
WEALTH AND POVERTY IN PROVERBS AND ECCLESIASTES

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All the days of the afflicted are evil, but the cheerful of heart has a continual feast. Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble with it. Better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it.

— Proverbs 15:15–17

INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL JUSTICE, WEALTH, AND SOLOMON'S TEACHING

In the Prologue to his National Book Award-winning *Stamped from the Beginning*, Ibram X. Kendi writes,

Federal data show that the median wealth of White households is a staggering *thirteen times* the median wealth of Black households. . . . If Black people make up 13.2 percent of the US population, then Black people should . . . [be] somewhere close to owning 13 percent of US wealth. But today, the United States remains nowhere close to racial parity. African Americans own 2.7 percent of the nation's wealth.¹

In the third edition of their popular introduction to *Critical Race Theory*, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic write,

Poverty . . . has a black or brown face: black families command, on the average, about one-thirteenth of the assets of their white counterparts. They pay more for many products and services, including cars. People of color lead shorter lives, receive worse medical care, complete fewer years of school, and occupy more menial jobs than do whites. . . . Why all this is so and the relationship between racism and economic oppression—between race and class—are topics of great interest to critical race theory.²

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¹ Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2016), 1–2.

² Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 3rd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 13.

Jemar Tisby asserts, “Racism today comes in the form of . . . the ongoing and widening racial wealth gap.”³

A common premise can be discerned from these statements: the idea that wealth and the good life go hand in hand, and the implication seems to be that some do not have wealth because of structural, societal injustice. On this point, Liz Mineo writes in the *Harvard Gazette*,

The wealth gap between Black and white Americans has been persistent and extreme. It represents, scholars say, the accumulated effects of four centuries of institutional and systemic racism and bears major responsibility for disparities in income, health, education, and opportunity that continue to this day.⁴

My goal in this presentation is to compare this premise (that wealth and the good life are necessarily connected) and its implication (that some do not have wealth because of structural injustice) to the teaching of Solomon in *Ecclesiastes* and *Proverbs*. This is an attempt to compare and contrast the worldviews of the Critical Race Theorists, on the one hand, and Solomon on the other. The majority of this presentation will seek to exposit Solomon’s worldview and how it impacts what he says about wealth. Whereas many advocates of social justice who speak to wealth in our culture seem to suggest that racism accounts for why some have wealth and others do not, the perspective reflected in the two books of Solomon we will consider here is more nuanced and flexible on the questions of *the relative value* of wealth and *whether* it goes hand in hand with the good life.

I am working from evangelical assumptions about *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes* that, I think, largely nullify the purported difficulty of integrating the so-called Wisdom Literature with biblical theology. These evangelical assumptions include (but are not limited to) the following:

- that the attributions of most of the material in *Proverbs* to Solomon are true and that the reference to “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” who surpassed all before him in *Ecclesiastes* 1:1, 1:16, and 2:9 likewise point to Solomon;⁵

³ Jemar Tisby, *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey Toward Racial Justice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 31.

⁴ Liz Mineo, “Racial Wealth Gap May Be a Key to Other Inequities,” *Harvard Gazette* (blog), June 3, 2021, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/06/racial-wealth-gap-may-be-a-key-to-other-inequities/>.

⁵ Contra R. N. Whybray, who writes, “It has long been recognized, however, that these attributions have no evidential value as far as *authorship* is concerned and do not necessarily indicate whose is the voice that speaks in these proverbs.” R. N. Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, JSOTSupp (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 46. It seems to me that the attributions to which Whybray alludes, at Prov. 1:1; 10:1; and 25:1, carry significant evidential value regarding both authorship and the voice that speaks in the proverbs. The attributions are, after all, primary source material universally attested in all textual witnesses to the content

- that when Solomon speaks of his father teaching him in Proverbs 4:2–3, he refers to David obeying Deuteronomy 6 (esp. 6:4–7, along with 17:14–20);
- that as Solomon addresses his son throughout Proverbs he too seeks to obey Deuteronomy 6 and 17 in an effort to prepare the future king of Israel to do the same;
- the idea that Solomon seeks to obey Deuteronomy 6 explains the heavy consonance between the teaching of Proverbs and Deuteronomy;
- the idea that Solomon’s teaching flows out of Deuteronomy indicates that he embraced the whole of the Torah and all other Scripture available to him;⁶
- and this in turn requires us to read Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as reflections on and contributions to the covenantal and salvation historical worldview set forth in the Torah by Moses and built upon by the other biblical authors.⁷

