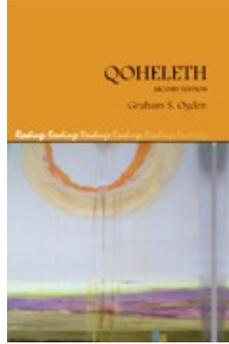


## ○ REVIEW OF GRAHAM S. OGDEN, *QOHELETH* (2nd EDN)

(SHEFFIELD: SHEFFIELD PHOENIX PRESS, 2007)

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This is a slightly modified and updated edition of Ogden's original 1987 commentary. He states explicitly in his preface that he sees no need to change his basic approach to and understanding of this short but difficult book. He briefly lays out this approach and understanding in his introduction situating them vis-à-vis the many other studies and commentaries on Qoheleth. He notes the broad spectrum of opinion stretching from Heine's that Qoheleth is the 'quintessence of skepticism' to Delitzsch's that it is the 'quintessence of piety' (p. 11). Ogden's interpretation is closer to the latter than the former and he fits well with the many studies of the past generation that seek a more positive reading of Qoheleth. (I use positive and negative in the review to refer to the overall tenor of a commentary and not to the specific interpretations that produce the tenor.)

In regard to the book's structure, Ogden opts for a mediating stance between those who see a tight, consistent work and those who see an unorganised collection of sayings and musings. Qoheleth comprises blocks of material centered on a given theme but the individual blocks do not follow one upon the other in a neat logical progression. A significant portion of the commentary is devoted to explaining the particular reasons for Ogden's divisions of Qoheleth.

At the start of his book, Qoheleth asks if there is any advantage or gain, Hebrew *yitrôn*, from a life's work; in the book he expands this to examine any supposed gain from the pursuit of worldly wealth or of a life guided by the insights of wisdom. In short Qoheleth regards life, especially as lived in the shadow of unpredictable death, as *hebel*; for Ogden the term means mysterious and enigmatic, not empty and vain. Ogden's opening for Qoheleth would read Mystery of mysteries, or Enigma of enigmas, not Vanity of vanities. He has two lengthy appendices at the close of his introduction examining Qoheleth's use of *yitrôn* and *hebel* and defending his own understanding of the terms.

At key points in his book Qoheleth recommends taking and enjoying life as we have it, accepting it as a gift of God. Enjoyment can be both material and spiritual; Ogden at points speaks

of inner contentment and satisfaction. The good life comprises anything positive that life or God offers: family, friends and possessions including food. However, disaster or death can quickly rob anyone of the enjoyment of life and there are no ways, through power, wealth or wisdom, to ensure or guarantee life and its enjoyment. For Ogden this is what Qoheleth means by life as *hebel*; there is no overarching explanation for why some live a good life and others don't, but this doesn't mean that life is therefore vain and meaningless.

After the introduction Ogden's commentary is organised according to the chapters of Qoheleth and according to Ogden's particular divisions of the material that occasionally cross a chapter division. (He accepts the consensus view that Qoheleth comprises 1:2 through 12:8 with editorial additions in 1:1 and 12:9-14.) After a brief summary of the content of each section Ogden proceeds with verse-by-verse comments. The comments cover a wide range of material: structure; form and content of a section or of a specific saying; the range of meaning of a particular word or phrase; relation of a passage to the wider context of Qoheleth and of the Hebrew Bible, especially other wisdom writings such as Proverbs and Job; relevant textual and translation issues; and discussion of other commentaries and studies whether they agree or contrast with Ogden's views. The commentary is thorough without getting lost in detail and offers a well-argued positive reading of Qoheleth.

To return to *yitrôn*, the gain or advantage to living a life guided by wisdom, Ogden reads 2.11, 'there is no *yitrôn* under the sun,' as 'at least pointing in the direction of a *yitrôn* which transcends this present earthly experience' (p. 28). He supports this with reference to 'eternity' (*ôlam*) in 3:11 and to the concept of God's judgment in 11.9. In the latter Qoheleth admonishes his student to enjoy life as it comes but to know that God brings all into judgment. Ogden concludes from this that God evaluates human responses to his gifts of life and enjoyment and apparently punishes those who don't respond properly. Ogden asserts 'Any future "reward" stands or falls upon our present response to God's major gifts of life and work, and on his justice (cf. 2.24-25)' (p. 211). Ogden, however, confines himself to occasional comments such as these and never argues the case at greater length.

To say that Qoheleth is looking to an afterlife to right all the problems with human life and divine justice, a justice that cannot be observed anywhere in this world, is a striking claim and demands much fuller treatment than Ogden devotes to it. (I don't address the question whether Qoheleth himself thinks there should be divine justice, as Ogden assumes he does, or whether that expectation itself is an essential part of life's *hebel*.) In 3.18-22 Qoheleth asserts that the same fate, death, awaits both humans and animals and Who knows whether the spirit of humans goes upward and the spirit of beasts goes downward? 'Who knows?' is Qoheleth's most explicit statement on a possible afterlife. Ogden maintains that this passage supports more: 'the real issue for Qoheleth is what happens *after* death,' he 'believes that some distinction [between the fate of animals and humans] is required' and there is 'hope for some post-death resolution' (p. 67). Again, such assertions require more developed argument based on Qoheleth's entire text, not just occasional comments on the topic since these claims go well beyond most positive readings of the book.

In closing I want to extend Ogden's understanding of *hebel* and apply it to Qoheleth's book, not just to the term's particular occurrences in that book. This line of thought was suggested to me by Ogden's consistent need to argue against those with more negative, or at least less positive, readings than his own. In his commentary Ogden's positive reading consistently stands in tension

with opposing interpretations. By contending with these interpretations, even if he rejects them, he explicitly includes them in his own reading. Since Qoheleth supports such diverse and even contradictory interpretations, as is manifest in Ogden's text, I suggest that *hebel*, mystery or enigma, applies to the book itself in both form and content. Qoheleth has no one view of human life or of God, whether positive, negative or some balanced combination of the two, and he has no one structure to his book, whether tight and neat, a hodgepodge of sayings or some middle way such as Ogden's. Both Heine and Delitzsch and all those in between do reflect major aspects of Qoheleth's book. Qoheleth's book is *hebel, mysterious and enigmatic, and the very structure and form of the text exemplify and mirror the assertion habel habalim hakkol habel.*