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Chapter 2

‘WHAT IS MAN?’ A WISDOM ANTHROPOLOGY

Jamie A. Grant

Introduction

Standard approaches to the question of Old Testament anthropology, perhaps naturally enough, tend to focus on foundational theological premises, often originating from Genesis 1–3, rather than the realities of human experience. Therefore, basic tenets like the creation of men and women in the image of God, humanity as the pinnacle of the created order and the first humans’ role as vice-regents and co-creators with Yhwh tend to dominate theological anthropologies derived from the Hebrew canon.¹ Such a starting point is, of course, defensible but is also, arguably, unhelpful. If the attempt to derive a theological anthropology from the ancient text revolves around the question, ‘What is man according to the Old Testament?’ then answers derived from Genesis 1–3 and its intertexts skew the discussion positively.² Undoubtedly, it is good to know the theory, but the abstract bears little

1. For example, Marc Cortez’s helpful *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2010) begins with a chapter on the ‘Imago Dei’ following introductory discussions. He comments on the creation of humanity in the image of God, ‘[c]onsequently, this statement has been understood by many theologians to stand at the very center of a properly Christian concept of what it means to be human, and the starting point of theological anthropology’ (15). To affirm his point, every systematic theology on my shelves begins its discussion of anthropology with reflection on creation in the divine image as the pinnacle of creation.

2. ‘Standard’ anthropological conclusions drawn from Genesis 1–3 include the following three views: first, humanity is created in the image of God (*imago Dei*, Gen. 1:26–28); second, humanity is created with a task and purpose in mind as part of God’s plan for creation; and, third, humanity has been marked by the fall (Genesis 3). It is this *fallen* reality that is our nexus with the sages’ consideration of the human condition. For sources on these three conclusions, see, for example, Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986); J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005); G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, trans. Dirk W. Jellema (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), and James Orr’s classic

resemblance to the concrete experience of being human. However, were we to take the Wisdom literature – with its focus on the empirical and its observational discussion of human experience – as our starting point, it would provide a helpful corrective to this imbalance.³ While in no way denying the *ultimate* reality of the theological construct presented in the early chapters of Genesis, the poetry of the OT wisdom tradition provides a perspective on anthropology that is much more focused on the challenges, frustrations, inconsistencies and banalities of human existence than it is on these much-discussed ideologies.⁴ These texts build a view of anthropological reality that, arguably, provides a better starting point for the modern reader's quest to understand human nature. The foundational texts become more, not less, intelligible when viewed in the light of human experience honestly described.⁵

text *God's Image in Man* (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1905). All of the standard commentaries will also address the question of humanity's creation in the image of God to one degree or another. See, for example, the discussion in Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. Dorothea Barton, (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1972), 57–61; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC; Waco: Word Books, 1987), 26–33, or John H. Walton, *Genesis* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 127–45.

3. I appreciate that there is some debate about both the extent of the Wisdom corpus and the appropriateness of the classification at all (see Will Kynes, 'The Nineteenth-Century Beginnings of "Wisdom Literature", and Its Twenty-first-Century End?', in *Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Jarick [LHBOTS 618; London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2015], 83–108). However, for the purposes of this essay I am adopting a tight definition of the Wisdom Literature as encompassing the books of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

4. Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli, 'Bodily and Embodied: Being Human in the Tradition of the Hebrew Bible', *Int.* 67, no. 1 (2013): 5–19. In his encyclopaedic, two-volume study, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), David Kelsey uses the language of humanity's 'ultimate context' to describe the human condition as creature before God and its 'proximate contexts' to elucidate the more experiential realities of life in creation. While there are points where our views vary, Kelsey makes a solid exegetical and theological case for beginning reflections on a Christian view of anthropology with the Wisdom texts, rather than Genesis 1–3 (see esp. ch. 4B, 176–89). I am grateful to the editors of this volume for drawing my attention to Kelsey's work at the first draft stage of this essay.

5. Richard Clifford comments, 'The wisdom books remind readers that one must take hold of life as both gift and task, that there are many possibilities but also profound limits, and that *honest observation and fidelity to one's experience of life* can put one in touch with a wondrous order whose source is God. The wisdom books' starting point of everyday experience and honest observations create common ground for Bible readers to engage with other people just as it once did for ancient Israel and its neighbors' ('Introduction to Wisdom Literature', in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, ed. Leander Keck, Vol. 5 [NIB; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997], 16 [emphasis mine]).

When we begin with the poetic Wisdom tradition, there seem to be three repeated frustrations that characterize human experience and provide us with a good starting point in the development of a sapiential anthropology. These are:

1. The frustration of divine sovereignty;
2. The frustration of human finitude; and,
3. The frustration of human mortality.

The second point is, of course, the flip side of the first and, indeed, the third is the ultimate conclusion of the second. So these three notions – the imponderability of God's sovereignty, human limitedness and the inevitability of death – are, in many ways, all aspects of the same experience. However, they also combine to paint a vivid picture of humanity from the perspective of the Wisdom tradition. The central and underlying premise behind these tensions is the idea of design or counsel.⁶ The sages believed that humanity plays a part in the divine plan for the cosmos; however, *discerning* that plan can be marred by complexity and confusion.⁷ This is the human experience. Wisdom's practical voice needs to be heard in order to counterbalance theoretical approaches to anthropology. It would be helpful to examine each of these points in turn before drawing some theological conclusions.

The Frustration of Divine Sovereignty

Ironically, knowledge of a sovereign Creator contributes to feelings of both great security and great frustration in the human experience. This is ideally illustrated for us in the book of Job. Often considered a classic theodicy, in reality, the topics under debate between Job and his friends vary widely.⁸ One of the themes that come under discussion time and again in the speech cycles (Job 4–27) is the question of human response to the sovereignty of God. For example, note Zophar's challenge to Job:

Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?

6. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, 'Liminality and Worldview in Proverbs 1–9', *Semeia* 50 (1990): 111–44.

7. See Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 8–11. In his comparison with Camus's concept of the absurd, Fox comments, 'Qohelet asserts the irrationality of life and the impenetrability of God's will, but he also seeks to recover meanings, values, and truths to discern a Way of life through the murky wasteland' (11).

