Ecclesiastes Among the Tragedians

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1 Introduction

It has long been noted that certain affinities can be detected between the ideas presented in the biblical book of Ecclesiastes and the wider Hellenistic culture within which or over against which the book may well have emerged. Many commentators on Ecclesiastes have made remarks on this matter, pointing to the writings of various sceptics, stoics, or epicureans for similarities in thought, and there have also been a number of studies focused on such aspects.1

As a further contribution to this discussion, I wish to consider some affinities between Ecclesiastes, especially as transmitted in its Septuagintal guise, and the concerns and phrasings of the fifth-century Athenian dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.2 I am not claiming that the writer of the Hebrew book of Qohelet was necessarily familiar with any of the plays of those three writers, nor even that the translator of the Greek book of Ecclesiastes was necessarily a connoisseur of classical tragedy; I am simply noting that the musings of the sage of Jerusalem bear interesting comparisons with various utterances placed in the mouths of the tragic characters in the Athenian theatre.3

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2 The translations deployed in this study are those of the Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press): for Aeschylus, the translations of Alan Sommerstein (vols. 145, 146, and 505); for Sophocles, those of Hugh Lloyd-Jones (vols. 20, 21, and 483); and for Euripides, those of David Kovacs (the extant plays: vols. 9, 10, 11, 12, 481, 484, and 495) and of Christopher Collard and Martin Cropp (the fragments: vols. 504 and 506).

3 I make similar observations concerning tragedy's dramatic companion, comedy, in my essay 'Ecclesiastes Among the Comedians', in Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually, ed. K. Dell and W. Kynes (LHBOTS, 587), London 2014, 176–88 [OR 176–188], where I investigate Aristophanes, Menander and other comic poets.
Such an observation should presumably come as no surprise. After all, decla-
mations on the instability of human life and the fragility of human happiness,
themes writ large upon the pages of Ecclesiastes, are the very stuff of tragedy. Little
wonder, then, if something rather akin to the view of life taken by Qohelet should
also be heard on the lips of protagonists within the dramatic presentations of the
three great classic tragedians. To borrow a phrase from the Jerusalemite work, we
might say that ‘a threefold cord is not quickly broken’ (Eccl. 4:12)—that is to say,
if the tragic vision deployed by the three prominent winners of the drama prizes
in Athens carries affinities with the viewpoint of the Hebrew Bible’s most promi-
nent gadfly, then Qohelet’s perspective stands in solid company.

2 General Themes in Common

2.1 Aeschylus

‘Farewell to you, old friends,’ intones the ghost of Darius in Aeschylus’ Persians
(840–842), ‘and even amid these troubles, see you give your hearts pleasure day
by day: wealth is of no benefit to the dead.’ So does the great Persian king echo,
as it were, the words of the so-called ‘king in Jerusalem’ (Eccl. 1:1) who was said
to ‘commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun
than to eat and drink and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their
toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun’ (8:15), whereas
after death ‘they have no more reward’ (9:5) and ‘never again will they have any
share in all that happens under the sun’ (9:6).

Meanwhile the Chorus of Persian elders had lamented the human condition
in the following words:

What mortal man can escape the guileful destruction of a god? Who is
so light of foot that he has power to leap easily away? For Ruin begins
by fawning on a man in a friendly way and leads him astray into her net,
from which it is impossible for a mortal to escape and flee. (Persians
93–100)

Such ruminations call to mind Qohelet’s gripping observation:

I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to
the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour
to the skilful; but time and chance happen to them all. For no one can
anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds
catched in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it sud-
denly falls upon them. (Eccl. 9:11–12)