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A Healthy Perspective of Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes



Paul (Kuei-chi) TSENG, Ph.D.

National Kaohsiung Normal University Assistant professor at Taipei
University of Nursing and Health Sciences, Taipei University of Technology
and Open University, New Taipei City, TAIWAN

ahkue@ms27.hinet.net

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ABSTRACT

In the times of the Covid-19 pandemic, a healthy perception of time does our spiritual and mental health good. Compared to the postmodern temporality, especially Nietzsche's philosophy, this paper ushers in a soundly healthy perspective of time portrayed in the book of Ecclesiastes. Time is one of the major themes in the book of Ecclesiastes. I intend to explore several aspects of time in this book, that is, wisdom, vanity, repetition, process, and determinism. The preacher Qohelet initially looks for the wisdom of life, and eventually, via a deep reflection of time, he concludes that wisdom in time is to turn to God for redemption in this troubled world.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Time is one of the major themes presented in the book of Ecclesiastes of the Old Testament. The book of Ecclesiastes is a book of the preacher, that is, a Qohelet, who seeks universal truth, the wisdom of life, finding that life is essentially hebel/vanity in an eternal and cyclical repetition, which is in the control of God, and which is a sort of determinism. Upon reflection of

the temporality, the wisest way of a human being is to look for God's wisdom, which is also salvation of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence" presents a challenge to the temporality of Christianity. According to *Thus Spoke Zarathustras*,^[1] Nietzsche is convinced that every event in the life of an individual, a people, a culture and in the cosmos itself

is destined to repeated occurrence. And he maintains that an entire eternity has already elapsed up to the present instant.

However, compared to Ecclesiastes, Nietzsche's vision of temporality stated here is echoed by that of his abused Christianity. A verse in Ecclesiastes goes in this way, "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun" (Eccles. 1: 9). Does the doctrine mean that all events are repeated endlessly in this world?

Despite the similarity of temporality, Nietzsche's deconstruction of logocentricism led to the tragic and unhealthy view of the postmodern world. As Habermas points out, Nietzsche opened up the gate of postmodernity of which two paths were later traveled by Heidegger and Bataille. And the later-comers such Lacan and Derrida, succeeding Bataille and Heidegger respectively use a psychological method to unmask the emergence of a subject-centered reason, and pursue the rise of the philosophy of subject back to its pre-Socratic beginnings.

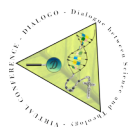
When travelling into the later period of postmodernity, Nietzsche's philosophy cast a "dark shadow" on the temporality of postmodernity as well as its view of language/Logos. Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God/the Word resulted in the deconstruction of center, then bringing about the decentered subject.

For "In the beginning was the Word,... And the Word was God" (Gospel John 1: 1). And the being of the Word is the holding center by which all things exist, just as the hub holds together the spokes of a wheel (Col. 1: 17). According to Nietzsche, God was dead. In other words, the Word/Logos was decentered. And if this premise stands, the breakdown of Being in the temporality, that is, the breakdown of the signifying chain will be predicted. In this way, St.

Paul's cosmological view in Colossians is instrumental in bridging the gap between Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God and the temporality of postmodernity. And since Nietzsche's declaration, the prevailing phenomenon has not only marked the end of the subject-centered reason but conceived the postmodern temporality, which is well portrayed in Jameson's "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." [2]

Before introducing Jameson's postmodern temporality, I have to reveal Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God in a dialectical way. In terms of the being of the Word, Nietzsche's declaration is somewhat paradoxical. For the Word has a double meaning in Greek; its translation can be either "Logos" or "Rema." In the beginning Logos preexisted with God and He was transformed into flesh within temporality. And then His crucifixion might result in the declaration of God's death.

