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Skepticism of Divine Justice and Action in Job and Ecclesiastes

Skepticism as a Means to an Authentic Religious Experience

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23 April 2021

A Senior Honors Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Bellarmine
University Honors Program

Under the Direction of Dr. Prince

Reviewed by Dr. Picken and Dr. Golding

Chapter One: Introduction and Review of Literature

The books of Job and Ecclesiastes have fascinated humanity for thousands of years now. As texts, they are about as enigmatic and ambitious as can be. As pieces of religious Sacred Scripture, they are brimming with spiritual insight and divine contemplation. Their nameless authors, mysterious origins, and unknown dates surely add to this rich enticement that comes with them. Some of the greatest theological, philosophical, and literary minds have wrestled with and written on these works and illuminated their vast and powerful ideas in continuously evolving lights. It is nothing short of a grand privilege to join them on this journey.

While these books are incredibly different in many ways, their themes often overlap, their characters ask the same questions. Specifically, this thesis focuses on skepticism as a unifying thread between the texts. These texts are skeptical about God as a just God, and about how God is understood to intervene in human affairs. Much of the rest of the Bible takes for granted that God intervenes in our world often. God often speaks with Moses, Abraham, David, and the whole nation of Israel at times. God of course also brings the Israelites out of Egypt and guides them to the promised land. More than likely coming out of a post-exilic framework, however, the authors of these books are forced to rethink these ideas and question how a God they still believe in operates in our world. Job and Ecclesiastes are the two biblical books that most explicitly address the concept of divine justice and action in our world. Thus, the thesis will be concerned with how Job and Ecclesiastes respond to earlier biblical tradition and accepted ideas about God, and how these books' ideas might still be pertinent in today's religious landscape.

The second chapter of this thesis deals with just this: how earlier biblical tradition (that is, before these two texts are understood to have been written) understands God's justice and action.

Justice, the concern with right and wrong, and a desire to be a part of Israel's collective life are all understood to be essential characteristics of God in such books as Genesis, Deuteronomy, Judges, and Amos. After the Exile, however, there is a shift that happens in biblical literature. Some of the Psalms are understood to represent this shift well, as is Ezekiel, the first prophet to be called outside of the land, and Habakkuk, who is second only to Job in his critique of God.

The third chapter is an overview and analysis of Job and Ecclesiastes. This chapter introduces the genre of wisdom literature, and how these two texts fit into this tradition or subvert it. These two books are then broken down in terms of structure, theme, and literary form. Several scholars are brought in to clarify points of contention or contradiction within the texts as well as highlight the mysterious nature of their origin and craft.

The fourth chapter analyzes their themes and conclusions from a more theological light. The manifestation of the skepticism of the books is understood to be the emphasis on life experience as opposed to previous tradition. The question of why Job is satisfied at the end of the text is considered as well as how Ecclesiastes can be regarded as a "hopeful" text. Also discussed in this section is a major difference in the two books: God speaks in Job, yet does not in Ecclesiastes.

Chapter five, the conclusion, brings the work home by considering its importance to our current age. The two books' emphasis on lived experience and authentic religious expression is once again brought up and considered in the light of our current religious landscape. The fact that both books use skepticism not to disprove God or prove God unworthy of worship, but to subvert unhealthy or insufficient religious experiences or expressions is the crux of this chapter.

As far as translation goes, I am approaching this thesis work from a Christian perspective, which means the Bibles I used were nearly always Christian translations, these being the Jerusalem Bible and the New American Bible. Many bible commentaries, translations, and introductions were also helpful in smaller capacities, such as the Harper Collins Study Bible, The Zondervan Bible Commentary, and Robert Alter's Wisdom translations. However, great care was taken to approach the texts simply as they are, taking care not to view them as anticipating a Christian revelation, as can sometimes be the temptation in Christian scholarship. Any theological insights that this thesis puts forward are a direct result of reading and studying these texts within themselves, with the help of both Christian and Jewish scholars.

Review of Literature

Job and Ecclesiastes have been considered sacred canon for thousands of years now. There has been an overwhelming amount of study on both texts that ranges from ancient to current times, which each subsequent age managing to add something new to the conversation. As such, there is far more information and study accessible about the subject than can be effectively synthesized and discussed. This review of literature will try to touch on many of the different approaches to biblical scholarship as it pertains especially to these texts, as well as give some insight into how the texts are generally read or what about them is considered noteworthy or important.

Biblical scholarship utilizes a vast number of critical methods by which texts might be examined and interpreted. Two methods that are particularly important in biblical scholarship are exegesis and hermeneutics. Exegesis seeks to understand what the author of a biblical text intended to communicate to their audience in their own time in order to more fully realize why

the text is written in the way that it is or why it includes what it does. Hermeneutics is a method of biblical interpretation that takes exegesis into account in considering how the text may be speaking to a modern audience in light of what the purpose of the text was. This thesis will rely on both of these methods, although it is challenging to understand what the authors' original intentions were, given that the books' origins are so mysterious. Overall, it is important to consider that the context the book was written in reflects how it should be interpreted even in our own time.

Some significant scholars that have contributed to the study of both books are Robert Alter, Harold Kushner, and Peter Kreeft. Alter was exceptionally helpful in understanding how the texts function linguistically¹. His work on the texts was especially crucial in my understanding of Ecclesiastes and the position of its author. His introduction to his translation of the book was illuminating in regards to the meaning of the words "Qoheleth", "hebel", and others, as well as how the style of writing is important to the overall meaning of the book. His translation of Job is similarly impactful, but was more important for my research in matters of language and translation over literary theme.

Harold Kushner's personal affection for Job and his academic approach to studying it was a combination that greatly informed my own research of the book². His work on how the text might be applied to a modern religious context while remaining faithful to the original meaning of the book was important in crafting my own research goals. Kushner was also instrumental in illustrating how different interpretations of a text could be valid provided they

¹ Alter, Robert. *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2011.

² Kushner, Harold S. *The Book of Job: When Bad things happen to a Good Person*. Nextbook, 2012

were effectively rooted in the source material. This was important for my own research in framing my focus on religious skepticism.

Peter Kreeft's focus on Job and Ecclesiastes³ was especially focused in meaning and life lessons that could be drawn from either text. He was important for my research, similarly to Kushner, in determining how the answer to my research question could be rooted in the texts in a way that was convincing. Unfortunately, Kreeft's philosophical approach to the books is harmed, in my opinion, by an overtly Christian bias that often imposes meaning on a text that the author may or may not have actually intended. His conclusions often assumed a tendency of the texts to point towards the Christian revelation of Jesus, which is, simply put, a reading that is difficult to pull from the texts without bringing in other perspectives or assumptions.

Other scholars came into play in more minor ways. Roper and Groenwald in their article "Job Ecclesiastes as (Postmodern?) Wisdom in Revolt"⁴ demonstrated how effective the two texts were at responding to one another and the overlap and departure they have with each other as far as themes and ideas are concerned. Their article ultimately concluded that the texts functioned effectively as wisdom literature but also departed from the tradition in ways that leads the texts to be revolutionary in nature. Joseph Telushkin's *Biblical Literacy*⁵ was adept at showing how these two texts can be framed within a larger biblical context, although his reading of them in my opinion tends to focus on the texts as antique (if not respectable) renderings of the past, whereas my research sought to bring them more into conversation with our current religious landscape. Gustavo Gutierrez was influential in reading Job from a liberationist theological

³ Kreeft, Peter. *Three Philosophies of Life: Ecclesiastes: Life as Vanity, Job: Life as Suffering, Song of Songs: Life as Love*. Ignatius Press, 1989

⁴ Roper, Leon A., and Alphonso Groenewald. "Job Ecclesiastes as (Postmodern?) Wisdom in Revolt." *Theological Studies*, no. 8, 2013

⁵ Telushkin, Joseph, *Biblical Literacy*, HarperCollins, 1997

perspective, and was masterful at reading Job as it is without allowing his Christian perspective to overtake his interpretation in a way that was harmful.

Typically, where the skepticism of these texts is concerned, much scholarship tends to focus on the theory that they respond to a broader theological and political context brought about by the return to Israel after the Babylonian Exile. This prevailing theory takes into account linguistic style, themes, and theological departures from earlier biblical tradition in order to back up this claim. This is a theory I will adopt and work from in my own research, and the convincing nature of it is supported by the work of scholars I reference throughout. Israel's shift in religious thought after the Exile, while not definitively the lens from which the texts see the world through, would explain why they approach their questions in the way that they do.

Interestingly, scholarship also tends to view this skepticism as a negative aspect of the text or an aspect that ought to be overlooked or justified. In the case of Christian scholarship especially, this skepticism is often offered as proof that the new revelation of Jesus was necessary, as if Israel's Jewish roots were somehow now insufficient and needed fixing. Other scholars tend to focus on the more "pious" parts of each text in order to justify their inclusion in scripture. In Ecclesiastes, for example, this often means that scholars will zero in on the final verse, which asserts one should fear God and keep God's commandments, as the whole meaning of the text. This approach that can be seen in Barker and Kohlenberger's introduction to the text in the Zondervan Commentary⁶.

My research will emphasize, in contrast, that the skepticism these texts put forward can be a positive thing for a religious person. It will consider how the two books present their cases,

⁶ Kohlenberger, John R. III and Barker, Kenneth L., *The Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary Volume 1: Old Testament*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids Michigan, 1994

which is through the lens of lived experience, and about what they are skeptical, which is religious systems that are oppressive and harmful in nature. My thesis puts forth the new case that the books focus on religion is positive and has much to offer religious people today as far as how skepticism can be beneficial in one's religious journey. There is an emphasis on how religion ought to be a life affirming rather than a life denying experience, and that religion should exist hand in hand with the lived experience of human beings.

Chapter Two: Early Biblical Views of Divine Justice and Action

The Relative Place of Job and Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Canon

Although no one knows exactly when the books of Job and Ecclesiastes were written, it is a scholarly consensus that they are later, post-exilic works of scripture. The ideas represented in are a conversation with and response to what has come before them in terms of biblical literature. This is particularly true in the case of what the two books present on divine justice and action, their understanding of how God operates and intervenes in our world. Job and Ecclesiastes at times differentiate from and at other times agree with pre-wisdom literature stances on such topics. Therefore, in order to fully understand how these function in the biblical canon, one must understand what came before it.

This can best be accomplished by examining the natural progression of Biblical ideas as they developed before Job and Ecclesiastes were written. This will be accomplished by analyzing stories, themes, and ideas from the different subgroups along the Bible's genre lines, The Torah, the historical literature, the prophets, and the Psalms that are thought to precede Job and Ecclesiastes. Most if not all of these texts would have been written before these two books, and therefore, taken together, they reflect an accurate portrayal of the biblical ideas that our primary two texts respond to.

The Torah

The Torah comprises the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, these being Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Genesis famously tells the story of creation, it also tells of God's calling of Abraham and of the beginning of the Israelite nation through him. Exodus tells the story of the enslavement of the Hebrews by Egypt, the calling of Moses, and the flight to the promised land. Leviticus is a mostly legal text that details moral and ritual law. Numbers is concerned primarily with the sojourn through the desert and the struggles of the people that arise from the journey. Deuteronomy is composed of long, eloquent speeches given by Moses just before the Hebrews are to enter the promised land. The book ends with the death of Moses and his succession by Joshua. Taken together, the books tell the origins of the Israelite people, and contain the 613 Torah laws of Judaism. The Torah contains many interesting insights into God's character and ways in the world, but for the purposes of this study, the focus will primarily be on Genesis and Deuteronomy.

Genesis's focus on God typically addresses either God's power (as in the creation and flood stories) or God's covenant relationships with Abraham's family. Genesis's primary commentary on the justice of God comes in the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah, two ancient cities known to be full of terribly wicked people. In the story, which appears in Genesis's 18th chapter, God appears to Abraham in the form of three men. He muses whether or not to tell Abraham about his plan because he knows that he plans to make a great nation out of him. Finally, he decides to tell Abraham what he is going to do- destroy the cities because of their wickedness. Interestingly, Abraham immediately intercedes on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah's inhabitants, "will you really sweep the innocent away with the wicked? Suppose there were fifty innocent people in the city, would you really sweep away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people within it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to kill the righteous

with the wicked, so that [they] should be treated alike! Far be it from you! *Should not the judge of all the world do what is just?*” (Gen. 18:23-25, emphasis mine).