What people say about wealth is a window into their worldview. According to Critical Race Theorists and Social Justice advocates, disparity in wealth results from the fact that “racism is ordinary, not aberrational . . . the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country.”⁸ It seems that according to this worldview, racism is the problem, and the wealth gap proves it.

In Solomon’s scriptural worldview, by contrast, the problem is that man sinned against God, resulting in the Genesis 3:14–19 words of judgment. Because of sin, humanity has been forbidden access to the tree of life (Gen. 3:22), expelled from Eden (3:23–24) to work the cursed land (3:17, 23), and all this under the sentence of death (2:17; 3:19). The resolution to this problem requires atonement being made

of the book of Proverbs. On Solomon as author of both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, see Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1993), 52, 254–67. For Proverbs, see also Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 31–37. For Ecclesiastes, see the case Frederick makes in Daniel C. Frederick and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Apollos OT Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 31–36.

⁶ Scott Harris discusses Prov. 1:8–19 and Gen. 37; Prov. 1:20–33 and Jeremiah 7 and 20; and Prov. 6:1–19 and the Joseph story. Scott L. Harris, *Proverbs 1–9: A Study of Inner-Biblical Interpretation*, SBL Dissertation Series (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

⁷ Whybray does not think that Solomon wrote Proverbs, nor does he interpret the book as teaching that flows out of the Torah of Moses, so it is not surprising that he thinks different statements made in the book reflect “different attitudes towards wealth and poverty” and “widely differing points of view.” Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 9–10.

⁸ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 8.

for sin so that God can offer just forgiveness, and those who experience God's merciful salvation are reconciled to God. In the biblical worldview, life's highest good is not wealth but God's presence: "in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11).

To be fair to the Critical Race Theorists, I would observe that they do not assert that their highest good is to possess wealth. But here I would critique their worldview against the standard of the Christian worldview. Whereas the Bible spells out the problem, its resolution, and what makes for a good life now and in the hereafter, Critical Race Theory does not spell out a way for people to experience forgiveness and reconciliation, nor does it articulate its vision for what constitutes the good life now and in the future. We are left to draw our own conclusions based on what its advocates say. Ibram X. Kendi asserts,

The only remedy to racist discrimination is antiracist discrimination. The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination.⁹

It appears that what is desired is power—power to discriminate, power to amass wealth, power to punish past wrongs. I submit that in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes Solomon shows us a more excellent way.

The wisdom that Solomon teaches stands most in contrast with the Critical Race Theory (CRT) worldview on the question of ultimate ends: everything Solomon says indicates that for him knowing God and enjoying him forever is the chief end of life, and this shows up the way God is a non-factor for those who operate according to CRT.

THE COVENANT AND SALVATION HISTORY

In the tradition Solomon was taught, which he also propagated, a tradition stemming from the Torah of Moses, *the* blessing of the covenant is life with God. Yahweh promises in Leviticus 26:11–13 that he will walk among his people as he walked in the garden, that he will dwell with them, that they will be his people and he will be their God. Because of who he is, the life-giving creator, fulness of life is found in his presence. If he is present with his people, life and blessing will abound for them because that's what happens where he is. Thus, the blessings of the covenant in Leviticus 26: the land will have rain in season and be abundantly fruitful, almost like the garden of Eden before sin (Lev. 26:3–5). The protection of his presence will also keep his people, the seed of the woman, from the enmity directed against them by their enemies, the seed of the serpent, as well as from harmful beasts (26:6–8). In addition to the promises that pertain to land and blessing, God promises to make his people fruitful and multiply them (26:9), giving them offspring, or seed. The blessings of

⁹ Ibram X. Kendi, "Book Extract: Ibram X. Kendi Defines What It Means to Be an Antiracist," June 9, 2020, <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/june/ibram-x-kendi-definition-of-antiracist.html>.

the covenant, then, promise realization of God's promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). The best part, of course, is that God promises himself to his people, his own presence (Lev. 26:11–13).

