Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of Life

What does the Book of Ecclesiastes (in Hebrew, Qohelet) have to tell us about the meaning of life? This lecture series explores what is often considered the most enigmatic book of the Hebrew Bible as a guide for reflecting on the messy realities of our lives and the world around us. We will explore the socio-historical, theological and literary features of the text along with its many echoes in the arts and popular culture over the ages. Although often seen as a pessimistic book, it offers a rich source of insight into life's perplexities and how to live more fully.

Schedule of Topics:

Week 1

Setting the context of Ecclesiastes, guidelines for parsing a biblical text, and a discussion of chapters 1 and 2: Vanity and the futility of self-indulgence.

Week 2

Discussion of chapters 3 and 4: Seasons of life and the God-given task; echoes of Ecclesiastes in poetry and song (from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* to Pete Seeger and Byrds, "Turn, Turn, Turn").

Week 3

Discussion of chapters 5 and 6: Humility and desire; echoes of Ecclesiastes in the existential philosophy and the work of Albert Camus (*The Plague*).

Week 4

Discussion of chapters 7 and 8: Disillusionment and riddles; the nature of meaning, illusion, disillusionment and letting go of false beliefs.

Week 5

Discussion of chapters 9 and 10: Wisdom and folly; the meaning of wisdom and Ecclesiastes' place in the Wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible.

Week 6

Discussion of chapters 11 and 12; Death and life; the meaning of life in the face of mortality, the view of death in contemporary culture; echoes with Dicken's "A Christmas Carol"; a summing up.

Jane Dawson, LinR 2019/2020

Recommended readings for continued learning

- The Book of Ecclesiastes/Qohelet (multiple translations)
- William P. Brown (2000) *Ecclesiastes*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Westminster John Knox Press.
- Elsa Tamez (2000). *When the Horizons Close: Rereading Ecclesiastes*. Wipf and Stock.
- David Gibson (2017). *Living Life Backwards: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live.* Crossway Books.

Other Interesting Resources

- T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*. Faber and Faber.
- The Byrds/Pete Seeger, "Turn, Turn, Turn"
- Roger Zelazny (1963). "A Rose for Ecclesiastes." *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction.*
- Charles Dickens, "A Christmas Carol."
- Robert K. Johnston (2004). *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes Through the Eyes of Contemporary Film.* Baker.
- Albert Camus, *The Plague*