Sneed, Mark R.

The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social-Science Perspective

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Mark Sneed is Professor of Bible at Lubbock Christian University. The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes is a heavily revised version of his 1990 Ph.D. dissertation from Drew University, finally published in 2012. Sneed explains his aim as follows: “I will offer an interpretation of Ecclesiastes that both acknowledges the unorthodox nature of Qohelet’s words and manages to account for its acceptance among the canonical books of the Hebrew Bible” (10).

A substantial part of Sneed’s book is given over to reviewing previous scholarly attempts to account for Qohelet’s heterodox character. Sneed begins examining non-social-scientific approaches, discussing in particular the notion that Qohelet’s pessimism and skepticism arise out of the national crisis associated with catastrophic historical events. Sneed dismisses such attempts and concludes that “the problem of evil is a universal and perennial phenomenon that is not necessarily connected with social upheaval or anarchy” (34).

Sneed also examines the claim that Qohelet’s pessimism reflects the influence of ancient Greek philosophical thought—a notion that has recently been regaining favor. Sneed concludes that “there is no definitive evidence that Qohelet has drunk deeply from the
well of Hellenism” (46). He demonstrates that there are adequate antecedents for Qohelet’s thought from throughout the ancient Near East (44–46).

Sneed’s second chapter presents a comprehensive review of social-science approaches to Qohelet, which serves as background to his own contribution (which he describes as a “reconfiguration” of the data accumulated in his analysis of the work of others). Sneed’s summary and critique of virtually all the work done in the area provides an invaluable resource for scholars and students seeking to engage with social-scientific approaches to Qohelet.

Having summarized the data, Sneed proceeds to examine Qohelet’s sociohistorical context by presenting a social history (he designates it “the social history”; however, the number of uncertainties that appear would seem to make that inappropriate) and class analysis of Ptolemaic Judah. Although Sneed does not emphasize it, it is quickly apparent just how little definitive knowledge is available about Judah at this time: Sneed notes that “primary sources are few” (85); “there is a lot of uncertainty about whether there was a royal governor in the city or a garrison” (90); he is forced to appeal to principles that operated in Egypt that are then applied to Judah because “they seem to fit the circumstances of Jerusalem” (90). Information derived from Josephus also needs to be treated carefully because of the probable bias inherent in the data (95).

Sneed proceeds to examine the social roles of various groups (priests, secular aristocracy, temple scribes and singers, merchants, and the lower class[es]). He argues that Ptolemaic Judah was a hierocracy (i.e., governed primarily by the priests, 102–7) that demonstrated no significant hellenization (120–23).

Sneed next turns to consider the social location of Qohelet and his audience. He examines proposed historical allusions within Qohelet’s words (the royal experiment of Qoh 1–2; references to injustice and oppression; the tale of the old foolish king and the youth who rises from prison to take his place in Qoh 4:13–16, together with a number of other passages). In the end, Sneed concurs with many others that Qohelet is not specific enough to allow us to clearly identify any specific historical information. Even in the broadest possible terms, Sneed notes that “it is easy to see that Qohelet observes oppression and corruption in the land, but whether it is the Ptolemaic period or some other is impossible to demonstrate” (131). Curiously, Sneed never follows up on this expression of uncertainty over the date of Qohelet, which, although it represents the majority opinion, is not without significant detractors.

Sneed discusses at length Qohelet’s social location, concluding that he (and his fellow sages) occupied the “lowest rung of the indigenous aristocracy” (143)—the “retainer
class.” This location introduces numerous complexities into the social position of Qohelet and his status group. “Qohelet’s ambivalence about wealth and power is partially attributable to this social location. His class feels intellectually superior to the governing elite but does not consider itself among the truly poor” (154). Sneed concludes that Qohelet was an intellectual, a scribal scholar who taught apprentices, but he held no political power.

