

## **Augustine Looks at Ecclesiastes from Within 'The City of God'**

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### **Abstract**

Here we sketch the broad outlines of Augustine's reflections about the ancient Hebraic biblical text, the Book of Ecclesiastes (or Qohelet) through all citations contained within his magnum opus, *The City of God*. After a few key preliminary remarks, we identify and discuss some salient patterns of interpretation that emerged from our findings. The central pattern was a distinct tendency to apply the vocabulary, expressions, and ideas of a largely evangelistic Christological paradigm, both explicitly and indirectly through conceptual applications. Persistent attempts to make verses relevant to the New Testament by seeing Christ everywhere possible in Qohelet verses sometimes stretched imagination to its limits and often culminated in the displacement and substitution of underlying ancient Hebraic theological and cosmological meanings. Other significant patterns were attempts to make Ecclesiastes applicable to everyday life at that time and the selective employment of other biblical texts to support versal interpretations even when they seemed questionable. Lastly, it was also evident the interpretation process itself was fueled by the fervent belief that verses in Ecclesiastes contained hidden spiritual meanings and messages which needed to be uncovered. Had Christ never appeared in the first century, the distinct impression remains that Augustine would have still engaged in a spiritual interpretation of Ecclesiastes albeit with slightly different results.

**Keywords:** Book of Ecclesiastes; Qohelet; Christological paradigm; Hebraic theology; cosmology; New and Old Testament; Church Father; predestination; vanity ('hebel'); spirit/soul; metaphor; exegesis; eisegesis.

This essay seeks to briefly outline the views about the Book of Ecclesiastes of perhaps the most distinguished and influential theologian of the first few centuries of Christianity, Augustine. Most contemporary biblical scholars would agree that Augustinian thought greatly shaped much of the Christian doctrine as we know it today in ways previously unmatched by others. Here we begin by providing a snapshot of his life, teachings, and influences as a backdrop to help understand how and why he interpreted various verses within Ecclesiastes the way he did.

Since Augustine did not write a detailed comprehensive exegetical commentary on Ecclesiastes, we are compelled to generalize from other writings. Ergo, we try to identify, extrapolate, and briefly discuss the more salient patterns of interpretation about Ecclesiastes concentrated in his magnum opus, *The City of God*. Before we do so, however, we need to keep a few key points in mind about the life situation of early Church Fathers in general and Augustine's life in particular.

### **Preliminary Remarks**

An absolutely pivotal point to recognize is that Augustine and the early Church Fathers in general were in the very thick of debates about what is acceptable Christian doctrine. That means that they commonly suffered tremendous persecution from imperial Roman leaders and others even after it was officially accepted as a state religion simply on the basis of their faith in God.<sup>1</sup> On the whole, while writing they weren't sitting

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<sup>1</sup> In 380 CE, Roman Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official state religion through issuing the Edict of Thessalonica. Before him, Emperor Constantine had bestowed legal status on almost all religions in Rome including Christianity through the Edict of Milan in 313 CE. Many people mistakenly assume that such official state actions effectively terminated

in the relatively more comfortable environment of scholarly offices or ecclesiastical residences like many Church Fathers that followed them later in history. At the time of writing, Augustine was surely vividly aware of the horrific and highly public nature of the persecutions of Christians that had taken place beforehand.

It is also important to mention that, like the others, he was an ordained, high-ranking member of the clergy. As such, we can be confident in asserting that his particular views carried considerable weight even beyond his own local church. In fact, like Augustine, many of the early Church Fathers were preaching in several other churches on a regular basis. Most of them were fighting influential heretical groups and beliefs at the time as well as the pagan practices of political rulers. As well, they were attending and/or significantly influencing ecumenical councils setting church policy on a variety of issues. Some of them even engaged in open public debates about particular Christian doctrines.

It is also interesting to point out that many of them were not born into Christian families. Many of them were born into pagan families or families where only one parent was devoutly Christian, like Augustine himself. Consequently, often baptism and mature Christianity came much later in their lives and early educational training proceeded along pagan lines. Equally interesting, many of them were born into well-to-do families or families of noble heritage. In the main, they didn't derive from

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the mass killings and persecutions of Christians inside and outside of the Roman Empire at that time. However, Constantine's edict did not totally replace traditional Roman belief systems with Christianity. Since Augustine lived from 354 to 430 CE, he was well versed on the history of Christian persecutions, and he knew that the official proclamations favoring Christianity did not put an end to Christian persecutions during nor after his lifetime. Augustine was heavily involved trying to put a stop to the vast numbers of Christians who were still being maimed, stoned, and otherwise killed even where he lived in Africa and across the world (Shaw, 2011).

impoverished families. Augustine is a case in point.

Lastly, many verses in Ecclesiastes which later came to be controversial in modern times for one reason or another tended not to be so controversial or otherwise problematic back then, perhaps because it was viewed as a divinely-inspired text. Conceivably, early Christian thinkers were perhaps not so inclined to toy with the sacred meaning which they believed underlay biblical texts. Augustine is certainly no exception to this general assertion (Graves, 2014).

