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Introduction

Questions about the meaning of life are often and openly vague. While that does not make them bad questions, it does make them difficult to understand. What is the meaning of life? Is life meaningful? And when or why does it become meaningless? Sincere as they may be, and as convoluted an answer as some might wish to give, these questions are imprecise and each of them depends completely upon what is meant by “meaning.” This word, when pressed for precision, is often explained in varied ways. It may refer to life having purpose or some direction and goal; it can mean that life “matters,” being worthwhile or better than death; and for some it stirs an intuitive sense of an all-encompassing quality of life that when put to words is sapped of its significance. This nebulous and at times disparate use of “the meaning of life” also appears in research on the book of Ecclesiastes, where efforts to interpret the book as a work about this topic have become increasingly popular since the beginning of the twentieth century. Starting with explicit references to “meaning” by scholars as early as 1904 and culminating with a decision to translate הבל as “meaningless” in 1984 (NIV), there has been an increasing trend to find concerns about the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes, and it characterizes how many have recently read the book.¹

¹ As far as I am aware, Arthur Peake (*The Problem of Suffering in the Old Testament* [London: Epworth, 1904], 126) made the first explicit comment about life’s “meaningfulness” in Ecclesiastes: “Life is meaningless” because human action achieves “no abiding result,” showing life to be “a closed circle from which man cannot get away.” George Barton (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ICC [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908], 69) later commented on Eccl 1:2–11 that “Life and the processes of nature are an endless and meaningless repetition.” He appealed to Wright,

According to James Crenshaw, Qohelet – the main character and mouthpiece of Ecclesiastes – asks “the question of questions: Does life have any meaning at all?”² For Craig Bartholomew, “[Qohelet’s] struggle is whether life is meaningful,” and for others his quest is a “search for meaning,” being the man who asks the great “Sinnfrage” and often comes up short of an answer.³ Despite the merits of such proposals, in most cases, the phrase – “the meaning of life,” “life is meaningful,” or Qohelet struggles with life’s “meaning” – is used with imprecision, even if it sometimes mirrors one of the classifications mentioned above, such as purpose or worth, or is gently propped up by its self-explanatory nature, which, it is thought, ought to be subconsciously understood and unhelden to further definition. It is not my contention that these interpretations are widely off-track, or that they have muddled the meaning of “life’s meaning,” or that some unnatural reading has been imposed, in every case, upon the book of Ecclesiastes. Part of my contention is that the endeavor needs a taxonomy: that the search for life’s meaning in biblical literature requires non-biblical resources – namely, psychological definitions for the meaning of life – and furthermore, that by drawing upon them, Ecclesiastes has much to say about such meaning. For the meaning of life is not self-explanatory, and therefore neither is its presence in Ecclesiastes. But that does not mean that the inquest needs to cease. As a matter of fact, by demanding clarity for the phrase, the inquest can gain ground; and so, in this monograph, I argue several things: that Ecclesiastes addresses the meaning of life from a threefold perspective, that it contains conditions for what makes life meaningful and

who did refer to such cycles but nowhere comments on their “meaninglessness.” See Charles H. H. Wright, *The Book of Kobleth, Commonly Called Ecclesiastes, Considered in Relation to Modern Criticism, and to the Doctrines of Modern Pessimism, with a Critical and Grammatical Commentary and a Revised Translation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1883), 141–182. For a background of talk about life’s meaning, see philosopher Wendell O’Brien (“The Meaning of Life: Early Continental and Analytic Perspectives,” in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.iep.utm.edu/mean-ear/), who finds that “it was only early in the nineteenth century that writers began to write directly about ‘the meaning of life,’” particularly when Arthur Schopenhauer articulated “der Sinn des Lebens.” See Schopenhauer’s essay, “On Human Nature: Character” (1851).

² James Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 116.

³ Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 113.

meaningless, and that the exploration of these ideas relates intimately to human suffering, not least Qohelet's.⁴