8. Ernest W. Nicholson, 'The Limits of Theodicy as a Theme of the Book of Job', in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, ed. John Day et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 71–82.

It is higher than heaven – what can you do? Deeper than Sheol – what can you know?

Its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea. (Job 11:7–9)⁹

The implication is clear. God is beyond human understanding and his sovereignty is unfathomable. Therefore, Zophar concludes that Job should turn aside from his iniquity in order to relieve himself of the wrath of God (11:13–20).¹⁰

Job is more than willing to agree with the premise while denying Zophar's conclusions:

With God are wisdom and might; he has counsel and understanding.

If he tears down, none can rebuild; if he shuts a man in, none can open.

If he withholds the waters, they dry up; if he sends them out, they overwhelm the land.

With him are strength and sound wisdom; the deceived and the deceiver are his. (Job 12:13–16)

The remainder of the pericope continues to make the same point with reference to the influence of officials and nations. These may be powerful individuals or states but the sovereignty of God always demarcates the extent of their success or failure. Job's acknowledgement of divine sovereignty is, however, a challenging one. God is sovereign and clearly in complete control, but this is often an uncomfortable truth from the human perspective.

I am a laughingstock to my friends;

I, who called to God and he answered me,

a just and blameless man, am a laughingstock. (Job 12:4)

From empirical observation and the experience of lived reality, divine sovereignty can be a difficult human experience for the believer.¹¹ Job knows and freely acknowledges God's complete control, yet he is still left to deal with the profoundly discomfiting reality that he, a God-fearing, righteous and faithful practitioner of wisdom, is left as a laughingstock before his friends and all observers through

9. All biblical citations are drawn from the English Standard Version (Crossway Bibles: 2011), unless otherwise indicated.

10. Katharine J. Dell, 'Job', in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 348–9.

11. 'Life and death are in God's hands – this can be seen as praiseworthy and yet terrifying if God has become the enemy . . . The problem that is made clear in 12:13–25 is that God often acts capriciously and arbitrarily in nature. He reverses human fortunes, and humans are helpless to do anything about it' (Dell, 'Job', 352). I am not sure that 'capricious' and 'arbitrary' are quite the right words to reflect Job's complaint here, but Dell certainly grasps the challenge of divine sovereignty from the human perspective well.

absolutely no fault of his own.¹² Job denies Zophar’s conclusion that he is suffering because he has sinned badly (13:4–12), but he is still confronted with the painful present reality of extreme suffering without ethical ‘cause’ on his part. So, sovereignty is not always a good thing from the anthropological perspective.

This tension is further emphasized in the following chapter. Job, under the influence of the friends, has come to believe that God has taken out a רִיב against him.

Though he slay me, I will hope in him;
 yet I will argue my ways to his face.
 This will be my salvation,
 that the godless shall not come before him.
 Keep listening to my words,
 and let my declaration be in your ears.
 Behold, I have prepared my case;
 I know that I shall be in the right.
 Who is there who will contend with me?
 For then I would be silent and die.
 Only grant me two things,
 then I will not hide myself from your face:
 withdraw your hand far from me,
 and let not dread of you terrify me.
 Then call, and I will answer;
 or let me speak, and you reply to me.
 How many are my iniquities and my sins?
 Make me know my transgression and my sin.
 Why do you hide your face
 and count me as your enemy? (Job 13:15–24)

This passage highlights some of the difficulties experienced by the believer in the face of the mysteries of divine sovereignty. Job clearly does not, indeed cannot, understand his present experience. The friends’ claim that he suffers because he has sinned greatly is a bare-faced lie (13:4–12), yet in the reality of his experience he still suffers terrors despite his reverence for God and his commitment to a life-style of wisdom.¹³ How can he possibly square this circle?

The tension of the human experience of divine sovereignty is palpable in the preceding passage. First, sovereignty inevitably leads to a sense of inner conflict for humanity (13:15a).¹⁴ Job knows that God is in complete control over his life and,

12. Note the theologically awkward use of לְבַיְתָא ‘without reason’ in Job 2:3.

13. Note Ticciati’s helpful discussion of Job’s ‘bipolar conception of self’ in *Job and the Disruption of Identity: Reading beyond Barth* (London: Continuum, 2005), 91–6. Citing the NIDOTTE article on בַּתָּה she comments that the terror Job expresses here is ‘a response to something not fully understood and overwhelmingly powerful’ (93).

14. There is a textual question with regard to this verse, but the modern English translations get it right in translating the verse as an expression of conflicted realities (“Though

therefore, ultimately responsible for the tragedies he currently experiences. However, despite this fact, he also declares hope in his Sovereign because he realizes that any *solution* to his present crisis is also only to be found in relationship with him. Sovereignty leads inevitably to a conflicted sense of human reality. For Job here, God is both the source of his problem and the source of his solution.¹⁵ This tension is the anthropological reality of all people of faith at some point (or at many points) in life.

Second, we see the significance of lament in the human experience of life with God (13:15b). We do not have scope to develop this argument to the full here, but Job is clear that the only possibility of finding ‘resolution’ to the experiential tension of a life of suffering lived *coram Dei* is through the honest and forthright expression of complaint to the Sovereign.¹⁶ Hebrew lament is not so much about the expression of sadness as it is about the perspectival declaration that Yhwh is not upholding his side of the covenant. Job knows that his perspective may be wrong, yet he laments forcefully and is ultimately *commended* for that lament. He is the only human participant in the dialogue who addresses God directly, and it is for this determination to bring all of the deep angst of his human experience before God that he is ultimately affirmed (Job 42:7–9).¹⁷ So, acknowledging our conflicted reality of human experience seems to be an essential part of our make up as people, especially as people of faith.

Third, there is no equality in sovereignty. God rules. The end. Note the tone of some of the verses highlighted previously. Job believes that God has taken legal action against him,¹⁸ yet there is no equity in defending a case brought by the

he slay me, I will hope in him’) rather than the more fatalistic expression of certain death (‘Behold, he will slay me, I have no hope’ [RSV]). See Francis I. Andersen, *Job* (TOTC; Leicester: IVP, 1976), 166–67 for fuller discussion.

