Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of Life in the Ancient World

In this book, Arthur Keefer offers a timely assessment of Ecclesiastes and what it has to do with the meaning of life. Drawing on recent psychological research, he argues that this Hebrew Bible text associates the meaning of life with various types of suffering in life. Keefer here situates Ecclesiastes within its ancient intellectual world. Offering an analysis of contemporary texts from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece, he demonstrates that concerns about meaning and suffering were widespread in the greater Mediterranean world. Ecclesiastes, however, handled the matters of suffering and meaning in an unprecedented way and to an unprecedented degree. With its rigorous commitment to precise definitions of life’s meaning, Keefer’s book provides a comprehensive set of definitions for “the meaning of life” as well as a conclusive point of reference for interpreters of Ecclesiastes. It also opens avenues for the interdisciplinary interpretation of texts from the ancient world.

ARThUR JAN KEEFER is a schoolmaster and chaplain at Eton College. He has published numerous articles and is the author of Proverbs 1–9 as an Introduction to the Book of Proverbs (LHBOTS, 2020) and The Book of Proverbs and Virtue Ethics: Integrating the Biblical and Philosophical Traditions (Cambridge University Press, 2021). He also co-edited The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Wisdom Literature (forthcoming).
Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of Life in the Ancient World

ARTHUR JAN KEEFER

Eton College
For Emem
Contents

Preface ix
Abbreviations xiii
1 Introduction 1
2 Suffering and Meaning in Egyptian Literature 26
3 Suffering and Meaning in Mesopotamian Literature 57
4 Suffering and Meaning in Greek Literature 78
5 Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of Life 89
6 Ecclesiastes, Suffering and Joy 121
7 In Context: Suffering, Meaning and Ecclesiastes in the Ancient World and Old Testament 169

Bibliography 217
Index of Sources 229
Index of Authors and Topics 241
In Hawarden, Wales, there is a small plot of land with a rather large library that belonged to William Gladstone (1809–1898). As the eldest and one of the longest serving Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom, a Chancellor of the Exchequer, an advocate of equal opportunity known as “The People’s William,” a committed Protestant Christian, a husband of fifty-nine years and father of eight children, I suspect that Gladstone considered his life a meaningful one. His contemporaries, not unaware of the man’s faults, nevertheless admired him and did so as colleagues, as distant observers and even as ideological rivals. What neither they nor he would have said, to my knowledge, though, is that Gladstone lived “a meaningful life,” that he “evaded meaninglessness” or wrestled with “the meaning of it all.” That language is quite contemporary, a feature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and now as common as Gladstone was accomplished.

Reference to life’s meaning is not only common to modern thought and conversation but also prevalent within interpretations of Ecclesiastes. Qohelet has become a sort of harbinger of modernity, existentialism and whatever else people associate with the exploration of one’s meaningful livelihood. It doesn’t help that he regularly comments on how difficult life has been amidst apparent meaninglessness: “in much toil is much vexation . . . I saw all that I had achieved and hated life. . . . Thus everything is \textit{hebel} [‘meaningless’ according to the NIV].” The reading of such statements comes naturally: Qohelet has embarked upon the search for meaning and come up empty-handed. But as effortless as such interpretations may be, very little consideration has been given to what we, as interpreters, mean by “meaning” and thus what exactly Qohelet could
Definitions of life’s meaning are often assumed, or one-sided, sometimes supposedly intuitive. By this I mean no indictment against what many hard-working exegetes have written about one of the most abstruse texts of the Bible. Nor is the situation surprising. For psychologists have only recently established categories for the meaning of life, and without such categories, we cannot very well understand the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes or propose that Qohelet had a keen interest in it or that he deemed life meaningful or meaningless after all.

In an attempt to clear up these matters, I went to Gladstone’s Library in 2016 for a short period of residential research and began a small article that appeared in a 2019 issue of *Harvard Theological Review.* It attempted to offer systematic definition to a topic so easily associated with Ecclesiastes – the meaning of life – and soon warranted a longer treatment. An exhaustive account of the various forms of life’s meaning within Ecclesiastes was needed, but I also came to realize that meaning for Qohelet has a great deal to do with life’s hardship, none of which could be truly appreciated without a sense for where the book stood within its ancient world. The meaning of life, human suffering and the broad intellectual context in which those themes appear comprise the book before you.

Monographs on Ecclesiastes tend to become virtual commentaries on the text, and while this one may be no exception, I have tried to leave detailed philological arguments in the footnotes and keep the wider, clearer concerns in the main body of prose. One question, however, that does not appear in this study is that of how Ecclesiastes informs the meaning of one’s life today. For some readers this may be the most important question and hence their greatest disappointment with what follows, so let me say a word here. How Ecclesiastes addresses the meaning of one’s own life depends on how one views biblical authority in general, and the normativity of Ecclesiastes in particular, not least in how we interpret its epilogue (12:9–14). For the way in which Ecclesiastes informs our own experience of life’s meaning depends upon how authoritative and coherent we consider the book to be. What seems clear, among other things, is that the work aims to provoke thought, and readers with any personal interest in life’s meaning will want to attend to the type of meaning it showcases (namely, coherence), Qohelet’s charge that humans succumb to delusion or a misapprehension of how life operates, and the

---

Preface

book’s metaphysical and theological presuppositions, on which its views are grounded. As to how authoritative or applicable one wishes to take these points of view, that I leave to the reader, with the hope that it will help those of various interests, whether it be academic, personal, ecclesial or otherwise.