Actually, Logos was dead just as St. Paul held that "the letter/the dead Logos kills" (2 Cor. 3: 6). The death of the Word, however, has an unconcealed side, which can be considered a margin with the function of supplementing the insufficiency of Nietzsche's declaration. "For the preaching/the word of the cross is to them that perish, foolishness; but unto us which are saved, it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1: 18). An unconcealed aspect of the Word is actually related to the living and diachronic nature of Rema, which is the metamorphosis of the dead Logos. For after the crucifixion of the Word, He was transformed into the living Word, that is, Rema, which in one sense broke the life-death cycle, exceeding the synchronic nature of temporality and rejuvenating His being within a diachronic temporality. Thus this accounts for Roman 10: 8, "But what saith it? The Word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the Word of



faith, which we preach.” Thus, it is inferred that just as he neglected the unconcealed salvation of this world in Ecclesiastes, so Nietzsche neglected or intentionally disregarded the unconcealed aspect of the Word. Furthermore, I go on the assumption that the misleading eschatology in some degree led to Nietzsche’s inspiration of “eternal recurrence.”

Likewise, Nietzsche’s unawareness of the nature of Rema might result in his declaration, which provided a wrong premise for the decentered subject in postmodernity and a critical insight to the explanation of Jameson’s temporality.

Under Nietzsche’s influence, Jameson raises the concept of “the breakdown of the signifying chain” to account for the decentered subject. According to Saussurean structuralism the function between Signified and Signifier is arbitrary. And once the one-to-one relationship between Signified and Signifier breaks down, we will have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated Signifiers. This kind of linguistic malfunction may lead to the non-identity of the subject, also disrupting the harmony and consistence of the state and relationship between self, God, and the universe. Thus the reasoning of Nietzsche’s temporality cast dim light on the world in the Covid-19 pandemic, which is being in an urgent need of more healthy impulse.

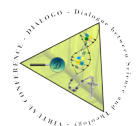
II. TIME: ON THE ASPECT OF WISDOM

Et is the regular word for ‘time’ in biblical Hebrew. It does not have an abstract sense in the Old Testament, either Ecclesiastes or elsewhere, but signifies the moment of a particular occasion of happening. Sometimes, however, it has the added nuance of a ‘regular’ or ‘appropriate’ happening: the ‘right’ time. [3] In the “Catalogue of Times” (3: 1-8),

Qohelet declares that “everything has a time” and proceeds to illustrate the principle by fourteen pairs of examples. The following verses vv.9-15, draw conclusions from this fact. In spite of the repetition, it is not evident what it means for everything to have a time. It is not even clear what a “time” (et) is in terms of multiple perspectives. This paper seeks to clarify the notion of “time” in Qohelet and its implications for the meaning of the Catalogue.

Qohelet was a seeker after truth of time, which was man’s fate in the contemporary world. The standard repository of such truths was the wisdom tradition, a tradition with which Qohelet was clearly very familiar, and so it was this that he took as his starting-point. But he was not content to take its tenets for granted: he aimed to test their truth by setting them against his own personal experience of life in the Jerusalem of the third century BC. He lived in a transitional period when the old tradition of Israelite life were breaking down. His book has been described as a philosophical dialogue with a hypothetical ‘wise man’ representing the conventional wisdom which had prevailed up to that time. Seeing through the essence of vanity in life is the preacher’s pragmatic wisdom.

Wisdom Literature occupies a strange place in the Bible. Unlike the historical books or the prophets, it shows little awareness of or interest in the foundational redemptive acts of God as recorded in the Pentateuch. No wonder God’s name had been hardly referred to in the whole book. Furthermore, God, as portrayed in the Wisdom Literature, is not a free agent but appears to be bound by the rules of moral cause and effect that the sages supposed were foundational to the universe in which they lived. According to Proverbs, even God must operate within the confines dictated by the wisdom that orders the



creation. Although even Homer nods, God has to act according to His covenant.

In addition, Wisdom-hokmah in morphology has two aspects: faculty and knowledge. As a faculty, wisdom is an intellectual power similar to intelligence in the uses to which it can be put. It encompasses common sense and practical skills. It includes the faculty of reason, that is, the capacity for orderly thinking whereby one derives valid conclusions from premises. The preacher perceived his world via the faculty of wisdom, accumulating hermeneutical experiences to lay the foundational philosophy of Ecclesiastes. Hokmah also exists as knowledge, that is, the communicable content of knowledge. Knowledge gained and transmitted by study of books and lore is “learning” or, if extensive and deep, “erudition”. True knowledge could be tested and transformed into wisdom.