15. As Robert Gordis puts it, ‘Finding neither compassion nor truth in the Friends, Job flees from God to God, seeking refuge from His wrath in His mercy’ (*The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965], 235). This is the essence of the concept of lament in Hebrew poetry.

16. I have developed this argument more fully elsewhere (see Jamie A. Grant, ‘The Hermeneutics of Humanity: Reflections on the Human Origin of the Laments’, in *A God of Faithfulness: Essays in Honour of J. Gordon McConville on His 60th Birthday*, ed. Jamie A. Grant et al. [LHBOTS 538; London: T&T Clark, 2011], 182–202). See also Craig C. Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms: A Form-Critical and Theological Study* (JSOTSup 52; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989) for a fuller-length treatment of these ideas.

17. Elaine A. Phillips, ‘Speaking Truthfully: Job’s Friends and Job’, *BBR* 18, no. 1 (2008): 31–43. See also Kenneth Numfor Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the ‘Happy’ Ending in Job 42:7–17* (BZAW 354; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005) and Grant, ‘Hermeneutics of Humanity’, 198–202.

18. This, of course, turns out to be a wrong conclusion when we arrive at the Yhwh speeches, Job’s conclusion and the epilogue. Job, influenced by the repeated assertions of the friends, accepts their argument that God has put him on trial. When we get to the end of the book, Yhwh replies, ‘What case? What trial? I have never brought a ריב and never turned my back.’ The friends’ conclusion was wrong and Job was led astray in accepting

Almighty. Job is determined to argue his case (13:15b), yet he knows that it could well get him killed (13:15a). He can voice his defence but where is the advocate who can contend on his behalf (13:19)? There is no one who can represent him and no judge who is higher than the One bringing the case.¹⁹ Divine sovereignty is an absolute concept. There is no leeway or fuzziness around the edges and this is an intimidating experience for frail humans. Anthropologically speaking, the confrontation with absolute rule is a sobering and mysterious reality check. It feels like there is no wriggle room. We are subjects, plain and simple.²⁰

Unsurprisingly, the book of Ecclesiastes and, arguably more surprisingly, the book of Proverbs echo the frustrations of human experience vis-à-vis relationship with an absolute Sovereign.²¹ Take, for example, the discussion of plans and planning in Proverbs 16:

The plans of the heart belong to man,
but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD (Prov. 16:1).
Commit your work to the LORD,
and your plans will be established (Prov. 16:3).
The heart of man plans his way,
but the LORD establishes his steps (Prov. 16:9).

Clearly, from the proverbial perspective, planning is a good thing.²² Yet the best plans of the wisest people are readily subverted by the sovereign will of God (16:9).²³ God has the final say in all of the events of humanity (16:1), and it is only in relationship with him that our plans have *any* chance of succeeding (16:3).²⁴

their premise. See Will Kynes, ‘The Trials of Job: Relitigating Job’s “Good Case” in Christian Interpretation,’ *SJT* 66, no. 2 (2013): 174–91, for a helpful discussion of legal motifs in Job.

19. Dell, ‘Job,’ 352.

20. Ironically, a key aspect of the message of Job, however, is that importunate human argument may well turn out to be part of the divine plan and purpose. This does not deny the fact, though, that there it is a stark reality to face up to the concept of a sovereign God from the human perspective. See Kynes, ‘The Trials of Job,’ 190–91.

21. It is often argued that Job and Ecclesiastes represent a reaction against the overly simplistic world view of Proverbs. This, of course, is something of a misrepresentation: Proverbs is far from simplistic and is fully cognizant of the evils that manifest themselves in the world. It is rather a fossilized *reading* of Proverbs that comes under critique in both Job and Ecclesiastes (see Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Wisdom: Israel’s Wisdom Literature in the Christian Life* [Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995]).

22. See, for example, Prov. 15:22: ‘Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed’; or Prov. 21:5: ‘The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty.’

23. Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2009), 631.

24. Indeed, Raymond Van Leeuwen argues that the question of divine sovereignty and human freedom is the focal point of the cluster of proverbs found in 16:1–9 (‘The Book of

The challenge of divine sovereignty is a repeated theme throughout the proverbial literature. Proverbs 1–9 encourages the reader to seek out wisdom as a faithful guide for life. The implications are clear throughout: wisdom is a good thing, it is of great value and should be pursued with all the strength that we can muster. However, the almost inevitable corrective appears in Proverbs 3:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.
(Prov. 3:5–6)

The directives of the introductory section of Proverbs are clear: wisdom is a faithful guide; folly will lead you astray; there is great value in wisdom; therefore, above all else, pursue wisdom with passion and vigour (Prov. 4:5–9). To that end the faithful reader is encouraged to:

Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure. (Prov. 4:26).

Except when they are not sure. Or, at best, one may say that applying wisdom leads to paths that are *by and large* sure except when Yhwh deems otherwise and intervenes to fulfil his own sovereign will and purpose. Wisdom and understanding are great things, the sages tell us, but remember the wisest of paths and the greatest human understanding can be subverted by God in a heartbeat. Such is the lot of creatures in the hands of their Creator.²⁵

The NET Bible captures the essence of this frustration perfectly in their rendering of Prov. 20:24:

The steps of a person are ordained by the LORD – so how can anyone understand his own way?

The subject notes in the NET Bible add insightfully: ‘To say that one’s steps are *ordained by the LORD* means that one’s course of actions, one’s whole life, is divinely prepared and sovereignly superintended (e.g. Gen. 50:26; Prov. 3:6). Ironically, man is not actually in control of his own steps.’²⁶ And there is great

Proverbs: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections’, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Keck, 159.

25. ‘This [dependence on Yhwh in Prov. 3:5–6] focuses on the point that there is a potential, if not explicitly acknowledged, tension between wisdom’s pragmatic concern to show the path to human well-being and happiness and the sometimes unfathomable demands of God’ (Ronald E. Clements, ‘Proverbs’, in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Dunn and Rogerson, 440–41).