Adam and Eve sinned and were driven from God's presence. When God declares that Israel is his son (Exod. 4:22–23), he asserts that the nation is a new Adam. Having liberated his new-Adam son from slavery in Egypt, he brings Israel to the land of promise, a new Eden where they are to enjoy God's presence in accordance with the terms of God's covenant. Israel's master story, the story that begins in the Torah of Moses, feeds into a distinctive worldview that cannot be simply equated with the alternative worldviews held by those who worshiped other gods and interpreted life according to other master narratives.¹⁰

Israel's master story traces a line of descent from Adam and Eve, to whom the conquering seed of the woman was promised in Genesis 3:15, through the genealogies to Noah (Gen. 5), to Abraham (Gen. 11), to David, and the covenant Yahweh makes with David in 2 Samuel 7 indicates that the blessing of Abraham will be realized through the future king from David's line. Solomon, the first king from David's line, reigns as a new-Adam, representative Israelite, exercising dominion, teaching wisdom, type of the one to come.¹¹ It is in this covenantal and salvation-historical setting that the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes must be interpreted. From what Solomon says in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, I would propose that we can see his statements in their wider context by articulating the question he seems to be answering in each respective book.

In Proverbs, it is as though Solomon is answering the question: how does one enter the garden of Eden to enjoy the presence of God? In Ecclesiastes, it is as though Solomon answers the question: since all die, what is good for man to do?¹²

PROVERBS: WISDOM TO ENTER EDEN

If life's *summum bonum* is the presence of God, then measuring quality of life by

¹⁰ Because he fails to understand this point about the distinctive covenantal and salvation-historical worldview of the biblical authors, including Solomon, Whybray writes, "the speakers [in Proverbs] share the view common to their ancient Near Eastern civilizations that wealth is, generally speaking, a blessing—though some qualify this assessment in various ways." Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 113. On the contrary, only Israel was in covenant with Yahweh, and Yahweh only promised the blessings of the covenant to Israel. We must understand that the blessing of wealth in Proverbs is a particularly *covenantal* blessing.

¹¹ See further James M. Hamilton, *Typology—Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns: How Old Testament Expectations Are Fulfilled in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022).

¹² The center of Solomon's theology is the glory of God in salvation through judgment. See the discussion in James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 290–301, 313–20.

economic standing would seem to imply that God sells time in his presence to the highest bidder. But if cash will not purchase a place in God's presence, we need some other index by which to assess quality of life. Solomon teaches his son that far more valuable than the possession of currency is the experience of knowing God and experiencing God's blessing, so he urges his son to get wisdom, the wisdom that knows to seek God.

Approaching the material from this covenantal and salvation-historical perspective, informed by the teaching of Torah and the identity of the author, knowing his responsibilities to teach Torah to his son, who will one day be king, we can understand why Solomon would set out to write a book "to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth" (Prov. 1:4). Young simpletons—and sometimes older people with no lack of shrewdness—are tempted to think that money is the key to life's pleasures. Get the key; unlock the pleasures.

Solomon makes a deeply personal appeal to the strongest of relational and affectional bonds as he pleads with his son to hear his father's instruction and forsake not his mother's *Torah* (Prov. 1:8), promising adornment characterized by God's own gracious character (ἡ, 1:9). As his father David taught, so Solomon urges against "the counsel of the wicked" (Ps. 1:3) as he seeks to deconstruct the allurements of sinners by showing the outcome of their attempt to make breaking the commandments (not to murder and not to steal) attractive (Prov. 1:10–19). David taught that "the way of the wicked will perish" (Ps. 1:6), and Solomon likewise asserts that loss of life awaits those who seek life by gaining treasure through murder and theft (Prov. 1:18–19).

Wisdom in Proverbs is not merely an impersonal force that punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. No, wisdom begins with the recognition that God himself personally polices the commandments he gave about how his created order is to be stewarded. And this is not some abstract deity but Yahweh, covenant God of Israel. Thus, "The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:9), and those who refuse the call of personified wisdom have "hated knowledge" and not chosen "the fear of Yahweh" (1:29).

