

W. Creighton Marlowe

Trump Was Trumped Long Ago: or, the Legacy of Leadership in the Book of Ecclesiastes

Abstract:

Around the globe at any moment in history we witness a world in which numerous nations simultaneously struggle with the person or party in power. Often, we hear senior citizens long for a return to “the good old days.” But biblical anthropology reminds us that everyone by nature is sinful (willingly disobedient to God’s laws); and Qoheleth corrects those who long for a past golden age, because such thinking is not realistic. There never has been a government under which people were not oppressed, even the Hebrew theocracy of the Old Testament. Over the centuries, whether in the East or West, Southern or Northern hemisphere, leaders of countries or companies often have been disappointing. Those over whose reign we currently fret, at their worst, have nothing on many past pretenders to bring prosperity. The Hebrew Bible testifies to this sad reality and to its reasons.

Keywords: Leadership, Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth, Solomon, wisdom

W. Creighton Marlowe is the Associate Professor of Old Testament at the Evangelical Theological Faculty (Evangelische Theologische Faculteit) in Leuven, Belgium. He is the author of *Other Voices in Old Testament Interpretation* and is working on a forthcoming book on the Psalms.

Introduction

The quest for quality leadership is universal and nothing new—from Nimrod to Nero to Nixon, from Popes to Pol Pot to Putin, from Moses to Mao to Merkel. Presently, leadership crises are erupting seemingly around the world—most notably in South America, the Middle East, and Africa, not to mention the USA. Katy Barnato of CNBC recently asked, “Is the World Suffering from a Leadership Crisis?”¹ Polls show that 78-90% of the population see corruption as a major problem in places with large populations, like China, Brazil, and India.² The five political crises that most threaten the global economy were named in 2014 as (1) Iraq and Syria, (2) China vs. Japan, (3) the rise of the European far right, (4) Russia vs. Ukraine, and (5) Washington, DC’s ineptitude.³ Around the globe at any moment in history we witness a world in which numerous nations simultaneously struggle with the person or party in power. Often, we hear senior citizens long for a return to “the good old days.” But biblical anthropology reminds us that everyone by nature is sinful (willingly disobedient to God’s laws); and Qoheleth corrects those who long for a past golden age, because such thinking is not realistic: “Do not ask, “Where have all the good times gone?” Wisdom knows better than to ask such a thing” (Eccl 7:10; *The Voice Bible*).⁴ There never has been a government under which people were not oppressed, even the Hebrew theocracy of the Old Testament (OT hereafter). Over the centuries, whether in the East or West, Southern or Northern hemisphere, leaders of countries or companies often have been disappointing. Those over whose reign we currently fret, at their worst, have nothing on many past pretenders to bring prosperity. The Hebrew Bible testifies to this sad reality and to its reasons.

The Book of Ecclesiastes (also known as Qoheleth after its namesake) is thought by many to have been composed by, or at least is about, King Solomon. After all, the author claims to be a son of David and king in Jerusalem (Eccl 1:1, 12). Only David and Solomon were Hebrew kings in Jerusalem. Solomon was gifted with immense wisdom:

²⁹God gave Solomon wisdom and discernment: his mind was as expansive as the sands of the beach;³⁰his wisdom was far beyond that of the wise men of the East and of Egypt. ³¹He was the wisest of any other man. *He was even wiser* than Ethan the Ezrahite, Heman, and Calcol and Darda (Mahol’s sons). [Remember these, they will be on the test] Solomon was immensely famous in all the nearby countries. ³²He also wrote 3,000 proverbs

and composed 1,005 songs. [And you wonder why he lacked the time to govern properly?] ³³He reflected upon trees, from Lebanon's cedars to the hyssop that blankets the walls. He reflected upon animals, birds, reptiles, and fish. ³⁴People came from every corner of the earth—sent by kings who were fascinated by Solomon's wise reputation—to listen to Solomon's wisdom. (1 Kings 4:29-34)

But the speaker in Ecclesiastes is stressed out over how much he cannot understand or improve the world in which he lives. He declares everything *hebel*, that is empty and enigmatic (Eccl 1:2). He says he looked into every issue, but everything was too burdensome, an empty pursuit, and broken beyond repair (Eccl 1:13–15). Why was a king unable to make effective changes? We know how democratic leaders are compromised by popular opinion and their political opponents; but if Qoheleth is king, why is it that all he can do is wring his hands in despair? He claims to have more wisdom than any previous “ruler” over Jerusalem. Some say this means the writer cannot be Solomon because there was only one (Hebrew) king before him in Jerusalem. However, the Hebrew text (forget the biased translations) does not use the word king or ruler. It merely says those who were “over Jerusalem” previously. This could include the Jebusite as well as Hebrew leaders. Regardless, the real problem is how Solomon is so impotent with all his wisdom to find any solutions, or use his power as king to make changes. He actually concludes that wisdom or knowledge is negative. The more you have the more you have pain and are sorry (Eccl 1:18). Just think about how every US president enters office healthy and leaves broken down. Truly wise people seem to avoid such jobs; but then it's where we need them most. Their absence of course leaves the job open to those less wise and knowledgeable. This phenomenon did not begin with US history. It has ancient roots. Salvation has no human source.

