Kumiko Takeuchi

Death and Divine Judgment in Ecclesiastes

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This revised version of Kumiko Takeuchi’s dissertation, undertaken at the University of Durham, proposes that Qoheleth’s views on the injustice of death participate in Hellenistic Judaism’s movement toward apocalyptic eschatology. The introduction offers a brief overview of the challenges involved with reading Ecclesiastes as a unified whole, as well as issues of historical context. While Takeuchi acknowledges that “dating Ecclesiastes is hardly straightforward,” she adopts as her “working hypothesis” a date “sometime during the Persian-Hellenistic transition period” near the end of the fourth century BCE (10–11).

The second chapter offers a wide-ranging survey of ancient Near East, Greek, and Israelite concepts of “death, afterlife, and divine judgement” (12) as a background for an exploration of these issues in Ecclesiastes. In her overview of Egyptian views, Takeuchi is particularly interested in the “shift to direct dependence on divine power,” seeming to begin in the seventh century BCE, which Takeuchi interprets as a response to political turmoil and military defeats (19). In both Ankhsheshonqy and Insinger Takeuchi finds a questioning of the world’s justice and acceptance of “inscrutable divine control” (22) similar to that which is present in Ecclesiastes. Takeuchi turns from Egypt to Mesopotamia, briefly discussing the oft-made comparisons between Ecclesiastes and the Epic of Gilgamesh (23–27). He argues that the “pessimistic view of death and afterlife” is an enduring facet of Mesopotamian thought. Takeuchi provides an overview of Greek ideas of death and the afterlife, including Plato’s arguments for the immortality of the soul, before turning
to the Hebrew Bible's presentation of these concepts. Takeuchi argues that “the biblical writers knew and accepted death as an unavoidable reality” but that “the manner or kind of death” was of utmost importance; dying of old age was accepted, but dying because “one … somehow offended God” was not (43). Takeuchi’s brief discussion of Sheol argues that it is associated “with untimely, unnatural, unexpected, or sinful death” (47), a place “in which only the ungodly may be imprisoned” (49). In contrast, preexilic biblical texts “are not fully conclusive about the ultimate destiny of the righteous dead” (51). Takeuchi reads later passages such as Dan 12:1–2 and Isa 25:8–9; 26:19 as demonstrating “a late development of apocalyptic eschatology” (55–56) and finds hints of “the resurrection motif” in earlier texts such as Pss 49, 73, and 88, as well as Ezek 37 (56). In summarizing the results of her survey, Takeuchi remarks, “there is some evidence that people begin to question their traditional beliefs and search for new ideas … when extensive social changes threaten their individual security and future” (58). It is against this background of social change that Takeuchi will read Ecclesiastes.

Before Takeuchi offers her own readings, chapter 3 surveys prior attempts to read Ecclesiastes. Takeuchi focuses on Childs’s canonical approach and Fox’s frame-narrative reading, both of which attempt to read Ecclesiastes as a unified work. Takeuchi provides a concise overview of Childs’s canonical approach as a whole, then turns to the canonical readings of Ecclesiastes offered by Childs and Sheppard. Both scholars find the interpretive key to Ecclesiastes in the epilogue. Takeuchi summarizes their approaches as follows: “They privilege the epilogue as integral to the whole of the book, in contrast to many historical-critical approaches that treat it as a secondary addition merely to correct Qoheleth’s unorthodox stance” (67–68). In contrast, these two scholars give the majority of Qoheleth’s monologue “less detailed attention than it deserves” (71). Takeuchi then turns to Fox’s reading of Ecclesiastes, which argues for a single-author structure that uses a “frame-narrative” to present the words of Qoheleth (68–71). In the epilogue, this frame-narrator provides a context for Qoheleth’s words, attempting to mitigate them with a more orthodox theological perspective. However, this perspective is not necessarily the perspective of the author: this “orthodox tone” adopted in the epilogue “maybe be reassuring, but it neither dominates the book nor cancels out Qoheleth’s view” (70). Takeuchi describes her own approach as hewing most closely to Fox’s, in that it will read the book as a whole as a monologue presented by a narrator, with the difference being that Takeuchi argues that “the frame-narrator is the author’s disguise” (86). In contrast to Childs, Takeuchi will also pay attention to the frame-narrator’s presentation of Qoheleth’s monologue rather than seeking the entire meaning of the book in the epilogue.

In chapter 4 Takeuchi offers her own presentation of Qoheleth’s views on death and injustice. Takeuchi notes that “Qoheleth is obsessed with death—the crux and archenemy of life on earth” (89). For Qoheleth, death is most problematic because it is “the fate of all human beings regardless of their moral/ethical or religious conduct” (94), making death the great “leveler” of the living (101). But more than that, Takeuchi argues that Qoheleth “ultimately views death as evil” (105–6), for it makes human activities meaningless. Turning to questions of divine judgment, Takeuchi reads...
Qoheleth as being distressed “over the absence of delay of justice in his society,” while also holding onto a “belief in God’s judgment” (110). Takeuchi’s main support comes from 8:5–6, following Rudman and others who read this passage in conjunction with 3:16–17 as referring to divine judgment (111). Suggesting that the concept of Sheol must be repellent to Qoheleth because all work or activity (and, hence, meaning) ceases there (120–23), Takeuchi suggests that Qoheleth instead holds out hope “that God will judge the right and wrongs before it is too late” (123). What, precisely, this means is left to the next chapter.

