

QOHELETH AND THE CROSS: BACK AND FORTH WITH JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN AND PETER ENNS¹

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ABSTRACT

The book of Ecclesiastes has often endured an existence at the margins of Christian faith. Interestingly, a theologian known precisely for his interest in retrieving the marginal, Jürgen Moltmann, has all but overlooked the theological value of this text, tending to treat it as a counterexample to the Christian life of hope, rather than grappling with its fundamental themes. But there is much that Ecclesiastes can offer Moltmann's theology, and much in Moltmann's theology that is amenable to a faithfully Christian interpretation of Ecclesiastes, particularly with respect to its value in voicing suffering in the Christian life. This article first provides an outline of Moltmann's basic rejection of Ecclesiastes. It then offers an overview of the outlook of Ecclesiastes's main voice, Qoheleth, drawing on Peter Enns's commentary. Next, it outlines the biblical-theological significance Enns accords to Ecclesiastes in the reflections that follow his exegesis. Finally, it revisits Ecclesiastes in the context of Moltmann's theology, demonstrating the commonalities between the two and contending that this biblical text can positively contribute to Moltmann's Christology.

KEYWORDS

Ecclesiastes, Jürgen Moltmann, Peter Enns, Christology, biblical theology

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The book of Ecclesiastes has often endured an existence at the margins of Christian faith. Interestingly, a theologian known precisely for his interest in retrieving the marginal, Jürgen Moltmann, has all but overlooked the theological value of this text, tending to treat it as a counterexample to the Christian life of hope, rather than grappling with its fundamental themes. But there is much that Ecclesiastes can offer Moltmann's theology, and much in Moltmann's theology that is amenable to a faithfully Christian interpretation of Ecclesiastes, particularly with respect to its value in voicing suffering in the Christian life. In the following, I will first attend to Moltmann's basic rejection of Ecclesiastes. Then, I will provide an overview of the outlook of Ecclesiastes's main voice, Qoheleth, drawing on Peter Enns's commentary. Next, I will outline the biblical-theological significance Enns accords to Ecclesiastes in the reflections that follow his exegesis. Finally, I will revisit Ecclesiastes in the context of Moltmann's theology, demonstrating the commonalities between the two and contending that this biblical text can positively contribute to Moltmann's Christology.

ECCLESIASTES IN MOLTSMANN'S THEOLOGY

An early reference to Ecclesiastes can be found in Moltmann's 1964 *Theology of Hope*.² Here, he reflects on the Christian tradition's doctrines of divine immutability and divine eternity—that God does not change and must be sharply demarcated from all things historical. Moltmann claims that this has implications not only for theology proper but for how creation is understood as well. In the context of this doctrine, historical events “are then no longer provisional events that point to the future of promise, but transient and relative events that reflect the eternal intransience of the

2 All dates in the body of the article refer to publication of the original German. For more details, see James L. Wakefield, *Jürgen Moltmann: A Research Bibliography* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2002). On this reference to Ecclesiastes and others discussed in this article, cf. the index to biblical references in Moltmann's early works, in Steven Phillips, “The Use of Scripture in Liberation Theologies: An Examination of Juan Luis Segundo, James H. Cone, and Jürgen Moltmann,” PhD dissertation (The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1978), 276, ProQuest (AAT 7821379). An updated index can be found in Cameron Coombe, “The Role of Scripture in the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann,” PhD dissertation (University of Otago, 2020), 361–422.

Deity. Then there can in principle be ‘nothing new under the sun’” (Eccl 1:9).³ For Moltmann, such an approach to immutability cannot be maintained if the biblical witness to hope is to be upheld. But the positive contribution that Qoheleth might make to biblical theology⁴ also falls by the wayside, as Moltmann’s use of him as an exemplar implies the incompatibility of biblical hope and this kind of protest.