### **A Brief Look at Early Life and Influences**

It's surely no exaggeration to begin by stating that Augustine (354-430 CE) is arguably one of the most, if not the most, important early Church Father. The famed Oxford historian, Diarmaid MacCulloch, goes even further in praise by comparing him to no less than Paul the Apostle:

“Augustine’s impact on Western Christian thought can hardly be overstated; only his beloved example, Paul of Tarsus, has been more influential, and Westerners have generally seen Paul through Augustine’s eyes.” (MacCulloch, 2009, p. 319)

Augustine’s central importance to the development of the Christian faith was also realized by many of his contemporaries. In a letter to Augustine, the venerable St. Jerome praises him for successfully re-establishing the genuine ancient faith as it was initially intended to be understood.

We know a lot about Augustine’s early life and adulthood through his own letters and especially through his famous autobiographical book, Confessions. He was born to a devout Christian mother and a pagan father who, nevertheless, converted to Christianity at death. The mother tried to raise him Christian as best she could, but he admits it was not easy doing so. Belonging to the upper crust of Roman citizens, the family was entirely Romanized and strongly subject to Roman cultural

influences especially as the family spoke only Latin.

At 11, he was sent to a nearby school to learn Latin literature and pagan religious beliefs and practices. While there and along with some friends, he needlessly stole fruit from a nearby garden simply because it was not allowed. The lesson he says he learned from that event was that human beings are naturally inclined to sin just for the sport of it. At 17, he was sent to a very expensive school in Carthage to pursue an education in rhetoric, his mother warning him to behave of himself at school. Impressionable young man that he was, however, led him to follow a hedonistic lifestyle for a while following the behaviors of other young men at the school.

Nevertheless, an encounter with Cicero's work at the school sparked his love of wisdom and ignited an interest in philosophy. To his mother's everlasting disappointment, however, he became a Manichean,<sup>2</sup> despite his mother's constant emphasis on the values and principles of the Christian faith. The chief rival to Christianity at the time, basically Manicheans believed in the dualistic struggle between a good spiritual world and an evil material world with human beings as the battleground between the forces of good and the forces of evil, so God under these conditions cannot be viewed as omnipotent.

In Carthage, Augustine had begun a sexual relationship with a woman outside of marriage that lasted over 15 years, out of which his only child was born. Later, he ended this relationship in favor of a planned marriage to a wealthy teenage heiress, but he became a priest before the marriage could take place. He

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<sup>2</sup> Manicheanism was a major world religion around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE named after the prophet Mani (216-274 CE) of the Sasanian Empire. It boldly proclaimed itself to be the only true synthesis of all religious belief systems known up to that time (Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and so forth). Essentially, it was a kind of dualistic religion (containing notions of good and evil) that claimed salvation was attainable only through privileged access to spiritual truths. Its view of earthly human life is that it is undeniably painful and fundamentally evil, a doctrine shared by all types of Gnosticism (Arendzen, 1910; Yarshater, 1983).

taught grammar and rhetoric at different schools in Carthage and Rome for a while, but that didn't work out either for a variety of reasons.

Then in 384 at the age of 30, some Manichean friends of his with political connections to the prefect of Rome eventually led him to secure a position as rhetoric professor with the imperial court at Milan, the most coveted academic position in the Latin world at the time. His mother followed him to Milan to impress upon him the necessity of continuous Christian training. Finally, at 31 years of age, he converted to Christianity after meeting and developing a lasting friendship with Ambrose who more or less adopted him as a spiritual son after his father died.

This conversion to Christianity turned out to be the pivotal moment for the rest of his life, leading him to turn away from rhetoric to spend the bulk of his time preaching on a great variety of biblical texts and combatting various heretical beliefs including his own former Manichean religion. In the process, he became more famous as a preacher than as a rhetorician, believing with great fervor that the salvation of his listeners was at stake each time he spoke. Consequently, we owe as much to Augustine in contemporary Christian preaching style as we do to his major contributions in Christian rhetoric and doctrine, having preached no less than 6,000 sermons in his life.

By 395, he was a fully ordained bishop in Hippo. By that time, he had already lost his son and both parents, and he decided to give all his property to a church where he had previously taught grammar. At the time, bishops were the only ones allowed to preach. So, while living a monastic life in episcopal residence of his church, he decided to schedule all of his time preaching unceasingly at his church and many other churches with the professed aim of converting as many people to Christianity as possible, eating sparingly and working tirelessly until his death in 430 (Bonner, 2002; Brown, 2000; Chadwick, 2009; Hollingworth, 2013; Kirwan, 2008; Knowles and Pinkett, 2004; Rist, 2008; Schaff, 2015).

## **Ecclesiastes in ‘The City of God’**

Although Augustine during his massively productive life as scholar, writer, and Christian cleric did not write a comprehensive detailed exegetical commentary on Ecclesiastes like some of his contemporaries (Jerome, for example), he did cite it numerous times in some of his major writings especially in Book XX of his magnum opus, *The City of God*. We shall deal here with this specific group of cited discussions to try to discern Augustine’s overall views on various Qohelet verses.

Our primary purpose will be not only to glean an overall sense of where Augustine sits on various topics and issues contained in those verses, but also to obtain insight into the theological and philosophical systems of ideas he applied to understand them. Perhaps later this approach may permit us to make at least some partial comparisons with other early Christian thinkers. Augustine’s magnificent stature within the history of Christianity and the development of Christian doctrine deserves nothing less, and he is surely an apropos focus for understanding the early patristic view on Ecclesiastes.

Few biblical scholars know that Augustine’s 800-page masterwork was written in Latin with the actual title, *On the City of God Against the Pagans* because he was born and reared into a thoroughly Romanized familie who spoke only Latin. Only much later did his magnum opus come to be known in the abbreviated form, *The City of God*. That slight difference in titles connotes a huge difference in the motivation behind writing it. Briefly, Augustine’s book was intended as a comprehensive response to allegations by many learned pagans in Rome and elsewhere at the time who were openly contending that Christianity was causing a decline of Rome’s greater glory, power and influence in the world.

Augustine wanted to counter these allegations by writing a book that addressed a host of central issues in theology to show that Christianity strengthens rather than weakens Roman nation

(Brown, *ibid.*; O'Donnell, *ibid.*). Some of the key theological questions it addresses are the tension between human free will and divine foresight, the relationship between human nature and the doctrine of original sin, the existence and nature of evil, and the suffering of the righteous. So, then, we have to understand Augustine's references to Ecclesiastes within this general narrative framework.

In *The City of God*, Augustine explicitly cites Ecclesiastes at least 15 times with occasional multiple versal entries in one footnote spread out across the book beginning at page 273 and ending on page 644. The writing is a collection of 22 books each addressing a series of different theological issues, topics, and controversies, so the references to Ecclesiastes are staggered and not addressed synchronically. Therefore, in order to avoid any confusion, our review here shall follow the order in which verses appear in the actual biblical text regardless of where they might be cited in Augustine's book. (See the Appendix for exact locations of Ecclesiastes citations in the book.)

From the start, it should be noted that Augustine references 9 out of Qohelet's 12 chapters. The three chapters which were not cited and discussed are: Chapter 4 on the evils of oppression, Chapter 6 on the futility of human life, and Chapter 9 on the shared fate of the righteous and the wicked. However, it may be possible to generalize from comments made in other citations or other parts of his book to provide a reasonable Augustinian interpretation about these topics the matter.

The earliest Ecclesiastes verses occur on pages 643 (1: 2-3) and 354 (1: 9-10) of Augustine's work. As you may no doubt recall, Qohelet's starting verses refer to the vanity concept, the question of what advantage falls to man in all the work he does 'under the sun', and the assertion that there is nothing new under the sun. It is important to note here that Augustine does not for one moment doubt that Jerusalem's King Solomon is talking, with an explicit reference to start his comments.



His interpretation of the purpose of Qohelet's verses appears to be accurate up to a certain point, at least from an ancient Hebraic point of view. He asserts that the king enumerates a series of delusions in earthly life 'under the sun' which makes human beings believe that something lasts when, in fact, everything is transitory and there's 'nothing lasting' neither for the wise man nor for the fool. What's worse, Augustine adds, is that 'one event happens to them all...in this life under the sun'. What event? Qohelet says death. What does Augustine say? Well, he believes that Solomon is "unquestionably alluding to those evils which we see befall good and bad men alike." Qohelet's shared fate of death is not alluded to at all here. The shared fate of death becomes the shared fate of 'evils' afflicting 'good and bad men alike'.

Augustine adopts a similar interpretative approach to the nothing-new-under-the-sun verses in Eccl 1:9-10. He claims that Solomon is not referring here to the cyclical repetition of the same periods and events of time like it is taught by some philosophers, most notably at Plato's Academy in Athens. Exactly repeating 'cycles' of life is not what Solomon meant, Augustine complained. "Far be it from any true believer to suppose that by those words...cycles are meant", warned Augustine. That would mean that Christ's death and resurrection would happen over and over again, and the promised resurrection of believers would be compromised. Instead, Solomon understood the words 'nothing new under the sun' to mean:

"...that in the predestination of God all things have already existed, and that thus there is no new thing under the sun" (Augustine, 2018, p. 355)

Generally, predestination is the belief that the destiny of all human beings is determined beforehand by God since it is assumed that all events have been willed by God. Quite apart from what 'the predestination of God' exactly means, it is unlikely that Qohelet was holding this doctrine in mind when

he coined the expression ‘nothing new under the sun’. The belief in predestination among the ancient Jews was anything but a settled affair, to say the least.

The Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes were all divided on this question. To the Pharisees, not all things are predestined by God because that would obviate the whole idea about man’s free will. As for the Sadducees, there was no predestination established by God at all and no divine interference whatsoever in earthly affairs. By contrast to these two Jewish religious factions, the Essenes believed that everything was predestined by God (Kohler and Broyde, 2021).

If we interpret Qohelet’s verses in Chapter 1 from an ancient Hebraic point of view, therefore, it would be difficult to argue that predestination of God is the intended meaning. Judaism professes a fervent belief in the principle of free will in the determination of eternal life. The human attainment of eternal life is totally dependent upon an individual’s good or bad actions in material earthly life. Divine decision or decree can determine good fortune or adversity in material earthly life, but neither God nor man can predetermine an individual’s election to eternal life or reprobation under the principle of free will.

Already, then, what we appear to be seeing here in Augustine’s interpretations of a few short introductory verses in Qohelet’s Chapter 1 is the displacement of the ancient Hebraic biblical meanings underlying its concepts, expressions, and ideas by a more current Christological theological paradigm. Augustine does not appear to be overwhelmingly concerned with uncovering Qohelet’s intended ancient Hebraic meanings within the text but, rather, employing its terms and expressions to explicate his Christological paradigm. Let us look at other verses in Qohelet to see if this pattern holds true.

The next Qohelet verse that Augustine cites is Eccl 2: 13-14 which expresses the idea of where the wise man’s eyes are located. According to Qohelet, regardless of where the eyes are

located for the wise or for the fool, “I know that one fate befalls them both”, that is, “the wise man and the fool alike die” (Eccl 2: 16). But as noted before, Augustine thinks that Solomon is “unquestioningly alluding to evils” that beset both the wise man and the fool, both the good man and the bad man alike. Augustine does not attempt to decipher what the expression means from within Qohelet’s ancient Hebraic biblical perspective. The assumption is that the fool lacks wisdom by definition, so he walks in darkness, while the righteous man possesses the light of wisdom.

Another verse in Chapter 2 which Augustine cites 200 pages earlier is Eccl 2: 24 which contains the popular ‘eat, drink, and be merry’ expression, as it were. What complicates things is that where this verse is cited actually contains 6 references to very different verses in Qohelet not exactly in the synchronic order presented there. Again, to avoid confusion, we will maintain our approach of dealing with content in Augustine’s book that applies specifically to particular verses rather than address all the verses cited as multiple entries in one discussion.

The traditional view of the meaning of this verse is that humanity is incapable of finding meaning and purpose in life through reason and experience. Enjoyment, fulfillment, or pleasure in life cannot exist without God. But if the sons of men see life itself as a gift from God, then labor can also be seen as a gift “from the hand of God,” as Qohelet states. Belief in God, therefore, is the foundation for enjoyment and fulfillment in life. What it means in terms of the ancient Hebraic perspective is that humanity should live for God in the true eternal meaning of life. In other words, the true meaning of life is not living it by finding meaning ‘under the sun’ but, rather, finding eternal meaning in their life. Human life is connected to eternity, and only God can impart eternal meaning to it.

What does Augustine say? Again, it is not clear here that Augustine is terribly concerned with explicating Qohelet’s underlying meaning, even to the point of quoting the verse

incorrectly. Augustine's quote reads: "There is no good for a man, except that he should eat and drink". Qohelet says: "There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God."

Consequently, Augustine introduces his Christological hermeneutic at this point through employing an 'eating-at-the-table' metaphor. Human beings are enjoined to partake of the spiritual nourishment offered at the table set by the "Mediator of the New Testament Himself" (Christ). Eat and drink the body and blood of Christ for true sustenance, Augustine hears Ecclesiastes saying, rather than "savor the dainties of carnal pleasures". Arguably, whose carnal pleasures he is referring to is not exactly difficult to imagine.

The next verses in Qohelet's synchronic arrangement cited in his book are Eccl 3: 13 and 3: 21, Qohelet's repeated reference to the divine gift of eating and drinking and viewing labor as good, and the man-beast analogy, respectively. We have already talked about Augustine's view of the 'eat, drink, and be merry' expression. What remains to be addressed in Chapter 3 are the verses dealing with the shared fate of man and beast, Eccl 3: 18-21, only the last verse of which is mentioned by Augustine. Despite the fact that Augustine rambles on for three pages till the end of Book 13 on the broad related topics of this verse comparing and contrasting Hebrew, Latin, and Greek meanings in the process (breath, spirit, bodily life, spiritual life, afterlife, and so forth), we can still deduce a fairly accurate Augustinian view of the man-beast relationship.

We will no doubt recall the full conventional import of meanings Qohelet conveys in those verses. God is testing human beings by creating them as animals that they may understand the meaninglessness of earthly life without Him front and center. This is why the fate of the sons of men and beasts is alike, namely, they both have the same 'breath', they both die, and the physical bodies of both return afterwards to the the earth.

Where does the breath of each go after it expires? Who knows? Qohelet quips, implying that only God knows where the breath of human beings and animals go at death; we cannot observe that animals go here and humans go there, so to speak.