In summarizing “Qoheleth’s dilemma,” Takeuchi writes that the sage “recognizes God’s sovereignty and control over creation but finds God’s work and activity in the human realm elusive to grasp” (126). This is most evident in the persistent injustice Qoheleth observes in the world. Qoheleth “has no answer to death rendering permanent the injustice experienced during life” (148). Even so, Qoheleth holds onto “his belief the God will judge,” an inconsistency that Takeuchi finds unanswerable from the perspective of Qoheleth’s monologue. It is only when turning to the frame-narrator, Takeuchi argues, that this contradiction can be solved. The subsequent chapter turns to the perspective of the frame-narrator. Takeuchi begins with Ecclesiastes’s final chapter, arguing that the discourses of both Qoheleth and the frame-narrator are connected through their form of instruction to a younger listener and suggesting that one might look for connections between these two viewpoints “in their final conclusive statements” (150). Takeuchi spends a good deal of time on “Qoheleth’s second instruction,” found in 12:1–7 (152–63). After reviewing the literature on this chapter, which tends to read it as an allegory for old age, Takeuchi instead opts for the tactic taken by Seow, Krüger, and Beal, arguing for it as an eschatological poem. For Takeuchi, the placement of this poem as the culmination of Qoheleth’s monologue is a sly move on the part of the frame-narrator, foregrounding his own preferred solution to Qoheleth’s dilemma. While Qoheleth “may not be aware of the full extent of what he himself is saying, since he cannot fathom anything beyond death” (162) the frame-narrator uses this poem as a way to lead into his own eschatological solution to the problem of divine justice. This leads Takeuchi into a discussion of the epilogue, which she considers as “not merely the frame-narrator’s conclusion but also the author’s plot to redirect the audience’s attention so that his audience may reconsider the consequence of Qoheleth’s message” (164). In the frame-narrator’s concluding words, Takeuchi emphasizes the assertion that God will judge every deed into judgment (12:13) and argues that this must indicate a belief in “a comprehensive, universal eschatological judgment of both the righteous and the wicked” (168). This view falls in line with Qoheleth’s assertion that “God will judge (3:17; 11:9) because there is a time for everything” (173); what Qoheleth has missed is that “God transcends time just as he does space” (173).

This leads into chapter 7, in which Takeuchi situates Ecclesiastes within the developing discourses of apocalyptic eschatology. As Takeuchi notes, “Qoheleth appears in a context where retributive justice no longer seems to be at work” (180), often one of the key societal developments thought to lead towards an apocalyptic eschatology. First, Takeuchi argues that Qoheleth would not have
been opposed to ideas of “postmortem divine judgment,” as these explain “why God’s justice is delayed” and support “Qoheleth’s insistence that God will just in the face of absent justice in his society” (183). Takeuchi also finds Qoheleth’s monologue to include “spatial and ethical dualisms” (188), which are often considered markers of apocalyptic eschatology. However, Takeuchi admits that Qoheleth is separated from “the apocalyptists” by their ideas of “temporal dualism,” which Qoheleth is loath to consider (188–89). This inability to consider temporal dualism as a solution to the problem of death and justice leaves Qoheleth without an answer “to the righteous dead to whom justice has been denied on earth” (189). In Takeuchi’s reading, this blind spot of Qoheleth’s is actually a strategy on the part of the author to “solicit a reaction or response from the audience,” pushing them to find answers to the dilemma that Qoheleth himself is unable to resolve (196). A brief conclusion (two pages) makes interesting connections between the multivalence of Qoheleth’s vocabulary, as well as the book’s pedagogical approach, with the author’s own cultural context of Japan. These explorations are insightful, and it is easy to wish they were expanded upon.

Takeuchi has offered an insightful, well-researched exploration of a book that continues to vex readers and scholars. The author is to be commended for the ways in which she connects disparate elements of Ecclesiastes and for her insistence that the frame narrative be taken seriously as influencing any final reading of the book. While her conclusions are evocative, they offer more potential for further exploration than final answers. (Which is perhaps fitting for a monograph on Ecclesiastes!) While Takeuchi seeks to demonstrate the ways in which the frame-narrator is making use of Qoheleth’s monologue to advance a separate theological agenda, too frequently it seems that this use is only by setting Qoheleth up as a foil to undercut. This leaves one wondering why an author would devote so much space to the writings of a sage whom he intends only to dismiss with a few brief verses at the end. The connections Takeuchi makes between the monologue of Qoheleth and apocalyptic eschatology are intriguing, but the difference in views regarding temporal dualism is not simply a minor point of disagreement. One hopes that Takeuchi will explore this question further in subsequent works and offer a more in-depth reconstruction of how temporal dualism might have evolved out of a work such as Ecclesiastes. But this is also what we should hope for from monographs in the field of biblical studies: that they will point the way toward further scholarly endeavors. In this regard, Takeuchi succeeds admirably.