What Solomon wants most for his son is for him to have such an experience of God that he will know God and that his confidence in God's holy character and faithful commitment to upholding his own word will make the prospect of transgression terrifying because of the certain judgment that will ensue. Accordingly, Solomon urges his son to receive his words, treasure his commandments, make his ear attentive to wisdom, incline his heart to understanding, call out for insight, raise his voice for understanding, and seek this understanding like silver, searching for it as for hidden treasure (Prov. 2:1–4)—because this understanding, *not money*, is the key that unlocks the door to the good life—"then you will understand the fear of Yahweh and find the knowledge of God" (2:5).

Solomon's teaching in Proverbs assumes earlier Scripture. His statements depend upon shared knowledge between himself and his audience. He does not spell things out, as I am doing here, because he does not think he needs to make the

connections overt. He knows the context in which his son, and the other members of his audience, operate.

Thus, Solomon does not feel a need to remind his audience that God promised land, seed, and blessing to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3), and that the Ten Commandments expisit the character of Yahweh as he proclaimed himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6–7, with the rest of the Torah’s stipulations being understood as expositions of the umbrella statement of those Ten Words.

Solomon does not need to restate all this in the same way that when Joe Buck goes to the microphone for a World Series broadcast, he doesn’t proceed to explain baseball as though those in his audience are watching their first game. Joe Buck assumes that his audience understands how the game works. Solomon does the same.

Land was promised to Abraham, however, and in the same way Adam was exiled from Eden, the curses of the covenant God made with Israel through Moses warn of exile from the land of promise. As Solomon urges his son—not literally but metaphorically—to stay on the straight and narrow path that leads to life that he might re-enter Eden (cf. Prov. 2:20), he explains, “For the upright will inhabit the land, and those with integrity will remain in it, but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it” (2:21–22). When Solomon promises that wisdom will be “a tree of life to those who lay hold of her” (3:18), it is almost as though wisdom takes people into the garden of Eden. Along these lines, the teaching of the righteous, the fear of Yahweh, and good sense are all said to be a fountain of life (10:11; 13:14; 14:27; 16:22; cf. Ps. 36:9).

Before we consider the way Solomon presents the teaching of Torah as the expression of God’s character and the path to experiencing the good life by enjoying God’s presence and blessing in Proverbs 3, allow me to give examples of statements that articulate the two other aspects of the blessing of Abraham: seed and blessing. We see the concern for seed in statements such as Proverbs 13:22, “A good man leaves an inheritance to his children’s children, but the sinner’s wealth is laid up for the righteous.” And the promise of blessing stands crisply in 10:22, “The blessing of the LORD makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it.”

Some relevant aspects of the Torah, such as the blessing of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3) and Yahweh’s declaration of his own name and character (Exod. 34:6–7), have been briefly referenced above. To appreciate what Solomon says in Proverbs 3, we should also note the way that in the Torah Moses gives certain pieces of financial instruction that are, to put it mildly, counterintuitive. Parade examples of what I have in mind relate to the sabbatical year, which required that every seventh year Israel give the land a Sabbath (Lev. 25:1–7), neither sowing the field nor pruning the vineyard (25:4). Though potential objections about how the people will be provided for are addressed (25:20–22), Yahweh seems to know that the people will not let the land lie fallow, promising that the land will have the sabbaths the people refused to give it once they have definitively broken the covenant and been driven into exile (26:34–35).

Not only were the people instructed not to work on the seventh year, they also were instructed to release the debts of their fellow Israelites in the seventh year (Deut. 15:1–6), and they were specifically told not to refuse to lend money because the seventh year was near (15:7–11). I submit that these two regulations, the sabbatical year and the release of debts to Israelites in the same, would have to be obeyed by faith. That is, as both Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15 promise, the people would have to trust the Lord to provide and bless in spite of the fact that, considered by worldly standards, it would make no financial sense to follow these instructions.