This is a moment in the Hebrew Bible that is uniquely striking. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin notes in *Biblical Literacy* that Abraham is not the only character in the bible to argue with God, Moses and Job also do so, but his argument is unique in the sense that it is for a group of obviously guilty people that bear no relation to him. Moses’s argument with God is on the behalf of the Israelites, his people, and Job’s argument, though valid, is because he believes *he* is being treated unfairly. Abraham’s argument is entirely disinterested. Telushkin also notes that “it is clear that [Abraham] has already understood justice to be an essential characteristic of God. Therefore, if God acts in a manner that is unjust, he is acting un-Godly”⁷.

There are a couple of details about this story that are pertinent to understanding how God’s justice and ways are perceived from the first book of the Bible. First of all, as Telushkin points out, Abraham takes justice to be a given aspect of God. There is no question as to this fact, the Bible sees no need to explain it. In addition, when there are found not to be even ten righteous people in the cities, but only Lot’s family is found innocent, God evacuates them before destroying the two cities. These details in the story seem to prove that Abraham is correct when he assumes that justice is an aspect of God that does not need to be questioned.

A second pertinent detail to consider is *why* God decides intervention is necessary. When these cities are first mentioned, all that is said is that “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sins so grave...” (Gen. 20). It is never explicitly stated what sins have provoked God’s wrath, although based on how the citizens “to the last man” (Gen. 19:4) later try

⁷ Telushkin, Joseph, *Biblical Literacy*, HarperCollins, 1997, Page 33

to sexually assault the two angels hiding with Lot, it can be assumed that they are as terribly wicked as has been hinted at in the text. After evacuating the family of Lot, God does fulfill his promise and destroy the two cities. The story makes clear that their sins were great enough that, despite Abraham's concern, they warranted complete annihilation.

One might easily compare this story to the story of the flood in Genesis 6 and 7 and observe some interesting parallels. In both stories, the wickedness of a place's people (Sodom and Gomorrah and the entire world, respectively) warrant some kind of ultimate, destructive punishment. Before enacting this punishment, however, God spares the righteous people of both places, Lot's family and Noah's family. One might conclude from this that, in the view of the Genesis author, the wickedness of people does deserve divine punishment, but that God's sense of justice compels him to first spare the righteous and innocent people from the punishment he decides to inflict.

In Deuteronomy, there is a different dynamic of divine justice that is in play. In these speeches, Moses enjoins on the Israelites how they are to observe the law and live as a nation once in the land. The focus here is not necessarily on justice as an aspect of God, but on what the people must do to stay in God's favor. This is a people who have become a nation, been enslaved by Egypt and subsequently freed, and have heard the ten commandments given on Mt. Sinai. It is also a people who have seen numerous instances of God punishing wrongdoing, from the idolatry of the golden calf, after which God promises that those who sinned will be punished (Exodus 34), to the rebellion of Korah, whose followers are swallowed by a chasm along with him (Numbers 16). In both of these instances and more, God proves that those who do wrong, even Moses, will be punished appropriately (as seen by Moses not being permitted to enter the land, see Numbers 21).

Moses emphasizes several key themes repeatedly throughout the text, the most important of these being to remember the law and to avoid idolatry. The most prominent idea that repeatedly comes up in Deuteronomy is that God will protect the Israelites, but only if they remain faithful to the covenant. References to the Babylonian Exile and to the fall of the Northern Kingdom throughout the book highlight this urgency to keep the covenant with God or risk the consequences (such references can be found in 4:26-28 and 28:63-68).

Deuteronomy repeatedly focuses on justice, particularly the justice of God. What might happen if Israel were to keep the covenant? Moses answers in no uncertain terms, “you must keep the statutes and commands which I command you today, that you and your children after you may prosper, and that you may have long life in the land which the Lord your God is giving you forever” (4:40), or in 6:3, “Hear then, Israel, and be careful to observe [these commandments], that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly”, or in 7:12-13, “As your reward for heeding these ordinances and keeping them carefully, the Lord your God will keep the covenant oath... he will bless and multiply you...”. All of these verses clearly demonstrate that it is the opinion of the Deuteronomy author that if the Israelites are faithful to God while they live in the land, then they will have tangible blessings, to prosper, multiply, and have long life.

On the other hand, what if the Israelites are not faithful to God? Moses again, in voices that seem to predict the future trials of the nation, answers: “But if you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods, serving and bowing down to them, I bear witness to you this day that you will utterly perish. Like the nations which the Lord destroys before you, so shall you perish” (8:19-20), or in 30:23-26, “They and all the nations will ask, ‘why has the Lord dealt thus with this land? Why this great outburst of wrath?’, and they will say, ‘Because they abandoned the

covenant of the Lord... they bowed down to and served other gods,... so the anger of the Lord flared up against them and brought on them every curse written in this book”. These verses, and several other warnings throughout the text, remind the Israelites that it is God who has helped them and protected them, and he expects their faithfulness. Idolatry, the worship of other gods, is seen as the ultimate evil, and the punishment is nothing short of the wrath of God.

In short, Genesis uses the story of Sodom and Gomorrah to show justice to be an essential aspect of God. The story proves that God knows and cares about the difference between good and evil, and will reward good while punishing evil. Deuteronomy builds on this in the context of Israel’s covenant relationship with God. The book promises over and over again that God will reward the Israelite’s faithfulness, but will punish their wickedness, and especially their failure to remain faithful to the Lord and uphold the covenant. Professor McConville notes in his article “Retribution in Deuteronomy” that “Deuteronomy presents the essence of evil as idolatry... The question of justice, therefore, is inseparable from the person of God.” (McConville, 287)⁸. Moses foresees that Israel will forsake God, and therefore “the Lord will bring you and your king to a nation which you and your ancestors have not known, and there you will serve other gods, of wood and stone”. The author of Deuteronomy seems to be blaming Israel’s idolatrous behavior for the future exile, an assertion that further characterizes the text’s belief that while faithfulness to God merits rewards, unfaithfulness merits punishment.

Judges

The book of Judges describes a period of Israelite history between the death of Joshua, successor of Moses, to the beginning of the monarchy, where Samuel, the last judge, crowns

⁸ McConville, J Gordon, “Retribution in Deuteronomy”, *Theology and Ethics. Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 69 (3). Page 287

Saul the first king of Israel. During this period of time, there is neither a king nor a charismatic leader like Moses or Joshua to effectively govern the Israelites, so God raises up heroic, folk heroes known as judges as needed. These judges are chosen by God when the Israelites stray from the covenant.

It is evident on first glance that the book operates according to a clear formula, and this formula is based off of the author's understanding on how the covenant with God works, and how God intervenes on behalf of the people. Often when the book begins a new story, it will introduce it by saying "the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord", a verse that occurs no less than six times throughout the book (2:11, 3:7, 4:1, 6:1, 10:6, and 13:1).

This "evil in the sight of the Lord" is nearly always idol worship, specifically of the gods of neighboring nations like the Canaanites and the Philistines. The author makes the point that by choosing to worship these other gods, the Israelites not only do evil, but they abandon God and the covenant of the Torah. In response, God delivers them into the hands of a foreign power, often for many years. After a period of time, the people of Israel will cry out to God, who will raise up a heroic judge who will deliver the people and establish peace. In *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, and Petersen observe that "the clear implication of the predominant formula of Judges is that *obedience to Yahweh* is a condition of land possession; conversely, *disobedience to Yahweh's Torah* is a sure way to lose the land"⁹.

The author couldn't be clearer in regard to their position. The way they write the text indicates that they believe that God is in control of whether or not the Israelites are allowed to

⁹ Peterson, David, Fretheim, Terrence, Brueggemann, Walter, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, Abingdon Press, 1999, Page 186

possess the land, and by remaining faithful to God's law, they get to stay there. By being unfaithful, especially through idol worship, God revokes their privilege to live in the land until they prove their faithfulness by crying out to him for mercy. After they do this, God will raise up a judge, and the people will be delivered. God's justice is seen almost as a "controlled variable", while the behavior of the Israelites is the "independent variable". The author consistently blames the victories of the enemy nations not on their own power, but on Israel's failure to uphold their end of the covenant by remaining faithful to God. What the author of Judges is trying to make expressly clear is much like what the author of Deuteronomy was trying to make clear, that faithfulness to God manifests a reward, be it prosperity, long life, riches, or remaining in the land. In contrast, turning away from God will manifest a quick and sure revoking of all of that privilege.

The Prophetic Literature

Biblical prophetic literature carries several key themes that distinguish it from other biblical texts. First of all, they exist not to give a detailed history of their time (although many of the texts do have some historical component to give context), but to describe visions or messages from God that are given in order to draw the Israelites back to the Torah. The prophets behind these texts were not necessarily historians or storytellers, they were heavily invested in their mission to bring awareness to Israel's sins and shortcomings, and to reestablish right relationship with God. Most of the prophets (with some exceptions, Jonah being an example) heavily critique Israelite society, so much so that most of them were either ignored or outright hated in their time. But their mission, as Telushkin points out, is to "say the things their fellow citizens least wanted

to hear”¹⁰. Often there are divine warnings of what will happen to the people if they do not heed the prophet’s call to repentance, and some, like Jeremiah, who lived through the exile, unfortunately live to see these warnings come to pass.

One noteworthy aspect of the prophetic literature that distinguishes it from Deuteronomy and Judges is that its focus on turning away from evil extends well beyond idol worship. In the previous two texts, turning away from God in order to worship something else was seen as certainly not the only sin, but the ultimate betrayal of the covenant. However, the prophets understand that one can turn away from God by exploiting the poor, widow, and orphan, and by acting unjustly in other aspects of life, even if they claim to be worshipping the one, true God (such as in the earlier case of Amos). Another interesting aspect of prophetic literature is that this push towards “justice” is not just an Israelite responsibility, but something God expects from everybody, Jewish or not. This is why Amos critiques other nations strongly in his opening chapter, and why God sends the prophet Jonah to Nineveh to preach there. As Abraham Joshua Heschel observes in *The Prophets*, “Justice is more than an idea or a norm. Justice is a divine concern”¹¹.

Prophets that demonstrated the major themes and functions of prophetic literature, warnings to motivate repentance, a concern beyond that of idolatry, and an exhortation towards purer justice are Jeremiah, Amos, and Jonah. These texts function differently and came at different times, but they are sufficient touch points to observe how this genre of biblical literature represents an evolution in biblical thought about divine justice and action. By observing themes

¹⁰ Telushkin, Joseph, *Biblical Literacy*, HarperCollins, 1997, Page 293

¹¹ Heschel, Abraham Joshua, *The Prophets*, New York and Evanston Harper & Row Publishers, 1962, Page 32

and aspects of the texts consistent across these three examples, one might gain an understanding of how this evolution of thought plays out in the prophets.

First, there is the warnings given by the prophet and the purposes behind them. As previously stated, prophets in the bible were called by God to turn the people of Israel away from sins and to convince them to turn back to God. This exhortation was often accompanied with a warning of what would happen if the message of the prophet was not heeded. Jeremiah, for example, repeatedly warns of “the wrath of God”, Heschel observes that “utterances denoting the wrath of God, the intent and threat of destruction, are found more frequently and expressed more strongly in Jeremiah than in any other biblical prophet”¹². Such warnings about God’s wrath can be seen in Jeremiah 4:8, 7:29, 23:19, and 30:23, all of which describe “The burning anger of the Lord”. Injustice is seen as sufficient to ignite God’s fury. Jeremiah consistently warns that God has become furious with the people’s turning away from him and means to act to bring them back.

Amos’s text opens with a multitude of prophecies concerning the nations surrounding Israel and Judah as well as them. Each prophecy opens with a formulaic “for three crimes of _____, now four, I have made my decree and will not relent...” (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13, 2:1, 4, and 6), with the text then describing the crimes of the nation in question and the punishments of the Lord that will follow. In addition, Jonah is told by God to “Go to Nineveh, the great city, and inform them that their wickedness has been made known to me” (1:2), and once he arrives at the city, Jonah prophecies that “Only forty days more, and Nineveh will be destroyed!” (3:5). Robert Chisholm notes in *Handbook on the Prophets* that, although the forty-day warning given by

¹² Heschel, Abraham Joshua, *The Prophets*, New York and Evanston Harper & Row Publishers, 1962, Page 106

Jonah sounds unconditional, it is implied that they have forty days to repent and return to God, and the story proves that this is a sufficient amount of time for the people to demonstrate their repentance¹³.

Secondly, it is important to consider what the texts perceive to be as unjust or wrong which, as has been established, extends well beyond just idol worship. Jeremiah lists many sins of Israel, which does include idolatry (5:7), but also lust (5:8), a denunciation of God, presumably fueled by pride (5:12-13), stealing (5:26) not caring for the vulnerable orphan and widow (5:27-28), and people acting as false prophets and priests (5:31). Amos also supplies a thorough listing of the people's wrongdoings, which include, in the case of Judah, "they have rejected the law of God... because the false gods which their ancestors followed have led them astray" (2:4) and in the case of Israel, "they have sold the virtuous man for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals..." (2:6). In essence, the Lord is furious because poorer people are being taken advantage of by those who claim to follow the law of God. In Jonah's case, the exact wickedness of Nineveh is never made expressly clear, just that they are wicked and engage in "evil behavior", from which they then repent (3:9). Since the Ninevites are a foreign power, however, it is reasonable to infer that it is not idolatry with which God is concerned about here, since the covenant that God made with Israel is not necessarily binding on the Ninevites.

Lastly, there is an exhortation towards justice. Jeremiah, again, is full of these types of verses, and the prophet is usually concerned with justice between people. He takes care to advise the people not to exploit one another, but to especially avoid exploiting the vulnerable in society. 7:5-6 has God saying "If you amend your behavior and actions, if you treat one another fairly, if

¹³ Chisholm Jr., Robert B., *Handbook on the Prophets*, Baker Academic, 2002, 413

you do not exploit the stranger, the widow, or the orphan, If you do not shed innocent blood in this place... then I will stay with you in this place forever”¹⁴. Note especially the conditions against exploitation and against shedding innocent blood. 22:3 sounds extraordinarily similar, with God saying “Thus says the Lord: practice honesty and integrity, rescue the man who has been wronged from the hand of his oppressor, do not exploit the stranger the widow, and the orphan, do no violence, do not shed innocent blood in this place...”. God, and likewise the prophet, are greatly concerned at the treatment of the vulnerable and the shedding of innocent blood by God’s people. Such issues of justice represent an urgent need to repent and reform society.

In Amos’s opening prophecies, God is angered at the multiple, capital offences of various nations (such horrifying offenses that include disemboweling pregnant women and inhumane slavery). Because of such crimes, God promises to punish them appropriately. This intervening action represents a standard of justice that God holds the whole world to. Such a justice is also hinted at in Jonah, where God seems poised and ready to punish the wickedness of the citizens of Nineveh. These prophetic authors make explicitly clear that God punishes evil and acts about the violations of basic ethical standards.

Put together, these three prophetic texts, each in their own way, reflect the ideas of biblical prophecy, that is that God expects justice, from Israel and the world at large, and that there are more evils than just idolatry with which God is concerned. However, while common in the genre as a whole, these are not the only ways in which biblical prophecy advances ideas about divine justice and action. The books of Ezekiel and Habakkuk, as well as several of the

¹⁴ The Zondervan Bible Commentary notes that, of all the things Jeremiah emphasizes in this verse, idolatry comes last, concern for justice comes first.

Psalms, illustrate other developments in biblical thought about divine justice and action that naturally lead to the positions of the books of Job and Ecclesiastes.

Ezekiel and the Shift Towards Individual Responsibility

Ezekiel is recognized as the first prophet to be called from outside the land of Israel. The opening vision of his text, which describes the commissioning of him as prophet by God, comes to him about five years after the exile began (1:2). What is noteworthy about this text as it pertains to this study is the emphasis on individual responsibility. Previously, there was an understanding in biblical literature that the actions of *nations* warranted God's punishment or favor, as was the case in Judges and in the opening visions of Amos. Jonah also demonstrated this, as it is the wickedness of Nineveh as a community that would warrant its destruction. In the eighteenth chapter of his text, Ezekiel makes it clear that that understanding needs to shift.

In this chapter, God asks Ezekiel about a certain proverb, "The fathers have eaten unripe grapes, the children's teeth are on edge" (18:2). From the context of the verse, it can be assumed that this proverb indicates children are to be punished for crimes of their fathers. God says that there is no need for this proverb anymore (18:3) and promises that only the one who sins will be punished. The passage goes on to describe the "upright man", one who is faithful in religious matters, not idolatrous, sexually moral, and kind to the poor. After this description, God proposes two scenarios, one in which a father is upright, but his son is wicked, and one in which the father is wicked, but the son is upright. In both cases, God promises that one's sin will not transfer to the other, and that only the one who sins will be punished. He goes on to promise "to the upright man his integrity will be credited to the wicked, his wickedness" (18:20).

But God goes on even further. God promises still that if a wicked person renounces his wickedness and turns back to God, that person will be forgiven and spared, “all the sins he committed will be forgotten from then on, he shall live because of the integrity he has promised” (18:22). In addition, God promises that if an upright person falls into wickedness and abandons their integrity, God will punish them for their sins. God seems to foresee that the Israelites will accuse him of being unjust for this, and promises “in the future I mean to judge each of you by what he does...repent, renounce your sins!” (18:30). God ends his reflection by encouraging the people to return to him and live rather than remain in wickedness and die. There is an explicit sense in this passage of Ezekiel’s text that God intervenes in tangible ways to reward goodness and punish evil.

Questioning God in the Psalms and the Prophet Habakkuk

An interesting trend in the Old Testament is the idea that mortal humans can question God’s decisions¹⁵. While Job is the most explicit and famous example of this, there is a precedent for it throughout the Hebrew Bible. Several individual Psalms indicate a questioning or despairing attitude towards God, and in some cases directly accuse God of ignoring their cries for help. The prophet Habakkuk also looks around the world and despairs at what he sees, begging God for an answer. In these two examples, one can observe a tendency of questioning divine providence that has clearly been a longstanding part of biblical tradition. Understanding how these texts function can illuminate how Job and Ecclesiastes function uniquely in their skepticism and show where the tradition of skepticism in the Bible comes from. For the purposes

¹⁵ Telushkin, Joseph, *Biblical Literacy*, HarperCollins, 1997, Page 32

of this study, the Psalms that will be observed will be Psalms 10, 22, and 74 in the Jerusalem Bible Translation¹⁶.

Psalm 10 begins with the opening line “God, why do you stand aside, why do you hide from us now that times are hard?” (10:1). The psalm goes on to say, “the poor are devoured by the wicked...” (10:2). This psalm focuses on the actions of wicked people towards good people, deceit that the psalmist may have witnessed in their own day. This horror inspires the psalmist to cry out to God and questions God’s inaction. The psalmist begs God “Rise, oh God, raise your hand, do not forget the poor!” (10:12). From their point of view, God is silent and inactive, allowing the evil taking place to go on unchecked. The psalmist also notes that these evildoers are mocking God both in action and speech (10:13) and wonders why God would let that go unchecked.

Psalm 22 is similar to Psalm 10 in that it describes the suffering of an innocent person and ascribes to God the responsibility of restoring justice¹⁷. The charges levied against God by this suffering person are not sugar coated at all. The psalmist continues “I call all day God, and you never answer, all night long I cry and can never rest” (22:2). Unlike Psalm 10, which focuses on the evil actions that should ignite God’s wrath but seem not to, this psalm focuses on the suffering of the author, described in great and poetic detail, that does not seem to spurn God’s sympathy. The psalmist cries “I am like water wasting away, my bones are all disjointed” (22:14), and again, “I can count every one of my bones, and there they glare at me, gloating”

¹⁶ This is important to note because between Hebrew and Christian Bibles there is sometimes a difference in numerical order.

¹⁷ According to the gospels of Matthew and Mark, its famous opening line, “My God, my God, why have you deserted me?” (22:1) was echoed by Jesus while he was crucified.

(22:17). Throughout their suffering, they seem to wonder why God does not notice all of this and do something about it.

Psalm 74 is considered to be a lament in response to the destruction of Israel's great temple, which was the center of religious life at the time. One can easily imagine that such a terrifying event would lead the psalmist to question God's ways. The psalm describes the enemy destroying the sacred building piece by piece, casting their emblems over it (a sign of conquering). The psalmist seems to be trying to awaken God so that God will come and fight back against these invaders, "How much longer, oh God, is the oppressor to blaspheme, is the enemy to insult your name forever? Why hold back your right hand, why keep your right hand hidden?" (74:10-11). The despairing tone of this psalm becomes crystal clear at the devastating question that Israel seems powerless to answer: "Deprived of signs, with no prophets left, who can say how long this will last?" (74:9). With no temple or prophets, the psalmist is forced to wonder if their God, the only thing they have left, will also be lost.

Taken together, these psalms, as well as plenty others, demonstrate that God's ways were both praised and admired by the psalmists, but also called into question and criticized. The prophet Habakkuk would follow in this tradition. It is unclear exactly when his text was written, although most biblical scholars assume it was written either just before or just after the Exile based on some historical allusions made in the book¹⁸. The text is divided into easily observable sections, the first being a dialogue between God and Habakkuk, the second being promises of

¹⁸ Peterson, David, Fretheim, Terrence, Brueggemann, Walter, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, Abingdon Press, 1999, page 345

destruction against tyrants, and the third being a hymn in which the prophet describes the coming of God to restore justice in awe-inspiring detail.

The book opens with Habakkuk confronting God and demanding an explanation about two situations in which evil seems to be allowed to prevail: both in what is happening within the prophet's own society, and in the overwhelmingly cruel Chaldean army that God sends to punish these offenses. The opening line of the text, "How long, oh God, am I to cry for help while you will not listen, cry 'Oppression!' in your ear and you will not save?" (1:2) bears a striking resemblance not only to the psalms described above, but also to several of Job's indictments of God. Habakkuk even goes so far as to complain that "the law loses its hold... and justice seems to be distorted" (1:4). Is that not Job's complaint also, that he cannot be made to understand the justice of his situation?

The difference between Job (and the psalmist, for that matter) and Habakkuk is that God readily answers Habakkuk's criticisms, "cast your eyes over the nations, look, and be amazed, for I am doing something in your own days that you would not believe if you were told of it" (1:5). God promises here to right the wrongs of Israelite society by means of the Chaldean army, which he is raising up in that moment to punish them. But Habakkuk seems to see this as going too far, "Your eyes are too pure to rest on wickedness, you cannot look at tyranny, why do you look while evil men are treacherous?" (1:13). God responds to this complaint also, "Write this vision down... 'the upright man will live by his faith'" (2:4). While the prophet does not describe the exact character of this vision, he does make clear that God makes a promise: the evildoers will *all* be punished, but the righteous person will live. Again we see tangible signs in Habakkuk's text of a belief in God's favor towards good and God's punishment towards evil.

Gesturing Towards Job and Ecclesiastes

This chapter has demonstrated that great questions and ideas about divine justice, action, and intervention have been at the heart of the Bible since the beginning of the text, and provided context for the religious thought that the authors of Job and Ecclesiastes respond to. As the nation of Israel grew in numbers and affluence, considered its history in light of its religious thought, witnessed prophets and judges, and eventually fell into exile, these ideas naturally evolved and changed over an immense span of time. The Torah assumes justice to be an aspect of God, and one that guides God's decisions to intervene on Earth. God's relationship with human beings also, as one can see in Deuteronomy and judges, involves not just justice on God's part but also on the part of the nation of Israel. Israel's actions, especially in terms of idolatry and religious worship, are rewarded and punished appropriately. As the prophetic literature is recorded, one can start to see a standard of justice that God sets not just on Israel but on the whole world, and one that extends beyond idolatry but into matters of social interaction and care for the vulnerable. Finally, Ezekiel, the first prophet to be called outside of the land in exile, hints at the evolution of thought towards divine justice by indicating that God will punish and reward individuals according to the measure of their integrity. The study will now turn to analyze Job and Ecclesiastes, and attention will later be given to how these texts take ideas of justice and divine action that the Bible had already considered for centuries even further. Special focus will be given to how the two texts respond to the one core principle that, despite the centuries of time that the biblical tradition prior to them spanned, never seemed to change: that God cares about good and evil, and rewards good actions while punishing evil ones.

Chapter Three: Outline and Analysis of the Book of Job and Ecclesiastes

The Literary Genre of Wisdom Literature

Job and Ecclesiastes are two books that consider similar themes and questions, going about them in vastly different ways. Their respective topics, methodology, and concerns lend them to the biblical category of wisdom literature. The exact canon of this umbrella category is somewhat debated, with different Christian denominations and reprintings of the Bible sometimes leaving out or including different books. Despite this flux, Job and Ecclesiastes are almost always included. Because of this consistency, it is worth defining what exactly the categorization of “wisdom literature” denotes, and how it is that these books are understood as such, before setting out to elaborate on them specifically.

As previously mentioned, Job and Ecclesiastes are nearly always found in the wisdom canon. Proverbs is seen as the archetypical wisdom text, given that reflecting on and dispensing wisdom is its primary focus. Other books typically included are Psalms, Esther, Wisdom of Ben Sirach, and in most Christian texts, The Book of Wisdom. Song of Songs is sometimes included due to the fact that Solomon is said to have written it, but its place in this list is debatable.

These books have several aspects in common that lend them to this canon. Wisdom is typically the chief focus, often being personified as “the woman wisdom”¹⁹. The purpose of these books is usually instruction, as is the case of Proverbs. In the cases where the purpose of the text is not explicitly to teach or instruct, the writing of these texts either elevates it to a new level that dates the text as being more comparably recent (Ecclesiastes is an example of this), or distinguishes it in a powerful way from anything else in the entire Bible (Job and Song of Songs

¹⁹ Proverbs chapter 8 is an illuminating example of this personification

are examples of this). Texts in the wisdom canon are sometimes subversive in their theology, more progressive in their ideas, and are linguistically different from more ancient biblical texts, often using loan words from Greek and Aramaic²⁰. Another interesting component of the books that distinguishes them as being more “recent” chronologically is the fact that, unlike the Torah, prophetic, and historical texts, the promises of God to Israel in the form of the covenant is not a foundational aspect of the text. God is always at least mentioned in wisdom literature (except in the rare case of Song of Songs), but the focus of the text is not about returning to the covenant or keeping the law of the Torah, something the prophets especially would consistently focus on.

God comes into play in unique ways in these texts, especially in the case of Job and Ecclesiastes. In Job God is intimately present in the story, but in an almost antagonistic role, as God’s bet with the Satan sets the plot in motion. The text also has God responding to traditional theology in a subversive way, God rebukes Job’s friends who have spent the whole book defending God as being in the wrong, and praises Job as “having spoken rightly of me” (Job 42:7), seemingly approving of Job’s sometimes very harsh critiques. God in Ecclesiastes, meanwhile, doesn’t say a word, and the text seems to hold God at a distance, referencing ways to worship and to fear God’s eventual judgement, but indicating nothing about a personal or national relationship with God. God’s covenant relationship with Israel is never mentioned at all.

Now that biblical wisdom literature has been defined, it is worth establishing how well Ecclesiastes and Job fit this established definition, and how this understanding of wisdom literature can inform one’s reading of the texts. The consensus among most biblical scholars is that the two books do fit this definition at least somewhat, but also subvert its typical format or

²⁰ Alter, Robert. *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2011, pp. 8 and 338

technique at times²¹. Robert Alter, in addition, notes in regard to these texts that “the classification [as wisdom literature] should be adopted with a degree of caution”²². Job is the lesser qualified of the two books, given that any instruction it does have is more under the surface. It is generally regarded as wisdom literature because of the uniquely high quality of its writing and the progressive nature of its theology²³. It is not generally regarded as anything other than wisdom literature though, in terms of both form and chronology, it does not resemble the historical books or the prophetic texts enough to be considered part of these canons. In most scholarly thought, it either fits this description or it is in a league of its own.

Ecclesiastes is generally more accepted in terms of wisdom canon. It possess all of the same qualities Job does, progressive thought, advanced ideas and writing, and is more modern chronologically speaking, but it also is definitively an instructive text, with great care given to not only the subject of wisdom, but its practical purpose in daily life. While it does depart from the established wisdom tradition with many of its ideas, it does impart wisdom and conclusions of its own. Several proverbs of the time are examined and critiqued, some accepted, some rejected. It also definitively ties into the wisdom tradition with its mythical attribution to King Solomon, who is thought to have also written all or most of the Book of Proverbs, and was legendary for his own wisdom²⁴.

²¹ Roper, Leon A., and Alphonso Groenewald. “Job Ecclesiastes as (Postmodern?) Wisdom in Revolt.” *Theological Studies*, no. 8, 2013,

²² Alter, Robert. *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2011, Page xiii

²³ Alter, Robert. *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2011, pp 3-4

²⁴ 1 Kings 9-14 alludes to this legendary status of Solomon

The Book of Job: Unjust Suffering

The Book of Job is universally considered to be a masterpiece of human writing, and is one of the most complex, advanced, and widely known books of the Bible. It is often recognized as the story of “the good man who suffers”, and of course this is the foundation which the book builds up from.

As has been mentioned already, the book’s origin is very mysterious. No one knows for sure who wrote it or when, and there is evidence to support the commonly accepted theory that the book was edited and compiled by many hands over time. The backbone of the book, 1:1 to 2:13 and 42:7-17, is an ancient parable that was actually passed around between cultures, a similar story can be found for example in Ancient Babylon called the Babylonian Theodicy²⁵, that it seems the author has adapted for their own purposes.

The rest of the book, however, consists of some of sustained, poetic debate between Job and his three friends on the subject of divine justice and God’s place in the world. There are three “cycles” of speeches, in which Job speaks, then a Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar each reply to him, with Job’s rebuttals being intertwined with their speeches. The first of these occurs from verses 3:1 to 14:22, the second from 15:1 to 21:34, and the third from 22:1 to 27:21. The third cycle is where the structure of the book begins to get murky, as Bildad’s reply is only 6 verses long and Zophar doesn’t speak at all. This shift in structure points to the dramatic climax of the book- where God will enter the picture and give the final word on the matter, chastising both Job and the friends separately, and restoring Job to glory.

²⁵ Crenshaw, James L., “Introduction to the Book of Job”, *HarperCollins Study Bible*, HarperCollins Publishers, 1989, Page 751

The first important subsection is the prologue, which serves to establish the themes of the book and the major players. Job is described in the first verse as a “blameless and upright man”. This description is actually used for Job several more times, even by God. The introduction takes time to discuss Job’s possessions, his large family, and the efforts he goes to safeguard them in God’s eyes. A particularly interesting scene in 1:5 describes Job offering sacrifices after his children host a party, just in case anyone sinned in their thoughts. The book then turns to the heavens, where God is seen holding a council of “the sons of God”. One of these beings is the Satan, literally, “the accuser” or “the adversary”. God asks the Satan if he has noticed “his servant Job” (1:8), and the Satan says he has, and not only that, but believes that Job’s goodness, which God makes special note of, is only because God has blessed him so richly. This is a brilliant move on the author’s part to temporarily cause the reader to consider this notion, as not five verses before the book discussed all of Job’s wealth and possessions.

God agrees to test Job’s faith in him by allowing the Satan to destroy all of his possessions, and to inflict all kinds of terror on him, only to not touch his body. The Satan immediately goes forth, and Job comes to find out that his house has been destroyed and collapsed on his children, his possessions carried off by enemies, and his servants killed. Job still cries out “The Lord gives and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord!” (1:21). The next verse tells us that “In all this... Job did not charge God with wrong”. The story is right now leaning on Job’s faith as the crux of the story, the real questioning and skepticism comes later on, when the book proper begins.

The Satan is not satisfied, and apparently, neither is God, for God allows the Satan to go and afflict Job’s body with suffering, only to spare his life. The Satan afflicts Job with horrible boils and sores, leaving the broken man to sit on a pile of ash and scratch himself. Job’s wife

encourages him to “curse God and die!” (2:9), assuming that if he does so, his suffering will end. But for Job, that is not the solution to his current plight. “We accept Good from the Lord”, Job says, “Should we not also accept evil?” (2:10). The book once again reiterates that Job did not sin at all. Job holds to his innocence, and seems to recognize that a relief from suffering that would drive a rift between him and God is not worth it.

The book proper begins with the start of chapter 3 with the first cycle of speeches, after his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar have sat with him for seven days in silence. There is a distinct shift from prose to poetry that the reader picks up on instantly, and this poetry is sustained until chapter 42 when we return to the parable in the epilogue. There is also a noticeable shift in Job’s character, which can be attributed either to the shift in author or the fact that Job, once steadfastly faithful and pious, now has had seven days to sit and wallow in his pity and realize his plight may be permanent. Job is now much more downtrodden, disillusioned, and even angry.

This new, darker perspective on his plight is evident in Job’s first speech, which begins at verse 3:3. Job opens his speech by cursing the day he was born, effectively implying that God made a mistake in creating him. While not explicitly making such a statement, Job reinforces the idea constantly throughout his speech by musing on how the dead (even naming, specifically, stillborn babies) are better off than the living, since they can rest in death, as in 3:11, “why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?” or more explicitly, “Or why was I not buried away like a stillborn child, like babies that have never seen the light? [in death] the wicked cease from troubling, there the weary are at rest” (3:16-17). Job leaves nothing left to question as he sums up his plight at the end of his speech in the last 3 verses: “for me sighing comes more readily than food; my groans well forth like water. For what I feared overtakes me;

what I dreaded comes upon me. I have no peace nor ease; I have no rest, for trouble has come!” (3:24-26).

A theme that continues throughout the text is that the friends of Job are furious at what he has to say, and seek to undermine not only his words, but his character, in order to defend their theology. This is evident in Eliphaz’s first speech, which begins with Chapter 4 of the book and goes on through Chapter 5.

In his speech, he asserts two things, that God is perfect and beyond human understanding, and that Job must have sinned to have brought this suffering on himself. Two important verses highlight these points and act as Eliphaz’s “thesis statements”, these verses being 4:7, “Reflect now, what innocent person perishes? Where are the upright destroyed?” and 5:9, “He (God) does things great and unsearchable, things marvelous and innumerable”. Bildad and Zophar will, of course, carry these themes through in their own speeches as well, but Eliphaz is the first to bring them to the table in response to Job’s angry lamentations.

These two verses should be considered carefully, given that they are so crucial to the theme and conversation of the text. Verse 4:7 concerns itself with Job’s own character. Job has, since the beginning of the text, upheld his own innocence, and he will continue to do so as the conversation progresses. The three friends cannot possibly comprehend why Job would believe himself to be innocent if he is suffering to the degree that he is and are offended that he would posit such a claim. In their eyes, and in the prevalent theology of the time, Job had to have sinned

to bring such a calamity on himself and his family²⁶. If Job had truly been as good as he claims to be, he would not be suffering.

In verse 5:9, Eliphaz now turns from attacking Job's character to asserting God's total transcendence from human beings. Eliphaz's description of God's power as "great and unsearchable, marvelous and innumerable" are meant to convey an unknowability of God's ways, and to illustrate a being which Job can't even possibly hope to ponder, much less make sense of. This is the second theme that the other two friends also friends consistently assert, that God is so far beyond human beings that any attempts to understand why He does what He does is futile.

Job is not satisfied with this justification. Job clearly believes that God is not unknowable or totally abstract, and that God does care about him and is present with him. That is why, in 7:12, Job shifts from speaking to Eliphaz (or at times indirectly to all three friends) to speaking directly to God. He does not do this simply out of vain frustration, he genuinely wants an answer that is not "just because". He knows God must have a reason for doing this (or allowing it), but he believes that reason needs to be based in some kind of understanding of fairness or justice. He knows he is innocent and has done nothing to offend God, so Eliphaz's answer of "we just can't understand God's ways" is not only patently false, but deeply offensive. This becomes obvious when Job says, "how painful honest words can be, how unconvincing is your argument!" (6:25) and then, "you would even cast lots for the orphan, and would barter over your friend!" (6:27).

Bildad answers Job next, repeating many of the same themes that Eliphaz put forward in his own speech, but more harshly. His speech begins with an accusation, "How long will you

²⁶ An interesting look into this theology comes in the gospel of John 9:2 just before Jesus cures a man born blind, and his disciples ask "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

utter such things? The words from your mouth are like a mighty win!” (8:2), followed by his own “thesis statement”, “Does God pervert judgement? Does the almighty pervert justice?” (8:3). This verse makes explicit what Eliphaz seemed content only to hint at, that this *is* God’s justice at work, however Job sinned, this is his punishment. The very next verse dials up the venom, stating matter-of-factly that Job’s children deserved their untimely death, and that Job, still living, has the opportunity to apologize to God and win back God’s favor. Eliphaz was indeed problematic, and Zophar will prove to be as well, but Bildad is entirely unlikeable.

Bildad’s speech is short, as is characteristic of his passages, and ends at the end of chapter 8. Job’s reply to him in chapter 9 introduces a theme that will recur several times throughout the text, that is, the idea of taking God to court to challenge him before an unbiased entity. Surely, if that were to happen, Job believes he would be found in the right, and God in the wrong. Job is forced to lament, however, that “Should one wish to contend with him, he could not answer him once in a thousand times” (9:3), and “would that there were an arbiter between us, who could lay his hand on us both...since this is not the case with me, I loathe my life” (9:33-35 and 10:1). This dream of Job’s is manifest in his desire to face God and present the facts of his situation, demanding to know what he is missing.

Zophar’s first speech focuses less on what Job has said, or on the overall theme of punishment that both prior friends have presented, but on the mercy of God. If Job would simply admit his wrongs, “set your heart aright and stretch out your hands before him” (11:13), then everything will be alright, “then your life shall be like the noonday, and its gloom shall become like the morning” (11:17). But of course, this would mean denying an essential fact, that Job has done nothing for which he should apologize, and the shift in perspective that Zophar suggests is not enough to solve his problems or answer his questions. His family will still be dead, his

possessions and home would still be lost, and God would still seem beyond far away. Job recognizes this is not enough, as he asserts in reply, “no doubt you are the people with whom wisdom shall die!” (12:2).

Job’s reply in chapter 12 seems to be an interesting reflection of what the friends argue, that God is supremely powerful and abstract, although where the friends see this as a positive thing, Job sees it as dismal and unencouraging when considering his plight and desire for answers. But this chapter as well as the next also find Job beginning to find some teeth in his defense, and he responds to the friends after all of them have spoken in fury. He laments that, “I have become the sport of my neighbors... the just, the perfect man is a laughingstock” (12:4). Chapter 13 expands on this quite a bit, “what you know, I also know. I do not fall short of you” (13:2), implying that all the friends have argued is old news to him, except for the fact that they are far off the mark, “You gloss over falsehoods, you are worthless physicians, every one of you!” (13:4).

Job clearly understands what the friends are all trying to say. It makes sense that God would punish him if he did something wrong, but he did not do anything wrong (something both he and the text again and again assert). It is not as if their reasoning is falling short or being misunderstood. The reason the friend’s advice is so scorned by Job is not that it is just hurtful and harsh, but it does not apply to his situation, “Is it for God that you speak falsehood? Is it for him that you utter deceit?”. Justice is not happening here in Job’s eyes, but a perversion of it. Whereas the friends see Job’s suffering as a part of the natural order, a balancing act of the universe, Job knows this cannot be true. Job is making it clear that he would rather argue with God, find the truth, and do right by him than slander him with lies in order to defend his good name.

The 14th chapter of the book concludes both Job's lengthy exhortation to his friends and the first cycle of speeches. The author has begun to develop the story further by going personality to Job and each of Job's friends, and has begun to shape the argument that they are going to put forward. The author will continue this dynamic in the second cycle of speeches as well, with each of the characters growing more harsh in their attacks and assertions. Job continues to implore God to answer him, and the friends berate him for even implying he deserves an answer. So it goes until the end of the third cycle of speeches, when the structure of the book begins to break down change in significant ways.

This starts noticeably with both Bildad's third speech to Job being incredibly short, only 6 verses long. In addition, Zophar doesn't ever speak again. There is also the aforementioned "Hymn to Wisdom" (all of chapter 28) that seems to interrupt two distinct speeches to Job (chapters 27 and 29 respectively), and while the flow of the book would lead us to believe it is Job who utters this sudden beautiful poem, it does not make sense given what he has been saying. The hymn does cement the text into the wisdom tradition, singing the praises of the "Woman Wisdom", "as for wisdom, where can she be found? Where is the place of understanding? Mortals do not know her path, nor is she to be found in the land of the living" (28:12-13), and ascribing wisdom's source to God alone, "But God understands the way to her, it is he who knows her place" (28:23). While no one is quite sure where the text originally came from, most scholars attribute its addition to the work of a later editor²⁷.

In either case, there is a noticeable shift in Job's pious tone in chapter 28 and his final speech that begins with chapter 29 and lasts for the next three chapters. Job in this speech is

²⁷ Alter, Robert. *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2011, Page 114

summarizing his situation, as if to give one last account, that if God or any other human should question his innocence, they should have only to look here and see the facts for themselves. Job starts off summarizing his life before this calamity was inflicted on him, “As I was in my flourishing days, when God sheltered my tent, when the Almighty was still with me, and my children were round about me” (29:4-5). He describes his status as a morally upright man, someone who has “earned” the goodness of his life that the first chapter describes, “I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame was I. I was father to the poor, the complaint of the stranger I pursued. I broke the jaw of the wicked man, from his teeth I forced the prey” (29:15-17). The last verse in particular demonstrates that Job is not simply morally upright himself, but an active pursuer of justice and right.

The focus of the speech shifts to his current suffering in chapter 30. Job tells of his persistent suffering, “terrors roll over me, my dignity is driven off like the wind, and my well-being vanishes like a cloud.” (30:15), and “and now my life ebbs away from me, days of affliction have taken hold of me, at night he pierces my bones, my sinews have no rest” (30:16-17). As has been typical of Job’s speeches, in between verses 19 and 20, he begins to speak to God, and in a verse as gut wrenching 2300 years ago as it ever was Job exclaims, “I cry out to you, but you do not answer me” (30:20). Chapter 31, which continues the speech, finds Job again revisiting his desire to challenge God in court, “Oh, that I had one to hear my case: here is my signature, let the Almighty answer me! Let my accuser write out his indictment!” (31:35). The lengthy speech ends with 31:40, “the words of Job are ended”.

Ultimately, Job’s persistence reduces his friends to silence, as “in his own eyes, he was in the right.” (32:1). It is here that a new character, Elihu, is introduced. Because he is not mentioned before or after the four speeches he is about to deliver, most biblical scholars chalk

his inclusion in the story up to a later editor²⁸. He speaks through five very long speeches, which make up chapters 33-37 respectively. Despite continuing the conversation, Elihu does not add much to the debate besides what the friends have said. His speeches do not focus so much on accusing Job of having sinned and bringing his calamity on himself, but they do insist that God is beyond our understanding, and that he “does not fit our measure”. In this way, he continues the theme that the friends have established, that to seek understanding about the ways of God is a fruitless search, and Job is better off giving it up. Elihu will uphold, along with the friends, the perceived unquestionable logic of divine punishment and retribution.

Job never replies to Elihu, as the end of his last speech is cut off by the entrance of God into the story, who appears to Job “In the whirlwind” (38:1). God goes on to give two lengthy speeches, the first making up 38:1-39:30, and the second lasting from 40:6-41:25. The entrance of God into our narrative is vividly dramatic, with God appearing from the storm cloud and thundering “Who is this obscuring my design with empty headed words? Brace yourself like a fighter, now it is my turn to question and your turn to inform me...” (38:2-3). The debate that we have witnessed and the questions that have been pondered over the past 37 chapters have finally reached their climax, and God’s sudden appearance after Elihu’s speeches captures our attention as the book shifts from a debate among friends to God’s power and might on full display.

God goes on to detail the wonder of creation in poetry that is simply astounding, beginning with cosmic details like the ordering of light, darkness, and the foundations of the earth and boundaries of the ocean (38:4, 7, 8, 10-12). He then moves down to Earth, as he questions Job about the origin of the icy hail (38:22), the lightning’s path across the sky (38:24),

²⁸ Alter, Robert. *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2011, Page 133

and the place where the rain must fall (38:26). Moving down even further to Earth's seemingly insignificant details, God then turns his focus to the hunting lion (38:39), the hunger of ravens (38:41), the birth of mountain goats (39:1), the habitats of wild donkeys (39:6), and the wingspan of the ostrich (39:13). These of course are aspects of existence that Job could never even consider, and only God has intimate knowledge of, as he intentionally designed each one. God almost teases Job about this throughout the speech, "Are you the one who makes the horse so brave... Does the hawk fly on your command?" (39:19 and 26), implying that while Job has made himself the center of the universe by his questioning, the universe that God knows and designed extends well beyond his singular person.

Chapter 40 begins with God pausing after his long discourse and saying to Job "Will the contender with God yield? Will God's opponent answer the Almighty?" (40:2). Job is clearly stunned and fearful, as he says "My words were frivolous, what can I reply?... I have spoken once, I will add nothing" (40:4). Here begins one of the more mysterious parts of a text that is full of mysteries. Job has nothing to say, and yet, God begins speaking again, and this speech will be much longer, but at the same time more focused. Rather than detailing all of the vast wonders of creation, God will focus on just two, the mythical creatures of Behemoth and Leviathan.

God begins this speech in a similar fashion to his last, by encouraging Job to "brace yourself like a fighter, it is my turn to ask questions and yours to inform me" (40:7), but he follows up with an interesting question, "Do you really want to put me in the wrong that you may be in the right?" (40:8). This question implies that if Job really were in the right over God, able to "beat him" in a sense, that would have vast implications beyond what Job has considered. God draws this out slightly by implying that if Job is able to "humiliate the haughty at a glance",

“cast a look at the proud and bring them low”, and “strike down the wicked”, that “I myself will be the first to acknowledge that your right hand assures your strength” (40:6-9).

After this challenge, God tells Job to consider the primordial beast Behemoth. The description of this creature leads many scholars to associate it either with an ox or, more commonly, the hippopotamus²⁹. The speech focuses on Behemoth’s great strength and might. At only 9 verses, the speech does not last that long at all. God’s description of Leviathan is quite the opposite. Not only does God detail every part of this creature’s body, he discusses in great lengths how one might, in futility, try face this creature, insisting that “no one can match him in a fight” (41:1). The speech’s digression on Leviathan is 33 verses long, over three times as long as what was devoted to Behemoth.

Chapter 42, the book’s final chapter, consist of Job’s answer to God. After all that he has seen, he has no more questions, no more challenges. He is apparently satisfied, even though God did not directly answer any of his questions, nor did he surrender in court as Job hoped he would. Still, he says “I know that you are all powerful... I obscured your designs with my empty-headed words, I have spoken on matters I did not understand...I knew you then only by hearsay, but now my eye has seen you. I retract all I have said, and I repent in dust and ashes” (42:2-6)³⁰.

Almost more miraculous than Job’s sudden change of heart is the next shift in God’s focus. The narrative once more shifts back to the prose story that made up the beginning of the book, as God turns to Eliphaz, who apparently bears the brunt of the guilt of the three friends, and says “My wrath flares against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken truthfully

²⁹ Alter, Robert. *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2011, Page 169

³⁰ The importance of this passage will be further elaborated on in chapter four of this thesis.

of me as my servant Job has done”. God then orders the friends to offer sacrifices in atonement, and they are forgiven after Job prays over them. God then restores Job’s fortunes and family, giving him “double what he had before” (42:10)³¹. Job then enjoys the company of his family and friends, and dies “old and full of years” (42:17).

There is much to glean from this masterpiece of literature, but interpretation and analysis will follow in later chapters. Now for summary’s sake, we will turn to our second subject, the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes: Qoheleth’s Skeptic Hindsight

The word “Ecclesiastes” is a Greek rendering of the word “Qoheleth”, which is the title of the book in the Hebrew Bible, and is a word meaning “preacher” or “assembler” (Murphy, 49). This title comes from the opening preamble of the text: “The words of Qoheleth, son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). Most scholars assume Qoheleth to be a title rather than a name, and the allusion to King Solomon, the son of David, to be a literary device rather than literal truth³².

Compared to the book of Job, Ecclesiastes is much shorter (at 12 chapters rather than 42) and much more straightforward. The author of Job skillfully works their ideas and theories about the universe and justice into the mouth of Job, while offering some resistance and alternative understandings through the friends and Elihu. The exploration of the author’s ideas is presented in a poetic, debate style format that builds up to the dramatic climax of the conversation between Job and God.

³¹ The footnote for this verse in the New American Bible notes that the penalty in the Torah for one who wrongs another is to give him twice what was taken from him, and that here God is abiding by his own law.

³² Murphy, Roland, *Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, Doubleday Publishing, 1990, Page 49

Ecclesiastes does not go about their exploration in this way. The ideas are presented in a straightforward style, and Qoheleth pulls no punches whatsoever. There is some type of narrative element to the book, as Qoheleth details their experiences in life and how they went about their search for meaning, but it is almost like the reader is sitting across from Qoheleth as they tell the story in hindsight, as opposed to watching the events in Job happen in real time. According to the outline of the text provided by the New American Bible, the book is split almost down the middle between two main sections: Qoheleth's observations and investigations, which are detailed until about 6:9, and Qoheleth's conclusions, which take up the rest of the book. The book is told less like a story and more like a philosophical exploration.

The book begins with the preamble that introduces the author as the person of Solomon. While biblical scholars have chalked this up to a literary device, it serves an important function within the book. The book does not just bear Solomon's name but his experiences, as the author describes accumulating "a greater stock of wisdom, more than anyone before me in Jerusalem" (1:16), which echoes Solomon's legendary wisdom that is described by the first Book of Kings (1 Kings 3:12). It also describes the life of a person immersed in royalty, "I did great things, built myself palaces, planted vineyards, made gardens and orchards..." (2:5-6). The author is clearly trying to not only ascribe whatever they will say in terms of new ideas or wisdom to Solomon, but trying to put themselves into his actual character.

The verse directly after that clues the reader into what the whole book will be about: "Vanity of vanities, says Qoheleth, all is vanity!" (1:2). This poignant verse both starts and ends the text proper (with the verse immediately preceding this one and the epilogue immediately following the "end" of the text being believed to be added by later editors, according to Robert

Alter's commentary as well as several others³³). The word vanity occurs no less than thirty times in the text, and is translated from a Hebrew word "hebel", which Alter asserts to mean "vanity" as well as "futility", "meaningless", "emptiness", and "vapor"³⁴.

The meaning of this "thesis statement" of Qoheleth is essentially that all of life is meaningless, emptiness, "mere breath". This is the hypothesis that they raise at the beginning of the text, and the next 7 verses are spent defending it by summing up life as entirely cyclical, without anything new or original. They open the section with the question "what profit has man to gain from his toil under the sun?" (1:3), and begin to lay out just why they think life is meaningless. If life is all a cycle, an observation the author illustrates by pointing to the rising and setting sun, the passage of time between generations, the rivers all flowing but the ocean never filling, and multiple other metaphors, then nothing that we do with our lives here on Earth is special whatsoever. Qoheleth will continue to develop this idea further as the first large section of the book, their observations and investigation, begins in 1:12.

Qoheleth asserts next that they "accumulated wisdom beyond all before me in Jerusalem", and decides to put this wisdom to the test. They come to the conclusion that wisdom itself is "vanity and a chase after wind" and explains this by quoting a proverb, "for in much wisdom there is much sorrow, whoever increases knowledge increases grief" (1:18). If wisdom only leads to despair, what good is it? They concede that wisdom is better than mere foolishness, but not by much.

³³ Alter, Robert. *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2011, Page 342

³⁴ While most biblical translations stick with "vanity", hearkening after the King James Translation, Alter's translation renders the verse slightly more powerful by translated hebel as "mere breath": "Merest breath, says Qoheleth, all is mere breath!".

Qoheleth also describes putting pleasure to the same test as wisdom, pondering if pleasure perhaps give life meaning. Here, the author describes getting just drunk enough to feel pleasure, but not enough to lose their wisdom, so that they may continue the investigation (2:3). Laughter also does not seem to contain the answer they seek, “of laughter I said ‘mad!’, of mirth, I said ‘what good does this do?’” (2:2). The author then turns to power, and describes their exploits as King of Israel. But this too is “vanity and a chase after wind”. Land, slaves, sex, gold, fruit, wine, nothing adequately fills the void that the author is peering into. The reason that the author insists that everything is vanity is made clear in verse 2:14-17, “wisdom has as much profit over folly as light has darkness...yet I knew in my heart the same lot (read: death) befalls both... therefore I detested life, since for me all work that is done under the sun is bad; for all is vanity and a chase after wind”. If both the wise person and the foolish person die, what’s the point of being wise?

The verse 2:24 gives a hint at a conclusion that Qoheleth will develop further later on in the text, “there is nothing better for mortals than to eat, drink, and provide for themselves with the profit of their toil”. This may rightly be read as a dismal conclusion, but since all life is temporary, the author seems to argue that the best thing to do is not fight a futile battle to make meaning but simply enjoy one’s lot while it lasts.

The poem that begins with 3:1 asserts that “there is a season for everything, an appointed time for every affair under heaven”. The cyclical nature of life is highlighted beautifully with phrases such as “a time to born, a time to die”, “a time to kill, a time to heal”, “a time to tear down and a time to build up”. The poem is extremely famous in its own right, and was worked

into a famous song by the band The Byrds³⁵. The purpose for it, however, is made clear in 3:11, “God has made everything appropriate to its time, but has put the timeless into their hearts...”. Human beings are unique in that they can comprehend eternal things, but their lives are only temporary, so their understanding of such eternal things is limited. Qoheleth regards this as a grim reality, almost as if God did this to add insult to the injury of the human condition.

A particular problem that Qoheleth is concerned with that the author of Job also investigated is the problem of retribution. They will revisit this theme again and again, but the first mention of it is in 3:16, “there under the sun in the judgement place I saw wickedness, and wickedness in the seat of justice”. This interesting commentary on corruption in places of power can be considered a parallel to Job’s observations on cosmic justice: not only are innocent people punished needlessly, wicked people are allowed to go on in evil without restraint. Life is not fair in this regard, both authors observe.

Qoheleth details many of their other observations in the next couple of chapters. They observe many “great evils” under the sun, from men and beasts having the same fate of death (3:19), victims of oppression being rejected and ignored by society (4:1), violation of justice in the land (5:7), and the rich not being satisfied with their many riches (5:12). Having detailed these observations in succinct fashion, the book then shifts to Qoheleth’s conclusions in 6:10, and in the New American Bible (along with several other translations and commentaries), this section is generally divided into two major conclusions: that no one can know the best way to act, because God’s wisdom will always be better than our limited wisdom, and that no one can know the future, since our lives are temporary and will someday expire.

³⁵ Telushkin, Joseph, *Biblical Literacy*, HarperCollins, 1997, Page 366

Qoheleth's detailing of their first conclusion begins along with chapter 7. Returning to the theme of "with wisdom comes sorrow" from chapter 2, the author observes that "the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, the heart of the fool in the house of dancing" (7:4). While this is true, they argue, it is still better to be wise than foolish, but only to an extent, since the author still maintains that they both die anyway. The fault that the author finds with folly seems to be that it is only distracting from the reality of life (hence why they are in the "house of dancing), which the author sees as evil in itself. In wisdom, one will recognize that all is meaningless, and this is better insofar as it is at least a recognition of the truth.

This theme is expanded upon when Qoheleth implores his reader to "consider the works of God, who can make straight what he has made crooked?" (7:13). This pondering, along with the observation that "the just perish in their justness, the wicked live long in their wickedness" (7:15), leads them to the conclusion that one should "be not just to excess, and be not overwise", but at the same time "be not wicked to excess, be not foolish" (7:16-17). Both of these extremes, they argue, is putting yourself at a risk to destroy your life, either valiantly or foolishly, and it is better not to destroy yourself for what is ultimately a vain cause.

After this digression, Qoheleth shifts their focus back to the problem of retribution they brought up several chapters before. Now, however, they have more to say: "I saw the wicked buried, they would come and go from the holy place, but they were forgotten in the city, those who had done justly. This too is vanity" (8:10). What Qoheleth observes from this is, because there is not always immediate punishment for evil deeds, wicked people can feel free to commit as much evil as they want, "the human heart is inclined towards evil" (8:11) they say. 8:14 continues this thought, "this is a vanity that occurs on Earth, there are those who are just who are

treated as if they had done evil, and those who are wicked but are treated as if they had done justly”. Any idea that life gives to people what they deserve is promptly rejected.

Qoheleth begins to discuss their second conclusion, that no one can know the future, with an observation that the Book of Job went to great lengths to prove, that God shows no partiality between good or bad people, “everything is the same for everybody, the same lot for the just and the wicked, for the one who offers sacrifice and for the one who does not...” (9:2). Here, the author seems to be critiquing not those who have faith in God but those who try to manipulate God by offering sacrifices or otherwise trying to appease him through their actions. However, the author takes no delight in this, “among all the things that are done under the sun, this is the worst, that there is one fate for all” (9:3). That one fate, of course, is death. Driving this point home, the author observes “the race is not won by the swift, nor the battle by the valiant... a time of misfortune comes to all... human beings no more know their own time than a fish caught in a fatal net... (9:11-12).

Chapter 12 rounds out this line of thinking by entreating the reader to enjoy life while they can. This section is called the hymn to life, as it reminds the reader that life is temporary and that youth, while you have it, is a gift from God to enjoy. The haunting beauty of this poem details the pain of growing older, and finally the inescapable fact of death, “remember your creator... before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken... and the dust returns to the earth, and the life breath to God who gave it” (12:1, 6-7). The verse immediately following this ends the book proper as it started, “vanity of vanities, says Qoheleth, all is vanity!” (12:8).

The epilogue that follows is generally thought to have been added by a later editor, and it almost seems to eulogize Qoheleth while giving more insight into who they were. Qoheleth

seems to have been a teacher, as well as an assembler of sayings and a writer of books (12:9-10). In 12:11, the author of the epilogue seems to shift to a different train of thought, as they assert that “of making many books there is no end, and in much study there is weariness” (12:12) (perhaps this is the epilogue author’s way of explaining Qoheleth’s cynical worldview). The final verse, along with its attribution to Solomon, is what biblical scholar Rabbi Joseph Telushkin believes got the book into the bible, “the last word... fear God and keep his commandments, for this concerns all mankind, because God will bring every deed to judgement” (12:13-14)³⁶. Qoheleth both upholds this view and rejects it at different points in the main argument, so it is unclear if they genuinely believed this or if this is an editor’s attempt to make the otherwise radical text slightly more pious.

The book is phenomenally concise and to the point, while at the same time displaying a profound depth and thoughtfulness in its contemplation. The author has detailed their quest to find meaning in life, and has come to the conclusion through much investigation and trial and error that there is none to be found, except in enjoying the present moment. It is a radical and terrifying conception, one that no other book of the Bible asserts. Professor Peter Kreeft of Boston College muses that “Ecclesiastes is the question to which the rest of the Bible is the answer...”³⁷. It certainly does stand out as a starkly contradictory text to the rest of the sacred canon.

³⁶ Telushkin, Joseph, *Biblical Literacy*, HarperCollins, 1997, Page 367

³⁷ Kreeft, Peter. *Three Philosophies of Life: Ecclesiastes: Life as Vanity, Job: Life as Suffering, Song of Songs: Life as Love*. Ignatius Press, 1989, Page 19

Both of these books are undoubtedly masterpieces of their respective authors, being worlds ahead of their time in terms of style, artistry, content, and ambition, and it is a tragedy that their identities have been lost to history. The incredible works of art, thought, and theology they left behind have captivated readers for thousands of years and it is unlikely they will fade to obscurity anytime soon. The books both represent an evolution of biblical thought on matters of divine justice and how God operates in the world when compared to older biblical literature. This shift is worth considering both as it reflects a furthering of human understanding or perspective on such topics, but also in terms of how we might understand God and justice today. While the books consider similar questions, they invite the reader to come to different conclusions. Job is more open ended in its answer to the suffering of the innocent, despite God being present in the book to give some kind of an answer, while Ecclesiastes is more definitive, as Qoheleth dares anyone to counter arguments they believe to be set in stone and perfectly obvious in their legitimacy to anyone willing to look around them. As pessimistic as Ecclesiastes is, far more than Job, at least its answer is given explicitly, and backed up by evidence, “all is vanity”. But there is still room for conversation between the two texts, and the thesis will now turn to understanding the common thread of skepticism between them.

Chapter Four: The Shift in Focus from Tradition to Lived Experience

Both Job and Ecclesiastes are undeniably skeptical texts. That much has been definitively established by scholarship on the books, and can be easily detected upon one's first casual reading of them. The challenge of this thesis is not to determine whether or not the texts are skeptical, indeed, there is no challenge there. Rather, having established how the books work and the biblical thought on divine justice and action that the books respond to, the project will now move to consider how skepticism functions in the texts, and to what end their skepticism aims.

Life Experience as Responding to Tradition

The skepticism of both Job and Ecclesiastes comes from the books' unique way of approaching the questions they ask- formulating their ideas and drawing evidence for them from personal, lived experience. Rather than lean exclusively on tradition, the books look to the lived experience of the fictional character Job and the historically real, though fictionalized, King Solomon. What these characters see and experience are elements of plot to be sure, but they are relatable and reasonable enough to translate to the lived experience of actual people, and thus the questions being asked and the conclusions being drawn are pertinent to the lives of the reading audience.

In considering the books, what is *not* mentioned is just as important, if not more, than what is. Neither book references the covenant with Israel, for example. Neither book, in fact, mentions Israel at all, nor do they mention the patriarchs, the Babylonian Exile, the Torah, or anything that would mark them as biblical in the slightest, save for God. Given that all evidence points to these books being most likely written in the postexilic period, this is striking, especially in comparison to earlier scripture. The books are responding to a historical and social climate in

which they have witnessed the destruction of the temple and the expulsion from the land, which God did nothing to prevent. Having witnessed a devastatingly incomprehensible tragedy, the collective Israelite religious thought has to take into account a national, traumatic experience.

Rather than point to preestablished tradition, the texts instead point to the lived experience of individuals, and what can be empirically observed. Job, for example, contains a debate that reaches to ideas of God, justice, fairness, human worship, and aspects of religious life that the Hebrew scriptures deal with extensively in earlier literature. However, the origin of the debate stems entirely from Job's experience of loss and suffering. Even when the focus of the book turns away from the physical experience of Job to the spiritual, inward battle he is waging, it is still Job's battle with which it is concerned. The perception of God that Job arrives at comes from his experience of suffering that he did not deserve, of losing his children, his possessions, livestock, and health. This is diametrically opposed to the arguments of the friends, which parrot earlier biblical traditional ideas about God and justice. The books counterpoint, through the voice of Job, uses experience as its vehicle to call these ideas into question- what happens when someone suffers despite being good? Even the conclusion of the text, where Job repents before God and is restored, comes from the experience Job has of meeting the Lord, not because Job was made to accept any kind of argument from the friends or from tradition.

Ecclesiastes is similar in its approach. At times, it directly quotes established proverbs of the day, but either refutes them or upholds them based on what the author's life experience tells them. Verses such as "I have *seen* all that is done under the sun, what vanity it is, what chasing after the wind!" (Ecc. 1:14, emphasis mine) illustrate this idea. The author describes the vast experiences of King Solomon, and all the ways in which he tries to find meaning in life by testing out different possibilities such as pleasure and wealth. The thesis of the book, that all is

meaningless, hinges directly on what the author has experienced, and what their own life tells them. The author is not concerned with anything other than what they can test, prove, and observe within the parameters of their own life. Other than the existence of God, the book takes nothing on faith.

The Encounter with God and the Liberation of Job

One of the most universally recognized themes of the Book of Job is the relationship between faith and suffering. Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez, one of the founding figures of Christian liberation theology, asserts that the book is about “disinterested religion”, whether or not human beings are religious in order to get a reward, or out of genuine love for God. The entire point of Job’s test, he argues, is whether or not Job will continue to love God despite losing all the blessings that he seems to have gained from his piety. It is a test he seems to pass, as Job never renounces God despite losing everything.

However, Job’s experience of suffering does lead him to question whether or not God is fair, just, or present. In Job’s mind, there has to be a reason for why he has suffered. The friends maintain that the reason for Job’s suffering is some kind of sin or evil on his part, Job maintains this cannot be the case. However, Job is constantly wishing he could challenge God in court to see just *why* he is being allowed to suffer as he is. He certainly believes that either God caused his suffering, or at least has the ability to bring it to an end. Why has he been allowed to lose everything for seemingly no reason? This is the question that undergirds the skepticism of Job’s story.

The book never really provides an explicit answer as to why there is evil and suffering in the world, despite its reputation as the one biblical book that purports to do that. What it does do very well is renounce understandings or answers to that question that are insufficient. While the

prevailing theology of the friends, and, it can be assumed, of the time the book was written, was that people earn their suffering by their actions, the author uses this book to turn that notion on its head and put forward a new understanding. In the author's view, Job did not bring that evil on himself, and God confirms this when he chastises the friends at the end of the book. People who are suffering are not to be seen as "getting what they deserve", and God is not the wicked punisher the friends make him out to be.

Of course, a problem comes up when the events in the book are simply seen as results of a cosmic bet. It is true that the folk story/frame narrative assigns most of the blame for Job's suffering to the Satan, with a fair amount falling on God for letting this happen. There is room, however, for an interpretation which reads the rest of the book without simply chalking Job's suffering up to the wager. This is because neither God nor the author references the wager ever again in the middle, poetic section of the book, even after it returns to the prose frame narrative in chapter 42. The author must have wanted to say something else. If the book was all about the singular event of the wager, then Job would certainly be unfortunate, but there would not be much to say on the subject other than that. In addition, one might think the book would also care to revisit such a crucial point, which it does not.

The wager might be seen as an example or symbol of forces beyond our understanding that inevitably cause us to suffer, forces that humanity has no control over. Job had no idea that he was being tested, and the thought never crosses his mind that that is what is happening. God does not come down from the tempest and confess everything when he finally does speak to Job. God does, however, illustrate a vast and wild cosmos, emphasizing details in his speech that Job wouldn't think to consider. The universe is incredibly unpredictable, and forces that we do not understand abound and are active whether we know of them or not. While it is unlikely that one

person might lose their family, their home, their belongings, their livelihood, and their possessions all in one day, it is possible, and many people go through similar tragedies seemingly at random.

What the author really wants to get at, it seems, is how Job is to respond to an event beyond his understanding. Does he respond in denial? Does he dust himself off and begin the process of rebuilding his life immediately? Does he reject God, blame God, curse God? How we think Job ought to respond to such things really says something about how *we* ought to respond to such things as they happen to us, or how anyone who finds themselves in such a position of sudden, undeserved suffering ought to respond.

It seems to be the author's position that abandoning God in any way is the wrong move. Job's replies to his friends showcase an interesting tendency within the book that may give the reader a clue to part of its deeply complex and nuanced response to human suffering. Professor Kreeft notes that Job in 7:12, and several more times after that, shifts from talking to the friends to speaking directly to God. The three friends never do this, they simply talk *about* God in order to assert their own theology. But Job's questions can't be answered by simple theology, he needs nothing less than an explanation that only God can provide. God is the only one who can make sense out of the insensible. Job's demanding for relief and for God is impassioned and heartfelt, and while his friends continue to berate him with logic and insufficient (indeed, false) reasoning, Job will again and again turn to God for an answer, a desire that is, in time, rewarded.

Even though God does not explicitly answer his charges, the encounter with God seems to satisfy Job in ways that the friends simply couldn't. Kreeft is not the only one to note that an encounter with God is what satisfies Job in lieu of sound reasoning and arguments. Gutierrez,

speaking in the language of the liberation theologian, asserts that the act of meeting God liberated Job, “it is not indeed the answer he had been looking for, and yet it brings the fulfillment of his hopes. The Lord’s words have released him from the cell in which he had found himself imprisoned because of the contradiction between his experience of his own innocence and the doctrine of retribution”³⁸. At the end of it all, only an encounter with God could provide Job with any life in the face of so much death, any hope in the face of so much loss.

Qoheleth and the Search for Meaning in Life

It seems almost redundant to say that, on the surface, Ecclesiastes is a dark book, brimming with nihilistic pessimism. Its answer, far more definitive than that of the book of Job, seems to begin and end with “all is meaningless”. The author has said what they will say, and that is all there is to it. What else could possibly be added to the conversation?

What the author is concerned about is what gives life meaning. What can someone point to in their life and say, “this matters, this will last”? Qoheleth will search relentlessly for anything that might do this, probing different aspects of life with a scientific methodology. Eventually, they conclude that there is nothing that human beings can do that will fulfill this criterion. Everything that humans can conceive of has been done before and will be done again (1:10). In addition to that, we all die eventually, so very little we do will matter beyond the scope of our temporary lives. Even the greatest heroes of the Hebrew scriptures had to die eventually, Moses, David, Job, even Solomon, the mouthpiece from which the author has chosen to

³⁸ Gutierrez, Gustavo, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, Orbis Books, 1988, Page 82

announce their message. This leads Qoheleth to conclude, essentially, “why bother?”. We may as well just eat, drink, and be merry while we can (2:24).

It is somewhat ironic that a book that insists that nothing in life has any lasting value is still in print thousands of years later, and going nowhere soon. One possible solution to the text’s seemingly unconquerable question, stemming from this reality, is that maybe Qoheleth was simply wrong. Maybe, despite death, there are ways we can add meaning to our lives. People will not soon forget the names of Moses, David, Solomon, Paul, Jesus, the list goes on. Maybe there are ways we can add meaning to our lives that enables us to, if not become “immortal”, immortalize ourselves in a legacy that will be remembered, such as works of art, innovative inventions, or near superhuman feats of achievement. Indeed, when novelist Thomas Wolfe calls Ecclesiastes “the noblest, the wisest, the most powerful expression of man’s life on Earth...”, it seems like that is exactly what Qoheleth did. Did they prove themselves wrong?

As has been established, not much is known about who Qoheleth was. It is impossible to tell definitively, except what can be inferred from their own writing, what circumstances or events led them to write the book, or even to the conclusions present in it. It can be reasonably assumed that living in the postexilic reality of Israel must have caused them to question just how much a great deal of what added meaning to Israel’s religious life, the Covenant, the Torah, even the land, was worth. One thing is abundantly clear, that they are deeply concerned with this question of meaning that will not let them sleep at night. There is a sense of urgency that makes the coupled sense of resignation almost painful. The author is invested in their journey and will leave no stone unturned, even if it means they eventually come up empty.

Too many scholars, especially Christian scholars, refuse to see anything in Ecclesiastes other than the need for the “new revelation” of Christ (Kreeft, for all his invaluable study on the text, is especially guilty of this). That comes off as a reductive and deeply flawed reading of a text that is ambitious and far reaching in its own right. There is meaning to this text, even in the meaningless, and it seems that part of the key to Ecclesiastes is in this “never give up” tendency of Qoheleth. There is something to admire about that aspect of the text, that is, the deep conviction with which the author conducts their search. All too easily, life can be lived just by going through the motions, so it is, in a strange way, inspiring to read a text that encourages and challenges its reader to find a way for their life to have meaning. The book snaps the reader out of any kind of complacency as far as their life is concerned and presents them with a gritty truth that is impossible to ignore. It seems easy to prove Qoheleth wrong by pointing to the lives of others, but the real challenge of the book must be applied to each of us as individuals. How will *we* make more of our lives than mere vanity, meaninglessness, vapor, hebel?

Nothing can be more motivating for us to live our lives with intention and purpose than the knowledge of our own death, a knowledge that Qoheleth frequently encourages. Psychologist Dr. Richard Carlson in his self-help book *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* puts forward the strategy of imagining yourself at your own funeral for this very purpose, “While it can be scary or painful, it’s a good idea to consider your own death, and in the process, your life. Doing so will remind you of the kind of person you want to be and the priorities that are most important to you.”³⁹ (Carlson, 59-60). The knowledge that our lives are temporary can be a defeating and demoralizing thought, but if considered rightly, it can also be a powerful motivating force to

³⁹ Carlson, Dr. Richard, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff...And it's all Small Stuff*, Hyperion, New York, 1997, pp. 59-60

make something of our lives while we have the chance to. This is something that modern day psychology recognizes, and something the ancient sage Qoheleth seems to acknowledge as well.

In addition, it is also noteworthy that Qoheleth's "solution" for the meaninglessness of life, to enjoy what we have while we have it, is actually something that anyone can do. Options for meaning like power and unlimited wealth may not be available to every person, but enjoying where we are at in their own lives and seeing the beauty of that is open to everyone. Ultimately, this book reads like a challenge to forego the impossible task of reaching for immortality and embrace the beauty of being human, imperfect, temporary, and in the grand scheme of things, absolutely meaningless. That is the hope of Ecclesiastes. The author claims, and goes to great lengths to prove, that if nothing we do matters, then all that matters is what we do with what we have.

The Place of God in Job and Ecclesiastes

Both Job and Ecclesiastes are strikingly similar in the ways that they use skepticism via lived experience in order to ask the questions that they do. One significant way in which they diverge, however, is the place that God has in either text. As has been established, neither book seeks to cut God out of the picture or make the case that they are unworthy of worship. There is a strong difference in how each book treats God, however, that is critical to interpreting what their rebuttal may be to the systems and ways of thinking they have so skeptically approached.

In Job, God is an extremely important figure in the story. Even when he is absent, he is the prime subject of conversation and debate. The author, throughout the book, is using the voices of each of the different characters to endeavor how one ought to respond to God in the midst of great suffering. God does eventually get a chance to come down and give the final word

on the subject, and as has been beautifully illustrated by Gutierrez, it is this encounter with God that allows Job some relief, and sets him on the path to his restoration. In seeing God with his eyes, Job's heart is somehow put to rest, and God eventually restores all that he lost, writing a happy ending for the story that his wager with the Satan set in motion.

Ecclesiastes takes almost the complete opposite approach. While God is still an important subject of study for the restless Qoheleth, there is no appearance from the tempest, no voice from the whirlwind. God is completely silent in Ecclesiastes, and that silence speaks volumes. All we have of God is Qoheleth's interpretations of how God operates, and more often than not, God is portrayed in a villainous light. The closing of the famous poem in chapter 3 finds Qoheleth despairing that God has "permitted man to consider time in its wholeness, [but] man cannot comprehend the work of God from beginning to end" (3:11).

What one might draw from this distinction is that God makes the difference between Job's hopeful restoration and Qoheleth's miserable despair. God's closeness or immanence might give someone hope in their suffering that at least God is with them. God as an abstract concept does nothing for Job, it is only when God comes down to Job's level and makes himself known that Job draws any relief from God. However, God never develops past a conceptual subject in Ecclesiastes, and Qoheleth is left to endure their condition with their only hope in the present moment's pleasure. If God had come down from heaven and spoken to Qoheleth, perhaps the book may have come to a different conclusion. But as it stands, Qoheleth did not get this encounter with God like Job did, and the difference between the two conclusions of each respective text is noticeable.

It is clear that both books are skeptical in nature, and specifically they are skeptical about ideas of suffering, meaning, evil, or ways of life that were generally accepted at the time, and may still be today. Using the arena of the lived experience of individuals, these books set out to refute what their respective authors cannot square between experience and belief. The doctrine of retribution, assumptions that wealth will serve to give life meaning, ideas such as this must go.

Their skepticism is far from skepticism without purpose. The ideas that they call into question are ideas that are either harmful (as in the case of Job) or false or misleading (as in Ecclesiastes). In the face of a historical reality in which religious assumptions were being called into question and reconsidered, these books offer fascinating insight on what specifically needs to change. Job will encourage its reading audience to reconsider who is responsible for suffering and what role God has to play in it. It is adamantly opposed to any kind of “answer” that takes the easy way out by blaming the victim. Considered in light of the Exile, one might ponder that, like Job, Israel was not responsible for its suffering at the hands of Babylon, and to assign blame to the God for punishing the nation, or to Israel to warrant it, is to miss the point. Qoheleth will urge its readers to refuse to find meaning in temporary, illusory things such as wealth and power, and hints at the need for religious reform by urging people to take religious obligations like worship or sacred oaths with the solemnity they deserve. The skepticism of these radical texts seeks to aim at a better life, a more authentic way of being with God.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The Aims of Skepticism as Authentic Religious Experience

Neither Ecclesiastes nor the Book of Job employ a *skepticism without purpose*. Rather, both books are extremely concerned with understanding life, especially life with God, as authentically as possible. They want to look beyond any kind of illusion or “sugar coating” to see life as it really is. That is why their respective authors lean so heavily on lived experience as their tool by which they measure life- they want to emphasize and focus on what they can know and what others who will read the books can experience for themselves.

This is not to say that the books are not concerned with religious or spiritual experiences at all. In fact, I will venture to argue that religion is precisely what the books are about, but it is *authentic* religion that is their concern. It is important to note that neither book uses their skepticism to prove that God does not exist or that God is unworthy of worship. On the contrary, both authors emphasize God’s worthiness of worship. God has a place in the life of the suffering Job and the despairing Qoheleth. What exactly that place is, however, is called into question. Is God the punisher, anxiously waiting to strike Job down for the simplest sin? Is God the ever-looming judge, eager to mete out just desserts to the wicked and the just alike? The books seek a religious experience and view that is congruent with the facts of life rather than in opposition to it.

That is why the books ultimately reject the idea, for example, of the doctrine of retribution, the idea that good and bad people are rewarded on Earth based on their actions. Anyone who looks around, like Qoheleth does in Ecclesiastes or Job does to his own life, and

sees good people suffering just by virtue of rotten luck can understand the lie that this doctrine represents. It may be something people *want* to believe, but the facts of life, more specifically, the *lived experience* of human beings disproves this idea. Therefore, the position that the books take is that God does not reward people based on this notion, Job is allowed to suffer despite his goodness, and Qoheleth takes note of wicked people who ascend even to society's most honorable places (8:10). Job, who has spent the entire book disproving and lambasting this idea, will eventually be vindicated by God for his insistence of its falsehood, "...You have not spoken rightly of me, as my servant Job has" (Job 42:7).

This idea of an authentic religious experience is relevant even today, particularly in the Jewish and Christian context in which the books are still read and considered scripture. The books are still in print and wide circulation by virtue of their biblical canonicity, and ought to be considered a healthy critique to any kind of current religious experience that is life denying or diametrically opposed to authentic experience of God or the sacred. That was the role of the books in their own time, and their themes, advice, and wisdom are still necessary as human beings continue to worship, pray, and contemplate the divine.

Pastor Jack Reece gives an account of what this authentic religion might look like in his article "When Life is Unfair: Living the Lessons of Ecclesiastes". In this reflective piece, Reece considers how his congregation lost several well respected and loved members of their community around the same time. This sequence of tragedies caused their community to question what they had done to deserve what happened to them, a reaction especially caused, Reece notes, by subconscious comparison to a seemingly well to do congregation right up the road that suffered no such loss. In reading, studying, and preaching on Ecclesiastes, Reece came to realize, and help his community to realize, that there was nothing they did to deserve loss on

that scale, and that God would not inflict this kind of punishment on people. Once they had overcome that hurdle of where to place the blame when blame simply could not be placed, the community could focus on what was really important being there for each other as they grew to heal from tragedy. Their collective, communal religious experience became one that acknowledged the complex, mysterious happenings of life instead of trying to rationalize or unbox them, and as a result, they resonated more completely with their love for one another instead of trying to blame each other or themselves.

What these books have consistently stand against is a religious experience that would seek the pigeonhole divine responsibility. There is a sense, especially in Job, that if someone is suffering, it is God's way of punishing them. The book of Job as a whole stands against this idea of God as eternal punisher. Qoheleth also refutes this idea in Ecclesiastes, assuring readers that, while there will be some kind of judgement before God eventually, God does not treat the good or bad any differently on Earth. One has only to look at the successful wicked or the suffering righteous to observe this truth. Any kind of dogmatic proclamation or religious ideology that asserts that God does in fact judge and reward or punish on Earth is clearly out of touch with reality, if these authors are to be believed.

Their same arguments can be made today, if one takes into consideration the easily observable reality of good people suffering and evil people prospering, a reality that continues to follow humanity into the postmodern age. For a contemporary example, one need look no further than the death of Trayvon Martin, whose murderer was later acquitted. In *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, theologian Kelly Brown Douglass asserts, when comparing

Martin to Jesus Christ, that “Both deaths say something about God”⁴⁰. How we attempt to make sense out of this tragedy and others like it, especially from a religious perspective, determines what kind of God we believe we ought to worship. Douglass also points out the responses of both Trayvon’s killer, who attributed everything that happened the night he killed him to “God’s plan”, and Trayvon’s mother to this assertion, “I don’t think it’s God’s plan... to kill an innocent teenager.”⁴¹.

If one follows the prevalent philosophy at the time Job and Ecclesiastes were written, it might be tempted to attribute the acquittal of George Zimmerman and the death of Trayvon Martin to God’s justice. Perhaps one might think of Zimmerman as an instrument of God’s vengeance against a guilty Trayvon. This is, of course, a horrifying prospect to anyone who believes in a remotely fair or just God. Such a tragedy of a young man’s life brutally cut short requires clear vision, but not unfeeling vision. It is a tragedy, and to assign blame to an innocent man and to God in this way is trying to make sense of out tragedy, ultimately an impossible task. It would mistakenly assume Martin was in the wrong, while vindicating the actions of his killer. It would place God on the side of evil, and deny the fact that Trayvon did nothing to warrant his killing. As is hopefully easy to see, ascribing to the “doctrine of retribution” philosophy is dangerously misleading, especially when real, innocent, suffering lives are taken into account. Placing the blame entirely on victims for their suffering is often needlessly cruel, as we see in the case of Job’s friends, and also completely excuses the violent acts of people against each other. Placing the blame entirely on God, and painting God to be a ruthless and unfeeling punisher, necessarily has an impact on what kind of relationship we form with that God.

⁴⁰ Douglass, Kelly, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, Orbis Books, 2015, Page 171

⁴¹ Douglass, Kelly, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, Orbis Books, 2015, Page 171

It must be considered what the books hope to leave their readers with. It is obvious that they depart from such harmful philosophies as the doctrine of retribution hoping to leave them behind. They put forth radical new ideas in the hopes of thinking about God differently. They are challenges to consider a reality in which not everything is held to a scale of justice, where not all sufferers have themselves to blame, where not all prospering wicked people are doing so because they deserve to be. In other words, they present a universe in which chaos is allowed to flourish, but that this isn't always a bad thing.

In his own study of Job, Harold Kushner asserts that in the second speech of God, Leviathan represents chaos, and Behemoth desire. These two forces are the only ones in which God will not exert power over, because while they have the potential for great harm, they also have the potential for goodness. God does not want to limit our capacity for desire or the universe's capacity for chance, because these two forces contribute to much of the good in the world along with its evil. This is how Kushner interprets God's answer to Job.

While this is not the religious outlook that everyone possesses, it is an example of one that does not deny the lived experience of humanity. Desire and chaos are primary forces in the lives of human beings, it does not take much looking around to see this. A religious outlook like Kushner's that, rather than denying the authentic experience of people, seeks to engage with it and consider it in a religious light is a valuable one. Ultimately, the challenge of both Job and Ecclesiastes is to peel back the curtains of life and see it as it really is. Like Qoheleth and Job, we may search relentlessly to find meaning in the lives we live and the circumstances that confront us. Religion, at its best, offers a way to find meaning in our lived experience, but, as the books assert, it must not be a meaning that is life denying or in any way illusory.

The books of Job and Ecclesiastes offer much in the way of literary drama, artistic importance, and deep sources of contemplation. They also offer a profound way of understanding the purpose of religious experience and how one ought to approach answering life's most difficult questions from a religious standpoint. The valuable critique they offer on inauthentic or life denying religions ought to be considered still even today as a voice of wisdom on the dangers of such ideologies. What they offer in place of them is the encouragement of a religious outlook that is life affirming, realistic, and genuine in approach and nature.

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