

# THE ANGELS OF ECCLESIASTES

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Robert Shenk

Thousands at his bidding speed  
And post o'er land and ocean without rest. . . .  
—John Milton

Dust you are, to dust you will return.  
—Book of Genesis

What a dark, unhappy book Ecclesiastes seems to be.

“What has happened will happen again, and what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun,” the speaker proclaims at the very beginning. He soon goes on to say, “I have seen everything that has been done here under the sun; it is all futility and a chasing of the wind.”

As a reader soon realizes, such laments occur everywhere in the text, varied though they be: “What is crooked cannot become straight; what is not there cannot be counted”; moreover, “in much wisdom is much vexation; the more knowledge, the more suffering.” And so on and on.

Like many a curious reader, I long looked

for a positive overall meaning in this book, a meaning such as one regularly finds in other biblical texts. Yes, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, but God (we eventually understand) let this event happen so as to save the Israelites, even thereby to begin to shape the Jewish nation. In later books, the exile into Babylon occurred, but the Jews eventually returned to the Promised Land wiser and more faithful, even if the temple they rebuilt was by no means as great as the one that had been destroyed.

Surely there was something deeper here in Ecclesiastes, too, something I was not yet perceiving. But all attempts on my part (or others) to ameliorate the apparent focus of the text seemed to strike a false chord. A

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scholar whose gloss I remember said something like this: “Statements of a traditional piety have been added toward the end to relieve the gloom of the book, and are in conflict with the rest of the text.” Yes. The contention that Ecclesiastes’s author, in the main, is cynical about discerning any larger, conclusive purpose to human events “under the sun” is simply true. There’s no way of getting around that.

Thinking a bit further about the latter scholar’s opinion, though, I realized that a comprehensive view of the text as involving *only* gloom was not quite accurate. Those magnificent verses that begin chapter 3, for example, the ones ironically often used in burial services, bespeak considerable optimism about human purposes and actions:

For everything its season, and for every  
 activity under heaven its time:  
 a time to be born and a time to die;  
 a time to plant and a time to uproot;  
 a time to kill and a time to heal;  
 a time to break down and a time to  
 build up;  
 a time to weep and a time to laugh;  
 a time for mourning and a time for  
 dancing;  
 a time to scatter stones and a time to  
 gather them;  
 a time to embrace and a time to  
 abstain from embracing...

Involving, as this statement does, purpose here, implied fulfillment there, considerable inferred purpose behind the negative as well as the positive—in many ways, this is a quite comprehensive and remarkably positive statement about the meaning of human activity.

Immediately after this passage, however (indeed, in the very next line of the text!), we are back to the speaker’s opening litany:

“What profit has the worker from his labor?” And then a bit later, “Man has no advantage over beast, for everything is futility. All go to the same place: all came from the dust, and to the dust all return.”

Indeed, precisely because human beings recognize purpose, fulfillment, and timeliness, the larger nonfulfillment and lack of deeper meaning evident in human life grate all the more harshly. Thinking further about the scholar’s statement, quoted above, it isn’t just those few optimistic statements of “traditional piety” at the end of this short work that “are in conflict with the rest of the text”: the text is in deep conflict with itself.

Looking elsewhere, one also sees some definite if limited meaning in the various proverbs that the speaker has sprinkled throughout this book of wisdom, some of which are at least as gripping as the best passages from the Book of Proverbs. “Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one mistake can undo many things done well,” so the speaker has discovered. And consider this relatively positive proverb (though it, too, is conditioned by cynicism): “Send your grain across the seas, and in time you will get a return. Divide your merchandise among seven or perhaps eight ventures, since you do not know what disasters are in store for the world.”

Actually, a fine small secondary book of aphoristic wisdom exists as a subtext within Ecclesiastes. Why is it here? I’d say that by citing so many proverbs, the author verifies that there is, in fact, such a thing as wisdom. The problem is that even the wise can never find *ultimate* wisdom. “I said, ‘I am resolved to be wise,’ but wisdom was beyond my reach—what has happened lies out of reach, deep down, deeper than anyone can fathom.”

In a parallel reflection, the voice of the text says, “When things go well, be glad; but when they go ill, consider this: God has set

the one alongside the other in such a way that no one can find out what is to happen afterwards.” Not only, then, are there barriers to ultimate wisdom, but God has placed the barriers! Far from being an atheist, the author firmly believes that God is providing both the temporal, limited meanings and fulfillments, *and* the withholding of spiritual or ultimate meaning.