Enter Solomon to teach his son in Proverbs 3:1–12. This unit of Proverbs 3 has a chiasmic structure that can be depicted as follows:¹³

- 3:1–2 — My son, keep Torah for long life
- 3:3–4 — Yahweh’s character results in favor and success
- 3:5–6 — Trust and know Yahweh
- 3:7–8 — Fear Yahweh for healing refreshment
- 3:9–10 — Honoring Yahweh with wealth produces abundance
- 3:11–12 — My son, the Lord disciplines those he loves

In this chiasmic structure, the fatherly instruction in Torah that leads to long life in Proverbs 3:1–2 stands across from the 3:11–12 fatherly discipline by Yahweh of those he loves—in terms reminiscent of the discipline of the Davidic king from 2 Samuel 7:14. And for the purposes of this study, we note that the call to live out God’s own character of “steadfast love and faithfulness” (תְּהִלָּתוֹ וְאֱמֻנָתוֹ) in 3:3–4 stands across from the faith-based honoring of God with wealth in 3:9–10. Godliness results in a God-honoring use of wealth. At the center of this chiasmic structure stands the two-sided coin of trusting and knowing Yahweh on the one hand and fearing him and not being wise in one’s own eyes on the other.

In this passage Solomon teaches his son that obeying Torah leads to life and *shalom* (Prov. 3:1–2). In Deuteronomy 6:6 Moses tells Israel that his words are to be on their hearts, in 6:7 he tells them to teach his words to their sons, and then in 6:8 he tells them—metaphorically—to bind (רָשָׁן) the words as a sign on their hand. Similarly, in Proverbs 3:1 Solomon instructs *his son* to keep his words *in his heart*, promising the same thing Moses promised to those who obey: long life (Deut. 6:2; Prov. 3:2).¹⁴ Solomon then metaphorically tells his son to do the same thing with God’s “steadfast love and faithfulness” (תְּהִלָּתוֹ וְאֱמֻנָתוֹ) that Moses said to do with the word: bind it, but here not on the hand but around the neck. And in anticipation of Jeremiah 31:33, Solomon instructs his son to *write on the tablet of his heart* what he is teaching him: *Torah*, commandments, steadfast love and faithfulness. In my view Solomon in Proverbs repackages the teaching of Torah in memorable ways for the

¹³ See also the chiasmic structure for the whole of Proverbs 3 proposed in James M. Hamilton Jr., “That the Coming Generation Might Praise the Lord,” *Journal of Family Ministry* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 17.

¹⁴ See the Table depicting lexical points of contact between Deuteronomy 6 and 17 and Proverbs 3 in Hamilton, “That the Coming Generation Might Praise the Lord,” 17–18.

instruction of his son, and by extension for all those under his fatherly kingship (all the people of God). I would note as well, though, that for Solomon to tell his son to do the same thing with his teaching that Moses told his audience to do with the Torah seems tantamount to Solomon indicating that his teaching carries the same level of authority as that of Moses. In other words, Solomon seems to think that he is writing instruction that comes from God and is to be regarded as Scripture.

As we have seen, some of the financial instructions in the Torah will seem counterintuitive, and other aspects certainly go against sinful inclinations humans have—greedy impulses that result in exploitative financial practices,¹⁵ whether those relate to acquisition of land, the charging of interest, or other matters Moses addresses in the Torah.¹⁶ Anticipating the all too human impulse to acquire excessive silver and gold, which the king was expressly forbidden from doing in Deuteronomy 17:17, Solomon urges his son to trust Yahweh with his whole heart and not to lean on his own understanding (Prov. 3:5), to know Yahweh in all his ways and be directed by him in all his paths (3:6).

Solomon knows exactly what his son needs if he is to obey this instruction: he needs to be not wise in his own eyes, and to fear Yahweh and turn from evil (3:7). Solomon also makes promises reminiscent of things his father David said in Psalm 19:7 (“reviving the soul”) and Psalm 32 (relief from bones wasting away), saying that fearing Yahweh will be healing to flesh and refreshment to bones (Prov. 3:8). In this context, having urged his son to trust, know, and fear Yahweh—centering that instruction in the chiasmic structure of Proverbs 3:1–12—and having taught that the Torah leads to life and *shalom* (3:1–2)—that living out the Torah by enacting God’s character (3:3) leads to favor and success in the sight of God and man (3:4; cf. Luke 2:52—Solomon teaches his son to honor Yahweh with his wealth, promising that doing so will lead to God’s covenant blessings on field and vineyard (Prov. 3:9–10).