The fifth chapter of Sneed’s book focuses primarily on determining the meaning of the term הָבָל, which “is better translated as ‘futility’ or ‘illusion’ and not in the sense of protest but resignation to the fact that life does not operate as one might expect or wish” (162). He singles out Michael Fox’s understanding of הָבָל as “absurd” for criticism, yet Sneed’s preferred glosses do not seem to convey the ideas he seeks to invest them with, and indeed “absurd” or “senseless” more closely approach his idea than “futility” or “illusion”! Furthermore, his critique of Fox’s position is not particularly compelling. Given that Qohelet repeatedly seeks the answer to questions and, when he fails to find an answer, declares it to be הָבָל, the idea that the world makes no sense seems eminently appropriate. That Fox then interprets this as a protest against God does not ultimately alter the viability of this understanding of the term. It is also difficult not to detect some amount of protest in Qohelet’s use of הָבָל, particularly when he describes events he so designates as, among other things, “a sickening evil” (רָע חָלִי, Qoh 6:2).

For Sneed, the “carpe diem ethic” (e.g., Qoh 2:24–26) is an antidote to הָבָל (168). Sneed argues that Qohelet does not describe this as הָבָל, but his case is not convincing because the frame narrator summarizes Qohelet’s argument as everything is הָבָל, and those days to be seized are just as much beyond Qohelet’s ken as were all other matters. Moreover, the epilogue moves beyond Qohelet’s advice, which rests only on the concession that wisdom has provided no meaningful answer in affirming religious piety. Sneed claims too much in affirming Matthew Schwartz’s view that “Koheleth’s world is neither meaningless nor absurd, and man may work, learn and be happy” such that “[h]e finds meaning in life” (169). Qohelet never denies that there is meaning in the world; he only denies the possibility of learning that meaning in accord with the repeated theme of the wisdom literature that there is some knowledge concealed by God (Job 28; Qoh 3:11). Sneed has recourse to appeal to the supposition that Qohelet’s “under the sun” perspective leaves open a possibility of finding meaning “beyond this world” (169), yet Qohelet never hints at this; it appears to be a construction of modern interpreters seeking to find some rationale for Qohelet’s presence in the canon, which otherwise faces the problem noted by Sneed that, “if that were Qohelet’s message, the book would have never

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been canonized. Such a position would not have helped anyone in Qohelet’s time adjust to difficult circumstances” (170).

The significant omission in Sneed’s reasoning here, however, is that he fails to account for the significance of the frame and treats Qohelet’s words in isolation. The frame, and in particular the epilogue, set Qohelet’s words in a particular context that also distances the narrator from Qohelet. Read within that frame, other possible readings open up that allow the book of Ecclesiastes to attain a more significant relevance to an ancient audience.

For example, Sneed’s earlier dismissal of my argument that the epilogist employs Qohelet’s words with polemical intent (“while this is a possibility, it does not explain why one would go to the trouble to do that when a direct confrontation would have been more effective,” 11 n. 38) obscures one possible explanation. Sneed does not explain how he knows that a direct confrontation would be more effective. I argue that Qohelet’s words are used to draw in an audience who finds his query and methodology compelling, only to show them that the quest is pointless. By creating a sympathetic link between the audience and the character Qohelet, the author has cleverly avoided immediately alienating the audience by simply telling them that they are wrong. The leaking of the “Climategate” emails in 2009 illustrate the power of such an approach, doing far more damage to the credibility of climate science than did the direct confrontation of numerous “climate change deniers” over many years. Similarly, the honest words of the most highly regarded sage do more to undermine the legitimacy of speculative wisdom than any direct confrontation. Thus while Sneed (following Douglas Miller and others, 170–74) is correct to find Qohelet destabilizing his audience, it is the frame narrator’s words in the epilogue that restabilize them, not Qohelet’s carpe diem ethic.