In this respect, a passage from another text can provide a metaphor whereby one can fruitfully examine this puzzling work just a bit more deeply, futile though any hope of deep understanding may be. It is well known that the ancient world had a god of fortune or luck (in Rome, it was the goddess Fortuna), but, after a manner, so did Dante in the *Divine Comedy*. Perhaps you will recall these lines:

Likewise, for earthly splendours [God]  
saw fit  
To ordain a general minister and guide.  
By whom vain wealth, as time grew ripe  
for it,  
From race to race, from blood to blood,  
should pass,  
Far beyond hindrance of all human  
wit. . . .  
Lo! This is she that hath so curst a name  
Even from those that should give praise  
to her—  
Luck, whom men senselessly revile and  
blame;  
But she is blissful and she does not hear,  
She, with the other primal creatures,  
gay  
Tastes her own blessedness, and turns  
her sphere.  
—*Inferno*, book 7, Sayers translation

Despite the occasionally dire results of its operation, this “angel of fortune” (portrayed by Dante as female, like Fortuna) is said to

be blessed and happy, for ironically she is carrying out the work of God.

The speaker in Ecclesiastes would certainly have agreed that such upsetting relocations of wealth often occur, and that they are also very much the actions of God. True, unlike our author, Dante portrays fortune as the work of a “primal creature,” or angelic power. But in the Bible beyond Ecclesiastes (likely the source of so much of our writer’s reflection), God often is said to act by means of the spiritual creatures under His command. Hence, it is but a step further to imagine the deeper metaphysical features of reality in Ecclesiastes as being, like Dante’s fortune, the specific spheres of the angelic.

Let me identify, then, some “angels” in Ecclesiastes beyond fortune whose primal operation might be perceived, had we eyes to see them. Consider the following passage, to begin with:

This is what I have seen: that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink and enjoy himself in return for his labours here under the sun, throughout the brief span of life which God has allotted him.

Here we see *the angel of the brief span*. This spirit (obviously a cousin of the angel of death spoken of in Exodus) no doubt had his coming-out party in Genesis, cutting down the years of all humanity following Methuselah. After that, he (or she?) made sure that nobody lives long—and even (one imagines) ensures that many of us die at a very early age, or at an especially inopportune moment.

Or look at the following Ecclesiastean passage, the fruit no doubt of years of observation and reflection: “It is a worthless task that God has given to mortals to keep them occupied.” Here we recognize *the angel of the worthless task*. This spiritual person would

be quite familiar to the modern bureaucrat, could the latter only see him. From another perspective, Homer would have thought this figure closely related to the jailor in his portrait of the afterlife, the one who keeps forcing Sisyphus to roll his rock up that hill.

To some of the apparently ironical and adverse spiritual beings that we are imagining (so troubling to the inhabitants of earth), one could give a more modern title. Take the lamentable power imagined in this Ecclesiastean proverb: “When riches increase, so does the number of parasites living off them.” I call this phenomenon the work of *the angel of paparazzi*, or perhaps better, *the angel of the NBA*. In the sphere of sports, to be sure, we are familiar with the operation of seemingly wayward, even smirking spiritual creatures, although we may never have recognized the power itself. When Zola Budd tripped up Mary Decker at the Olympics, way back when, we might have seen *the angel of the tripped foot* (not Puck, exactly, but something like him) had we only been a bit more aware.

Actually, long ago we might have noticed kindred spiritual creatures at play in the larger work of which Ecclesiastes is a part, had we the spiritual sense to recognize them. At the Bible’s very beginning, we heard of the predicted actions of *the angel of labor in childbearing*, and of *the angel of the curse on the earth*, to name just a couple of examples. Only a few chapters further on, *the angel of verbal confusion* shows up at Babel; he or she now helps to makes millions for Berlitz, and even maybe for Rosetta Stone. “It’s an ill wind that blows nobody good,” as the saying goes . . . but that’s a proverb from a later tradition.

Returning to the Bible, we have all heard of the righteous judgments enacted upon the human beings there, but some of us under the sun are troubled by not knowing why unjust catastrophes occur. Long before the disciples of Jesus asked of the man born blind, “Who

sinned, Lord—the man or his parents that he was born blind,” Job wrestled heroically with an angel of his own, one of God’s very favorites, who we might call *the angel of the suffering good*. “Though I am blameless, he makes me out to be crooked. . . . I declare “[God] destroys blameless and wicked alike.’” In Ecclesiastean terms, Job’s main problem would seem to be with the *angel of the mysterious character of God*, for “the righteous and the wise and whatever they do are under God’s control; but whether they will earn love or hatred they have no way of knowing.”

Probably Job and many another were also perplexed by the work of Ecclesiastes’s *angel of the impenetrable future*: “When things go well, be glad; but when they go ill, consider this: God has set the one alongside the other in such a way that no one can find out what is to happen afterwards.” In this connection, almost all of us are uncertain and concerned about what happens after death.

