Dealing with Death: Reading Qoheleth in Different Contexts

Klaas Spronk, Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam

The book of Qoheleth is fascinating reading for a man of my age (nearly sixty), somewhere between a midlife crisis (I survived) and a good death (I hope). The relation between Qoheleth and the midlife crisis is obvious to every man in his forties looking at his life and wondering whether all he did was and still is worthwhile. Taking seriously Qoheleth’s advice to enjoy life as good and long as possible, I realize that it makes a big difference whether your prospect is a good or a bad death. With the biblical views on this subject at the back of my mind (Spronk 2004), I picture the end of my life at this moment more in line with that of the good death of Abraham than with that of Absalom’s bad death, because I have grandchildren, I am still with the woman I love since my youth, have enough money and feel healthy. Someone who is less lucky will not read Qoheleth in the same way as I do. Does he/she understand Qoheleth better? Is my interpretation of the words of Qoheleth correct when I do not feel provoked by them?

One thing is clear to me. The context of the reader of Qoheleth has a strong influence on its interpretation – more than with many other books of the Bible. In this contribution I want to make a modest attempt to describe a number of readings from readers in different contexts, past and present, of a text of Qoheleth on death. This may enable me to get a better, more critical view on my own way of reading this text.

I will concentrate on what we read in chapter 9 about life in the face of death. There can be no doubt that death is one of the primary themes in the book of Qoheleth. It has been demonstrated in scholarly literature time and again (Burkes 1999; George 2000; Krüger 2005; Lux 2009; Debel 2011; Fuhr 2013:117-136; Berner 2015). Most scholars agree that, according to Qoheleth, death is the great equalizer, making no difference between good or bad, wise or foolish, and that there is no life after death. Some want to leave open the possibility that Qoheleth, when speaking of the spirit of man going to God (3.21 and 12.7), indirectly refers to a positive conception of the afterlife (Lux 2009:61-63). Others assume a later ‘eschatological’ redaction, especially in 3.17; 8.5b-6; 11.9; 12.13-14 (Park 2014:195-209; Berner 2015:70-72). In his monumental commentary, however, Schoors sticks to the interpretation of Qoheleth denying any form of individual survival and is also reluctant to assume redactional activity in a verse like 12.7 (Schoors 2013:819-820).

Reading Qoheleth 9

In chapter 9 there is clearly no life after death in sight. The focus in vv. 1-3 is completely on this life, as summarised by Schoors: ‘(t)he idea that the same fate overtakes everybody is expressed in a more emphatic way’ than in previous texts (Schoors 2013:649). He adds that in vv. 4-6 Qoheleth ‘underlines the emptiness of death’, that there is ‘neither reward nor punishment to be received’ in Sheol and that ‘(t)he only practical solution is again to enjoy the good things of life’ (2013:650). I have read 9.1-12 in a class with thirty students. Twenty of them were Dutch students in their final year of their academic

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1 Thanks are due to my students Liesbeth van Deventer, Stefan Honing, Sico de Jong, and André Wingelaar for their support in writing this article.
study and preparing for ministry in Protestant churches. Ten students came from other parts of the world, following a three months master program at our university in Amsterdam. I asked them to give a personal reaction to this text from Qoheleth: how does it relate to your own views on death, life, and the afterlife?

Most of the students pointed to the contrast with their own Christian views about life after death. Some pointed to the different views within the Bible, especially Luke 16.19-33; 1 Corinthians 15; and the book of Revelation. Two African students also indicated that they could not accept Qoheleth’s view because it was not in line with traditional African conceptions of afterlife with a prominent place for ancestors. They did not indicate that there was a tension between these African religions and Christianity in this matter. Some of the students stated that they no longer shared traditional Christian ideas in this matter and sympathized with Qoheleth. Two Dutch students did not accept the idea of completely different views within the Bible and announced that they were going study this matter, apparently hoping to find some way to bring the seemingly opposing views together as different aspects of the same belief. A student from Myanmar reported that Qoheleth 9 is the text quoted most in his country at funeral services and that it is used to make clear in this situation how important it is ‘to understand the will of God, and to learn how to live the rest of each and everyone’s life’. It was also remarked, especially by Dutch students, that Qoheleth’s view sounds remarkably modern, which makes it possible to use it ‘as a beautiful gate’ for a good conversation. Two students related it to their future occupation as a minister, stating that from a pastoral point of view, this text of Qoheleth is of no use. A number of students indicated feeling provoked by the words of Qoheleth. Only two of them spoke of a slight change of mind caused by reading this chapter. A white student from South Africa remarked: ‘For me, this text is bringing relief in a way – it reassures me that it will not help me to stress and worry about death. Rather, we must spend our time in life on living it.’ A Dutch student concluded his reaction with: ‘Perhaps we should live this life as if it is the only one we have got ...’.