Ecclesiastes 1:9 will enjoy continued attention from Moltmann throughout his career. Indeed, it introduces his 1967 essay, “What is ‘New’ in Christianity.” Here Moltmann again responds to Qoheleth’s charge, writing, “If there can be nothing new in the world, there is also no real future.”⁵ His dismissal of Qoheleth is further justified through a juxtaposition with Rev 21:5, where Christ declares, “See, I am making all things new.” Qoheleth’s outlook is a resignation to hopelessness. It is therefore not Christian faith in the Renewer. Moltmann expresses the same sentiments with similar words in a 1970 essay.⁶

An interesting comment on Eccl 1:9–10 that helps to situate Moltmann’s citations in context appears in his 1989 *The Way of Jesus Christ*. Here, Moltmann interprets these verses as an example of a belief that subscribes to “the eternal return of the same,” that is, a belief that sees the cosmos continually reborn throughout eternity, ever and again generating the same world.⁷ In contrast to such a view, “apocalyptic broke through that doctrine of the aeons with the idea of uniqueness and finality.”⁸ The present is subject to death. The future, however, will not be a repetition of this mortal age but a genuinely new age. Death will no longer be. Moreover, even traditional apocalyptic is surpassed with the uniquely Christian claim that the power

3 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. by James W. Leitch (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 110. Unless quoting Enns or Moltmann, citations of Ecclesiastes are taken from the NRSV.

4 “Biblical theology” in this article means a theology that takes the whole story from Genesis to Revelation as its starting point and therefore finds each book in the (Protestant) biblical canon to be significant both on its own terms and in relation to the larger arc that encompasses it.

5 Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, trans. by M. Douglas Meeks (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), 3.

6 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Experiment Hope*, trans. by M. Douglas Meeks (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1975), 25.

7 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 381n27.

8 Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ*, 381n27.

of the new can already be found in the present, where Christ's kingdom is breaking in. Key to Moltmann's interpretation here is his assumption which follows the biblical scholarship of his day. That is, that Old Testament theology progresses through the nomadic theology of God's wandering people, finding new expression among the prophets, reaching its logical end in apocalyptic literature, and culminating in the New Testament confession of the Christ who has been exalted as Lord now through the resurrection and yet looks to a time when Christ's kingdom will be consummated in the eschatological defeat of death.⁹ But while Moltmann generally sees earlier stages in the formation of the theology of promise to be positive witnesses to God's past faithfulness, the aeonic theology of Ecclesiastes is consistently cited as a counterexample to the otherwise laudable history of this development.

Ecclesiastes 1:9 makes its final appearance in Moltmann's 1995 *The Coming of God*. Here again it works contrary to the gospel. "We cannot derive our expectations entirely from our experiences. If we could, there would be nothing new under the sun."¹⁰ Conversely, Christ's resurrection teaches us to look beyond what we have experienced to behold the genuinely new. In this same work, Moltmann again connects the doctrines of divine immutability and eternity—which he rejects in their traditional forms—with Qoheleth's outlook. "To the Eternal One, all times are simultaneous and of equal validity. This view is in line with the blithe resignation of Ecclesiastes, but not with the messianic passion of Isaiah."¹¹ Tellingly, Isaiah's "messianic passion" forms part of Scripture's positive contribution to the formation of the theology of promise. Ecclesiastes is again nothing more than a counterexample.

Nonetheless, Moltmann's overall assessment of the theological value of Ecclesiastes is not wholly negative. Thus, in his 1971 *Theology of Play*, Eccl 9:4 means that even the alienated can find joy amid their oppression as "false living is still living."¹² So the verse reads, "A living dog is better than a dead lion." And in his 1991 *The Spirit of Life*, Moltmann cites Eccl 3:21 and 12:7 as evidence of the *ruach's* universality,

9 This sentence summarises Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 95–154.

10 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 289.