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frustration in the constant encouragement to seek wisdom in order to live well when one is confronted with the realization that ultimately ‘one’s whole life is divinely prepared and sovereignly superintended’.²⁷

It will come as a surprise to precisely no one that Qohelet also struggles with the concept of divine sovereignty, so we can be brief here. Following the introductory wisdom poem that reflects on the grinding monotony of life, the sage begins his ‘autobiographical’ section with the summary statement:

I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men!

I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted. (Eccl. 1:12–15, NIV)

The ‘heavy burden’ (עֲבֹדָה כְּבִדָּה) has attracted a wide diversity of colourful translation options from the RSV’s ‘unhappy business’ to the KJV’s ‘sore travail’. However one parses the precise nuance of this idiom, clearly, it is not a good thing. The essence of Qohelet’s frustration lies in the realities of v. 15 – that which has been preordained cannot be changed or impacted even by the greatest of human endeavours.²⁸ As echoed in 7:13, that which the Sovereign decides to do is done and cannot be undone.²⁹

So, in summary, what can be said regarding the essence of humanity according to the Wisdom literature? People are creature subjects to the will of their Creator. They are subjects under the rule of a Sovereign. If we are to read the text (and life) honestly, there are times when the absolute rule of the creator and covenant God

27. ‘Man cannot fully plan or control the course of his life, for God is ultimately in control, and God’s plans are not transparent. This is the message of Prov. 16:9’ (Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 674). Although, clearly, not an OT text, the Epistle of James is strongly flavoured by the Hebrew sapiential tradition and comes to similar conclusions: ‘Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that”’ (Jas 4:13–15, NIV).

28. Eccl.1:15 is sometimes taken to be a reference simply to a broken world that cannot be fixed by human effort. However, the essence of Qohelet’s problem is that God lies behind all of these realities; hence, God is explicitly the subject of the repetition in 7:13. The inability to correct that which needs to be corrected is one aspect of the עֲבֹדָה כְּבִדָּה laid on humanity by God. See Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 82–83 and 191.

29. ‘Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked? When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future’ (Eccl. 7:13–14, NIV).

throws up issues for us as human beings. God's sovereign will can often be troublesome or unpalatable, and it is almost always shrouded in mystery and difficult to read. Yet, his will simply *is*. People must accommodate to his purposes and never the other way around.

The Frustration of Human Finitude

The flip side of the frustrations of divine sovereignty is the problem of human limitedness. God is in complete control, and it often seems to the sages that people have little or no understanding of what he is doing or how they might play their part in his sovereign design.

The Knowledge Issue

Qohelet is perhaps the best starting point for our consideration of human limitedness. One of the great debates regarding Ecclesiastes is the extent to which Qohelet manifests a deterministic world view. Some would argue that Qohelet holds a world view grounded in the belief that our lot is predetermined and there is nothing that we can do about it.³⁰ While ultimately, as argued next, a hard view of determinism in Ecclesiastes (and life) is difficult to sustain, Qohelet is clearly troubled by the implications of human limitedness. Perhaps, this is most clearly expressed in his reflections in Ecclesiastes 3. Following the famous song that reflects on the appropriate times and seasons for all events (some of which are determined and beyond human control, while others are not), Qohelet reflects on the consequences of human finitude:

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. (Eccl. 3:11, NIV)

Roland Murphy describes this reality as a 'fantastic statement of divine sabotage'.³¹ God gives humanity a flavour of eternity but only to a limited extent. It is almost as if he gives people just enough insight into his plans and purposes for it to be frustrating.³² People have an awareness that there *is* an eternal design that functions well ('beautiful in its time', יָפֶה בְּעֵתוֹ) but perceiving that design is beyond us due to our own human limitedness. There is an issue of lack of understanding when it comes to human finitude. We have a *limited* perception of divine reality.

30. See the thorough discussion of this topic in Dominic Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (JSOTSup 316; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

31. Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC 23A; Waco, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 39.

32. Norbert F. Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, trans. Sean McEvenue (CC; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 61.

Qohelet makes it clear that we do have some sense of eternity but we cannot discern its totality. This is part of *the frustration* of being made ‘a little lower than God’ despite the elevated status that this implies (Ps. 8:5). We sense a design beyond ourselves, but we cannot grasp it.³³

The impenetrability of the divine purpose was Job’s problem as well. He simply could not discern any sense of design in the tragic events that unfolded in his life. Finally he came to perceive that his finite understanding lay at the root of his existential crisis (Job 42:1–6). Job ultimately came to understand that his error lay not in terms of his perception of his own righteousness or in the forceful nature of his lament – the former is established in the prologue and for the latter he is commended in the epilogue. The root of Job’s error is in calling into question the very fact *that God had a plan* for him. The assumption of 29:1–6 is that God has turned his back on Job. He has ‘removed his friendship’ from Job’s tent (29:4). The Hebrew here is interesting. Job laments the loss of days when the חַדְוָתָיו rested on himself and his family.³⁴ Most modern translations render the term חַדְוָתָיו as ‘friendship’ (NRSV, ESV, NASB etc.) or ‘intimate friendship’ (NIV, NET, etc.). The rendering is accurate enough, but some nuance is lost in translation.³⁵ The NKJV perhaps comes closest to the Hebrew in translating חַדְוָתָיו as ‘friendly council.’³⁶ This seems to be the essence of the Hebrew – it implies the confidences and secret counsel that is shared among friends and is used in this way in Job 15:8. So, effectively, Job laments the removal of *insight into God’s design and plan for him*. His frustration arises through lack of understanding – human finitude – so, he questions God’s purposes for his life.

Resolution comes for Job in the realization that sovereignty automatically implies mystery and, therefore, lack of understanding does not equate with lack of a good purpose for his life. Note Job 42:1–3:

Then Job answered the LORD and said:

I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

33. Fox comments on the rendering of this verse, “The usual translation, “without being able to find out the work that God has done from beginning to end” (or the like), has Qohelet complaining about the impossibility of knowing the entirety of God’s work. Such a complaint would be trivial, because it would be senseless to hope for an absolute knowledge of everything. Rather, Qohelet is saying that man can *in no way* understand *ma’āšeh ha’ēlohim*’ (Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 212). His point is that humans have no hope of grasping God’s work, despite some awareness of his purpose.