Lessons about Life, Learning, and Labor⁵

Despair and Disobedience

As often happens, Qoheleth decided following the rules was not working, so why not try being unruly: “I said to myself, ‘Let me dabble and test you in pleasure and see if there is any good *in that*’” (Eccl 2:1a). Solomon certainly had the time and treasure to test out all life's options. He even admitted, “What is left for those who come after the king to do? They can only repeat what he has already done” (Eccl 2:12b). He records that

he engaged in more activities, good and bad, than any commoner would have the resources to do: entertainment, excessive wine, building projects, gardens, vineyards, irrigation projects, servants, herds, treasures of precious metals, hired workers, musicians—every desire he had (Eccl 2:2-10). And we know from elsewhere in the OT he bragged about 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kgs 11:3; although this may be the kind of embellishment over victories for which kings of the ancient world are famous). He loved so many foreign women he was led into idolatry (1 Kgs 11:1-5). He sinned much more than his father David (1 Kgs 11:6). But in all this, he found no lasting value (2:11). He concluded, however, that on balance wisdom is still more valuable than foolishness, because at least an informed person operates in the light of knowledge while the fool lives in the darkness of ignorance (2:12-14a).

In another place, he gives what seems to be odd advice from the Bible:

¹⁶*So my advice?* Do not act overly righteous, and do not *think yourself* wiser than others. *Why go and ruin yourself?* ¹⁷But do not be too wicked or foolish either. *Why die before it's your time?* ¹⁸Grasp both sides of things and keep the two in balance; for anyone who fears God won't give in to the extremes. (Eccl 7:16-18)

Qoheleth's point seems to be to realize that you cannot be so good that you earn God's blessings. Do not become so frustrated over the fact that good people often have bad experiences that you turn to rebellion as a response. Although goodness cannot guarantee a lack of problems, perplexities, and pain, purposeful wickedness has a high probability of leading to destruction. So (he is not saying be righteous and wicked in balance) the answer is to avoid any extreme lifestyle. Do not use law keeping or law breaking as ways hopefully to make life work in terms of health and wealth. Fear God but do not be a fanatic. Obedience to God's and man's laws is wise but cannot stop injustice or injury. Disobedience may be without consequences at times but is dangerous in the long run.

Despair and Death

On the heels of this hope, he then realized that even if he lives wisely, he will still die just like those who live wickedly and forsake wisdom (2:14b-16). For all it is worth, knowledge cannot empower us to cheat death. It will come to all, great or small, sooner or later. So why be wise,

why be righteous? Qoheleth confesses at this point he hated his life and his labor! (2:17–18). Mel Brooks famously said, “It’s good to be the king,” but Qoheleth seems not to agree, even with his many concubines and wives—maybe because of them—and his great wealth and wisdom. Even if this book was written long after Solomon, Solomon is the one to whom the text is applied and upon whose life the lessons are based.

The Defeat of Despair

Qoheleth probably means “a collector” (in this case of wisdom). Remember Solomon is credited with thousands of proverbs, created or collected. At the end of this book Qoheleth explains that he “searched for just the right words *to bring hope and encouragement*, and he wrote honestly about truth *and the realities of life*” (12:10). Reflecting on how hard work cannot guarantee success (2:19–23), he decided: “There is nothing better than for people to eat and drink and to see the good in their hard work. These *beautiful gifts*, I realized, too, come from God’s hand” (2:24). The antidote to anguish is appreciation. In spite of all life’s puzzles, problems, and perplexities, some satisfaction may be found in life’s everyday activities like mealtimes as well as manual and mental labors. Something good can be found and focused upon in the midst of the difficulties and even disasters of life. Find enjoyment in meals with family and friends, today, while you can, not waiting for some theoretical thrill to come. The very opposite of the hedonist, Qoheleth speaks not of finding life’s meaning in food and fun but merely accept simple pleasures as God’s gifts and means for delight in the midst of all that can cause despair. He urges people to see God and something good in life’s everyday affairs rather than waiting on extraordinary excitement that might never come. Life is short. Find a way to enjoy each day. He says if anyone could find meaning in material things, he could. But he could not do it, meaning all those with less opportunities need not try. He has already proven they will fail (2:25). Wisdom and knowledge and joy will come to those who seek to please God (2:26a). God allows (which we cannot fathom) all extremes of delight and disaster to color life (3:1–8). But we are accountable for our actions (3:15). We, like Eve, want an eternal perspective (to have our eyes opened and understand good and bad—an idiom for “everything”), but we remain human to our frustration (3:10–11). So, there is “nothing better for us than to be joyful and to do good throughout our lives; to eat and drink and see the good in all of our hard work is a gift from God” (3:12–13).