11 Moltmann, *Coming of God*, 19.

12 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 10.

extending beyond human beings to the animals.¹³ A particularly interesting positive application of Qoheleth's theology is to be found in Moltmann's 1985 *God in Creation*. Here, the poem on time in Eccl 3:1–8 is a notable instance of ancient Israel's "kairological" understanding of time. That is, seedtime, harvest, birth, and death all have their own time. As Moltmann puts it, "That is why Israel talked about 'times' in the plural. She was not conscious of time as a unity, because she did not see world events as homogeneous. Time is determined by happening, not happening by time."¹⁴ Yet while such a worldview is theologically serviceable and surely has something worthwhile to contribute to biblical approaches to time, its value is determined by Moltmann in relation to other experiences of time in the history of promise. For him, the origin of Qoheleth's understanding of time in the "astrological notions of the ancient East" finds its fulfilment in that "in the story of the covenant with Noah, Israel already bound these times for seedtime and harvest, frost and heat, day and night, not to the constellations of the stars, but to the covenant and faithfulness of her God."¹⁵ Genesis 8:22 promises the continuity of seasonal and diurnal cycles, yet with the caveat, "as long as the earth endures." And though Moltmann does not state this explicitly, the implication is that neither can Qoheleth's approach to time be valid in abstraction from this historicisation.

In view of Moltmann's extensive corpus, Ecclesiastes hardly features. Where Ecclesiastes does feature, however, it is typically invoked as a counterexample to what Moltmann sees as the central biblical theme of promise, in both his first and final major works. But making this observation on a relatively minor feature of Moltmann's theology is not a criticism. No theologian can be expected to do justice to the abundant wealth of the biblical texts. What I want to demonstrate in the following exposition is that Ecclesiastes remains theologically promising, especially with reference to Moltmann's theology.

13 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), 41.

14 Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation: The Gifford Lectures 1984–85*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 118; cf. Moltmann, *Coming of God*, 200, 299.

15 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 118–19.

QOHELETH AGAINST GOD

Moltmann is not alone in his approach to Ecclesiastes as a counterexample to the life of faith. Similar sentiments have also been expressed recently in Anglophone biblical studies. For example, in his 1998 commentary, Tremper Longman III writes, “Just as in the book of Job, most of the book of Ecclesiastes is composed of the nonorthodox speeches of the human participants in the book, speeches that are torn down and demolished in the end.”¹⁶ Somewhat differently, in his 2001 commentary, Iain Provan claims, “The Bible as a whole sets the *entirety* of human existence as we know it within the context of such a failed human attempt to become ‘like God’ (Gen. 3). . . . It is against this background that Qohelet speaks, seeking to persuade his hearers of the futility of this ongoing human quest.”¹⁷ The effect is the same, however. Whatever Qoheleth has said, it has no value on its own terms but only insofar as it prepares the way for the alternative, the life of belief and trust in God. Against such as these, Peter Enns presents a compelling reading of Ecclesiastes that carries important implications for Christian doctrine and practice. His Qoheleth is a man of bold cynicism, a cynicism, even so, that is practised in the presence of God.

Early on in his commentary, Enns introduces the “frame narrator,” a secondary voice in Ecclesiastes, whose words frame the main discourse. This narrator appears in 1:1–11, announcing the central themes of what is to follow, and, in 12:8–14, briefly summarises Qoheleth’s treatise and provides some evaluative comment.¹⁸ Importantly, for Enns, this framework should not be read in such a way that Qoheleth’s outlook becomes a mere counterexample for life without God. Nor was Ecclesiastes “originally composed as the wholly skeptical discourse of Qohelet

16 Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 38. Longman tempers his assessment in later work, though there still seems to be a reluctance to see the value of Qoheleth’s words on their own terms. “The frame narrator exposes his son to Qohelet in order to show the failure of such ‘under the sun’ thinking. He will direct his son to a different (what we might call ‘above the sun’) perspective in the concluding two verses of the book.” Longman, *The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 40.

17 Iain Provan, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 39, emphasis original.

18 Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 4. The narrator also makes a brief appearance in Eccl 7:27.