The Jewish Midrash interprets these verses as metaphorically comparing righteous ‘men’ with wicked or beastly ‘men’. Men who are not righteous believers live as beasts do in the wild but among other men. However, this metaphorical interpretation is highly unlikely given the initial ‘test’ verse which begins the versal sequence. Therefore, it is likely that Qohelet was indeed referring to the breath or spirit of animals in the wild. We cannot observe whether an animal or a human has a soul or a spirit, so we cannot know for certain where they go after death if they do have one. The best that we can do is to have faith, fear God adoringly and trustfully, and obey His commandments, he suggests.

Augustine labors on for nearly three pages to settle some of these questions basing his argument principally on Genesis but referencing other biblical texts as well. As for whether or not human beings have souls, he warns the reader not to “carelessly neglect the teaching of Scripture” where it states: “Let the earth bring forth the living soul’ (Gen 1: 24), when all the terrestrial animals were created.” (Augustine, *ibid.*, p. 395). And just a few verses down from the same verse in Genesis where it speaks about all life on dry land had died due to the great flood, Augustine asserts wryly why haven’t readers noticed: “All in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of all that was in the dry land, died.”

Essentially, Augustine’s train of thought here is that if Scripture can talk about living souls and spirits of life “even in reference to beasts,” then why should we doubt that animals have souls? Indeed, it was the “ordinary style of Scripture” to speak of animals as those “in which the soul serves as the residence of sensation”. Granted, the rational soul of man was not created in the same way as the soul of other animals out of the waters

and the earth, Augustine says, but still God “ordered that it should live in an animal body like those other animals”

Scripture talks implicitly about the spirit when it says, “Let the earth produce every living soul”. It is safe to say, therefore, that Augustine here is answering Qohelet’s ‘Who knows’ question in Eccl 3: 21, namely, animals have souls although not the same type and not made in the same way as that of human souls. If there was any doubt intended by Qohelet about the existence of souls in humans and animals, evidently there was no such doubt within Augustine. The physical bodies of animals may perish, but their souls do not.

The next Qohelet synchronic verse addressed by Augustine is Eccl 5: 18, again part of one multiple entry footnote on p. 546 in his book. As it turns out, it is yet another out of 5 times that Qohelet repeats the ‘eat, drink, and be merry’ advice already reviewed. However, Qohelet this time introduces new terminological considerations in the same message, so it is important to cite it fully here for proper comparative purposes:

“Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting; to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one’s labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward.”

Furthermore, to make clear what he intends to mean by this verse, Qohelet goes on to say in the very next key verse that the same rule applies to “every man to whom God has given riches and wealth...(as) his reward...(for) his labor.” Labor is God’s ‘reward’ to the common man, while ‘wealth’ is the reward to the rich man. Both the common man and the rich man should rejoice and enjoy God’s rewards to them.

The terms “good and fitting”, “enjoy oneself”, and “reward” are all new terminological embellishments to the same Qohelet message. Whatever Qohelet may mean by this message, given

the timeframe involved, it is certainly not in any way a veiled nor explicit reference to partaking at the New Testament table of the body and blood of Christ, as evangelists might claim. However true it may be to live by faith in Christ who will nourish or feed the believer's soul, and however spiritual it may be to eat His flesh and drink His blood in the sacrament of the Eucharist, it seems unlikely that this was Qohelet's message in verse 5: 18.

Yet Augustine proceeds exactly along these lines, as noted before in one of the earlier repeated verses. Augustine claims that Qohelet is beseeching readers to partake at the table of the "mediator of the New Testament" who furnishes a meal replete with His own body and blood. Referring just previously to Proverbs 9: 1-6 on the nature of wisdom and then to Psalms 40: 6 on offering body as sacrifice, Augustine contends that this is exactly what Ecclesiastes means in "the sentence about eating and drinking." All of the "sacrifices of the Old Testament" have been succeeded by the New Testament sacrifice of Christ, and now "His body is offered, and served up to the partakers of it" (Ibid., p. 546).

According to Augustine, the proof that Qohelet is referring to the New Testament sacrifice of Christ "is made plain when he says, 'It is better to go into the house of mourning than to go into the house of feasting'" (Eccl 7: 2), the next synchronic citation of Ecclesiastes in Augustine's book. And then again, presumably to reinforce the same evangelistic eating-at-the-table-of-Christ message, Augustine boldly cites Qohelet two verses later: "The house of the wise is in the house of mourning, and the heart of the simple in the house of feasting" (Eccl 7: 4). Apparently, Augustine was so enamored with communicating his evangelistic message that he neglected to notice the inherent tensions between these two verses. It was simply good enough that both Qohelet sentences referred to 'feasting'.

The last verse in Chapter 7 of Ecclesiastes that Augustine cites in his book is 7: 29, nearly 150 pages earlier than the two

Chapter 7 verses just mentioned. Since we have not previously reviewed this short particular verse, we need to quote it now in full: “Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices”. The traditional interpretation of the meaning of this sentence is not hard to decipher. Qohelet seems to be saying that God originally had a simple design for man, but humanity’s sinful nature always leads him to concoct evil or sinful schemes which frustrate God’s simple plan, which is to worship Him only and obey His commandments. Humanity would prefer to worship idols and false gods, and love money, power, and pleasure rather than to love God and live righteously.