Lessons about Leaders

In several places in the rest of this book, Qoheleth deals with leadership issues. At the end of chapter three he observes “that in place of justice, wickedness prevails. In place of righteousness, wrongdoing succeeds” (3:16). You would think a king could make heads roll and fix this. Trump did (by saying “You’re fired!”). But the point is that long ago we find incompetent and/or immoral people in important jobs. Justices of the peace brought neither. Religious leaders were irreligious. Why? They will be judged by God, so we cannot conclude bad leaders were put there by God’s will (3:17). God wants us to learn from this, that no matter how elevated a position someone has, he or she is still a human, who will die just like an animal and decay in the ground (3:18–20). No leader is divine even if amazing. But the norm is that leaders are disappointing. Power corrupts. So, they have to be subject to the same standards as everyone. They have no divine rights; they are not above God’s or man’s laws. Whenever proper safeguards have been lacking, stupid and dangerous people have entered and remained in power to the detriment of their constituencies. In a democracy people who feel oppressed by elites can elect an idiot just out of spite. It’s happened before.

Origin of Oppressions

Chapter four begins with the author saying he looked around and witnessed a lot of oppression in the world (4:1ai). Again, how is it that the king can only look and bemoan the situation? Anyway, he saw oppressed people in tears with no one to help them (4:1aii–b). Their abuse was so bad Qoheleth decided it better to be dead than in this living death (4:2). Better yet, is never to have been born and to have to experience this suffering (4:3). It doesn’t get much worse than this. Perhaps this king was talking about conditions in lands over which he had no control. Although in the OT God often judges his people as worse than the idolatrous nations. Regardless, he then realizes that all this pursuit of power is fueled by envy: “All the work and skills people develop come from their desire to be better than their neighbors” (4:4a). To this there are two extreme responses, which are frequent: (1) be a fool and run away from the rat race and refuse to work, but then be poor and waste your life, or (2) be another kind of fool, a workaholic, who forsakes happiness and health for material success (4:5–6). The latter often become leaders, but only because the façade of work and wealth is misinterpreted as wisdom.

Later he says we should not be surprised that oppression of the weak by the strong takes place, because everyone is part of a hierarchical system (5:8a). Each person is on some rung of the ladder of success and is simultaneously stepping on someone below them to get higher while being stepped on by the person above them. (5:8b). It's dog eat dog and every man for himself. Even in so-called Christian countries. A country does best when its leaders are not spoiled elites who know nothing of an honest day's work (5:9). Those who love wealth never have enough (5:10). Hard working people with few possessions fall to sleep easily; but those whose lives are built on the pursuit of wealth, stay awake worrying about their possessions (5:11–12). It is true, as some may reply, many rich people probably sleep well. I am sure many do because they are those who have attained such wealth and power they have little or nothing to worry about—unless it is their eternal fate.

Woe is pronounced on a land whose leaders are not sophisticated and party when they should work; who live to drink and eat rather than drink and eat to live (Eccl 10:16–17). Beware of incompetent leaders: a house with a lazy owner will leak (10:18). Beware of immature leaders, who are preoccupied with sensual and monetary concerns (10:19). Beware of paranoid leaders, even pastors, who will send out spies and imprison you for even the rumor that you disagree with them (10:20).

Old or Young?

Leadership lapses lead to debates over whether it is best to have older, experienced leaders (who might be out of date) or younger exciting, fresh leaders (who might be naïve). Qoheleth tells a story about an old, foolish king who rejected advice, so a young opponent from a poor background rose up to take his place (with the promise of reform and making the country great again; 4:13–15). Initially he was loved by all, who surrendered all authority to him. (4:16a). But he apparently abused his authority (power corrupts), and was no longer popular (4:16b). This is the way of leadership and those being led. People are fickle and a leader lasts only as long as he pleases them. Only a fool believes his power and popularity will last (4:16c).

In Ecclesiastes 9:13–18, the author tells how once a small city was besieged by a powerful king. A poor but wise man was able to save the city. Still he was not remembered. Although wisdom seems better than mere might, this wisdom was despised. But wisdom is usually found in

quiet words, and foolishness in shouting. Wisdom is stronger than war weapons (the pen is mightier than the sword), but it only takes one sinful and stupid person to destroy everything good and peaceful that has been accomplished.