(1:12–12:7) to which was added a later, orthodox framework.”¹⁹ This is speculation congenial to a theology that wants to dismiss Qoheleth’s strange words from the outset, rather than hear them as Scripture. And neither does the frame narrator’s concluding comment justify such a reading. That this reading can’t be justified can be seen firstly in the amount of space given to the main discourse. The frame narrator, though occupying a significant space at the beginning and end of the text, nonetheless allows Qoheleth to speak for himself. Secondly, the narrator provides a “corrective” which consists not in an overall rejection of Qoheleth’s outlook but in situating it in the broader context of Israel’s story. For the narrator,

(1) Qohelet is wise (12:9–11), (2) nothing can be added to his words (12:12–13a), (3) the proper response is never to dismiss Qohelet’s words or revel in them but to move beyond them by acknowledging one’s duty to fear God and keep the commandments (12:13b), and trust that God is still about the business of setting all things aright (12:14).²⁰

As Enns later reflects, the frame narrator’s conclusion is anything but typical. “Frankly, I find 12:9–10 to be wholly unexpected and among the more jarring words we find in all of the OT.”²¹

Having established the importance of hearing Qoheleth on his own terms, Enns proceeds to offer an exposition of this disturbing work. Qoheleth’s position as king of Israel, invoking the figure of Solomon (1:1, 12), allows him to enter into and survey the whole breadth of human experience, rich and poor, young and old, righteous and wicked.²² Indeed, this scope is the essential meaning of the phrase “under the sun.”²³ But Qoheleth’s experiments only yield the insight that everything is absurd (*hebel*): “all the deeds that are done under the sun” (1:14). Following Michael Fox, Enns prefers “absurd” for *hebel* as it expresses not only a negation of meaning, as

19 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 5.

20 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 15.

21 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 170.

22 This is Qoheleth’s claim, though the reader will rightly question it. Is his experience representative of women, for example? See 7:26–28.

23 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 32.

in the word “meaningless,” but the contortion of it. Things are *hebel* because they are an “affront to reason.”²⁴

From the very beginning, Qoheleth’s tone is confrontational. “It is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with” (1:13). As Enns puts it, “It is God who is responsible for laying this business on humanity.”²⁵ God has a lot to answer for regarding the pervasive absurdity of the human condition. But here Enns again pushes back against alternative interpretations. Qoheleth is not simply “someone who ‘does not know God’ and is trying to make sense of life apart from him. He knows how things are supposed to be, yet his experience does not mesh with the ideal.”²⁶

Throughout his commentary, Enns regularly revisits this combative nature of Qoheleth’s railings. The famous poem of 3:1–8, for example, in which Qoheleth speaks of a time for all manner of earthly things, is not, according to Enns, a celebration of human life as it stands, given by God. Rather, it is a protest against the insurmountable absurdity of God’s having ordained times for all of these. “God is no friend to humanity, as Qoheleth sees it. God orders and appoints times, from which there is no escape.”²⁷ The theme continues in 5:2, “Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God.” This is not a sudden turn in Qoheleth’s discourse, a pious epiphany of the need for a reverent posture. Enns’s paraphrase demonstrates the continuity of this section with the foregoing: “Watch yourself when you approach God. Save your words. They will not do any good. He is far off.”²⁸ Qoheleth is rather in a state of “exasperation.”²⁹ So, too, is Qoheleth’s

24 Michael Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 31, cited in Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 31. The meaning of *hebel* continues to be debated. See Russell L. Meek, “Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Readings of Hebel (הֶבֶל) in Ecclesiastes,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 14, no. 3 (2016): 279–97. To some degree, a different meaning for *hebel* would require a reassessment of Enns’s exegesis, though the basically negative evaluation of life under the sun would remain.

25 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 38.

26 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 40.

27 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 55.

28 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 67.