Basically, Augustine understands Qohelet to be proffering the same message except his interpretation is wholly framed within an exegesis on free will in the context of the fall of mankind in Genesis. “Accordingly, God, as it is written, made man upright, and consequently with a good will”, says Augustine (Ibid., p. 413). Apparently, ‘upright’ makes possible a ‘good will’ in Augustine’s eyes. Good will, then, is the “work of God” which means that God created man with it. “But the first evil will,” he continues, the same evil will that came from the “evil tree bringing forth evil fruit,” which “preceded all man’s evil acts, was...a...falling away from the work of God...therefore the acts resulting were evil, not having God, but the will itself for their end...” Man may be good by nature, but evil can exist alongside it. “Evil cannot exist without good,” Augustine cautions. The will, then, can worship the good or be the “slave of vice and sin”. Therefore, a truly free will is not a slave to vice. Arguably, there is hardly a Christian biblical scholar who would disagree with Augustine on these points.

The next set of verses that Augustine addresses in his book are Eccl 8: 14 and 8:15. Since verse 8:15 is yet another repetition of the ‘eat, drink, and be merry’ expression by Qohelet, there is no need to provide any further analysis or commentary – except to say that verses 8: 14 and 8: 15 are more than 100 pages apart and discussed within different topical contexts in



Augustine's book. Again, since verse 8: 14 has not been reviewed in this study, we need to quote it in full here:

“There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility.”

The traditional interpretation of this verse is fairly simple to understand. Basically, Qohelet is claiming here that it often happens in earthly life that the righteous seem to receive what the wicked deserve, and the wicked seem to receive what the righteous deserve. In this way as in many other ways Qohelet points out, earthly human life is often unjust and doesn't make much sense. The perfect example of this in the ancient Hebrew Torah is when Cain murders his brother Able and then goes on to reap great prosperity. It is rather surprising that Qohelet doesn't mention this at all.

Needless to say, this enigmatic state of human affairs begs the question of why would a just God permit such a thing to happen. It seems to be a mystery known only to God. Like the other confusing and troubling nonsensical things that happen in human life, we should simply rejoice in the work or labor that we do and in the good that we can do in our lifetime, as Qohelet advises (Eccl 3: 12). But human beings can only truly enjoy life and experience pleasures through faith in God. We should find pleasure in living for God on earth every day of our lives meaning fearing God reverentially and obeying His commandments.

What does Augustine say about this? Apparently, Qohelet devoted the entire book of Ecclesiastes to fully expose this particular vanity, he claims. Why? Answer:

“...evidently with no other object that we might long

for that life in which there is no vanity under the sun, but verity under Him who made the sun.” (Ibid., p. 644).

Why can't humanity do this now? Answer:

“...it was by the just and righteous judgment of God that man, made like to vanity, was destined to pass away...” (Ibid).

With an implicit reference to creation in Genesis, this is the truth of man's situation, argues Augustine. But while man lives his days of vanity on earth, it makes a crucial difference whether he resists this truth in vice or yields to it in piety because there will be a “future judgment” when God shall bring justice and reward to good men and reprobation to bad men, Augustine states assuredly. Again, here it is likely that Augustine's interpretation would meet with some consensus among most contemporary Christian biblical scholars.

The next synchronic verse in Ecclesiastes which Augustine addresses is Eccl 10: 16-17 in one footnote on page 547. Since we have not commented on these verses previously, again we need to quote them here fully before comparing views:

”...Woe to you. O land, whose king is a lad, and whose princes feast in the morning. Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time – for strength and not for drunkenness.”

The conventional interpretation of the meaning of these verses is relatively straightforward. To set the context properly, what Qohelet is referring to in these verses as well as across most of Chapter 10 is the folly and foolishness that he has witnessed even in the loftiest and most exalted of places where powerful and rich men sit in humble seats of authority. When young and inexperienced kings acquire leadership positions of power and wealth, their immaturity makes them unprepared to handle

their duties with consummate responsibility.

Consequently, the princes under them also act irresponsibly, even when it comes to eating. They are prone to self-indulgence and lack of discipline and self-control. What Qohelet is saying is that it is better to have leaders with great maturity, integrity, wisdom, and good character who eat “for strength, not for drunkenness” and who can seek good counsel from others when needed, rather than young, inexperienced leaders lacking in these qualities of leadership. The fact that Qohelet remarks a few verses earlier, “folly... in many exalted places ... humble places”, would seem to suggest that he is not only talking about political rulers, but also leaders of other social institutions such as religious and educational. In other words, Qohelet implies that when the ruler of a country is young and inexperienced, folly tends to rule alongside him, and consequently, people with similar undisciplined characters tend to dominate the other institutions of that nation.