A word of thanks goes to the hospitable staff at Gladstone’s Library and the generous Residential Study Scholarship provided by them. I am also greatly appreciative of the man himself, William Gladstone, who, in his older age, made it clear that his library should be made available to the public. His bust is one of twenty-five in a frequented room at Eton College, an institution that demands much from its teachers but supports their professional activities to whatever extent possible. My research is no exception. As mentioned, *Harvard Theological Review* gave first voice to the ideas presented here and that article, aided greatly by the eye of Dr. Michael Rhodes, forms the backbone of Chapter 5. The Latimer Trust provided a research grant that helped the article become a book, a process finally made possible thanks to the enthusiasm of editor Beatrice Rehl, the exceptional diligence and good humor of copy-editor Beth Morel, and the shrewd comments of the manuscript’s reviewers.

I did not write this book because my life lacks meaning; it does not and, in my judgment, never has. But there is one person who has shown me ways of living a meaningful life that were, to me, unfamiliar, and this work is dedicated to her: my wife, Emem Ukor Keefer.
Abbreviations

AAeg  Analecta Aegyptiaca
ABs  Anchor Bible
AIL  Ancient Israel and Its Literature
AJSL  The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures
AnBib  Analecta biblica
AnSt  Anatolian Studies
AOAT  Alter Orient und Altes Testament
AOTC  Apollos Old Testament Commentary
ATD  Das Alte Testament Deutsch
BASOR  Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research
BBR  Bulletin for Biblical Research
BBRSup  Supplements to the Bulletin for Biblical Research
BCOTWP  Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BEATAJ  Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentum
List of Abbreviations

BETL  Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium
BibInt  Biblical Interpretation
BKAT  Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament
BM  British Museum
BSac  Bibliotheca Sacra
BTB  Bulletin for Biblical Research
BZA  Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CAD  The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1956–.
CBQ  Catholic Biblical Quarterly
CBR  Currents in Biblical Research
CC  Continental Commentaries
CTR  Criswell Theological Review
EA  Amarna Letters
ESV  English Standard Version
EvQ  Evangelical Quarterly
FAT  Forschung zum Alten Testament
HAR  Hebrew Annual Review
HS  Hebrew Studies
HTKAT  Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Altes Testament
HTR  Harvard Theological Review
ICC  International Critical Commentary
JANES  Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society
JBL  Journal of Biblical Literature
JEAN  The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology
**List of Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JNSL</td>
<td><em>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSJ</td>
<td><em>Journal for the Study of Judaism</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSJPHRP</td>
<td><em>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSJSup</td>
<td>Supplements to the <em>Journal for the Study of Judaism</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSOT</td>
<td><em>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSOTSsup</td>
<td>Supplements to the <em>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSS</td>
<td><em>Journal for Semitic Studies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KJV</td>
<td>King James Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LHBOTS</td>
<td>The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LNTS</td>
<td>The Library of New Testament Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTP</td>
<td><em>Laval théologique et philosophique</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS(S)</td>
<td>manuscript(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MT</td>
<td>Masoretic Text: generally from <em>BHS</em> 1997.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASB</td>
<td>New American Standard Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEchtB</td>
<td>Neue Echter Bibel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NICOT</td>
<td>The New International Commentary on the Old Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OB</td>
<td>Old Babylonian Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBO</td>
<td>Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obv</td>
<td>obverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OED</td>
<td>Oxford English Dictionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OLA</td>
<td>Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OT</td>
<td>Old Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTE</td>
<td><em>Old Testament Essays</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTL</td>
<td>Old Testament Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OtSt</td>
<td><em>Oudtestamentliche Studiën</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ReIS</td>
<td>Religious Studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Abbreviations

RSR  Recherches de Science Religieuse
rto  recto(s)
SAAB  State Archives of Assyria Bulletin
SBJT  Southern Baptist Journal of Theology
SBL  Society of Biblical Literature
SBLWAW  Society of Biblical Literature Writings from the Ancient World
SDBH  Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew
SJOT  Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament
ThLZ  Theologische Literaturzeitung
TS  Theological Studies
TynBul  Tyndale Bulletin
V  Vulgate
VetE  Verbum et Ecclesia
vso  verso(s)
VT  Vetus Testamentum
VTSup  Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC  Word Bible Commentary
ZÄS  Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde
ZAW  Zeitschrift für die Altestamentliche Wissenschaft
ZDPV  Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins