Abstract

Ecclesiastes is a book that communicates hope. In Eccl. 3:1-15, Qohelet conveys a realistic depiction on the concept of time. In Eccl. 7:15-22, Qohelet acknowledges that a mortal, striving to be righteous, is nevertheless hampered by human limitations. And in Eccl. 11:1-6, Qohelet asserts that human ignorance should not deter one from carpe diem action. These passages suggest life-giving aspects to contend with the mentality of fearing death, over-confidence and workaholic tendency among the Chinese. Asian Chinese in general are informed, through generations of Confucian teachings, to be pragmatic, morally guided and diligent. Qohelet points out to the Asian Chinese the reality confronting these teachings. Qohelet teaches one to live here and now, in line with Asian Chinese’ pragmatism. This paper argues for Ecclesiastes’ message that it offers salvific hope, in line with the Gospel and salvation as proffered in the Christian belief.

Keywords: Old Testament Theology; Wisdom Theology; Salvation History; Ecclesiastes; Qohelet; Eccl. 3:1-15; Eccl. 7:15-22; Eccl. 11:1-6.
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Conclusion
Introduction

This paper upholds the theme of Salvation History as an Old Testament theology, wherein the role of biblical wisdom literature to convey Salvation History is accentuated. With this perception, I am surveying and evaluating the biblical passages that are frequently used by some Asian Chinese scholars to construct the Chinese Christian understanding of salvation. Ecclesiastes is suggested in this paper to offer salvific hope as well. Three passages taken from Ecclesiastes will be used to illustrate the point. In Eccl. 3:1-15, Qohelet conveys a realistic depiction on the concept of timing; this reduces the general fear of death. In Eccl. 7:15-22, Qohelet acknowledges that humankind, striving to be righteous, have to accept human limitations nevertheless. This acceptance will guide people to be realistic and reasonable in daily living. In Eccl. 11:1-6, Qohelet asserts that human ignorance should not deter one from taking actions; thus one can be ready to act and at the same time without being seen to be a workaholic. The three passages suggest life-giving aspects to contend with the mentality of fearing death, over-confidence, and workaholic tendency among the Asian Chinese. Asian Chinese in general are informed through generations of Confucian teachings, to be pragmatic, morally guided and diligent. Qohelet points out to the Asian Chinese the reality confronting these teachings. Nevertheless, Qohelet teaches one to live here and now as in line with Asian Chinese pragmatism. As such, this paper argues for Ecclesiastes’ message that it offers hope, and is consistent with the Gospel and salvation proffered in the Christian belief.

1. Theological Construction on the Theme of Salvation: Some Asian Chinese Perspectives

Constructing a Chinese Christian Theology is a task that had been taken on by some Asian scholars in recent decades. This task will only be reflected upon briefly in my paper. The Asian Chinese Christians’ basic understanding of salvation, or soteriology, is primarily Christ-centered. Understandably, their theological construction builds heavily upon the New Testament. The Christ Event is regarded as the continuation of the Salvation History from the Old Testament, and is also the defining line of understanding the law “before” and “after” Jesus’ coming, as

1 The representatives from this region of Asian Chinese reflect scholars and theologians from Malaysia, Hong Kong and Taiwan especially, as the references suggest.
mentioned in Galatians 3:23-25.² Related passages of the Christ Event are generally quoted to articulate the theological understanding of salvation, especially the historical death of Jesus (Heb. 2:14-15), the imagery of the cross (Eph. 2:16; 1 Peter 2:24), and the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28; Rom. 3:25; Heb. 9:12).³ These New Testament passages, as anticipated, have built upon the idea of sacrifice from the Old Testament.

Salvation is needed because of the presence of sin.⁴ In the Old Testament, a sacrifice is necessary to eliminate sin. On this founding idea, the New Testament avers that sin, regardless of its form, makes humankind fall short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23) and being alienated from God (Eph. 4:18). The death of Jesus Christ on the cross represents the sacrifice that is required to deal with sin. Redemption therefore takes place through the grace of God. Hence, when articulating salvation in the Bible, grace (hēsed in the Old Testament, charis in the New Testament) is an important idea that will not escape deliberation among Asian Chinese scholars. As a result of this grace of God, the fallen humankind can be made “right” or “justified” (Eph. 1:4-6; Rom. 3:21-26).⁵ This idea of “justification” is in relation to one’s faith, and is tied closely to the interpretation of salvation based on Paul’s epistle to the Romans.⁶ Therefore understandably, in the theological construction of Christian doctrine on Soteriology, the declaration of one being saved “by grace” and “through faith” (Eph. 2:8) is often purposely asserted.⁷

In a commentary on the Nicene Creed, a group of Chinese Scholars in South East Asia further elaborate on the Creed.⁸ The conviction of the salvation through Christ is partly reflected in the phrase “For us and for our salvation, He came down from heaven.”⁹ Citing biblical events like that of God’s deliverance through Noah’s ark (Gen. 6:8), the Exodus (Exod. 1:14), and the

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² Kok Hon Seng, Jialataishu Daolun [Introduction to the Book of Galatians] (Hong Kong: Logos Publishers, 2003), p. 110.
⁴ The word “sin” is somewhat an alien concept in Chinese vocabulary. Though it is commonly found in the Bible, it is often understood in light of, or is related to, the idea of “shame” among Asian Chinese.
⁵ On how this “rightness” or “justification” takes place, various Asian biblical scholars differ in their interpretations depending on their perspectives on Pauline Epistles. See for example, one that derives from the new perspective on Paul by Lo Lung-Kwong, Baoluoxinguan: Luomashu de Zhuti ya Mudi [New Perspectives on Paul: The Theme and Purpose of the Book to the Romans] (Taipei: University of Donghai Press, 2007).
⁶ See a title by Sam Tsang, Luomashu Jiedu: Jidu Fuyin de Zhanxin Shyie [An Imperial-Missiological Re-reading of Romans] (Taipei: Campus Evangelical Fellowship Press, 2009).
⁷ See for example, Kok Hon Seng, Heavenly Vision for Witness on Earth: A Commentary on Ephesians (Kuala Lumpur: Bridge Communication, 2010), especially pp. 180-188.
⁹ Yip and Lo, We Believe, pp. 109-117.
deliverance from sin (Matt. 1:21), God’s salvation is again affirmed. Their theological construction on salvation also relates Christian faith to the life of the Church in Asia. The way of faith thinking according to Asian Chinese theologians also relies on passages like Colossians 1:15-19, declaring that Christ is the head of the Church, through Christ all things have been created, and in him all things hold together.\(^\text{10}\)

A dual theme of Creation and Redemption has also shaped Asian Chinese theological understanding of salvation.\(^\text{11}\) The notion on Creation was closely tied in with the creation account in the book of Genesis. This dual theme is reflected in the work of Yee-cheung Wong, *Old Testament Theology-from Creation to New Creation*, who uses the terms “creation” and “restoration” to narrate the message of the Old Testament.\(^\text{12}\) The concept of “new creation” in his work also builds upon the Genesis creational account. In this dual theme, redemption refers to the restoration of the order of things that includes human condition, lifestyle, relationship and the cosmos.

In the Chinese understanding, theology is relational. The second paragraph of the Nicene Creed spells out the relationship of the Father and the Son: Jesus Christ is the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, and of one Being with the Father. This declaration is made before affirming in the Creed that Jesus Christ is the salvation. Salvation therefore is based on a relationship, and this relationship is extended into “for us” in the Creed, making possible the reconciliation between God and humankind (Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:20-22; Eph. 2:12-13).\(^\text{13}\) Such grace of reconciliation is given freely through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:23; 5:11).\(^\text{14}\) Based on this theological understanding of reconciliation, the identity of the Asian Church is in some way defined by reconciling people to God. As an example in practice, such reconciliation through Christ’s redemption should have an effect on human living

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conditions, including solving the problems of poverty in Asia. Salvation, in this sense the breaking down of the oppressive and destructive cycle in that society, will then be truly experienced by all.

The understanding of relationship can be expanded into a constant dialogue between faith and context. Thus, some have advocated for the task of constructing Christian Theology from Chinese cultural contexts by means of native resources and terminologies. Exploring cultural connection between the Bible and Chinese literature is not new either, wherein Archie Lee has written substantially in cross-textual hermeneutics in the past three decades. Furthermore, an in-depth research by K. K. Yeo to pursue a Chinese Christian theology is notable. Yeo asserts a Chinese Christian theology based on a study on Confucian xin (trustworthiness) and Pauline pistis (faith). He also compares Confucius with Paul in their pursuit of ethics and virtues as professed in the Analects and the book of Galatians. By being creatively faithful to the two living texts, Yeo illustrates effectively both the ethical and theological task of Chinese Christians.

From my observation, the biblical and theological research conducted by the Asian Chinese will inevitably face a constant pressure. On one hand we are informed and nurtured by education from the West; on the other we try to come to terms with the biblical and theological meanings in various Asian Chinese contexts. As Terence Fretheim correctly opines, Christians typically relate salvation to “forgiveness,” granted to those who believe in Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:8-10). This occurs similarly among the Asian Chinese. Furthermore, the idea of salvation from the Bible is largely informed by the New Testament readings, and it reflects the same circumstance of the Chinese Christians in Asia. Nevertheless, the Christ-event and its often

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15 Kung Lap Yan, Quanren Yushe Hehao: Jiaohui de Shenfen [Ministry of Reconciliation: The Identity of the Church] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Christian Institute, 2002), pp. 127-140, points out the relatedness between Jesus Christ’s redemption and the fate of the poor.

16 Benedict Hung-biu Kwok, Chaoxiang Zhengquan Shenxue Sikao [Towards complete Theological Thinking] (Hong Kong: Tien Dao, 2004), p. 27, p. 33. The notion on theology being relational is inevitably informed by Karl Barth’s and Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of humankind being created “in God’s image.” See also Tang ed., Zai Xinyang Zhisi de Tuzhong [On the Way of Faith Thinking], p. 133.

17 See his major works recently collected and published in Archie Lee, Kuawenben Yuedu: Xibolai Shengjing Quanshi [Cross-textual Reading of the Hebrew Bible] (Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Books, 2015).


19 See for example, Yeo, Musing with Confucius and Paul, p. 403.

quoted New Testament passages, do not exhaust the experience of salvation in the Bible. Also, the Old Testament’s use of salvation language varies in the New Testament. My contention is that, the Old Testament articulates comprehensive dimensions in understanding “salvation” or “soteriology” as purported in Christian theology.

2. Salvation History, Wisdom and Old Testament Theology

In this section, I propose an Asian Chinese perspective of constructing the Old Testament theology with dual emphasis: the theme of Salvation History and the role of wisdom. The Old Testament encompasses mixed writings and is highly diverse in terms of its compositions, contents, and themes. Due to this diversity, one is compelled to choose between constructing a coherent Old Testament theology or a combination of Old Testament theologies. The former endeavor strives to find a theological center and usually leads to a marginalization of wisdom’s theological perspective.21 The latter approach attempts to assess theological perspectives alongside Pentateuchal, historical, prophetic and wisdom writings. Walther Eichrodt’s theme on the Covenant belongs to the former endeavor.22 Gerhard von Rad’s Salvation History, on the other hand, represents an effort of the latter.23 Both works have generated important contributions, but have inevitably marginalized the aspect of wisdom.24 Brevard S. Childs contends a descriptive discipline of analyzing Old Testament text in a canonical context, and views the final form of the Old Testament by seriously considering its various components as they stand in canon.25 In delivering the total message of the Old Testament, von Rad’s Salvation

21 Despite many attempts to find the theological center or Mitte of Old Testament, none satisfactorily expresses an Old Testament theology, and none has succeeded in commanding a consensus. See Roland E. Murphy, The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 112.


24 Von Rad’s later work, Wisdom in Israel (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), focuses solely on the aspect of wisdom.24 Brevard S. Childs, Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context (London: SCM, 1985); also by Brevard S. Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979). Childs’ theological reading of the final form of the Old Testament involves a process of integrating larger canonical units of Torah, Prophets and Writings. This theological mode of study enables a Christian interpreter to apply biblical texts without marginalizing any component that comprises the Old Testament.
History is the most telling in my opinion. Childs’ canonical approach, on the other hand, has its advantage to maintain the diversity within the Old Testament. Therefore, despite striving to maintain an Asian Chinese voice, this paper is largely informed by the work of von Rad and of Childs.

Within the wisdom corpus itself, there is a theological diversity. Anyone who attempts to construct wisdom’s theological perspective would consider the complexity within Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. Job and Qohelet depart in form and content from the Proverbs; on the other hand, all three share a common wisdom unifying theme. In essence, wisdom is “the ability to cope,” “the art of steering,” and “the quest for self-understanding and for mastery of the world.” Therefore Job’s and Qohelet’s “voices of protest” should be viewed as an integral and genuine expression of faith, rather than as a rejection of traditional wisdom thought.

3 Canonical Witnesses to Salvation History

3.1 Salvation History in the Torah

The Salvation History begins with God creating the world. The biblical creation narrative supplements the Chinese understanding of creation of the world in some ways. God does, for instance, appear in a human form (Gen. 6:1-4). In the biblical account, due to humans’ wrongful choices, God initiated to save his people from the consequences of divine-human alienation. This divine initiative is also notable in Chinese understanding, wherein humans usually aspire to seek God by establishing certain connections with the heavens, or by attempting to attain immortality. In the biblical account, it was God who made a connection. In seeking the return of his own people,

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28 In this section of “Canonical Witnesses to Salvation History,” a greater space will be given to the wisdom literature in view of Ecclesiastes as the book in focus. I can only wish to elaborate more on other sections (Torah, Historical and Prophetic Books). Alongside many others who attempt a theological theme that runs through the Old Testament, I suggest “Salvation History” in hope to contribute partly to the endeavor of Eerdmans’ Majority World Theology Series in the volume of Soteriology.
29 See a theological reading of Chinese creation stories of Pan Gu and Nu Wa by Archie C. C. Lee, “Theological Reading of Chinese Creation Stories of P’an Ku and Nu Kua,” in *Doing Theology with Asian Resources: Ten Years in the Formation of Living Theology in Asia*, edited by John C. England and Archie C. C. Lee (Auckland: Pace Publishing, 1993), pp. 230-236. As one has noticed from the folklores of Pan Gu and Nu Wa, Chinese have their own creation stories. Here Lee points out how the Chinese reading of the creation of heaven and earth, and the creation of human beings, identify with that of the Bible. Lee’s work therefore has opened the door to a theological dialogue about creation narratives.
God chose Abraham and his descendants. He established a covenantal relationship that binds his people with certain expectations and responsibilities. His people embarked on a journey of faith henceforth with notable victories and many pitfalls. Yet God delivered them from the oppressions of their enemies and from the consequences of their choices. The idea of Salvation History is reflected through the divine faithfulness in the midst of struggles and rebellions of God’s people. This idea of the divine *hesed* “faithfulness” is largely reassuring, especially for the Chinese who as a nation encountered a long history of struggles and failures.

3.2 Salvation History in the Historical and Prophetic Books

The struggles between divine-human continuums continue in the formation of a nation and then in its fall. Leaders and kings were elected partly in the hope to carry out the salvific task of shepherding and protecting God’s people. However, God’s people including their political leaders failed to respond according to God’s salvific plan. Along with those struggles, God’s message of rebuke and restoration were communicated eloquently through various prophets who were called to speak to God’s people. Their message varied depending on the dispositions of the prophets and their socio-political contexts. The Salvation History continues to imprint upon the journey of God’s people in Israel’s history nonetheless.

3.3 Salvation History in the Wisdom and Poetic Books

Theology is the *logos* of *theos*. It narrates about God and the faith of God’s people. In living out faith, one may either trust human ability for survival or rely totally on God’s mercy. There is a tension between human confidence and human limitations within a believer. This tension is also reflected in wisdom writing, and it is often perceived as conflicts of perspectives or wisdom’s self-correction. There is a theological reason underlying such a tension. It signifies a journey of faith by a believer alongside the Salvation History.

**Proverbs: A Good Disciple**

A disciple of God embarks on a journey of faith by learning proverbial sayings and admonitions. To fear God ensures deliverance from the evil path. A good disciple, therefore, may subscribe to absolute and formulaic certainty. As a new beginner in faith, one exercises his or her discernment, hoping to steer lives safely into harbor and avoiding
hazards that may bring catastrophe to the fools.\textsuperscript{30} Every bad consequence like suffering presumes a prior sin or wrongful behavior, and it needs divine redemption. Therefore, one holds fast to God’s commandment and lives ethically in order to obtain the goodness of life, while at the same time avoiding calamity which represents divine disfavor.

**Job: A Questioning Devotee**

The faith of a believer in God is tested in the realities of life, prompting tremendous struggles. Along the journey of such struggles, the absence of God becomes offensive. The subsequent response from God, too, appears confrontational rather than therapeutic. Job’s questioning signifies a quest as a faithful follower to know God. This quest is compounded with challenges from Job’s three friends. The struggles, however, does not conceal one’s hope that God will eventually come to one’s assistance. In the momentous theophany, the faithful follower is confronted by God’s presence. One realizes that God does not owe an answer to the human quest even though God is the one in charge of running the world. The faith of a questioning devotee is saved through this encounter, by journeying in faith, from “hearing about God” to “seeing God.”

**Qohelet: A Skeptic Believer**

Qohelet appears to have tested the confident assertions about the way the world works, and found that they are not always valid. A faithful follower here faces a threatening skepticism. Ecclesiastes is Job without the theophany.\textsuperscript{31} The truth once learnt becomes less verifiable and more ungraspable. The realities of life become unpredictable and incomprehensible. A believer begins to settle for a less structured attitude without compromising the trust in God. A faith journey arriving at this stage has inevitably embraced a dubious yet matured aptitude. The Salvation History continues, as the tested believer does not cease to believe in God. Qohelet even challenges younger ones to be mindful of the harsh realities in life at the same time asserting the idea to fear God. This grown believer conserves hasty judgment and reserves to absolutize any conclusion in life. Such a disciple is both a skeptic and a believer.


The fear of God in wisdom thoughts elaborated above, reflects both human obedience and doubtfulness in the Salvation History. Tracing the wisdom conclusion from Proverbs through Job and eventually to Ecclesiastes, a believer in God embraces Torah obedience while growing in faith. Such obedience demands a serious engagement with harsh issues in life (like righteous suffering, toil and death) and with the ultimate divine presence or absence. In this journey of faith, God-human relationship is retrospective and two dimensional. The whole process is salvific nonetheless: a believer in God grows from a simple faith to a faith in crisis and to a renewed faith.

**The Poetic Books**

The Poetic Books in the Old Testament represent the voices of God’s people along their journey in the Salvation History. In the biblical poetics books, human confidence is exemplified through love songs, hymns of praise and psalms of trust. In the laments however, the troubled psalmists reflect upon human-God relationships, grieving for unresolved questions and pains. Outcries are heard at both individual and community levels. The psalms of lament especially resemble the Chinese poetic corpus, *Shijing*, reflecting a common contest in human experience. The psalms of lament as well as the Chinese *Shijing* commonly reflect a quest for divine intervention in such despirations. God in the Bible, explicitly depicted as an all-powerful deliverer, is at the same time, the psalmists’ enemy. The deity in *Shijing*, Tian, is also perceived to be an adversary and is often questioned in human suffering. While some psalmists stressed on moral conduct being an agent of change (from the reading of *Shijing*), some others find comfort in piety and to trust God nonetheless (from the reading of Psalms). Both of these elements of lament speak powerfully of how people in Asia would cry over poverty and injustice occurring sometimes.

The Bible in general points to various perspectives of Salvation History in the Old Testament. A person of faith takes on an attitude shaped by various Old Testament writings. The

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Bible as a whole is therefore a book of faith. It narrates the salvation that God has provided for people of faith, and the struggles and promises that come along with that faith. This discussion will now be narrowed down to just the book of Ecclesiastes, a book that also offers hope for faithful people.

4. Ecclesiastes: a Book that Offers Salvific Hope

Qohelet seems to challenge the view that wisdom in the past had given enormous confidence in human intellect. The literary genre of Ecclesiastes is “a vehicle of critical reflection upon traditional values and beliefs.” Qohelet recognizes wisdom’s advantage and that folly is never better. Nevertheless, wisdom has its limits and is subject to failures too. At the point where such limits and failure are experienced in life, there is still a hope to cope with them.

In Ecclesiastes, Qohelet launches a search for meaning amid limits and failures. The search is expressed through a compound use of verbs for seeking, finding out and scrutinizing: dāraš, tūr (Eccl. 1:13), māšā’ (7:24), bāqāš (7:25), hēger and āzen (12:9).

In such pursuits, Qohelet is aware of the challenges in the world where humanity has to live. Qohelet avers that humankind cannot find out what God has done (3:11). Qohelet avows that even the wise cannot find out what is happening under the sun (8:16-17). In short, Qohelet does not only draw on the

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35 The perceived tension within wisdom thought in Ecclesiastes garners various opinions. Walther Zimmerli, for instance, suggests that Qohelet is engaged in a dialogue with the sages and their traditional wisdom, confronting wisdom’s boast to solve every human problem. See Walther Zimmerli, Sprüche, Prediger Altes Testament Deutsch 16/1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), quoted in Richard J. Clifford, The Wisdom Literature (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 111. K. Galling, on the other hand, has in mind that with Qohelet, wisdom has entered a crisis situation. See K. Galling, Die Krise der Aufklärung in Israel (Mainz: Mainzer Universitätsreden 19, 1952); quoted in Murphy, Tree of Life, p. 55. Elsewhere, Michael Fox maintains that Qohelet does not attack wisdom or the wise but instead favors wisdom; he nevertheless examines the contradictions observed in human life rather than explain them away. See Michael V. Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 71; edited by David J. A. Clines and Philip R Davies (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), pp. 10-12.


37 Qohelet appears to be challenging the traditional wisdom, yet it does not mean that Qohelet dismisses wisdom. Wisdom is always better than folly in the book of Ecclesiastes.


39 The rare verb tūr connote an extraordinary measure for a firm resolve, more appropriate to spying. The verb is used in Job 39:8 referring to an animal’s search for food, and in Prov. 12:26 to imply examining one’s friend closely. See Crenshaw, Old Testament Wisdom, p. 116 and p. 134.
wisdom tradition, he brings the tradition to bear on human experiences. Qohelet concludes that wisdom provides no advantage in the grasping of one’s destiny—when it does not provide sufficient knowledge, when it is determined by chance, and when it is restrained by death. Recognizing such human limitations is not depressing, but rather liberating. For in Ecclesiastes, the scope of wisdom has extended to discern the ways to survive meaningfully regardless of circumstances. To Qohelet, life is momentary, and therefore one has to seize the moment by working diligently while at the same time observing the fear of God.

Ecclesiastes exhorts living pragmatically in a disorderly world. The motif of the book is often claimed to be one with a negative tone because of the recurrent hebel in the book, occurring 38 times altogether. Yet the underlying theme of the book is constructive, and one can view Qohelet’s commendation to enjoyment positively. The interplay between the commendation of enjoyment and the injunction to fear God in Ecclesiastes suggests both to be positively correlated. Enjoyment of life lies at the heart of Qohelet’s vision of piety, which can be said to be an ethic of joy and a social responsibility.

There is a positive undertone in Ecclesiastes based on three reasons. First, the recurrent ‘ĕlōhîm “God” in Qohelet’s articulation is remarkable. The verbs that have been associated with ‘ĕlōhîm in Ecclesiastes illustrate “a very active God”. God is the subject of two frequent verbs: give nātan (1:13; 2:26; 3:10,11; 5:18-19; 6:2; 8:15; 9:9; 12:7) and do or make ‘āšā (3:11,14; 7:14, 29; 8:17; 11:5). God is also the one who judges (3:17), is angry (5:6), and who brings all human things into judgment (11:9). Therefore, Qohelet affirms the divine actions and sovereignty.

Second, ‘et-hâ ‘ĕlōhîm yērā’ “to fear God” is the motive behind Qohelet’s quest for meaning. This similar phrase appears throughout the book (3:14; 5:6; 7:18; 8:12-13; 12:13). This

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40 Seow, Ecclesiastes, p. 69.
42 Von Rad, Wisdom in Israel, 101, states that recognizing human limitations puts a stop to the false security in human wisdom, and enables one to open to the activity of God.
43 Eunny P. Lee, The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet’s Theological Rhetoric (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), pp. 32-82; see also pp. 123-140.
44 Lee, The Vitality of Enjoyment, pp. 129-134.
fear of God is consistent in the wisdom tradition aiming to promote godly behavior. In Eccl. 5: 1-7, for example, Qohelet advances lengthy remarks upon religion. He solicits reverence, and one’s faithful implementation of the covenants with God. People are advised to fear elôhîm eventually in all that they do.

Finally and most significantly, Qohelet looks at human life through the lens of exception. Traditional teachings distinguish clearly between the rights and the wrongs, but Qohelet points out their exceptions. Such a perspective is critical and realistic, but not necessarily pessimistic. The exceptions are used to be perceived as contradictions, raising questions of integrity and authorship. The attempts to harmonize Qohelet’s such lens of exception would have dismissed his intended rhetoric. The exceptions raise the possibility of intended dialectical rhetoric of Qohelet. Leland Ryken calls this rhetoric a “dialectical structure of contrasts.” Craig Bartholomew opines that the exceptions are “part of the very fabric of Ecclesiastes.” Qohelet simply keeps in view two scenarios that are in tension. Through this lens of exception, Qohelet points out life’s transitory nature, and advocates against life’s absolute certainty. Therefore, Qohelet presents a quest for meaningful survival. This quest results in Qohelet’s recommendations to embrace a certain attitude, which is a “reconstruction and recovering of meanings” according to Fox.


47 For example, like the other sages, Qohelet affirms elôhîm as one who is powerful in Eccl. 3:14-15. But the is an exception: at times God keeps humans in ignorance (3:10-11). Similarly, God controls the details of human life, but Qohelet professes also that God is distant in human affairs (6:1-2, 11-12). In Qohelet’s articulation, wisdom is asserted like the traditional teaching (2:13; 7:11-12, 19), yet the exception is that wisdom is belittled at other times (1:18; 2:15-16; 8:16-17).

48 Besides harmonizing the “contradictory views,” scholars also have tried to identify one of the opinions as an unmarked quotation, or to suggest a dialectic between Qohelet with an opponent. See for example, T.A. Perry, *Dialogues With Kohelet: The Book of Ecclesiastes: Translation and Commentary* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).