Finally, Ecclesiastes’s speaker would insist that, high or low, rich or poor, all human beings struggle with a particularly perverse spiritual creature related to those just above, for “this is what is wrong in all that is done here under the sun: that one and the same fate befalls everyone.” This latter grim power, who has been called, colloquially, *the great equalizer*, would always seems to be hovering about and matching up entries of rich and poor just for the obituary section of your local paper, if you still read one.

One major implication of this brief and incomplete summary of Ecclesiastes is, again, that through more or less permanent decrees (which I have personalized by delegating their enforcement to specific great spiritual powers), God has set up all manner of ironical barriers or limitations for humankind.

Why does God place such barriers? It would all be conjecture, of course, but one feels bound to guess... so one might have to live by faith, perhaps. Or so that one's reach should exceed one's grasp (as Browning once put it). Or perhaps, in the words of Ecclesiastes itself, "In dealing with human beings it is God's purpose to test them and to see what they really are."

Again, I must emphasize that the main point isn't that *you or I* can't find out God's purposes—by divine decree, they are all (at least from the standpoint of human wisdom) *unknowable*. They remain mysterious, "Far beyond hindrance of all human wit," as Dante puts it. And "under the sun," even the wise can never know why. Instead, the main points of the text seem to be that all these limitations or barriers exist, and that, like the famous angel in Numbers standing with drawn sword in opposition to Balaam, they are utterly inexorable.

Just knowing of the existence of some barriers, to be sure, can be a great good.

Living near New Orleans, I have sometimes reflected on a particular street that was said to be flooded during Katrina, but an approaching driver was not sure how deeply. Was it of any benefit to know whether one could safely get through that street or not? Of course it was. An official might have said, "I don't know how you can get out of the city, but I do know this—*this street is blocked*; it will take you nowhere, and your car will only flood, or worse!" Our Jewish author has composed *the book of all the blocked streets*, as it were, and it has become a bestseller.

But, in the end, is *any* kind of purpose (even such cautionary purpose as I have illustrated above) really to be recommended? If everything is futile, why take any action at all?

Again, the author seems to have purposely cut himself off from any religious perspective, speaking only from the standpoint of

human wisdom. Why, for heaven's sake? If he knew the tradition of revelation (as he surely did, writing as he does as if he were the "King in Jerusalem," after all), and if he had himself considered tentative answers that might be inferred from the grand biblical stories, or the psalms, or maybe the perspectives of Abraham or Moses or Elijah ("Think of Elijah," he might have counseled: "Elijah was taken up to heaven and to God by the fiery chariot; somehow that has to be our hope as well")—this author chose not to advert to that tradition. Why not?

To provide a tentative answer to this question, let's look at one additional "angelic" perspective, admittedly very different from that of all the impedimentary angels that I have pictured above, a perspective that by no means overturns the portrait I have painted but that does add a significant qualification. This thought came originally from my considering some of those puzzling passages placed at the very end of the book that deal with the need to remember God in the face of approaching death. There are three such passages. Here's part of one of them:

Remember your Creator in the days...  
when the sound of the mill fades, when  
the chirping of the sparrow grows faint  
and the songbirds fall silent, when people  
are afraid of a steep place and the  
street is full of terrors.

The latter part of this passage came regularly to mind when my wife or I helped my aged mother up even the slightest step.

But this textual description is not merely topical; in speaking of the chirping of sparrows and the sound of the mill and the terrors of the street, it is also highly imaginative. That is, both in this passage and in the related, concluding passage quoted below, there's a strong *poetic* element:

Remember your Creator before the silver cord is snapped and the golden bowl is broken, before the pitcher is shattered at the spring and the wheel broken at the well, before the dust returns to the earth as it began and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Despite the author's bent toward the invention of memorable proverbs (as in "a live dog is better than a dead lion"), and despite his regular cynicism, the author's words also frequently contain both gracefulness and a deep intimation.

Besides the two citations just above, consider the famous passage about the uncertainty of earthly reward:

One more thing I observed under the sun: Swiftmess does not win the race, nor strength the battle. Food does not belong to the wise, nor wealth to the intelligent, nor success to the dutiful; time and chance govern all.

And note the poetry in the close of the famous passage about seasons and times:

[There's] a time for silence and a time for speech; a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace.

In both these quotations, the love of words as well as their import seeps through almost any translation. Given such passages, one muses whether, in leaving his main point wholly unmitigated by any counterbalancing religious message, the writer might have been driven by a strong poetic urge rather than the rhetorical or "preacherly" impulse traditionally attributed to him.

Why couldn't Ecclesiastes, in his larger presentation, be a poet similar to the author of the Book of Job, who not only writes

poetry but also portrays God Himself as a great poet?