III. TIME: ON THE ASPECT OF HEBEL/VANITY

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Qohelet is wise enough to see through the essence of life, revealing it is hebel/vanity. Qohelet begins and ends his teaching with the declaration that all is hebel, and throughout the book he calls things he sees hebel. What exactly does he mean by this? And what does he mean when he applies this word to everything? The basic meaning of hebel, the literal sense from which the others are derived, is vapor. This sense is evident in Isa 57:13; Prov 13:11; 21:6 and Ps 144: 4. It is usually used in ways easily derived by metaphoric transfer from the qualities of vapor. [4]

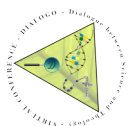
Furthermore, the traditional gloss “vanity” means something worthless or trivial. An effort that achieves nothing, or nothing worthwhile, is in vain. Elsewhere in the Bible, hebel has this sense several times. Examples: Isa 49:4 (“And I said, ‘In

vain I have toiled, for emptiness and vanity [hebel] I wasted my strength”); Isa 30: 7 (“Egypt will help only in vain [hebel] and emptily”); Job 9:29; Lam 4:17. Human plans are vapor—trivial, ineffectual (Ps 94:11).

IV. TIME: ON THE ASPECT OF REPETITION

And vanity of life is also a cyclical repetition. Ecclesiastes is full of repetition as Murphy, for example, recognizes: “While judgement about the peculiar grammatical characteristics of the language is still out...there can be no doubt about the distinctiveness of Qoheleth’s literary style. The poem on the repetition of events in 1: 4-11 is a symbol of this style; repetition is its trademark. This repetition is manifest in vocabulary and also in a phraseology that is almost formulaic. [5] For example, Qoh.1:5-7 turn to the natural elements and connect the notion of permanence to more dynamic ideas of continuity and repetition. While the issue in 1:4 could simply be one of continuity versus brevity, 1: 5-7 introduces the idea of a cyclical movement which can be tied closely to the more static permanence explored in the second half of 1: 4. The elements are neither transitory nor immobile. Their movement is one of repetition, and thus of cyclicity. Sun, wind, and water are all excellent metaphors for time, and in these verses their immediate function is to exemplify the repetitious movements of nature through time. They are part of a pattern which neither changes substantially nor ends. [6] In these verses, the grammatical structure and literary meaning prove to be intentionally cyclical, manifesting the essence of vanity.

It would initially seem that Qohelet carries on his depiction of cyclicity and repetition into the human realm in 1: 8-11: as the rivers flow and flow, so the human sees and hears—endlessly and without satiation. Certainly, this is how the poem is generally read. The main point of 1: 4-11,



then, would be that there is no gain to be had despite the overwhelming continuity, permanence and repetition observed in the world and in human life. Instead of being meaningful and progressive, the repetitious movement of human beings and phenomena across the face of the world is entirely without purpose—an endless striving without any goal. As the order of things is always the same, neither humanity's nor nature's efforts accomplish anything. Just as Hemingway pointed out in *The Sun Also Rises*, human affairs like war and love eventually turns out to be vanity in vanity.

Moreover, in the poem's presentation of the human situation in time, a strong dichotomy is established between the elements' repetitious, cyclical movement through time—embodying the cosmic, temporal structure—and the linear, ephemeral life of individual human beings. The human being is not able to participate in the continuous repetition which characterizes the temporal movement of the elements. Instead, it is emphasized that he or she is cut off from both the past and future of mankind. Transient as it is, man is only a tiny spec in the universe, as opposed to Nietzsche's view of eternal recurrence.