51 He communicates this quest through the recurring word yôtâr (6:8) and yitrôn, both meaning “surplus, advantage or profit.”

In short, a realistic attitude toward life is a hopeful praxis in the Salvation History of God’s people. Ecclesiastes conveys honest reflections of people who search for hope and meaning in living. After all, wisdom is about a way of steering in life, and Ecclesiastes conveys such wisdom to live out salvific hope.

5. Readings in Asian Chinese Context

5.1 Qohelet’s Concept of Time in Eccl. 3:1-15

The catalogue of season and time in Eccl. 3:1-8 is the most illustrative on Qohelet’s insistence that God makes everything “beautiful in its time” (3:11). In upholding God’s “making” (‘asâ) in Eccl. 3:1, the list of human events is then depicted in fourteen sets of antithetical parallelisms. The antithetical pairs point out a certain tension within. The tension reflects favorable actions (for instance, to live, to laugh, or to dance) or unfavorable ones (for example, to die, to cry, or to grieve). It does not show any order or pattern, but represents life occurrences in a spontaneous manner, which is always found to be in apprehension. Qohelet asserts that there is a time for these human circumstances, but he rules out human determination for the outcome of these circumstances.

Even if humankind does not determine life occurrences, people can still respond to them and discern the appropriate moment for any human activity. Life occurrences are not just out of human control, they are out of human comprehension as well (3:11). Yet in the same verse, Qohelet affirms clearly that for God, the scenario is otherwise: God is the one who determines life occurrences for humans. The concept of ‘ôtâm “eternity” can be understood as the time-transcending nature of God’s activity, which is not bound by time. God puts “eternity” in human hearts, so that they can cope with various situations, one at a time. Therefore for a human, one can still do well in one’s lifetime (3:12), as well as eat, drink and see tôb “good” in one’s toil (3:13). The idea of ‘ôtâm “eternity” returns in 3:14 describing what God has done, with an added concept of

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53 Eccl. 3:1-15 is a logical unit by itself, though the thought on timing is able to be detected again in 3:17, wherein God “has appointed a time for every matter and for every work. This thought echoes what Qohelet has declared in 3:1, that for everything there is a season, and for every matter a time. Still, Eccl. 3:16 suggests a new turn with the phrase “and again I saw;” and new subjects on justice and righteousness.

54 Seow, Ecclesiastes, p. 171.

fearing God as one’s purpose. This concept of fearing God first appears here and elsewhere in Eccl. 5:7 [Hebrew 5:6]; 7:18; 8:12-13 and 12:13. It is a theological marker for Qohelet’s articulation of life elusiveness. In light of Eccl. 3:15, it is also an affirmation of God’s activity in the human realm, consistent as in Eccl. 3:10, 11, 13-14.

**On Fearing Death: Time is in God’s Hand**

Among the taboos in Chinese thoughts, the idea of death generates a sense of fear. People are fearful of losing everything that has been accumulated in their lifetime. Reading Eccl. 3:1-15 affirms that there is a time for everything in life, including living and dying. The Chinese in general work hard to make life better, more so in Asia where living is competitive due to rapid social and economic developments. Losing everything at the point of one’s death can be frightening, because every hard work that one has put in would become void. Nevertheless, Eccl. 3:1-15 avers that even death is beautiful in its time because God is in the picture. The passage, too, reminds one of the differences between God’s actions and human activities. Knowing these differences, one is reminded of the affirmation of eternity when human works are done in full awareness of God’s presence. Furthermore, reading Eccl. 3:1-15 prompts one to fear God yet at the same time to endeavor to live meaningfully in the present. One can see still the good in life and live it out abundantly while one is able to. Death, in this sense, does not cancel out one’s gained possessions, accomplishments and even wealth. For these things have their meaning under God’s time-transcending activities. Death also testifies to the milestone that one has eventually lived to the depth and height of life. At one’s death therefore, one’s total achievement in life is being witnessed and celebrated. Death becomes hence a reason to be called “beautiful” when it comes.

**5.2 Qohelet’s View of Righteousness in Eccl. 7:15-22**

Qohelet’s articulations on the topic of righteousness occurs here three times (7:15-16, 20), and elsewhere in Eccl. 3:17; 8:14; 9:1-2. Most of these articulations appear to question the common pursuit of righteousness. Here in Eccl. 7:15-22, Qohelet questions the absolute value of being righteous. Eccl. 7:15 depicts that righteous people do perish in their righteousness, and wicked people have their lives prolonged despite
their evildoings. Once again looking through Qohelet’s “lens of exceptions,” righteous people do not necessary have better lives as the wise had commonly thought.

Though this view on exceptions does have canonical witnesses from other parts of the Bible (for instance, the psalms of lament, and the prophetic books), Qohelet goes further to advise people “do not be overly righteous,” and to suggest that “to be overly righteous could be destructive” (7:16). Eccl. 7:17-18 is even more perplexing, because wickedness and folly “should not be let go” as well. One assumes here that Qohelet does not engage righteousness as affirmatively as the sages do but appears to commend half-hearted righteousness. This leaves him open to the allegation of negotiating immorality. Schooled by Confucian teachings, the Chinese in general believe that righteousness is needed to alleviate social injustice. Therefore, scholars of Chinese descent may find it disturbing and uncomfortable to accept Qohelet’s idea of half-hearted righteousness here. Some may even choose to interpret the passage from the lens of the Confucian golden mean to secure the idea of morality, so that yi (righteousness) is still necessitated. This reflects Confucian confidence of upholding righteousness to re-order individual and communal life. Righteousness is seen as an initiative to guide human behavior, unlike Qohelet who stresses on human limitation in living out righteousness.