A difference between the reactions of the foreign students and those from the Netherlands is that the former referred more explicitly to their context and to the community they live in. This may have to do with the fact that at that moment they were far away from home for one month and probably were used to tell Dutch people, including me as a teacher, about their background. Nevertheless, it is an indication of the impact of one’s context in reading texts about death. More than the Dutch students, the foreign students could refer to their own experiences with death. An African student told of the death of her four siblings. She was the only child left to her parents. A student from Colombia wrote: ‘This portion of the Jewish Scriptures allows me to put in dialogue the meaning of death and hope in this passage to the context of war and desolation in my country. More than two interrupted centuries of civil wars within our country made Colombian population to see death as a natural or normal event. The surprise for us is to watch a newspaper not informing about death. The most usual experience in my country for decades has been to be eating a lunch and share some good moment with a partner while on the screen the news is transmitting how dozens of Colombians kill themselves. The experience of the other’s death is a place not to mourn, but to naturalize the hegemony of evil of our society.’ The only Dutch student who brought in his personal experience was an older student who stated that for him ‘death is not a taboo’, because his wife worked in a hospice and they often spoke about death. Moreover, he had also lost his wife at a relatively young age. He stated that he does not fear death, does not have illusions about a life after death, and that death is primarily a problem for those who stay behind.

This small investigation of the modern reception of the words of Qoheleth on death underlines the great influence of the context on the way Qoheleth’s message is understood and digested. It also indicates that this text does not seem to have much potential for making a change in the way the reader looks at death. Before going further into this matter of the application of the text it is interesting to pay attention to the interaction between Qoheleth and the context in which it was written.
Qoheleth in his historical context

The book of Qoheleth is presented as the work of king Solomon, but in all probability it has to be dated in the Hellenistic era, somewhere between 280 and 230 BCE (Schoors 2013:3). One of the arguments put forward by many scholars is that Qoheleth seems to be influenced by Greek ideas. One of parallels that can be noted between Qoheleth and Greek literature is the combination of the conviction of death as the absolute end and the admonition to enjoy life as long and as well as possible. One can find this also, for instance, in Euripides’ play *Alcestis*, about a woman who dies so that her husband may live, but who eventually is brought back by Heracles from the netherworld. In one part of the play, a drunken Heracles proclaims:

... let me
tell you something that will make you wiser.  
Do you know what human life is all about?  
I think you don’t. How could you? Listen to me:  
We all must die. That goes for me and you,  
and no man living has the slightest clue  
if he’ll live another day. Out of the blue  
comes all our fortune. Scientists pursue  
the truth, and teachers teach their arts and skills,  
but still we know less than we ever knew.  
You’ve heard what I have to say. Now, have a drink!  
Enjoy yourself! The life you live today  
is yours, and all the rest belongs to fortune.  

Especially on this point there are also close parallels with much older Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts. The most famous one is the ending of the Gilgamesh Epic, where the hero of story, who had striven in vain for immortality, is addressed by the tavern-keeper Shidiru in a way that strongly reminds of Qoh 9.7-9:

O Gilgamesh, where are you wandering?  
The life that you seek you never will find:  
when the gods created mankind,  
death they dispensed to mankind,  
life they kept for themselves.  
But you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,  
enjoy yourself always by day and by night!  
Make merry each day,  
dance and play day and night!  
let your clothes be clean,  
let your head be washed, may you bathe in water!  
Gaze on the child who holds your hand,  
let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace!

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3 This was already suggested in the eighteenth century; cf. the survey by Burkes 1999:91-108. Burkes herself is not convinced. She finds an explanation for Qoheleth’s worldview from within the history of the Jewish tradition.
For such is the destiny [of mortal men,]
that the one who lives ...  