The verdict of those who have found concerns about meaning within Ecclesiastes is epitomized by Crenshaw. As mentioned above, Qohelet asks “the question of questions: Does life have any meaning at all?” and that question leads Crenshaw to conclude, in the end, that Qohelet finds none.⁵ Qohelet tests several possibilities for a meaningful life – wealth, reputation, work and pleasure – and yet he deems each of them worthless. For death eradicates advantage so that all potentially meaningful ventures add up to zero. “Ultimately, all these so-called meanings, for which humans strive relentlessly, amount to nothing.”⁶ But alongside these many overt declarations about Qohelet's meaningless life are arguments to the contrary. That is, for certain interpreters, an absorption with questions about the meaning of life has nothing to do with Ecclesiastes, leading to a denial that the book deals with issues of life's ultimate meaning and an affirmation of its alternative concerns: epistemological boundaries and the limits of human control, for instance. While these alternative concerns are no less comprehensive or significant for human life, they are not matters of “meaningfulness” as such. Even the *הבל* statements, translated by some as “meaningless” and interpreted by others as much the same, carry no connotation of life's meaning for many scholars. By *הבל*, says Choon-Leong Seow, Qohelet “does not mean that everything is meaningless or insignificant, but that everything is beyond human apprehension and comprehension.”⁷ Qohelet probes the limitations of human knowledge and control, problems that may implicate all of life but remain distinct from how “meaningful” it could be.

The comments of Crenshaw and Seow disclose a debate about if and how the meaning of life vexed Qohelet, much of which entails competing assertions instead of developed arguments about what life's meaning is or could be. For aside from their particular emphases and nuances, interpreters hold that Ecclesiastes simply does or does not address the meaning of life. It should be said that scholarly interaction with respect to this issue remains minimal, and that the cause for said disconnect seems rooted in the failure to adequately define “meaning,” even if it does, as prefaced

⁴ I refer to the literary text as “Ecclesiastes” as distinct from “Qohelet,” whether narrator, persona or implied author.

⁵ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 116. ⁶ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 118.

⁷ Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 59.

above, have something to do with worth, in some cases knowledge, and in fewer instances life's direction.⁸

Admittedly, not every attempt falters in this regard, and a few interpreters have conscientiously applied definitions of life's meaning to Ecclesiastes.⁹ Foremost is Michael V. Fox, who crystalizes a referent for the term: "To say that a person's *life* has meaning implies that the sum total of his deeds and experiences achieve or prove something beyond themselves. In other words, they *do* something."¹⁰ A meaningful life, like language, accomplishes something outside of itself or corresponds to an action by being effectual. It seems akin to "fruitful" or "effective," and aligns with justice to the extent that certain deeds ought to correspond with their outcomes.¹¹ Other notions of meaningfulness have crept up among European scholars, such as Aarre Lauha, who in Eccl 2:12–26 refers to the "Sinnfrage" (question of meaning) and whether or not life has any "Sinn" (meaning) and "Wert" (worth).¹² Both of these attempts,

⁸ For interpreters who locate a concern with the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes, often without defining the concept, see, among others, Norbert Lohfink (*Kobelet*, NEchtB 1 [Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1980], 21), for example, who writes, "Der Horizont der Frage [Eccl. 1.3] ist die Welt als solche. Diese ist eine durchlichtete Wirklichkeit ('Sonne'), aber in ihr stellt sich dennoch für den Menschen die Sinnfrage [question of meaning]"; Aarre Lauha, *Kobelet*, BKAT 19 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 59–60; Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), *passim*; Tilmann Zimmer, *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück: Eine Untersuchung zur Anthropologie Kobelets*, BZAW 286 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 32, 218; Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kobelet*, HTKAT (Freiburg: Herder, 2004), 154; Graham Ogden, *Qobelet. Readings: A New Biblical Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 23, 51; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes, passim*; Melanie Köhlmoos, *Kobelet: Der Prediger Salomo*, ATD 16 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 56–57. The pattern also appears among systematic theologians: Karl Barth (*Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956], 1:245) and Stanley Grenz (*Theology for the Community of God* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994], 749). Aside from such assertions, certain interpreters argue against particular meaning of life interpretations, as Mark Sneed, for example, accuses Fox and Crenshaw of anachronism because they overlap Ecclesiastes and modern existentialism. See Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social-Science Perspective*, AIL 12 (Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 168–170. See below for further examples.

⁹ See Chapter 5.

¹⁰ Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 5. Emphasis in the original.

¹¹ Fox (*Time*, 53) defines "justice" as synonymous with his conception of meaning. Justice, he says, is "(1) a correlation between behavior and its consequences and (2) a principle that causes and preserves that state." See also pages 59, 62, 69.

¹² Lauha, *Kobelet*, 59–60. Zimmer (*Zwischen*, 33–72) titles an entire section "Der Sinn des menschlichen Lebens" (the meaning of human life), in which he argues that Eccl 1:3 refers to a search for the profit ("Nutzen"), gain ("Gewinn") and yield ("Ertrag") of human life.