In addition, the passage is understood by some as a warning against self-righteousness, as the particle adverb harbēh, from the word rābā, means “much, many, great” or “numerous” but not “too” or “over”. In light of this, it is not an aspect of moral agent that is absent in Ecclesiastes. There is yet another view suggesting that Qohelet’s dissent is aiming at the overconfidence in righteousness. This warning is directed against the case of a person who lays claim to righteousness to the effect that it is absolutely attainable. This view is consistent with Qohelet’s thought against the certainty of wisdom (7:23-29; 9:13-16) and of advantage (1:3; 3:9; 6:8) elsewhere in the book. Taken together, the passage does not advocate for unrighteousness. Rather, Qohelet perceives an actual human limitation to live out righteousness. Therefore, “the

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56 For example, R. N. Whybray, “Qoheleth the Immoralist? (Qoh 7:16-17),” in Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien, edited by John G, Gammie et. al. (New York: Union Theological Seminary, 1978), pp. 191-204, here p. 191. The particle adverb harbēh according to Whybray does not express any value judgment such as “too righteous” in Eccl. 7:16, but an ironical sense, that is, a “self-styled ṣaddiq,” see pp. 195-196.

57 Seow, Ecclesiastes, p. 267.
one who fears God” (7:18) weighs securely between being righteous and acknowledging human limitation. The idea of this limitation continues in Eccl. 7:19-22, including the idea of wisdom as well. It is no surprise that Qohelet’s address in Eccl. 7:15-22 with regard to righteousness appear to be half-hearted. Qohelet is less convinced of the human success in living out righteousness. Regardless of striving to be righteous and wise, one just cannot deny the realities of wickedness and folly in one’s life.

**Be Confident yet Not Overconfident**

Hardworking and diligent, the Chinese are generally confident of what can be done and achieved. Such confidence may mistakenly sneak into our reasoning of faith experience, that as long as one attends church worship, gives tithe and serves well, one attains the “righteousness” required of the Bible. Being righteous becomes attainable as long as one obeys what the Bible tells us. Righteousness has also become something that can be attained and worked for, such as having good reputations, holding important positions in Christian ministry, serving many years in Christian ministry and so forth. One therefore becomes overconfident of living “right”, as if this is easy and natural. As a result, some may not be able to cope when fellow Christians fail in witnessing and are involved in scandals and lawsuits. Qohelet advises us to be cautious of such certainty. The overconfidence can be destructive, as Eccl. 7:15-22 suggests. One should perceive the actual human limitation to practise righteousness in life by simply acknowledging our humanness. A righteous and wise person does not necessarily rule out the chances of being wicked and foolish later.

**5.3 Qohelet’s Idea of Human Ignorance in Eccl. 11:1-6**

There is an observable double theme of “what a human does not know” and “what a human does know” in Eccl 11:1-6. In this passage, although human knowledge is limited, the idea “to embark upon life” is asserted. The idea of action frames the theme on

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58 Eccl. 11:1-6 is an independent unit for several reasons. First, the change in subject matter is discernable from the political rhetoric in Eccl. 10:16-20 to the economical concern in Eccl. 11:1-6. Second, the verbs in Eccl. 11:1, 2 and 6 are found in the imperative mood, unlike the ones from the preceding chapter, and the one after in 11:7-8. Third, the passage is framed by a purpose clause that is introduced with כִּי (twice in 11:1-2, once in 11:6). Fourth, there is a four-fold expression of “you do not know” in Eccl. 11:2, 5 (twice) and 6, which comprise its theme. See also the observations by Graham S. Ogden, “Qohelet 11:1-6,” Vetus Testamentum 33 (Apr 1983): 223.

human ignorance. This means that one can be doing something without knowing exactly why or how, yet at the same time would also be preparing for multiple contingencies. Thus Eccl. 11:1 and 11:6 present the chances for spontaneous actions despite uncertain outcomes.

In Eccl. 11:1-2, Qohelet quotes a popular proverb in the ancient Near East to commend liberality and to suggest its proliferation. Some interpret Eccl. 11:1-2 as an investment, whereby lehem “bread” is a metaphor for merchandise. According to this interpretation, one can avoid losing everything in a business venture by dividing one’s risks in the investment. This interpretation needs to explain, however, that the idea of lehem being goods is unattested in the Bible. Besides, one should màṣā “find” more than what is invested from any venture; yet profit is not found in Eccl. 11:2, instead the “getting back” of what is originally sent. Qohelet argues that the unknown future may bring forth desirable results or undesirable misfortunes, yet one can know that charitable giving at present is the recommended thing to do. The appropriate action is thus doing something useful, and it is better than doing nothing at all.