This parallel of Qoheleth with the Gilgamesh Epic is one of many, but it is striking that this element of the Gilgamesh Epic is only found in the Old Babylonian version, dating from the first half of the second millennium BCE. There are also clear parallels with ancient Egyptian literature, especially with the harper’s song from the tomb of king Intef, found in different copies from the second millennium BCE. It expresses serious doubts about all efforts made to secure a good life after death. Little is left of the ‘houses of eternity’ of the kings of old. Therefore, it is better to concentrate on this life and make the most of it:

What of their places?
Their walls have crumbled,
their places are gone,
as though they had never been!
None comes from there,
to tell of their state,
to tell of their needs,
to calm our hearts,
until we go where they have gone!
Hence rejoice in your heart!
Forgetfulness profits you,
Follow your heart as long as you live!
Put myrrh on your head,
dress in fine linen,
anoint yourself with oils fit for a god.
Heap up your joys,
let your heart not sink!
Follow your heart and your happiness,
do your things on earth as your heart commands!
When there comes to you that day of mourning,
the Weary-hearted hears not their mourning,
wailing saves no man from the pit!
Make holiday,
do not weary of it!
Lo, none is allowed to take his goods with him,
Lo, none who departs comes back again!

There is much discussion about how precisely these texts should be related to the book of Qoheleth. Although some still assume that the Gilgamesh Epic functioned as a direct literary source of Qoheleth (Samet 2015), most scholars nowadays are more reluctant in this matter and consider a relation with popular Greek philosophy as more likely (Van der Toorn 2001; Kelly 2010; Sneed 2012:42-43). A middle position is taken by those who emphasize that Qoheleth should be read in a traditional Semitic context and that echoes of the views of the Gilgamesh Epic can still be found in later Akkadian texts and that the

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6 A survey is given by Samet 2015. The parallel with Qoh 9 is discussed on pp. 377-379.
same holds true for the Egyptian views (Kaiser 2003:263). When evaluating the relation with the Greek, Mesopotamian, and Egyptians texts one should also take into account that next to these parallels there are also a number of differences. The most important of these is that according to Qoheleth one can find no comfort in the expectation of being remembered after death: ‘there is no enduring remembrance of the wise as well as of the fool, because all that now is will be forgotten in the days to come’ (2.16). Here Qoheleth contradicts a motif which is broadly attested in Greek literature (Berner 2015:59) and which also occurs at the end of the epic of Gilgamesh. It concludes with Gilgamesh proudly referring to the walls of Uruk for which he became and will remain famous (George 1999:xxxiv). In 3.21 Qoheleth had also settled with another idea about escaping death. He asked the rhetorical question: ‘Who knows if the spirit of the sons of men goes upward and the spirit of the animal goes down to the earth?’ It can be read as a denial of a belief in the immortality of the soul, which became common in later Greek-influenced Jewish writings (Schoors 2013:309) and of the ancient Egyptian conception of the spirit as a bird leaving the body after death.

Burkes compares Qoheleth’s view on death with the way death is described in late Egyptian biographies as an insoluble problem. She does not assume that one has been influenced by the other. What connects them is that they both were ‘part of a broader pattern of change where a wide spectrum of religious beliefs, expectations, and emphases are coming in for new reflection (…) at approximately the same time’ (Burkes 1999:236). The problem with this theory is that Qoheleth’s view on death can hardly be seen as a deviating from traditional views. It is the other way around: Qoheleth is resisting new ways, probably influenced by Greek thinking, of softening the harsh reality of death. In his plea for making the best of this life, he wants to cut off every escape in some form of positive view on afterlife.

A liberationist reading

In her rereading of the book of Qoheleth in both today’s context and its own context, Elsa Tamez sees similarities between the frustration of the people suffering under the ‘globalization’ of the Hellenistic Ptolemaic system in the time of Qoheleth and the ‘dehumanizing reality’ of our time (Tamez 2000:v). She interprets 4.1-12, which starts with the reference to the ‘tears of the oppressed’ who ‘have no comforter’, as a call for ‘solidarity as a way of combating the avaricious and meaningless spirit of his society’ (Tamez 2000:68). She also wants to read chapter 9 as a text of resistance: ‘to live and feel the vibrancy of life (…) is a feasible way to resist the times of anti-human hostility, and to combat the total frustration caused by the society’ (Tamez 2000:113).⁸ She acknowledges, however, that from a liberationist point of view, Qoheleth as ‘a renegade aristocrat under foreign domination’ may have been inclined too much to accept a situation he could not easily change. There are also situations where suffering people no longer have this luxury. For this reason Tamez wants to put the apocalyptic vision of a completely different future next to Qoheleth’s advice ‘to live life from day to day (…) in the midst of enslaving labour and sorrow (Tamez 2000:145).