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and those they represent, are plausible and, in their own ways, close to comprehensive, but they have not accounted for the scope of what is meant by “the meaning of life,” which, as will be seen, can refer to deed-consequence correspondence, or to one’s own purpose, or to the intrinsic value of life. This has created, on the one hand, a fuzzy reading of the book, as it simply remains unclear what is meant by the proposal, for instance, that in Qohelet’s experience life has no meaning. On the other hand, it has produced apparent, rather than real, conflicts between interpreters, with some claiming that Ecclesiastes addresses the meaning of life and others asserting that the book has nothing at all to do with such an issue. All the while both parties have come to no agreement on what “the meaning of life” means. Therefore, some of the central aims of the present book have been crafted to respond to that debate: to resolve it, to clarify the notion of life’s meaning, and to make additional advancements in the interpretation of Ecclesiastes in its final form.¹³

Success at this endeavor requires resources beyond biblical studies and, in my judgment, the best are found in a subfield of psychology. For approximately the last four decades, psychologists have been very occupied with defining the meaning of life and have come to understand the phrase from three perspectives – “coherence,” “purpose” and “significance” – concepts that have been recently collated in the work of Frank Martela and Michael Steger.¹⁴ The first refers to both order and sense-making, as a coherent life contains reliable patterns of act and consequence, and is comprehensible to the human mind. The second, purpose, means that life has a direction, an overarching goal that informs the present and in that way endows it with meaning. Lastly, aside from coherence and purpose, a life can be “significant” and thereby worth

¹³ Although the achievements of my argument may inform diachronic approaches to Ecclesiastes, I treat the book in its final form. Matters of authorship, redaction and editing are treated to some degree in the notes but do not influence the present argument.

¹⁴ Frank Martela and Michael Steger, “The Three Meanings of Meaning in Life: Distinguishing Coherence, Purpose, and Significance,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 11 (2016): 531–545. I am using meaning of life to refer to what Martela and Steger call meaning *in* life, that is, how humans experience meaning, though the distinction is not entirely convincing (532). For similar results, see Login George and Crystal Park, “Meaning in Life as Comprehension, Purpose, and Mattering: Toward Integration and New Research Questions,” *Review of General Psychology* 20 (2016): 205–220. By recognizing three distinct notions of life’s meaning, I part ways with what psychologists call the “amalgam thesis,” which views the meaning of life as one singular category (see, e.g., R. W. Hepburn, “Questions about the Meaning of Life,” *RelS* 1 [1966]: 125–140).

living; it might hold intrinsic value, and would then, in more colloquial terms, “matter.” Coherence, purpose and significance: these categories will not only bring definition to a concept largely assumed and vague in biblical discussion but will also uncover how Qohelet addresses different aspects of life’s meaning and how these aspects enrich our understanding of the book as a whole.¹⁵

Scholarship on Ecclesiastes notoriously lacks consensus, and by identifying a problem with it I do not mean to undermine the very cogent work that has been produced, which so often exercises care in thought and language for one of the most abstruse texts in the Bible. Nevertheless, numerous interpreters have casually employed the phrase “meaning of life” to describe Qohelet’s inquest, and they have, in some cases, neglected the possible ways in which the phrase can be understood. That observation is not strictly accusatory, however, given the fact that meaning of life definitions have only somewhat recently come to the fore in psychology, and psychologists themselves have at times casually employed the phrase. But, whatever the case, it is now high time to make clear what we mean about the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes.

I have been proffering semantic vagueness as the main snag for interpretations of Ecclesiastes and the meaning of life, and yet perhaps that snag is not as troublesome as I have made it out to be. Is the ambiguity of “life’s meaning” really a problem? And, furthermore, might we actually be missing out on part of the concept’s import by trying to slice the phrase into pieces and segregate them with a rigid taxonomy?¹⁶ That objection leaves room for linguistic ambiguity, particularly in the sort of phenomenological language that we often employ with phrases like “the meaning of life.” But, while such ambiguity is prudent in some cases, in this case it does not enrich our reading of Ecclesiastes. It is one thing to sanction ambiguity in biblical language, like the multivalent meanings of the lexeme *הבל*, which can sometimes constitute the very depth of a text’s

¹⁵ For a concise overview of philosophical approaches to Ecclesiastes, see Jaco Gericke, “A Comprehensive Typology of Philosophical Perspectives on Qohelet,” *VetE* 36 (2015): 1–7. Interestingly, psychologists themselves have deemed Ecclesiastes as worthy of attention within discussions about the meaning of life, placing the entire book, for instance, in a recent anthology (*Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide*, ed. Joshua Seachris [Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013]).