34. There is a textual variant in the BHS but most translations accept the given text.

35. Jamie A. Grant, “When the Friendship of God Was Upon My Tent”: Covenant as Essential Background to Lament in the Wisdom Literature’, in *Covenant in the Persian Period: From Genesis to Chronicles*, ed. Richard I. Bauckham and Gary N. Knoppers (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 348–50.

36. See HALOT 6475.

‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

Job repeats the challenge that Yhwh lays out to him in 38:2. The key word in Job’s conclusion, of course, is *חַזְקָה*³⁷ – ‘counsel’ or, perhaps better here ‘plan’ or ‘purpose’ used as a synonym of *חַזְקָה*³⁸ in the previous verse. Since Job could no longer understand the divine plan, he came to assume that there was not one. The interrogation of the Yhwh speeches drew him to the logical conclusion that God’s ways *are there*, but they are beyond his human understanding. Therefore, he concludes, ‘I know that you can do all things, no plan of yours can be thwarted.’ Job acknowledges both the validity of the divine design and the inevitability of his own incapacity to comprehend that blueprint.³⁹ The realization of our human finitude vis-à-vis unquestionable divine sovereignty leads to an uncomfortable anthropological reality. Accepting limitedness is never an easy thing, yet accept it we must, if we are to understand our true nature.⁴⁰

The Sin Problem

Alongside the essential problem of limited awareness and understanding, there comes the additional frustration of human ethical incapacity. Put simply, we are not as good as we would like to be and even the extent of our desire for good is not what it should be. Whatever the first causes, the Wisdom literature is forthright about the essential corruption of human nature. In a typically pithy fashion, Proverbs summarizes the issue with a rhetorical question:

Who can say, ‘I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin?’ (Prov. 20:9)⁴¹

The answer is obvious to every honest reader. Humanity has a problem with corruption. Purity escapes us. The effect of our ethical inability on the created order and its societal structures is profound. This is the net effect of Proverbs 1–9: choose the right way because wrong choices have a calamitous effect on the personal, the familial and the societal level.⁴² Wisdom and folly are strongly associated with the *ethical* effects of the reader’s life choices in this section of the book.

37. HALOT 7220.

38. HALOT 4981.

39. John H. Walton, *Job* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 398–99.

40. There are many verses and passages in Proverbs that acknowledge the same reality. The Proverbs 3 passage discussed earlier would be one of them, see esp. v. 7. There is no ‘solution’ to the problem of divine sovereignty and human limitedness, but we will reflect on those conclusions that bring at least some light to the question in the final section of this essay.

41. Similarly, the Teacher pronounces: ‘surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins’ (Eccl. 7:20).

42. Paul E. Koptak, *Proverbs* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 46–48.

Wisdom leads to righteousness, whereas folly leads to adultery and moral failing. There are strong associations between the vocabulary of wisdom and the language of uprightness, righteousness and integrity (e.g. Prov. 2:1–15). Folly, however, leads to all things evil (e.g. Prov. 1:8–19; 4:10–19).⁴³ The difficulty in terms of human nature according to the Wisdom literature, of course, is that determination of will is not enough for people to be godly. Proverbs acknowledges this fact (20:9), but this is a recurring focus of the Joban speech cycles.

The closed system adopted by Job’s friends requires them to find the locus of his suffering in the sinfulness of his behaviour. Following a strict view of divine retribution, the friends consistently highlight the impossibility of human moral purity and conclude that Job suffers greatly because he has sinned greatly (e.g. 4:17–19 and *passim*).⁴⁴ Job resents even the hint of this equation, asking the conceptual question: what does his holiness or sinfulness do to God (7:20–21)? Why should behaviour so impact the divine? Yet, the reader is given a hermeneutical insight that the protagonists do not have. Job is declared ‘blameless and upright’ (אִשְׁרָיִם וְיָשָׁר) in the prologue and is affirmed as such by Yhwh (1:1, 8; 2:3). So, whatever the cause of Job’s suffering, it is not due to his sins. This, of course, creates an interesting conundrum because, although Yhwh declares him blameless, Job is open about his moral failings throughout the debate (31:33–34).⁴⁵ How does one square this circle: Job confesses sin yet is affirmed and accepted by God as upright?

The key seems to be found in the language of Job’s affirmation by the narrator. Being ‘blameless and upright’ is obviously not the same as being without sin. The two terms are often used in parallel and combine to indicate a genuine integrity of heart that is Godward in direction.⁴⁶ אִשְׁרָיִם implies integrity of lifestyle, rather than the traditional ‘perfection’ of the KJV. It speaks of the honest and wholehearted attempt to live for God. When combined with יָשָׁר, these terms imply a lifestyle that is honestly and holistically determined to live in relationship with the Creator by walking in his ways (Ps. 25:21).⁴⁷ However, a tension still remains. According to the

43. See Fox’s excellent essay on ‘Words for Wisdom and Folly in Proverbs’ in *Proverbs* 1–9, 28–43.

44. See Walton’s helpful discussion of the ‘Retribution Principle’ in *Job*, 39–41.

45. The friends often misrepresent Job’s defence as a false claim of sinless perfection (e.g. 11:1–6). Job never claims to be sinless. His contention is, merely, that if he is suffering greatly because of sin, then surely he would be aware of the heinous acts that led to this punishment (13:20–23).

46. Note Ticciati’s discussion of the possible presentation of Job as a faithful adherent to the Deuteronomic Covenant (*Job and the Disruption of Identity*, 59–65).

47. ‘In Heb. the concept of integrity is for the most part expressed by the root תָּמַם and its derivatives. . . . The word תָּמַם designates (esp. in the Wisdom literature) a discernible group of people to whom adherence to the ethos and the social values that clearly distinguish the God-fearing from the wicked . . . is of prime importance’ (J. P. J. Oliver, ‘תָּמַם’, in *New International Dictionary of the Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 4:306–7). See also HALOT 10118.

sages, sin is intrinsic to human nature and it separates from God, yet at the same time it is possible for sinful human beings, like Job, to enjoy his friendship. How is this possible? One suspects that the sages found resolution to their moral conundrum in a manner similar to that found throughout the rest of Scripture: divine mercy as the sole source of human hope (Prov. 16:6).