Not everyone will agree with Tamez about her analysis of Qoheleth’s view on society. According to Schoors, Qoheleth was aware of the political and economic oppression, but did not really criticize them. He did not see it as a problem but only used it to illustrate the absurdity of human existence (Schoors 2013:325). Catherine Dell, who sympathizes with the liberationist approach, is also reluctant in this matter: ‘the very bluntness and realism of Ecclesiastes make it a resistant text for liberation’ (Dell

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⁸ Besides the parallel from the Gilgamesh epic, she also refers to the admonition to enjoy life in the face of death in a Latin-American (Nahuatl) poem of the sixteenth century AD: ‘For only a short time, like the magnolia flower, have we come to open our corolla in the world. We have come only to wilt. Let your bitterness cease for a moment: even for a moment let us cast away sorrow! What shall we sing, oh my friends? In what shall we delight?’ (Tamez 2000:118).
Instead, she advocates a postcolonial approach, reading the texts as a two-edged sword, leaving room for a struggle over their meaning, both creating problems and solving them. With regard to the issue of life and death, Dell concludes that Qoheleth ‘could be read in the postcolonial context of either group—by the dominant Eurocentric former colonizer or the poverty-ridden formerly colonized—and both would probably come to the same conclusion that life should be enjoyed in the present, whoever you are, and that nothing can ultimately be changed’ (Dell 2013:83). Read this way, however, the biblical text hardly functions as a two-edged sword. Motivated by the experiences of reading this text with my students, I think that more inspiration can be found in it.

**Enjoying life as a protest**

What strikes me in the reactions to the way Qoheleth speaks about life in the face of death is that his advice to enjoy life as much as possible is taken up so differently. I now realise all the more that it makes a big difference when you hear this in my privileged situation as described above or when you live, like some of the students, in Medellin or in Central Africa. For me, enjoying life is simply taking some of the many possibilities offered by the amusement industry and advocated by my employer who wants me to stay happy and healthy. For people in a situation of poverty and oppression, the advice to enjoy life can be heard as a call for protest against their situation and the urge not to give in to resignation. Here I agree with Elsa Tamez. This can also explain why it sometimes seems to be more difficult to enjoy life properly in a comfortable situation. One could also say that being bored or depressed is a luxury not everyone can afford.

These experiences with reading Qoheleth in different contexts were enriched by what Mark George writes about his way of reading the texts in a post-Holocaust age. In his view, Qoheleth teaches us to accept the reality of death in order to take responsibility for the life one has been given (George 2000:289). In his attempt to apply this to our own situation, George first consults Jacques Derrida, who states that responsibility requires the act of a unique person, a subject who is finite and irreplaceable. The unique self is not constituted by the role one plays in life, but by one’s death. Each person’s death is unique (George 2000:290-91). To cope with death in a post-Holocaust age, George suggests going one step further. In line with the view of Emmanuel Levinas that subjectivity arises in the encounter with the Other, George suggests that ‘it is not only one’s own death one must take upon oneself, but also the death of the Other, for the death of the Other is oneself’ (George 2000:293). The death one must accept is also the death of those who died in the Holocaust and the freedom to enjoy life is ‘a freedom derived from taking on the deaths of all those who died’. In this way the awareness of death is the beginning of life. I see here also a connection with what I learned from my foreign students, namely that it makes a big difference whether you think of death from the perspective of the individual or from the experience of being part of a community.9

The obvious conclusion of this survey of interpretations and applications of Qoheleth’s texts on life and death is that there are many differences which to a large extent can be attributed to the different contexts of the readers. What can be indicated as characteristic of Qoheleth and can also be used as a critique on some of the positions taken, is that Qoheleth is constantly presenting problems. One should be careful with attributing definitive answers or clear-cut conceptions to Qoheleth, because ‘he shows that any truth wisdom can attain has only a relative value, there is always a pro and a con’ (Schoors 2013:20). So, why not take the rhetorical question of 3.21 (‘Who knows if the spirit of the sons of men goes upward and the spirit of the animal goes down to the earth?’) as a real question. In 9.3 Qoheleth

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9 It is interesting in this connection to note that in his essay of 2012 on the Gilgamesh Epic George points to the contrasts between man as an individual and man as society in old Babylonian thought as one of the basic elements of the text.
confronts the reader with a harsh reality: ‘and afterwards – to the dead’. Ps 73.24 can be read as a specific reaction to that statement, declaring that a difference is made for those who stay with God: ‘and afterward you will take me into glory’ (Spronk 1986:326). One does not have to see this as a contradiction. Where Qoheleth did not want or dare to go further, the psalmist did want to or could not stop.

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