¹⁶ A similar issue between what some have called “reductionist” versus more complex approaches to life’s meaning feeds debate among psychologists (see Martela and Steger, “Three Meanings,” 531).

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message.¹⁷ However, it is much less advantageous to use vague concepts when approaching a text. The term *לֵב* is one that the text brings to us; “the meaning of life” is a concept that we have brought to the text, and so we ought to be as clear as possible. This is particularly imperative for an ancient text, which can so easily become a victim of anachronistic interpretation or a container for modern-day assumptions. So rather than missing the point of the concept, a taxonomy of the meaning of life will elucidate the many notions of this idea within Ecclesiastes.¹⁸

That elucidation, though, does risk the problem of over-definition, whereby the external categories become the only thing that we see within a text and consequently leave us with a distorted version of its message. In other words, with a trustworthy set of psychological tools we could dismantle Ecclesiastes, fit all its parts into three neat piles, and conclude that the meaning of life was Qohelet’s sole concern. Voila. For this reason, meaning of life definitions must be employed as a starting point, not an end point, and space must be given for material in Ecclesiastes that may have nothing to do with psychology and for passages that stretch and perhaps counter the meaning of life definitions. Each of these possibilities will become a reality in what follows, where the clarity of psychological resources will benefit the interpretation of Ecclesiastes without imposing over-definition. More broadly, in a book of the Bible so fraught with textual difficulties and interpretive disagreements, I have tried to tread a path of plausibility, neither simply accepting the “consensus” interpretation of passages to the extent that those exist, which would make the task much easier, nor proposing too many innovative readings or selecting the most contested passages to make my case.

My aim, then, is to argue that Ecclesiastes does indeed address the meaning of life, but that it does so in accord with the pre-established, threefold definition of meaningfulness as delineated by psychological research. Using those definitions as a basis for analysis, I propose that

¹⁷ For ambiguities in Ecclesiastes that incorporate single lexemes and yet extend beyond them, see Thomas Krüger, “Meaningful Ambiguities in the Book of Qoheleth,” in *The Language of Qoheleth in Its Context: Essays in Honour of Prof. A. Schoors on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. A. Berlejung and P. Van Hecke, OLA 164 (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 63–74.

¹⁸ Interpretations of Ecclesiastes that have employed psychological research focus on Qohelet’s inner world rather than on what he observes within the world (e.g., Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qoheleth [with Translation and Commentary]* [New York: KTAV, 1973]). My interest in life’s meaning remains independent of any concern with Qohelet’s psychological state.

Ecclesiastes had much to say about the meaning of life and that it addressed this meaning in decisive ways. I would even submit that it is only by using such definitions that can we say much about the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes, or in any other ancient literature for that matter, making this analysis the distinctive feature of my method: using external categories to bring definition and clarity to vague conceptions within biblical interpretation, while giving equal respect to critical modes of biblical study and to the historical and cultural meaning that Ecclesiastes bore for its ancient audience. Despite the necessity of Hebrew lexicography and critical commentary on the Bible, biblical study only gets so far when speaking its own language and drawing on its own resources – primarily, the accepted corpus of academic journals, monographs and commentaries. It is really no surprise, to me, that “the meaning of life” has been treated as it has among interpreters of Ecclesiastes. For to venture beyond convention often results in anachronism, bizarre interpretations or one-sided conclusions that favor some current concern; but it need not. What I am getting at here is a way of reading ancient, even sacred, material that can bear the weight of our present questions while allowing the material to address those questions from its own historical location and in its own voice. In this case, that requires not only modern psychological resources but also traditional, critical methods of exegesis and a robust context for it, in this case a comparative exposition of other ancient texts. Thus I have here conceptual categories, the text of Ecclesiastes, and a wealth of other ancient literature that forms the intellectual contexts of interpretation. That method makes this book not only distinct but, in my judgment, better placed than any other to deal with questions about Ecclesiastes and the meaning of life. As a result, we should be able to say, certainly with more clarity and hopefully with more confidence, just what it means for Qohelet to address “the meaning of life.”