More could undoubtedly be said, but I contend that in Proverbs Solomon teaches his son how to pursue the good life, and that good life consists of trusting, knowing, and fearing Yahweh, living in accordance with his character as revealed in the commands and prohibitions, instructions and regulations given in the Torah of Moses. Living this way will not *literally* take one back into the garden of Eden, but the best thing about the garden was the presence of God. In the tabernacle and temple Yahweh gave to Israel a Leviticult that would enable them to experience his presence and not be struck dead by his holiness. Solomon urges his son to embrace the wisdom of living in accordance with Torah, in the fear of Yahweh, to know him and enjoy his presence.

What Solomon says reflects no divide between Torah and wisdom.¹⁷ Rather, the

¹⁵ Cf. Prov. 28:25, “A greedy man stirs up strife, but the one who trusts in the LORD will be enriched.”

¹⁶ Consider, for instance, Prov. 28:8, “Whoever multiplies his wealth by interest and profit gathers it for him who is generous to the poor.”

¹⁷ Contra Duane A. Garrett, *The Problem of the Old Testament: Hermeneutical, Schematic,*

same thing David said about the man who delights in Torah in Psalm 1—that he would be blessed, אֲשֶׁר־יִהְיֶה־אִישׁ, “blessed is the man” (Ps. 1:1, 3)—Solomon says of the one who finds wisdom in Proverbs 3:13, אֲשֶׁר־יִאָּדָם, “blessed is the man.” He goes on to explain that the one who finds wisdom and gets understanding (Prov. 3:13) has acquired something that will produce better yield than the profits of silver and gold (3:14) because wisdom is “more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her” (3:15). She has long life in her right hand, riches and honor in her left (3:16), and her ways are pleasant, her paths *shalom* (3:17). Those who have wisdom are called “blessed,” מְאֻשָּׁר.

ECCLESIASTES: DOING GOOD IN THE FACE OF DEATH

We now turn our attention to the book of Ecclesiastes, the “words of delight” and “words of truth” (Eccl. 12:10) that Solomon gave “like goads,” “like nails firmly fixed” from the “one Shepherd” (12:11). This “one Shepherd” by whom “the words of the wise” and “the collected sayings” are given seems to be God,¹⁸ so here again it seems that Solomon claims that what he has written in Ecclesiastes is the word of God.

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon provides mankind with our deepest exploration of what death means for human life. Death, the consequence warned of in Genesis 2:17, then visited on humanity after sin (Gen. 3:19; Rom. 5:12), is arguably the driving reality behind the assessment that brackets Solomon’s meditation: “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2; 12:8).

The fact that death awaits us all gives urgency to the question Solomon raises in Ecclesiastes 1:3, a question that immediately puts the social justice premise to the test: “What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”¹⁹ The end that looms over all puts Solomon on the quest to seek “what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life” (Eccl. 2:3).²⁰ Death means that pleasure (2:1–11) and wisdom (2:12–17) are but “vanity and a striving after wind” (2:11, 17; see esp. 2:14–16). Death results in the frustrations of having to leave the results of wisdom and skill to one who might be a fool (2:18–26). There is a time for everything (3:1–8), and the question of what is to be gained by

and Theological Approaches (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020), 165–70.

¹⁸ James Bollhagen, *Ecclesiastes*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 2011), 432; Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 344.

¹⁹ A slightly altered form of the question recurs in Eccl. 3:9.

²⁰ Though I do not directly cite him here, Addison Wright has shaped my thinking on Ecclesiastes. See Addison G. Wright, “The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (July 1968): 313–34; Addison G. Wright, “The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (January 1980): 38–51; and Addison G. Wright, “Additional Numerical Patterns in Qoheleth,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (January 1983): 32–43.

toil remains (3:9). God has made everything beautiful in its time and put eternity in man's heart (3:11), and Solomon looks God's justice (3:17) full in the face: as man was made from dust in Genesis 2:7 and sentenced to return to it in 3:19, the vanity of Ecclesiastes 3:19 arises from the fact that, as stated in 3:20, "All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return" (cf. 12:7). Solomon wrestles with the problem of solitude (4:7–16), and his ruminations on having and enjoying in chapters 5 and 6 are particularly relevant for the topic of this presentation.