Sneed moves next to examine theodicial strategies employed by Qohelet. He identifies the primary strategy as a tacit denial of God’s justice, a solution that fits with Qohelet’s overall theme, concluding that “Qohelet no longer has to defend God’s justice since it cannot be comprehended” (185). Sneed makes the important observation that Qohelet does not always use language in the same way that it is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (particularly language about “fearing God,” 186–87). Qohelet’s God, argues Sneed, is largely impersonal and remote (189). Sneed connects Qohelet’s theodicy with the social

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2. Sneed only briefly engages with the epilogue in his work. On page 174 he argues that Qohelet’s “pleasing words” must refer to aesthetics and not the meaning of the words. Had this been the meaning the epilogist sought to convey, however, it would have made better sense to have written “Qohelet found pleasing words.” To say he “sought” following the record of Qohelet’s words implies that he did not find pleasing words; see Martin A. Shields, *The End of Wisdom* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 64–66.
Finally, Sneed appeals to the notion of cognitive dissonance in an attempt to explain how Qohelet functioned “positively and creatively to help its audience deal with the troubling times of the Ptolemaic period” (197). The result, according to Sneed, is that the problem of theodicy is ultimately dissolved by Qohelet, whose emphasis on the sovereignty of God results in a “whatever will be, will be” attitude and an impersonal deity. Sneed thus accurately depicts Qohelet’s understanding on these matters and also correctly notes that “the impersonal God that Qohelet portrays was unlikely to have been very appealing to most religious persons of his day” (201–2).

Sneed next argues that Qohelet’s polemic against the overly rational traditional wisdom serves to resolve the problems raised by the doctrine of retribution around the time of the exile by making it more flexible (224). There is little doubt that Sneed is correct about Qohelet’s depiction of God, although his sociohistorical rationale for Qohelet’s presentation of God in these terms is perhaps less compelling.

The remainder of Sneed’s work concentrates on demonstrating how Qohelet’s pessimism did not serve as an impediment to the book’s inclusion in the canon. He argues that Qohelet uses pessimism to lower his audience’s expectations of the wisdom tradition as part of his polemic (240). This involves skepticism about human cognitive ability, about the value of a wise lifestyle, and about the doctrine of retribution. “His skepticism undermines wisdom’s legitimacy and value” (242). Sneed explains that

Qohelet does a service for his audience by questioning most of the traditional values of olden times, and he brings Judaism into a new era where new values were needed and new strategies developed. Instead of exclusive emphasis on religious piety, wisdom, and industriousness, which are possible only with social stability and predictability, Qohelet emphasizes the precariousness of his culture and society. Caution, fatalism, resignation, enjoyment of the present, and moderation are the new virtues and strategic outlooks that are more likely to succeed. (251)

In the end, Sneed argues that the final two verses (which he asserts are a gloss made by a later, Pharisaic editor, 273) of the book (Qoh 12:13–14) played a vital role in ensuring the work’s acceptance.

Sneed’s analysis is informed and thorough, although lacking at a number of critical points. First, he offers little justification for Ptolemaic dating but depends upon it for
establishing the social context of the work. Even during this period it is clear from Sneed’s work that there is a paucity of specific data, so any social reconstruction is necessarily contingent. While Sneed is successful in constructing a social setting that could fit much of what Qohelet records, it is far from clear whether Qohelet’s words would not equally well fit other historical and social settings were there sufficient information available from prior to the Ptolemaic period.

Second, he fails to engage in any significant way with the epilogue, essentially dismissing the last part without adequate justification. Even without this, he fails to investigate the role the distance the epilogue places between the book’s narrator and the words of Qohelet would play in the minds of the book’s audience.

Third, while Sneed does identify Qohelet with pessimistic literature from the ancient Near East, his analysis of genre falls short in not investigating connections with royal autobiographies and the impact that genre has on the generation of meaning in the text.

These criticisms should not overshadow the importance of Sneed’s work as both an invaluable introduction to social-scientific perspectives on Qohelet as well as an important contribution to the this area of study in its own right. For anyone interested in the area, Sneed’s work is essential reading. His work reflects a solid understanding of Qohelet’s message that the sages could offer no conclusive answers to the discrepancies observed in the just operation of the universe and provides a plausible sociohistorical context for the words of Qohelet.