What does Augustine think about these verses? Well, put simply, he thinks that Qohelet:

“...has called the devil a youth, because of the folly and pride, and rashness and unruliness, and other vices which are wont to abound at that age; but Christ is the Son of nobles, that is, of the holy patriarchs, of those belonging to the free city, of whom He was begotten in the flesh.” (Ibid., p. 547).

The opportunistic introduction of a Christological perspective to explain what Qohelet allegedly means by the verses in question is evident here. Whereas Qohelet is referring to the damaging effects of poor leadership, Augustine is referring to the leaders of the city where Christ was born as well as the leaders of other cities “...who are eaters in the morning...before the suitable hour”. Why? Well, because:

“...they do not expect the seasonal felicity, which is

the true, in the world to come, desiring to be speedily made happy with the renown of this world...” (Ibid.)

That is why those “princes of that and other cities” are always in error. Clearly, the expression ‘the world to come’ is an implicit reference to the Second Coming of Christ from the dominant evangelistic Christological perspective at that time. Lest there is any doubt that this is actually what Augustine means, he concludes his discussion of the cited reference: “...but the princes of the city of Christ patiently wait for the time of a blessedness that is not fallacious.”

The next synchronic verse Augustine cites in his book from Ecclesiastes is 11:13 on page 273, nearly 300 pages earlier from the Chapter 10 citation on page 547. On page 273, Eccl 11: 13 is cited in a multiple entry Footnote 6 which also includes references to 2 Chron 30: 9 and Jth 7: 20. There are at least two problems with this citation. Most seriously, there is no verse 13 in Chapter 11 of Ecclesiastes since it ends at verse 10. When we look at where Footnote 6 is cited within the text of the page itself, it is located at the end of a phrase which talks about the piety of God, following a lengthy discussion about piety that began on the previous page.

It should also be noted that the entire Chapter 11 in Ecclesiastes is about Qohelet’s advice for youth to ‘cast their bread on the waters’, followed shortly thereafter by ‘sowing their seeds’ as much as they can in the morning and in the evening, with all the evident sexual insinuations. Presumably, it is unlikely that Augustine would mix a discussion about piety in his book with a discussion about sexuality in Ecclesiastes. Now, when we look at the other cited verses in the footnote, 2 Chron 30: 9 speaks about God not turning away those the king invited to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover even if they had been unfaithful to God. Curiously, there is no such thing as Jth 7: 20 in the entire Bible, both New and Old Testaments. All of this being the case, no discussion can be pursued.

Finally, the last verse of Ecclesiastes which Augustine cites in his book is Eccl 12: 13-14, the last two verses of the book. Needless to say, from an evangelistic Christological biblical perspective, it would seem to be an appropriate way for Augustine to conclude citations to Qohelet's book. Let us recall those verses now:

“The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.”

On the same page and the one that follows it, Augustine's subsection titles contain the expressions “last judgment”, “divine judgment”, and “end of the world”. It appears, then, that Augustine chose to cite the ending verses of Ecclesiastes in fitting preparation for a full-fledged discussion about what will occur at the end times, a central focus of the evangelistic Christological theological paradigm.

The conventional biblical meaning of the verses is clear. We should fear and worship God our Creator in love and reverence by obeying his laws for human living as expressed in the commandments and elsewhere in the Bible. We should do our best to do good in all our earthly affairs until we die, after which God will judge us. God will judge all things that we do, even our secret or hidden things, even things done by people who are hated. God's judgment will be particular to each and every human being, and therefore not a general judgment of the species. He will decide whether what all human beings have done is good or evil, and no other one will decide. Life is brief, changing, and impermanent, but God's judgment is fixed and certain.

What does Augustine say in reference to these verses? His immediate reaction: “What truer, terser, more salutary enouncement could be made?” Then he goes on to proclaim that

only those who are ‘keepers of God’s commandments’ have a “real existence”, and those who are not such keepers are “nothing”. It is clear by using the term ‘nothing’, Augustine does not mean to imply condescendingly that they are worthless human beings. Rather, it is an idiomatic way of referring back to Qohelet’s vanity as ‘vapor’. The implication is that so long as human beings want to remain in the likeness of vanity they were created in, as he previously mentioned, they cannot be “renewed in the image of truth”. Ergo, they are ‘nothing’.

Presumably, in order to achieve this renewal, they need to admit their sinful nature and repent of their sins. Still, whether they choose to keep God’s commandments or not, God will surely render judgment upon every act done in a man’s earthly life including the acts of “every despised person”. God sees every earthly person, despised by men or not, and will “not pass over him in His judgment” for He does not despise him, claims Augustine. Once again, there is hardly a Christian biblical scholar who would disagree with Augustine’s interpretation of these verses.

## **Conclusions**

We have now completed our brief outline of Augustine’s life influences, teachings, and views about the overall meaning of the Book of Ecclesiastes and various verses it contains through a close examination of all citations and discussions within his magnum opus, *The City of God*. Perhaps we are in a propitious position to draw some key observations and generalizations from our findings. We need to extrapolate, identify, and briefly discuss some of the more salient patterns of interpretation which emerged.