29 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 67.

warning against taking vows (5:5) a suggestion that “God is not to be messed with.”³⁰ Failing to fulfil a vow might result in divine punishment, both disproportionate and petty. As Enns writes regarding Qoheleth’s guidance on living the life of moderation (7:16–18), fearing God in Ecclesiastes “is not a healthy, covenantal fear, as we see elsewhere in the OT, but something dysfunctional, born out of frustration. God is not to be trusted, so keep out of his way.”³¹ Another notable example appears in 9:12, where Qoheleth speaks of the unpredictability of death. Enns can write, “Like helpless animals caught by men of prey, a ‘bad time’ . . . will fall upon us suddenly by a God who . . . is out to trap us.”³² Readings such as these fill his commentary.³³

ECCLESIASTES IN BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Enns’s work is valuable not only because he draws out the radicality of Qoheleth’s outlook, but also because he situates this outlook in the wider context of biblical theology. Such a direction is already suggested in his interpretation of the frame narrator’s role. But Enns goes further. He takes up Walter Brueggemann’s courtroom imagery, distinguishing between Israel’s “core testimony” and “countertestimony” in the OT.³⁴ Whereas the former dominates Scripture, attesting to God’s faithfulness, the latter is also present, albeit on the margins, providing a contrary picture that runs against and calls into question the central confession. Ecclesiastes falls into this antithetical category, alongside Job, Lamentations, and the psalms of lament. Here, “Qohelet is a relentless prosecuting attorney cross-examining the dominant portrayals of God in the OT.”³⁵ Nonetheless, his view does not negate Israel’s core testimony but is rather held in tension with it.

For Enns, Ecclesiastes occupies the extreme end of Israel’s countertestimony. While Job, for example, is met with a lengthy discourse on God’s part, effectively

30 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 68.

31 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 84.

32 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 98.

33 Summarising Qoheleth’s approach to God, Enns writes of the former’s cynicism that “this view of God is maintained throughout the book.” *Ecclesiastes*, 123.

34 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), 317–32; on Ecclesiastes, see 393–98.

35 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 154.

silencing his protest, “Qohelet’s God is distant and hardly worth the effort to bring into the conversation, so Qohelet does not bother; he simply accuses.”³⁶ This is especially significant when the national context of Israel’s countertestimony is recognised. Job and the psalms of lament, while at a primary level expressing the distresses of individuals, have nonetheless enjoyed a long history of interpretation in which they are understood to be representative of the community of Israel. In this context, Ecclesiastes, too, characterises the despairs and grievances of a nation after the exile.³⁷ “Qohelet gives voice to the people’s anger at being abandoned by God.”³⁸

Nor is this countertestimony superseded by the NT witness to Christ. The task of biblical theology is “one where all of Scripture is brought under the authority of the risen Christ and where the work of Christ is understood more deeply on the basis of Israel’s Scripture.”³⁹ That is, the task is to be understood as in a sense dialectical, Qoheleth’s discourse both being illumined by and illumining Christ. For Enns, then, reading Ecclesiastes christologically first of all means attending to the connection between two suffering kings—Qoheleth and Christ. In his exegesis, Enns had argued that Qoheleth’s suffering was representative. This is because in his position as king Qoheleth was uniquely placed to survey and enter into the breadth of human experience. Here, Christ’s suffering can be read through Ecclesiastes similar to the way it can be through the Davidic lament of Ps 22 (though this psalm holds more weight as the NT authors directly associate it with Christ’s passion). Thus, with reference to the cross, “The sense of utter despair that Qohelet experiences . . . can help readers gain perhaps a sense of Jesus’ experience of abandonment.”⁴⁰ In this way, however, Qoheleth’s discourse does not so much directly tell Jesus’ suffering as it does anticipate it, since the passion is unique to Jesus. So, Enns writes, regarding the theatrics of Ecclesiastes, “Qohelet does not go nearly far enough!”⁴¹

36 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 148.

37 Cf. Jennie Barbour, *The Story of Israel in the Book of Qohelet: Ecclesiastes as Cultural Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

38 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 166.

39 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 140.

40 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 169.

41 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 171.