The Enjoyment Prerogative

The Wisdom corpus makes it clear that life is difficult but that it is also a gift to be enjoyed. The human experience is blighted by human incapacity both cognitive and moral, yet people can – and probably should – still enjoy the experience of life in meaningful ways. There are many examples of this ideology, but perhaps it is most clearly stated in the *carpe diem* passages of Ecclesiastes (2:24–26; 3:12–14, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; and, more contentiously, 11:7–12:7).

These passages reflect on the human experience and conclude that, although life is blighted by lack of understanding (and, therefore, lack of meaning), there is still pleasure (and, thus, meaning of some sort) to be found in the enjoyment of life's simple delights: good food, good drink, life with one's spouse, a fulfilling vocation, and so on. The influence of Greek philosophy on these reflections seems strong and Qohelet's conclusions come close to the approach to life advocated by the Epicureans.⁴⁸ It is an understanding of human nature that essentially brackets the big questions (while still reflecting on them) and encourages focus on the moment and life's present experience.⁴⁹ However, Epicurus's denial of divine intervention is not reflected in Qohelet's world view.⁵⁰ While the dominant voice of Qohelet's book rings with the refrain of 'meaninglessness', there is plenty in Ecclesiastes to suggest that Qohelet believed in an interventionist God. For Qohelet, the divine hand is hidden and mysterious, rather than absent.⁵¹ See, for example, Eccl. 8:14–17:

There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless. So I commend the enjoyment of life,

48. 'The individualism and empiricism are probably best accounted for by the Greek influence that Jews were being exposed to in the third century BC. . . . It is notoriously difficult to pin down the specific Greek influences affecting Qoheleth, but I think it is right to imagine a situation in which Jews are increasingly being exposed to the sort of epistemologies that Epicureanism exhibits' (Craig G. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory* [AB 139; Rome: Pontifical Bible Institute, 1998], 261).

49. The trend towards the practice of 'mindfulness' is a current expression of this phenomenon.

50. Gadi Charles Weber, 'Maimonides and the Epicurean Position on Providence', *RMeta* 68, no. 3 (2015): 545–72.

51. See James L. Crenshaw, 'In Search of Divine Presence: Some Remarks Preliminary to a Theology of Wisdom', *RevExp* 74, no. 3 (1977): 364–6.

because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun.

When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth – his eyes not seeing sleep day or night – then I saw all that God has done. No-one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it. (NIV)

So, although reflecting aspects of Epicurean ideas of pleasure, Qohelet's *carpe diem* thought is more complex. He believes that God *is* at work in the world and that human life and experience do have meaning as a result, even if ultimate appreciation of that meaning is hidden from us, which results in an anthropology of frustration.⁵²

The enjoyment passages in Ecclesiastes encourage a human experience of presence and mindfulness. Since the problem of divine sovereignty and human finitude places the big picture beyond our grasp, real meaning is only to be found in the enjoyment of those tangible pleasures that are our present experience. So, for the Hebrew sages, questions of anthropology are earthy and rooted in the real world. We discover what it means to be truly human *in our enjoyment* of the life given to us.⁵³

The Frustration of Human Mortality

A third telling aspect to the human experience from the sapiential perspective is the inevitability of death. Of course, the theme of mortality is inescapably present throughout the whole of the Hebrew canon from Adam and Eve to Abel to Moses and David and the list of kings who 'slept with their fathers' in Jerusalem. However, there is an added bite of meaninglessness to the question of death in the Wisdom texts which gives a structural significance to the inevitability of death as part of the human experience.⁵⁴ Death is not just an inevitable reality for the sages. Particularly for Qohelet, the inevitability of death actually relativizes every other experience of value in life.

For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. (Eccl. 3:19–20)

52. Iain W. Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 168.

53. Graham S. Ogden, 'Qoheleth's Use of the "Nothing Is Better"-Form', *JBL* 98, no. 3 (1979): 339–50.

54. Alison Lo, 'Death in Qohelet', *JANESCU* 31 (2008): 85–98.

Our end is no better than that of the animals. They live and breathe, eat and drink, and then they die, as do we. So, Qohelet wonders, what point can there possibly be in a life that ends in death and the inevitability of being forgotten (2:15–17)? Any value that might be found in the whole range of human experience becomes subjective, at best, and dubious, at worst. The pursuit of wisdom does not matter because the sage and the fool meet the same end (2:15). Entrepreneurship is pointless, because even the greatest businessman will die and who knows what his heirs will do with his wealth (2:18–19). Whatever excellence of human achievement we might aspire to is without meaning because ultimately both we and it will be forgotten in the voracious movement of history (2:16). Death calls the meaningfulness of the human experience into question.⁵⁵

Yet, at the same time, both Job and Qohelet acknowledge that death may be more desirable than a life of suffering or a life without meaning. Job's powerful lament frames the discussion that follows in the speech cycles in de-creative terms (Job 3).⁵⁶ He longs for darkness not light, night not day, death not life – the grave would be a place of rejoicing for him (2:22). In the face of great suffering, death can be the preferable option. Equally, given the vicissitudes of life, Qohelet ultimately concludes that 'the day of death is better than the day of life' (7:1–2). Although death relativizes any sense of meaning, purpose and achievement in life, ultimately, according to the sages, it may be more desirable than a life lived in the face of either overwhelming human suffering or the complete lack of any sense of purpose or meaning.⁵⁷

Either way, death is the inevitable and inescapable conclusion to life, and the sages openly confront their readers with that sobering thought, encouraging them to take stock of their present reality. As we have seen earlier, to be human means to be finite, to be human means to be sinful, to be human means to be under the control of the Creator and here we see, additionally, that humanity inevitably implies mortality. In all of these factors the sages are pointing out our extreme limitedness as humans. OT anthropological 'theory' points us to the realities that we do not really experience in the here and now (pinnacle of creation, little lower than God, etc.). A Wisdom anthropology confronts us with an image of human experience as

55. However, Lo argues cogently that the inevitability of death passages in Ecclesiastes actually serve as a spur to enjoy life to the full ('Death in Qohelet'). The brevity of life and the stark inevitability of death are also frequent points of reflection in Job (e.g. 10:18–22; 14:10–14). Proverbs tends to present death as the consequence of folly (e.g. 5:23), but this sense of the inescapability of death comes through on occasion as well (e.g. 30:7–9). Also, twice in Proverbs we come across the recognition that a person's honest and best plans can lead to death (14:12; 16:25). Lack of *understanding* can lead to wrong choices that lead to death.