The present chapter is a fairly long introduction to a deceptively simple question: What does the meaning of life have to do with Ecclesiastes? Thus far, I have only diagnosed the problem that surrounds the question and asserted a way of answering it that I think is best. However, in order to give an answer that has any chance of being satisfactory, much more is required. First, the notion of life’s meaning as prescribed by psychologists must be laid out. For only by determining what is meant by “the meaning of life” can we determine whether and how it appears in Ecclesiastes. Second, the sibling of life’s meaning in Ecclesiastes must be introduced – namely, suffering – which will form a sort of auxiliary thesis for this study. Third, the presence of these two ideas, meaning and suffering, must

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be identified within other texts from the ancient world, which will produce a context in which Ecclesiastes might be understood, one that extends over the first several chapters of this book. In the remainder of this chapter, then, I'd like to say just enough about life's meaning and Ecclesiastes in order to get on with the substance of my argument about Ecclesiastes, suffering, and the meaning of life in the ancient world.

THE MEANING OF LIFE

Researchers of psychology have spent substantial effort to determine what we mean when we talk about the meaning of life. According to them, humans mean one of three things when they raise questions about it. Life makes sense; life has goals that direct it; or life in itself is valuable. These three conceptions of meaning are referred to, respectively, as “coherence,” “purpose” and “significance.”¹⁹ Such definitional clarity and the expanded threefold conceptual scheme for understanding the meaning of life have only recently come about within psychological research, making its consultation quite timely,²⁰ and it is these advances that provide biblical scholarship with unmatched resources for deciphering biblical texts relevant to the topic, most notably Ecclesiastes, a book rife with scholarly proposals about the meaningfulness and meaninglessness of life.

¹⁹ See Martela and Steger above. Although these three categories find wide acceptance among psychologists, additional conceptions of life's meaning do surface, including possibility (what could have been different about my life?), instrumental value (vs. intrinsic value), causal meaning (vs. referential/semantic meaning), meaning as lesson and supernatural meaning.

²⁰ Martela and Steger (“Three Meanings,” 531), citing works from 2013–2014, note that “the field still suffers from definitional ambiguity and simplified approaches that neglect the complexity and conceptual range of meaning in life as a construct.” Their article, from 2016, is one of two publications attempting to resolve the problem of vagueness. Like psychologists, philosophers too have arrived at no consensus about a singular definition for life's meaning. Thaddeus Metz, “The Meaning of Life,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. N. Zalta, last revised June 3, 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/life-meaning/>. Metz has surveyed the field and determined that by “meaning” many philosophers mean something different from happiness or rightness: “If talk about meaning in life is not by definition talk about happiness or rightness, then what is it about? There is as yet no consensus in the field.” In view of this lack of consensus, Metz proffers possibilities that amount to “a grab-bag of heterogenous ideas.” For a helpful discussion, see Hepburn, “Questions.”

“Coherence” refers to the human’s cognitive comprehension of life, as life “makes sense” because predictable and recognizable patterns are discernable within it. Martela and Steger put it this way:

Beginning at the discrete level of moment-to-moment experiences, coherence centers on the perception that stimuli are predictable and conform to recognizable patterns. From here, it would appear that ever more elaborate models of patterns and predictability can be constructed, eventually building to overarching meaning models that help people make sense of one’s self, the world, and one’s fit within the world.²¹

When coherent, life holds epistemological integrity, especially with respect to stable patterns of cause and effect. A classical formulation of coherence in OT literature is the doctrine of retribution, whereby disobedience and rebellion against the Lord, along with other forms of wickedness, beget misfortune. Likewise, obedience and faithfulness to God beget righteousness, so that life, when lived righteously, goes well. Furthermore, these predictable patterns correspond to a comprehension of them, as a retribution doctrine enables humans to grasp how the world works and to live life in a way that obtains reliable outcomes, affording one a meaningful life in this sense.

The breakdown of such coherence is easy to spot within Ecclesiastes. Take Qohelet’s observation in 8:14, for instance:

There is לֵב that occurs upon the earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous.

The eventualities that strike the righteous and the wicked do not correspond to their respective characters. In other words, bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people; the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper, a tragically fine example of the lack of coherence in Qohelet’s world. He makes similar declarations about work, wealth and wisdom, all of which have expected, “coherent” outcomes, but these outcomes fail to materialize, or at least fail to materialize in any consistent way. In other words, the planning and prudence that characterize the wise man do not always produce the advantageous results that he deserves (9:11); for riches and long life may just as well come to the fool. While coherence involves the reliable and predictable patterns that have so easily broken down in Qohelet’s eyes, this category also includes the limits of comprehending such patterns. So when Qohelet questions why he has bothered to become so wise, given the fact that he and the common fool

²¹ Martela and Steger, “Three Meanings,” 533–534.