–7, where he advises circumspection when speaking at the “house of God” and quick payment of one's vows to God, before summing up the matter with a clear declaration that God should be feared. Craig Bartholomew points out the striking thematic and verbal similarities with Proverbs and Psalm 40, which indicates that the passage reflects a common biblical

⁴⁹Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 100.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Tremper Longman, III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, the New International Commentary on the Old Testament Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 124–125.

⁵²See Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 168.

attitude toward one's relationship with God.⁵³ Qoheleth's concern in these verses is that his readers understand God's proper place in their lives, and consequently, the right attitude that they should exhibit before him—fear. As in the previous passage, there is nothing in the context to suggest that Qoheleth views God negatively. Rather, he expresses the traditional wisdom stance of relating to God through fear that leads to obedience.

In Eccl 8:10–13, Qoheleth addresses what for him—and for us too—is one of the most problematic issues he observes in life: the wicked receive the benefits of the righteous, namely a proper burial, access to the holy place, prolonged life, and praise from others. Not only do they receive good things, but the fact that their evil deeds go unpunished encourages others to sin. Despite this injustice, Qoheleth resolutely states that he knows those who fear God will eventually fare better. There is no doubt that the injustice Qoheleth sees troubles him deeply, but it remains that he advises the fear of God (i.e., obedience to God) over sinful living, even if the world is at times turned upside down. The prosperity of the wicked creates mental and emotional anguish, but it is insufficient to cause Qoheleth to discourage humanity's proper relationship with God.

Finally, we find in Eccl 12:13–14 the book's final—and perhaps most important—admonition to fear God. These two verses form the conclusion to the entire book and provide readers with the hermeneutical lens through which to read the book as a whole. Based on the transition from first person to third person—verse 9 refers to “the Qoheleth”—most scholars today hold that these verses are the voice of the “frame narrator” rather than Qoheleth. Yet this only adds to the passage's importance for understanding the book's theology, for the book's final form has come to us imbedded with an important clue regarding how we are to interpret it.⁵⁴

Bartholomew rightly points out that the frame narrator has framed Qoheleth's journey in a way that ensures its readers do not misunderstand his point.⁵⁵ The frame narrator accomplishes this task by stating in no uncertain terms that Qoheleth was wise and performed the tasks of a sage (e.g., teaching others, thinking, and arranging proverbs), and that at the end of the day, the “whole of humanity” is to “fear God and keep his commandments.” If the frame narrator were truly at odd with the rest of Ecclesiastes, thinking that he had to baptize the book so that it would be acceptable, then why would he hold Qoheleth in such high regard? As Bartholomew points out, the assumption that the frame narrator is at odds with the rest of the book rests on a negative reading of הָבַל coupled with the idea that the other orthodox statements do not reflect Qoheleth's true

⁵³Ibid., 203–205.

⁵⁴E.g., Longman, who argues that these verses critique the words of Qoheleth found in the rest of the book. See Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 281. Also see Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 360; and Eric Christianson, *A Time To Tell: Narrative Strategy in Ecclesiastes*, JSOT Supplemental Series 280 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998).

⁵⁵Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 362.

thoughts.⁵⁶ The book thus ends with a forceful statement regarding the role of humanity: to fear and obey God, clear statements regarding Yahweh, and his relationship to humans.

VI. CONCLUSION

Since Eichrodt's groundbreaking work in the 1930's, there has been no shortage of proposals for a center to the OT. And the primary difficulty with locating it has been two-fold. First, attempts to discover a principle that *organizes* the OT have failed in large part because of the great diversity of the biblical material. This was made abundantly clear by scholars such as Jon Levenson and Walter Bruegemann. Gerhard Hasel rightly pointed out that the OT's center must be a *unifying* principle that runs through its materials. Scholars should not look for some sort of organization principle; rather, they should search for a principle that will unify the diverse genres and themes in the OT. The other difficulty has been in relating wisdom literature to rest of the OT. We saw that schemas such as Kaiser's promise-plan and Waltke's irruption of God's kingdom fail on this front because the wisdom literature *presupposes* these aspects of OT thought rather than developing them in any significant way.

Several decades ago, Hasel pointed out that there was a growing consensus that the OT's center had something to do with Yahweh, much like the New Testament is clearly centered around Christ's salvific work. This observation led us to search for the center of the OT in another important thematic element: Yahweh and his relationship to humanity. Because of the difficulty of integrating wisdom into a proposal for the center of the OT, we examined the book of Ecclesiastes to determine if Yahweh's relationship to humanity formed a significant part of its theology. Our admittedly brief overview of pertinent passages showed that Ecclesiastes is indeed very concerned with how people are to live in relationship with God. So while further work is needed to determine the extent to which the rest of the OT profiles Yahweh's relationship with humanity, it is clear from our treatment that the proposal accounts for the most problematic categories of the OT, its wisdom literature.

⁵⁶Ibid., 361.