56. Michael A Fishbane, 'Jeremiah 4:23–6 and Job 3:3–13: A Recovered Use of the Creation Pattern,' *VT* 21, no. 2 (1971): 151–67.

57. This could, of course, be the result of a burgeoning concept of life with God after death in the period in which Job and Ecclesiastes were penned. This, however, remains a point of some debate.

one which is severely bounded by lack of understanding, moral failing and death. Yet, at the same time, life is a gift to be enjoyed. Is it possible to reconcile these voices?

An Anthropology of Frustration

The Wisdom texts point us to a picture of human existence that is different from the theological starting points that are normally cast over the question of the human nature from the perspective of the Hebrew canon. What we see in these books is a presentation of anthropological reality that is, at best, conflicted. Clearly, human life is a gift from God (Job 3)⁵⁸ and it is something to be enjoyed (*carpe diem* in Ecclesiastes),⁵⁹ and yet the sages universally paint an image of life that is difficult to understand and impossible to master. In one sense, this should not surprise us. The imponderability of life has been a theme in literature from the most ancient of times, so the Hebrew Wisdom texts are no different in that sense.⁶⁰ However, canonical status separates from the rest of the literary corpus, so one might reasonably expect that greater anthropological clarity could be drawn from the Writings than from the meanderings of other works of philosophy. However, the neutral reader would probably question whether such is actually the case. What clarity does Wisdom bring to the question of 'ultimate' anthropology?

As discussed earlier, human beings are creaturely and, in real and daily terms, we are more frustrated by our limits than we are inspired by our noble origins. So, anthropologically, we may well have been made in the image of the Creator as the pinnacle of the creative process – and this is significant – but, as creatures, we are frustrated by a limited capacity to understand our lot, by a moral corruption that defies our best intentions and by death as the final line in the sand of all human beings. This is the reality of all people bar none. So, the question may well arise, what difference does faith make? If these frustrations are the shared experience of all humanity, do our noble origins make any difference whatsoever to our lived reality?

It may be a very modest claim, but the sapiential texts seem to argue that one has little chance of making sense out of life with God, but, at the same time, one has no chance of making sense out of life apart from God.

58. This understanding obviously calibrates quite closely the creational images of life as divine gift that we see in the Genesis 1–3 accounts.

59. The priority of vocational satisfaction and enjoyment of life's pleasures also correlate with the idea of the Priestly task and the blessed existence of our primordial parents in Eden, respectively. So, we see that the Wisdom literature does not reject the 'ultimate contexts' of anthropological theory, but, equally, it does not tend to focus on these ontological discussions.

60. From the Babylonian Theodicy's quest for justice to Aristotle's pursuit of the good life right through to David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and the quest for meaning in entertainment.

There is a sense in which Job's ontological crisis is resolved in the prologue. His ultimate conundrum is framed by his wife:

Then his wife said to him, 'Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die.' (Job 2:9)

Job's wife encapsulates the essence of his decision. His life is in tatters, his suffering beyond comprehension, so only one question remains: will Job curse God and die or somehow cling to the Creator despite his torment?⁶¹ So, as Ticciati argues, Job's crisis is actually resolved in the prologue: the only question that remains is *how* is he going to be able to maintain relationship with God in the face of these traumatic events?⁶² Job does not understand. He laments his losses in forceful terms, accusing God of breach of covenant, but from the very outset, he realizes that life with God – though still imponderable and inexplicably hard – is better than life without God.⁶³

Job's cognitively limited, but still significant, final realization revolves around the question of design. He, along with every reader of the book, still does not understand *why* Yhwh has allowed such tragic events to mar his life. Job's expectation had been to interrogate God (31:35–37) but, instead, he is the one who gets a grilling (Job 38–41). The divine questioning, however, has a singular theme: design and control over that design. Job's thinly veiled accusation that God has lost control over his life (Job 9–10; 16–17; 19, etc.) is addressed in Yhwh's cross-examination.⁶⁴ The Creator challenges Job to control the weather elements and to place the constellations where they are meant to be. Such questions draw Job's attention to a design and order that is not only beyond his control but also beyond his comprehension. In 42:3, in response to Yhwh's question in 38:2, Job acknowledges that he has overstepped the mark in one key area:

'You asked, "Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?"' (Job 42:3, NIV [2011])⁶⁵

61. Some scholars see this as the main role of Job's wife – she crystallizes Job's options, making him aware that there are only two live options. In this way, effectively, she forces Job's hand and encourages him along the path of seeking resolution with God. See, for example, E. J. van Wolde, *Mr and Mrs Job*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1997).

62. 'In the poem the question of whether Job will bless or curse God in response to affliction (cf. 1:11) is considerably complexified. This simple choice is no longer what is at stake. There is no question of Job's letting go of God; the question is *just how* is he to hold on to him?' (Ticciati, *Job and the Disruption of Identity*, 56).

63. Grant, 'When the Friendship of God', 348–52.

64. See Karen Langton, 'Job's Attempt to Regain Control: Traces of a Babylonian Birth Incantation in Job 3', *JSOT* 36, no. 4 (2012): 459–69; and Johan de Joode, 'The Body and Its Boundaries: The Coherence of Conceptual Metaphors for Job's Distress and Lack of Control', *ZAW* 126, no. 4 (2014): 554–69, for discussion of control images in Job. On the question of design and order in 42:3, see Andersen, *Job*, 273–74; and Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (OTL; Louisville: WJKP, 1985), 536–37.