Oaths and Broken Promises

Qoheleth warns his readers to be sure to keep their promises, especially those made to God. Better not to take any oath than make one and break it (5:1–5). He then perhaps gives the best advice ever given to politicians:

⁶Do not let your mouth lead you to sin, and do not claim before the temple messenger that your vow was a mistake. Why should God be angry at the sound of your voice and destroy everything you've worked hard to achieve? ⁷Daydreaming and excessive talking are pointless *and fleeting things to do, like trying to catch hold of a breath.* (Eccl 5:6–7).

Opposite Realities

Another aspect of life and leadership is that wealth is not a necessary evidence of wisdom or a good work ethic. Success or failure can be due to dumb luck. The fastest runner will not necessarily win the gold medal, and the strongest army does not always win the battle; and a skillful and smart person may be poor, because all are subject to time and chance or misfortune (9:11). No one knows the future. He who is successful today may be suddenly a failure and lose all, not due to his own fault but due to the crimes of others and unexpected events, like a fish is caught in a net without warning (9:12). The only guarantee is death (even more than taxes). So

⁷*here is what you should do:* go and enjoy your meals, drink your wine and love every *minute of it* because God is already pleased with what you do. ⁸Dress your best, and don't forget a splash of scented fragrance. ⁹Enjoy life with the woman you love. Cherish every moment of the fleeting life which God has given you under the sun. For this is your lot in life, *your great reward* for all of your hard work under the sun. ¹⁰Whatever you find to do, do it well because where you are going—the grave—there will be no working or thinking or knowing or wisdom. (Eccl 9:7–10)

Finally, everyone will do well to follow the final advice of Ecclesiastes:

¹³And, when all is said and done, here is the last word: worship in reverence the one True God, and keep His commands, for this is *what God expects* of every person.
¹⁴For God will judge every action—including everything done in secret—whether it be good or evil. (Eccl 12:13–14)

Conclusion: Attitudes and Actions

Beliefs influence behavior. To borrow an expression from Francis Schaeffer: in light of this, how should we then live? Perhaps something important to keep in mind is that when Israel asked for a human king, to be like the nations around them (1 Sam 8:5–22), this was not God's ideal. A long history of commendable as well as corrupt and cruel kings was already a historical reality. Samuel listed the liabilities of having a king, which many subsequent societies also ignored; and ironically used other OT passages to justify their monarchies. Regardless of the governing styles politically or institutionally, past or present, leaders were and are necessary components, and what scripture helps us understand is that incompetent and/or immoral leaders are at times unavoidable and inevitable. Our current global realities are nothing new when it comes to European, Asian, African, or American leaders. Post-Eden and pre-Eternity, good and bad emperors and executives have, do, and will exist; although one person's strongman is another's bully, and one person's mild or moderate leader is another's milquetoast. Both will come and go, and Qoheleth's advice is not to overreact with doomsday predictions or depression, but to be wise and avoid extreme solutions. Pray for your leaders, and be a good citizen to the limit of conscience and God's commands. Your current leadership crisis, wherever you are, likely pales in comparison with many past political, professional, and even ecclesiastical, predicaments. Resort neither to flight nor a fight, but articulate and advance a measured, level-headed, and balanced biblical answer.

End Notes

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/23/is-the-world-suffering-from-a-leadership-crisis.html> (accessed 07 Sept 2016, 15:51).

² <http://reports.weforum.org/outlook-global-agenda-2015/top-10-trends-of-2015/3-lack-of-leadership/> (accessed 07 Sept 2016, 15:45).

³http://www.salon.com/2014/06/18/5_political_crises_that_threaten_the_global_economy_partner/#topOfPage2 (accessed 07 Sept 2016, 15:39).

⁴ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations are taken from *The Voice Bible: Step into the Story of Scripture*, Ecclesia Bible Society (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

⁵ This essay is based on the author's many years of studying and teaching Ecclesiastes, so the content is not drawn directly from other than the primary source of the Hebrew Qoheleth; however, significant publications that have influenced my interpretations and translations are: Christian D. Ginsburg, *Cohleth, Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes: Translated from the Original Hebrew, with a Commentary, Historical and Critical* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861); Richard G. Moulton, *Ecclesiastes and the Wisdom of Solomon*, The Modern Reader's Bible (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1902); H. L. Ginsberg, "The Structure and Contents of the Book of Koheleth," In *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, ed. M. Noth and D. Winton Thomas, 2nd reprint. Vetus Testamentum Supplement III (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 138-; H. Carl Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Life View as Seen in His Recurring Phrases," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 37:1 (Fall 1974): 57-73; Graham S. Ogden, "Qoheleth's Use of the 'Nothing is Better' Form," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98 (1978): 339-50; R. E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature. Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature XIII (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1981); M. A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 16 (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983); M. V. Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 (1986): 409-27; J. L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1988); T. Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament 16 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998); N. Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, Continental Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, The JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004); Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, The Two Horizons OT Commentary series (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011).