In Eccl. 11:3-5, knowing the uncertainties of life, some people refuse to take certain risks to act and consequently end up being unproductive. The double theme of “one does know” and “one does not know” persists. In human ignorance, some people resort to obsessive weather-watching. They paralyze agricultural efforts and may have

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61 Seow, Ecclesiastes, p. 335. There is yet another interpretation taking in the sense of beer production; see Michael M.Homan, “Beer Production by Throwing Bread into Water: A New Interpretation of Qoh. XI 1-2,” Vetus Testamentum 52 (2002): 275-278. According to this interpretation, Qohelet recommends beer production and consumption in risky times similar to the advice in Eccl. 9:7. Isa. 22:13 is quoted, “eat and drink for tomorrow we die” to support his thesis. However, Homan might be informed by a pessimistic understanding of Ecclesiastes. Qohelet is recommending a proactive attitude of seizing opportunity amidst life’s uncertainty, rather than escapism of drinking, be merry and die. His interpretation needs to establish links to the previous and subsequent passages concerning beer production. It appears unlikely too that Qohelet would contradict the warning given in 10:16, and his criticism rendered in Eccl. 10:19, by suggesting beer production and consumption here. Eccl. 11:6 appropriately closes the passage in a proactive outlook that advocates human’s endeavor. In sum, Eccl. 11:1-2 most likely refer to good deeds given freely and plentifully.

62 Qohelet uses the aphorism of a farmer who awaits perfect conditions to sow and harvest, criticizing the idling state of people who should have done something constructive. There is some predictability from nature, for example, one knows that strong wind and a storm would uproot a tree, but one does not know which way it will fall.
missed the proper time for action.\textsuperscript{63} There is hitherto an opportunity for sowing and reaping despite not knowing the right time. The danger remains, that one who is always on the watch for the perfect moment, will never act.\textsuperscript{64} While one cannot ascertain the result, it does not mean one can do nothing at all. The motif “one does not know” reappears twice in Eccl. 11:5, conveying that no one knows how new life begins in a mother’s womb, much less one knows the work of God. In short, the action of God is beyond human calculation.

Therefore in Eccl. 11:6, one should act according to what one knows, without being bothered by what is unknown.\textsuperscript{65} There is an imperative followed by a motive clause here. This idea recalls Eccl. 11:1-2, and hence is an inclusio of Qohelet’s rhetoric. Qohelet advises that one should live and work according to what one has been taught. Being diligent by sowing seeds in the morning and keeping active in the evening, may secure some relative advantages. Taken as a whole, Qohelet is realistic about how much a human does not know, yet how much one can do based on understandable facts. Qohelet’s thesis, namely, the twin themes of what human can and cannot know, is specified clearly in Eccl. 11:1-2, the illustrative materials for these themes are set forth in Eccl. 11:3-5, and the concluding advice is offered in Eccl. 11:6.\textsuperscript{66}

\emph{Carpe Diem but Not Workaholic and Kiasu}\textsuperscript{67}

The Chinese are in general, hardworking. Having vast opportunities for social and economic growth in Asia, many pragmatic Chinese toil diligently to acquire more opportunities as to gain greater advantages. Yet, people at the same time are fearful of failing to secure these opportunities and advantages, especially when they are confronted by factors beyond their comprehension and control. People do not know when the best time to act or when a financial crisis will occur. The calculations of uncertainties in life may paralyze some observant and careful people. This is true in business ventures, career planning and investments in Asia. Yet, there is always a place for human efforts. One cannot remain inactive under the pretext of waiting for the best time. Eccl. 11:1-6


\textsuperscript{64} Murphy, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, p. 109.

\textsuperscript{65} Crenshaw, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 181; see also Ogden, “Qohelet 11:1-6,” p. 223.

\textsuperscript{66} Ogden, “Qohelet 11:1-6,” p. 227.

\textsuperscript{67} “Kiasu” is taken from Hokkien language, which is a division among Chinese languages, meaning “afraid to lose” mentality.
conveys that, instead of pondering life’s obscurities, one should act promptly based on what one is able to comprehend in order to seize the opportunity. So, on the one hand, this passage informs Asian Chinese the importance of timely hard work. It is a carpe diem advice, pointing people to seize the day despite life’s uncertainties. It is about human effort but not about blind chance.

Yet on the other hand, some people may have worked too hard to secure maximum results. Many Asian Chinese hence have become too busy and are workaholics. To them, profiting the most during their youth will make life comfortable later. Under such circumstances, one may also resort to a kiasu mentality. Kiasu is a mindset that means “afraid to lose.” It is a mentality that generally reflects the way some Asian Chinese think: they aspire to have something greater, bigger or more valuable as compared to others. Yet, there are exceptions to one’s experiences in life and one cannot be sure of everything. There is always a case that one may face limitations amid many possibilities. It often happens that one may gain this time but loses the next. Again, as Eccl. 11:1-6 suggests, one does not know the certainty of the outcome of one’s over-diligence. Therefore one should just work sensibly and be productive, without compromising the good things in life. Asian Chinese in general, through generations of Confucian teachings, are pragmatic and diligent. Qohelet attunes us to the realistic sides of being so.

Conclusion
Qohelet teaches one to live here and now, in line with Chinese’ pragmatism. This paper argues for the Ecclesiastes’ message that offers hope, in line with the message of salvation as proffered in Christian belief. Wisdom represents one of the three ways in which God’s Salvation History is being communicated: through the priestly laws, the sages’ worldviews and the prophetic utterances. Within the wisdom corpus, Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes demonstrate a progress of salvific faith grounded in the fear of God. The book of Ecclesiastes conveys hope between the two extremes of human potential and limitation, its ideal and its realities. The emphasis upon human potential harmonizes with emphasis upon covenantal revelation. The two different points of departure should prompt biblical interpreters to defend wisdom heritage in the proclamation of salvation. It is enriching to know that human limitation is acknowledged, not
judged; and that human potential is affirmed, not dismissed. The affinity between wisdom literature with other canonical witnesses is important to articulate the Salvation History in biblical theology.

Further Reading