In this vein, Qoheleth's journey is also significant for the Christian life. Enns's exploration of this theme is particularly interesting when he forays into Christian experiences of doubt. If not already required by the need to be honest with God, Qoheleth's cynicism legitimates the expression of faith crises and potent doubts in the presence of God. Indeed, such expression is essential to the Christian life. "When we are truly suffering—to the point where we, like Qohelet, the psalmists, and Job, question God himself—we are engaged in something truly meaningful for our spiritual development. . . . Suffering is what propels us on the road to great maturity."⁴² And though our suffering continues to resist rationalisation, remaining *hebel*, we should nonetheless seek to "keep going"⁴³ in spite of it, to "fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone" (12:13).

It is this biblical-theological application that makes Enns's interpretation especially compelling. Related approaches have been undertaken elsewhere.⁴⁴ While he surely has his own assumptions, informing his conclusions, and while the minor points of his exegesis may still be up for debate, the overall account that Enns provides is serviceable to both canonical and christological readings of Ecclesiastes. Moreover, the picture of a person doubting in the presence of God, representative of Israel and, later, believing humanity in general, is supported by similar expressions in the lament psalms, Job, and the passion narratives. It seems to me, because of the biblical breadth of this theme, that this is a more convincing reading than that which presents Qoheleth as a counterexample to the life of faith.

Of course, it may still be argued on exegetical grounds that the author of Ecclesiastes intends Qoheleth as a counterexample, or that the book's inclusion in the canon has this intention. Even if that were the case—and length does not allow a closer examination of these claims—I would maintain in tension with the author of Ecclesiastes or compilers of the canon that to limit Qoheleth's discourse to a counterexample would be to overlook the potentially positive contributions

42 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 214–15.

43 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 217.

44 Kandy Queen-Sutherland, "Ruth, Qoheleth, and Esther: Counter Voices from the Megilloth," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 43, no. 2 (2016): 227–42; Eric Ortlund, "The Gospel in the Book of Ecclesiastes," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56, no. 4 (2013): 697–706.

it can make to the life of faith. In my opinion, Enns has identified some of these contributions. In the following, I will demonstrate not only that Enns's exegesis opens up a new avenue for the place of Ecclesiastes in Moltmann's theology, but, vice versa, that Moltmann's theology provides a helpful means for extending Enns's and our own biblical-theological reflections on the book.

MOLTMANN AND ECCLESIASTES: A REASSESSMENT

In contrast to what Moltmann's comments on Ecclesiastes might otherwise imply, Enns's interpretation of the work suggests significant promise for Moltmann's theology, as does Moltmann's theology for future approaches to this biblical text.

A key aspect of Moltmann's theology resembling that of Qoheleth is his staunch refusal to attribute any meaning to suffering. He states in his 1972 *The Crucified God* that the majority of the Christian tradition tends to claim that suffering either "must be tolerated, or it will be compensated for by the second world in heaven." But, he avers, "This answer is idolatry."⁴⁵ Such a God is not the God of Christ, who enters into suffering and testifies to its reality, albeit not its meaning. Suffering, for Moltmann, is only rightly perceived as suffering if its nihilistic substance is affirmed along with it. This is particularly clear in his 1980 *The Trinity and the Kingdom*: "The person who is torn by suffering stands alone. There is no explanation of suffering which is capable of obliterating his pain, and no consolation of a higher wisdom which could assuage it."⁴⁶ This means that no theological justification for suffering—either explicit or in the form of an explanation of suffering's origin or purpose—can be proffered. It is clear, too, that suffering is not only without meaning but an affront to it, what Enns parses as "absurd." "The suffering of a single innocent child is an irrefutable rebuttal of the notion of the almighty and kindly God in heaven. For a God who lets the innocent suffer and who permits senseless death is not worthy to be called God at all."⁴⁷ While Moltmann does not adopt Qoheleth's assessment concerning everything being *hebel*, his affirmation of the absurdity of suffering accords with that of Ecclesiastes.

45 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 225.

46 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 47.

47 Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 47.