V. TIME, ON THE ASPECT OF BEING CONCRETE IN JUDAISM

Besides the feature of repetition, temporality in the book of Ecclesiastes is of the nature of being concrete. Wheeler Robison defines biblical time as concrete time. He argues that the Hebrew mind conceives time in the concrete, in its filled content, and not as an abstract idea. Also Stern argues that the ancient Jews understood reality as consisting of a multitude of discrete and concrete phenomena—activities, motions, changes, and events—occurring simultaneously or in sequence, i.e. processes. The words

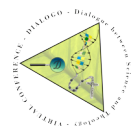
'discrete' and 'concrete' are important here. Stern does not imagine a cohesive system of temporal thinking in which process serves as an abstract label, simply replacing that of time. Instead, he argues that the ancient Jews experienced their reality as a number of concrete processes—including both human activities, such as the process of harvesting or the period of pregnancy, and processes tied to natural phenomena, such as the movement of the sun across the sky during the course of the day. Processes like these are real and concrete, and Stern argues that you don't need a functional concept of time in order to organize your activities according to them. Just as Moses recorded the process of God's creation in Genesis, concrete events were characteristic of six days of time. Time flies by in the presence of concrete historical events.

VI. TIME, ON THE ASPECT OF DETERMINISM

Was Qohelet a determinist? Many commentators have suggested as much. Delitzsch, for example, saw key texts expressing Qohelet's worldview such as Eccl. 3.1-15; 9.11-12 as deterministic, stating that '(Man) is on the whole not master of his own life.' More recently, Fox argued in much the same vein. Other commentators more wary of committing themselves on this question have nevertheless hinted that at least some aspects of Qohelet's work may be explicable from a deterministic angle. [7]

It should be noted that Qohelet's meaning cannot be resolved on the lexical level, since both main senses of "time" appear in the book, though not in the passage under consideration. We must ask just what kind of time Qohelet has in mind in the Catalogue and in what sense there is a time "for" everything.

If by *et* Qohelet means a unique



moment on the time-line, he is assuming a strong determinism: every act and event is assigned in advance a moment at which it will occur. Qohelet would be saying that people will inevitably harvest at harvest time. This represents one line of interpretation of the present passage. As mentioned earlier, the Catalogue could be interpreted as a statement of divine determination of all that occurs.

Furthermore, I now interpret this passage as presuming a less rigid sort of determinism. Qohelet does believe in divine control. God controls what will happen on the large scale, creating the world the way it is, and on the small scale he repeatedly and unpredictably intrudes and overrides human efforts. He makes man die at apparently arbitrary times. He radically circumscribes human freedom and effectuality. Nevertheless, Qohelet does not hold to a strict fatalism. God does not predetermine exactly what will happen and when. He has the power to do so but does not always use it. The Catalogue speaks about the right times when something should happen or be done. But these are not the times when things will inevitably occur. Determinism is supposed to be a relative point of view and thus it is not an absolute way of interpreting the course of human events.

CONCLUSION: ON THE ASPECT OF SALVATION

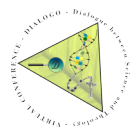
Is Ecclesiastes a Wisdom book in the common understanding of the term? The answer is yes regarding the literary form of many verses, particularly those found in the large middle section. The pattern of observation, reflection, and drawing a conclusion is common in Wisdom literature. Regarding content, the answer is also yes. But how should wisdom be defined? One helpful definition of wisdom is as follows: [8] The Spirit-given ability to ascertain

through the Word of God that the One who has created and redeemed us in Christ for cares also about the even now of everyday existence, enough to show his people through explicit messages the structure and meaning of his world and the laws by which he governs it.

This definition will work well with Ecclesiastes. We must remember that ours is a fallen world subject to capricious forces of evil. God will always maintain a degree of unpredictability and will keep his creatures guessing about why he allows certain things to happen to us in this world. Nevertheless, his ordering and governance of this creation is still evident in the laws of nature. What is more, the Word made flesh has redeemed God's lost and condemned creatures for eternity, and this gives our present lives meaning and purpose in here and now. Indeed, salvation would definitely fill the void of vanity repeatedly manifested in Ecclesiastes, showing forth the wisdom of the Creator and Savior.

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr. **Tseng Kuei-chi** is an assistant profession at National Taipei University of Health and Nursing Sciences, Taipei University of Technology, and Open University. He also runs St. Paul Workshop of Editing and Translation (www.ahkue.com) to serve the need of campus by editing textbooks and translation.