65. The latest version of the NIV captures the sense of this verse perfectly. The Hebrew word used is *נִצַּח*, which is traditionally translated as 'counsel'. However, the term is

Job has complained that Yhwh has lost control over his life or, perhaps, worse that the essence of God's plan is dark and malevolent. However, in his encounter with Yhwh at the conclusion of the book, Job realizes that the crux of the issue is actually mystery beyond comprehension rather than lack of control or evil intent. God *has* a plan, even when the experience of it is irresolutely hard to grasp from the human perspective. Job's personal encounter with God makes it possible for him to accept his anthropological limitations in a way that would have been impossible apart from that relational recalibration of his thinking.⁶⁶

Qohelet concludes in a similar manner in the epilogue to his book (Eccl. 12:9–14).⁶⁷ Just as Job finds indications of benevolent design in the mystery of God despite his experiential torment, Qohelet also comes to an unexpectedly orthodox conclusion.

Having heard everything, I have reached this conclusion: Fear God and keep his commandments, because this is the whole duty of man.

For God will evaluate every deed, including every secret thing, whether good or evil. (Eccl. 12:13–14, NET)

While the NET Bible captures well the idea of the sum total of human responsibility that is encapsulated in the final verses of Ecclesiastes, it misses out one of the texts most poignant plays on words. סוף דבר ('the end of the matter', 12:13) is, of course, a counterpoint to the familiar Wisdom assertion that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7; 9:10; Ps. 111:10, etc.). Qohelet concludes that fear of God is also the end of the matter.⁶⁸ To 'fear God and keep his

frequently used to refer to the divine plan and purpose (see, e.g. Mic. 4:12 and Isa. 14:26) and this rendering makes the most sense of the dialogue between Yhwh and Job at the conclusion of the book. See HALOT 7220 and Walton, *Job*, 399.

66. 'Job has "found" the God he sought to "see" (23:9). Thus Job may lack the wisdom which derives from a primordial knowledge of the principle governing Yahweh's design for the cosmos, but he gains a first-hand knowledge of God through the theophany of the whirlwind. He did not find wisdom but he found God. That experience makes all other claims to knowledge relative. In the last analysis wisdom, as the principle which governs all other structures and principles of the world, is inaccessible to humans, but to heroic mortals like Job, God himself is not. Job sees God and survives!' (Norman C. Habel, 'Of Things Beyond Me: Wisdom in the Book of Job', *CurTM* 10, no. 3 [1983]: 154).

67. Now is not the place to discuss the number of epilogists, nor the details of their hermeneutical stance towards Qohelet. See, for example, the discussions in Gerald T. Sheppard, 'Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary', *CBQ* 39, no. 2 (1977): 182–9; Andrew G. Shead, 'Reading Ecclesiastes "Epilogically"', *TynBul* 48, no. 1 (1997): 67–91 and Michael V. Fox, 'Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet', *HUCA* 48 (1977): 83–106.

68. Qohelet, of course, uses the fear of God rather than Yhwh, but there seems to be little rhetorical significance to this transition (see R. Norman Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* [OTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989], 77–80).



commandments' seems a strange summation of life for the tortured sage who so struggles to find any sense or meaning in life. Yet, the conclusion is not inappropriate when compared with many of Qohelet's varied deliberations (note, e.g. the other 'fear God' passages in the main text, 3:14; 5:7; 8:12–13).

Qohelet's conclusion is similar to Job's in that the fear of God is relational and the torah language implies design. Job found some sense of resolution in the realization that Yhwh had *not* turned against him and that he *did* have a plan for his life, even though the task of discerning its contours was elusive. Similarly, the fear of God language in Ecclesiastes implies the importance of relationship with the Creator because the exhortation is *profoundly* relational.⁶⁹ Also the notion of keeping his commandments in the sapiential setting is often a reference to the divine design inscribed in the universe. His commandments are ingrained into the created order, so obedience to the written law implies following that godly cosmic design.⁷⁰ So, Qohelet joins Job and the author of *Proverbs*, in also concluding that, while life with God is by no means easy or understandable, it is *better* than life without God. Life with God offers some hope of ultimate meaning and significance, whereas a life apart from God inevitably lacks any sense of ultimate meaning (Eccl. 8:12–17).

Conclusion

So, what conclusions might one draw from a sapiential anthropology? In many ways, it is appropriate to describe an OT wisdom anthropology as an anthropology of frustration. Knowledge of the ultimate realities of human origins does little to alleviate the tensions and traumas of lived human experience. Mystery, as we have seen above, makes the human experience inexplicably arduous. However, the sages would argue that *mystery* is far better than *randomness*. Mystery implies that there is a plan, even if it is opaque to our eyes. Randomness means that the brutal vicissitudes of life actually have no meaning. The sapiential tradition is absolutely honest about the difficulty of human finitude. Experientially, mystery can often *feel* like randomness and the sages – especially in Job and Qohelet – voice that pain forcefully. However, their final reckonings lead the reader to the conclusion that there is a plan and a design, hidden to us, but one that ultimately makes all of these

69. See Deut. 10:12–13 as an exegetical description of what the fear of the Lord means. 'Although this phrase has its origin in the experience of God's numinous majesty (as at Sinai, Deut. 4:9–10), it eventually has come to express the total claim of God upon humans and the total life-response of humans to God' (Van Leeuwen, 'Proverbs', 33).

70. See, for example, Prov. 8:27–31, which describes the establishment of the cosmos in accordance with the divine decree (חוק, חקק) using torah language. Similarly, Yhwh's argument from creation in Job 38–39 is also described using torah synonyms (e.g. חוק in 38:10, or the חוקות שמיים ['laws of the heavens'] in 38:33). See Daniel G. Ashburn, 'Creation and Torah in Psalm 19', *JBQ* 22 (1994): 241–8, and Van Leeuwen, 'Liminality'.





hardships meaningful. Without design (atheism), there *can be* no meaning to life. Although the anthropological experience remains painfully difficult and impenetrably complex, design (theism) does bring a profound sense of ultimate meaning to the human experience.