As he continues to pursue the question of what is good for man to do (Eccl. 6:12), he turns to consider the way that man is unable to fully understand God's work (6:10–11:6, see esp. 8:17; 11:5–6; cf. 3:11). We do not always know what is best to do, and we do not know what will come after (6:12). Decline and death, however, should be considered that the living might gain wisdom (11:7–12:8).

How does Solomon in his wisdom recommend that people respond to the fact that death makes everything vanity and a striving after wind? To answer this question, the whole book must be taken together, and no *Sachkritik* should be used to excise portions of the book, nor should we attribute the epilogue to some other author. In his conclusion Solomon affirms key ideas that he has peppered throughout his discourse: "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Eccl. 12:13–14).

Note that Solomon has just warned young men that as they enjoy their youthful vigor, they should remember that God will bring them into judgment for all these things (Eccl. 11:9). Though he does not say the words "fear Yahweh," surely the call to remember that God will judge is meant to stimulate appropriate caution, reverence, circumspection, and, to put it positively, a commitment to walk in the safe space of obedience because of the fear of judgment.

Solomon likewise asserts in Ecclesiastes 8:12–13,

Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

He also urges the fear of God in Ecclesiastes 3:14 and 5:7, warning of judgment in 3:17 and, implicitly, in all the references to death and the consequences of not pleasing God. The application of these ideas to how to approach the good life can be seen in the repeated encouragement to enjoy what God gives in the form of food, drink, labor, and family life (Eccl. 2:24–25; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18; 8:13; 9:7–10; 11:8–10; cf. Ps. 128). One way that Solomon aids his audience in getting to a mindset that enables them to live out his teaching can be seen in his emphasis on the fact that the ability to enjoy is a gift of God not given to all.

The futility of wealth can be particularly felt as Solomon writes:

There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all

that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous evil. (Eccl. 6:1–2)

One aspect of the gift of the power to enjoy wealth surely involves contentment, which overcomes the insatiability Solomon describes as afflicting mankind: “the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing” (Eccl. 1:8b); “he has put eternity into man’s heart” (3:11); “his eyes are never satisfied with riches” (4:8); “he who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income” (5:10). Solomon knows there is injustice in the world (3:16; 4:1; 5:8; 7:7), and he knows that in worldly terms “money answers everything (10:19). And still his positive message is that God’s gift is to enjoy one’s work and the blessings of the covenant, and as in Proverbs, he commends diligence: “But this is gain for a land in every way: a king committed to cultivated fields” (5:9).

CONCLUSION

What Solomon teaches about wealth and poverty in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes is fruit that grows on a tree planted by the Torah stream, in the sunshine of the teaching of David, informed by the other prophets who had been active to that point. Consider, for instance, how what Solomon says resonates with what Moses said in Deuteronomy 8:17–18 and 1 Samuel 2:7.

Beware lest you say in your heart, “My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.” You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day. (Deut. 8:17–18)

The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and exalts. (1 Sam. 2:7)

This perspective can also be seen to inform the Lord Jesus in his disregard for earthly wealth and happy embrace of economic poverty. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 8:9, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” Paul likewise knew a joy in God that did not arise from money: “I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need” (Phil. 4:12).

We have good news both for those who have embraced Critical Race Theory and for those who in their desire for social justice demand equal outcomes for all: there is a good and wise God who can be trusted to administrate all economic outcomes according to his good pleasure. It has not been given to us to control those outcomes, for the secret things belong to him (Deut. 29:29). What has been given to us is a revealed call to learn wisdom, to see the futility of living to amass wealth, experience earthly pleasure, or gain power. Nor does Solomon commend all-consuming advocacy of justice in the here and now as the path to the good life (cf. Eccl. 3:16–17). The wisdom Solomon teaches urges us to know God, to trust him, to fear him, and to enjoy his goodness to us. That is his gift to us.