Another connection can be seen in Moltmann's Christology. Like Qoheleth, Moltmann's Christ undergoes alienation from God, epitomised by Mark 15:34, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (cf. Matt 27:46).⁴⁸ Such words have profound theological implications. As Moltmann writes,

Anyone who lived and preached so close to God, his kingdom and his grace, and associated the decision of faith with his own person, could not regard his being handed over to death on the cross as one accursed as a mere mishap, a human misunderstanding or a final trial, but was bound to experience it as rejection by the very God whom he dared to call "My Father."⁴⁹

This understanding of Jesus is why Moltmann employs terms such as "*stasis*" (revolt), "enmity," and "God against God" to denote the Father-Son relationship at the cross.⁵⁰ Moreover, the harsh reality of the crucifixion that is expressed in the cry cannot be understated, an argument Moltmann forwards on the basis of later attempts outside Mark and Matthew to diminish the cry's severity. Luke focuses on Jesus' trust in the Father (23:46), while John simply has, "It is finished" (19:30), and later manuscripts of Mark take a yet softer approach, with such as, "[Why] hast thou reproached [or, taunted] me?"⁵¹ Indeed, Moltmann certainly goes further than Ecclesiastes here, finding protest not only in the mouth of Israel's king but in the mouth of God's own Son, Godself. As with Enns, however, Moltmann does not want to conclude with *hebel* and protest. While this is certainly clear in *Theology of Hope* (1964), following Josef Pieper in characterising despair as sin,⁵² still in *The Crucified God* (1972), Moltmann finds the God of hope at the centre of his theological project. Investigation into Jesus' death must not be purely historical but theological as well, which requires that the crucifixion not be abstracted from the resurrection. Indeed,

48 On this, see my, "Reading Scripture with Moltmann: The Cry of Dereliction and the Trinity," *Colloquium* 48, no. 2 (2016): 130–45.

49 Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 147–48.

50 Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 152.

51 Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 120. See Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 146–47.

52 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 22–26.

even from a purely historical perspective there would likely be little if any interest in the figure of Jesus had it not been claimed that he rose from the dead. And it is in the resurrection that the significance of Jesus' death can be fully realised. Here, God demonstrates that love is "stronger than death and can sustain death."⁵³ Regardless of whether this is taken whole with Moltmann's doctrine of the Trinity, so that death enters the trinitarian landscape and is thus overcome, or in the more traditional way, as to Jesus' assumption of flesh and, with it, death, the essential point remains. The resurrection demonstrates that even death is not too great a power for God. In particular, Moltmann draws attention to the love between the Father and the Son, in the Holy Spirit, that unites them despite any separation.⁵⁴ Again, whether this separation occurs ontologically, as Moltmann wants to claim, or quite simply in the "non-intervention" of the Father on the cross,⁵⁵ the point remains. Surely it is this victory over death, inaugurated in Christ and hoped for by believers in the present, that Qoheleth seeks as well, and which the frame narrator anticipates in the sober call to faith despite *hebel*, "Fear God, and keep his commandments" (Eccl 12:13).

At one level, then, Moltmann and Qoheleth seem to share some agreement with regard to the futility of attributing meaning to suffering and the protest this entails. They depart, however, concerning hope, particularly where Moltmann sees in the resurrection a genuine reason to hope for a world beyond that which is currently subject to death. Nonetheless, as Enns has argued, the concluding words of the frame narrator, situating Qoheleth's discourse in the broader context of Israel's story, allow for the question of a connection to NT hope to be fruitfully pursued.

But it is the biblical text that precedes theological reflection in importance. Ecclesiastes still holds promise for Moltmann's theology, beyond merely being a counterexample for the life of faith. In *The Crucified God*, Moltmann advances an

53 Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 278.

54 "Whatever proceeds from the event between the Father and the Son must be understood as the Spirit of the surrender of the Father and the Son, as the Spirit who creates love for forsaken men, as the Spirit who brings the dead alive. It is the unconditioned and therefore boundless love which proceeds from the grief of the Father and the dying of the Son and reaches forsaken men in order to create in them the possibility and the force of new life." Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 245, translation adjusted.