Not surprisingly, the central pattern that emerged was a distinct (but not the sole) tendency to apply the concepts, expressions, and ideas from a dominant Christological paradigm to help interpret particular verses in Ecclesiastes. This perspective was not applied in a broad, sweeping sort of

way to every verse from beginning to end of citations, however, nor was it applied explicitly in each and every case. Many times it seemed to be applied through associated concepts and principles like sin, repentance, resurrection, and so forth. Augustine appeared to be very selective and indeed sometimes even opportunistic as to how and when it would be applied, often times straining imagination to forge a link that simply was not feasible from a strictly rational point of view.

Clearly, the author of Ecclesiastes could not have been a New Testament author, whoever else he may or may not have been. Ostensibly, Augustine was quite aware of this historical fact. Yet persistent attempts to make verses relevant to New Testament biblical texts and verses flirted perilously close to, if not outright, illegitimate revision of Qohelet verses. To try to see Christ everywhere in Ecclesiastes verses doesn't seem to be a hermeneutical approach to the Bible terribly interested in truthful interpretation in this specific regard. Many times, it resulted in the eisegetical force-feeding of an evangelistic Christological paradigm into Qohelet verses that was doubtful at best and inapplicable at worst. A good example of this problem is the eating-at-the-table-of-Christ metaphor reviewed above, but there were many others.

Given this heavy tendency to read Ecclesiastes through the eyes of a Christological paradigm, it shouldn't be very surprising that Augustine didn't appear terribly interested in understanding Qohelet from Qohelet's point of view or from within the ancient Hebraic point of view out of which it presumably emerged. In other words, for the most part, he didn't seem to be overwhelmingly concerned with deciphering Qohelet's intended meaning from within an ancient Hebraic theological and cosmological framework other than through the occasional versal agreement. The dominant approach was to impose upon them where possible an established external theological paradigm rather than to decipher the author's intended meanings - sort of like trying to understand Shakespeare from Socrates' point of view rather than Shakespeare's, or eisegesis

rather than exegesis.

Beyond the application of an evangelistic Christological paradigm, another significant interpretative pattern that emerged from analysis was the tendency to make Ecclesiastes verses applicable to everyday life. For example, after his conversion to Christianity at 31 years old Augustine decided to combat the hedonistic lifestyles of people living in major cosmopolitan cities like Rome as well as heretical belief systems like Manicheanism that were challenging various Christian doctrines at the time.

Yet another significant interpretative pattern worth mentioning is the Augustine's strong tendency to draw upon other biblical texts from both the Old and the New Testament to assist and support interpretations of particular verses in Ecclesiastes. The selective employment of other biblical texts to support conclusions made about the meaning of different verses within Ecclesiastes was a dominant tendency of all early Church Fathers, to be sure, although to varying degrees. For example, Chrysostom hardly called upon them at all, whereas St. Jerome and Augustine drew upon them more heavily.

Much more importantly, in some cases intertextual referencing didn't seem to make much common sense and it led Augustine to make questionable interpretations or to neglect conventional interpretations of verses that were more reasonable and more in line with ancient Hebraic theology and cosmology. Often times, intertextual referencing was also employed to legitimize reinterpretation of a verse and attach other meanings.

A final pattern of interpretation should also be noted since it appeared to underlie and fire Augustine's theological motivation beyond an evangelical Christological paradigm, applicability to everyday life at that time, and intertextual referencing with other parts of the Old and New Testaments. What appeared to be informing or infusing his interpretation was the fervent belief that the verses in Ecclesiastes contained hidden spiritual



meanings and messages that needed to be uncovered, messages about how to live a genuine Christian life on earth even though, strictly speaking, it was presumably written from within an ancient Hebraic theological and cosmological paradigm that did not include Christ. In other words, the point is that had Christ never appeared in the first century, the reader gets the distinct impression that Augustine would have still engaged in a spiritual interpretation of Ecclesiastes albeit with slightly different results.

## **Appendix**

All cited references to Ecclesiastes contained within: Saint Augustine. Translated by Marcus Dods, D.D. 2018. *The City of God*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.

- 1- p. 273 = Eccl 11: 13 (footnote = f 6)
- 2- p. 354 = Eccl 1: 9-10 (f 20)
- 3- p. 394 = Eccl 3: 21 (f 52)
- 4- p. 413 = Eccl 7: 29 ( f 87)
- 5- p. 546 = Eccl 2: 24; 3: 13; 5: 18; 8: 15 (f 143)  
Eccl 7: 2 (f 145)  
Eccl 7: 4 (f 146)
- 6- p. 547 = Eccl 10: 16-17 (f 147)
- 7- p. 643 = Eccl 1: 2-3 (f 5)  
Eccl 2: 13-14 (f 6)
- 8- p. 644 = Eccl 8: 14 (f 7)  
Eccl 12: 13-14 (f 8)

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