That is, when God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind at the climax of the Book of Job, what does He say? Yes, God tells Job to "stand up like a man," but then, rather than manifesting a great anger or preaching at Job, or maybe (what many of us might have hoped for) answering all of Job's questions *philosophically*, He *composes poetry* for Job instead, poetry like this:

In all your life have you ever called up  
the dawn  
or assigned the morning its place?  
Have you taught it to grasp the fringes  
of the earth  
and shake the Dog-star from the sky;  
to bring up the horizon in relief as clay  
under a seal,  
until all things stand out like the folds  
of a cloak,  
when the light of the Dog-star is  
dimmed  
and the stars of the Navigator's Line go  
out one by one?

Have you visited the storehouses of the  
snow  
or seen the arsenal where hail is stored...?

Does the rain have a father?  
Who sired the drops of dew?

This poetry goes on for pages. Mystery and wonder, not power, are what God displays to Job in his final great gift to his favorite. Why can't mystery and wonder rather than cynicism be the superintending emphasis of the author of Ecclesiastes too?

That is, instead of pronouncing an overt message of faith complete with thesis and argument and examples, might our author instead be doing much of what all poets

do—hinting, evoking, and suggesting—ever putting pregnant instances or thoughts side by side for the reader to puzzle over? Then he would not be proclaiming his meaning rhetorically but like a poet would be inviting his readers in imagination to hypothesize, to guess, to wonder—to get us somehow to *see for ourselves* what he darkly glimpses.

Why couldn't our author, overall, be operating in such a way? It certainly can't be because the Bible, outside of Job, never asks the reader to imagine, because of course it regularly does.

Consider just one short passage, a selection from very early in Genesis. After Adam and Eve have disobeyed God and have been judged, God says, “The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; what if he now reaches out and takes fruit from the tree of life also, and eats it and lives forever?” Using this as explanation, God decides to drive Adam and Eve out of the garden. Some modern readers (including Northrop Frye, who ought to have known better) see fear in God's action here, but others (like St. Augustine) are surely right in understanding God to be speaking ironically at this point. Surely He is mocking Satan's original temptation that humans “will be like gods” (and the accompanying human belief in that statement), because the duped, ashamed, blame-shifting, and weak creatures that stand before God are the very last thing from being godlike.

Such irony of course depends on a reader being able to detect the opposite intent from an apparent literal meaning. Like poetry, irony depends on a reader's wit. Featuring untold comparable instances, the Bible from the very beginning invites readers to use imagination, to fill in the blanks, to find their own ways to the author's unspoken or nonliteral meaning.

Nor can one object that there is no wonder elsewhere in Ecclesiastes. Besides the poetry in the texts that I have just discussed, I've already pointed out the perplexing placement of the verses about times and seasons. With that monumental passage on a time for every purpose under heaven having been set alongside the author's major, repeated theme of futility, sooner or later one naturally wonders whether the author might believe that there is a “time for fulfillment” and a “time for futility,” too—as if, indeed, futility itself might be perceived to have meaning, if one could only see it from the highest mountaintop.

Then again there are those three great, parallel reflections on the expectation of death (death being the great instrument of earthly futility) that I have already referred to. Each of these culminating reflections is introduced by the exhortation to “Remember your Creator” before all the troubles come. However, given the repeated cautions about futility up to this point, a reader may want to cry out, “*What for? Why remember Him if everything is futile?*”

Finally, one returns to the very phrase “under the sun” itself. In our English translation, we find this curious phrase used more than twenty-five times, ever hinting or calling forth a wonder as to what it actually means. Has not the author's very phrasing been chosen in the hope that his readers will sooner or later consider what the *opposite* condition might be? If utter futility is ever the case “under the sun,” as the author insists again and again and again (occupied with earthly vanity and all the utterly unavoidable concomitants of death as he is), a reader naturally wonders whether there might be another possible human circumstance. Would the opposite be *over* the sun...or *under* God...or perhaps *with* God? Readers naturally wonder how and when—and

whether—any such differing and perhaps compensating final circumstances might relate to or involve them.

In the end, the author places these paradoxes and implies these great questions, and leaves his readers to come to their own conclusions. Perhaps he hopes to enlarge the poetry of their faith thereby.

In conclusion, I'd argue that the most important angel of Ecclesiastes is likely what Milton's Urania is sometimes thought to be, a grand angel who is primarily a muse.

Yes, in our author's discussion of futility, he shows himself a master of dire argument

and of telling examples to prove his case. However, if in his *overall, superintending* operation, the author of this "book of wisdom" has chosen to act under the predominant influence of this latter angel, this great *poetic* power—and one need only remember the author's preoccupation throughout his text with irony and perplexity and mystery to recognize the likelihood of this latter possibility—then the author will be recognized as having a much larger nature and much greater power than that of the complaining, contemptuous, mixed-up, and rather pitiable imposter that he is often assumed to be. †

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