55 John Yocum, "A Cry of Dereliction? Reconsidering a Recent Theological Commonplace," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 1 (2005): 72–80, at 77.

interesting thesis in regard to the relationship between Scripture and Christ, writing, “It is not right to interpret the cry of Jesus in the sense of Ps. 22, but more proper to interpret the words of the psalm here in the sense of the situation of Jesus.”⁵⁶ Even though the same words are used, they are nonetheless uttered in quite different contexts. “He is no longer crying for Israel’s covenant God. Were that the case, the Zealots who were crucified with him could have echoed him. He is crying for ‘his’ God and Father.”⁵⁷ While there may be some truth to his claim—the Davidic figure of the psalmist does not exhaust the interpretative possibilities of Jesus’ passion—Moltmann’s argument is still limited by its polemical context. In his attempt to retrieve the properly christological dimensions of Jesus’ cry on the cross, he appears to completely overlook the significance of the context of Ps 22, divorcing Mark’s passion narrative from its rich background. On an even more fundamental level, such a move inhibits the full extent of Christ’s story from being considered.

Over and above Moltmann’s relatively narrow focus on the events of Christ’s life⁵⁸, Jesus’ story must be seen in its fullness as the story of Israel that situates his life. Not least, it is Qoheleth’s railings that illuminate the wedge that is lodged, further and further as the passion narrative progresses, between Father and Son in Christ’s representative conformation to the cross. That is, Ecclesiastes gives expression to the breadth of Christ’s protest, a cry that speaks not only of his immediate circumstances, his being crucified, but which thrusts the gamut of the history of godforsaken human suffering before the one whom Jesus calls Father. As Moltmann himself says, in the crucifixion “the history of God contains within itself the whole abyss of godforsakenness, absolute death and the non-God.”⁵⁹ Ecclesiastes, alongside other literary recollections of human chasms and hells, is the biblical *belles lettres* of this abyss, particularly as it concerns the people of God. Qoheleth’s protests find their *telos* in Christ, yes, but the *depth* of Christ’s protest in his godforsaken state cannot be apprehended apart from the hard words of Qoheleth before the hidden face of God.

56 Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 150.

57 Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 150.

58 This is true for *The Crucified God*. Moltmann’s later work sees a broadening of his Christology, though this is not extended to Ecclesiastes.

59 Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 276.

Here, too, Moltmann's perennial rejection of Qoheleth's resignation requires reconsideration in light of his Christology. Something of the sinful despair [*Verzweiflung*] Moltmann had criticised in his 1964 *Theology of Hope* is taken up by Jesus himself in the 1980 *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, in his own "cry of despair [*Verzweiflungsschrei*]."60 Insofar as it represents a genuine inability to grasp God's goodness or sovereignty in the present, and especially insofar as it is voiced not in rebellion but in beseeching confrontation with the God who might rectify its causes, despair must not be seen primarily in terms of sin but of faith. This follows the example that Jesus and the suffering righteous before him provide. Even Qoheleth must be understood in this context. "Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it" (Matt 13:17). His righteous and despairing protest, not rejected but adopted by the frame narrator and later compilers of the canon, is a negative anticipation of Christ. It calls out for him to affirm the reality of humanity's lot, yet also, unknowingly, for him to overcome it in his resurrection and abolish its *hebel* character. With regard to its affirmation in Christ, Qoheleth's outlook should not be summarily rejected on the basis of its being an affront to hope, but taken up by the church like a psalm, bewailing Christian despairs in order to find Christ in these and these in Christ, where they will be triumphed over in the coming kingdom.

60 Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 78. For the German see Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung: Untersuchungen zur Begründigung und zu den Konsequenzen einer christlichen Eschatologie*, 1964 reprint (Munich: Random House, 2016), 18; Moltmann, *Trinität und Reich Gottes: Zur Gotteslehre*, 1980 reprint (Munich: Random House, 2016), 94.