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**OPEN-MINDEDNESS IN THE  
BIBLE AND BEYOND**

**A Volume of Studies in Honour of Bob Becking**

**Edited by Marjo C. A. Korpel and Lester L. Grabbe**

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## A HUMAN AND A DEITY WITH CONFLICTING MORALS (QOHELET 2.26)

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Open-mindedness and scholarship belong together. During his career, Bob Becking demonstrated how important it is to not take the traditional scholarly approaches for granted and to implement innovative methods. He showed that approaching a question from an unexpected angle gives a positive incentive to discussions that had come to a standstill. Also, scholars must be prepared to take new evidence into account, because it may show that fixed presuppositions are untenable.

In the book of Qohelet we encounter a critical, non-conformist wisdom seeker from the remote past. The anonymous thinker, whom the book designates as Qohelet (1.1–2, 12; 7.27; 12.8–10), is not a scholar in our sense of the word, but has something in common with good scholars: he is prepared to give up fixed ideas as soon as new evidence undermines them. In his case, the evidence consists of human vicissitudes that he observes attentively. His observations bring him to the conclusion that life is not as meaningful as previous sages suggested. In his book, the word *הבל* ‘vanity’ has a significant role. It is used in 30 verses to express that life is absurd. Qohelet is astonished by the prosperity of the wicked and the misfortune of the righteous and can no longer believe that there is a causal relationship between people’s righteousness and their prosperity, or between human misbehaviour and misfortune (e.g. 7.15; 8.10–14; 9.1–3). He has become critical of the traditional ideas about retribution that he knows, for instance, from the book of Proverbs.<sup>1</sup> Humans make efforts and do their best to live a just life, but there is nothing to be gained. Qohelet contends that God determines everything, but argues that he does so in a way that is quite incomprehensible and puzzling to humans.<sup>2</sup>

1. For the traditional assumption of a causal relationship between behaviour and reward, see Prov. 10.3; 11.5–6; 13.21–22; 17.13, 20, etc.

2. For a description of Qohelet’s thinking about divine justice, see Fox 1989: 121–50; Fox 2004: xxxi–xxxii; Schoors 2013: 19–22.



*Qohelet 2.26: Just or Incomprehensible Retribution?*

Some passages in the book of Qohelet seem to maintain that God rewards those who obey him and punishes the disobedient. Among these passages are 2.26 and 7.26, where the person who pleases God is designated as טוב לפני האלהים 'good before God' or טוב לפניו 'good before him',<sup>3</sup> whereas the person who displeases God is called חוטא 'sinner'. According to these verses, the good person is blessed, but the sinner receives an unfavourable lot:<sup>4</sup>

כי לאדם שטוב לפניו נתן חכמה ודעת ושמחה ולחוטא נתן ענין לאסוף ולכנוס לתת לטוב  
לפני האלהים  
גם זה הבל ורעות רוח

*Yes, to the person who is good before him he (i.e. God)<sup>5</sup> gave wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he gave the occupation of gathering and heaping in order to give to the good one before God. This also is vanity and striving after wind. (2.26)*

ומוצא אני מר ממות את האשה אשר היא מצודים וחרמים לבה אסורים ידיה  
טוב לפני האלהים ימלט ממנה וחוטא ילכד בה

*And I find (something) more bitter than death: the woman who is snares, and drag-nets is her heart, fetters are her hands. The good one before God will escape from her, but the sinner will get trapped by her. (7.26)*

Many twentieth-century exegetes were inclined to regard the parts of these two verses that are in italics in the translation as expressing the predominant retribution theology of the Hebrew Bible and as alien to Qohelet's own thinking. Among the first of these scholars was Alan Hugh McNeile.<sup>6</sup> McNeile and many scholars after him saw these phrases as secondary insertions by a pious redactor into an older composition. The supposed intention of the redactor was to countervail the radical scepticism that characterizes the older sections and to reassure the readers that it is profitable to obey God's rules.<sup>7</sup> These exegetes believed that the pious end of Qohelet 12 was also added by the redactor. For several decades, this interpretation of Qohelet 2.26 and 7.26 predominated in scholarly circles. The

3. The meaning of the expressions seems to be close to טוב בעיני האלהים and טוב בעיניו; compare 2 Chron. 31.20 with 2 Chron. 14.1.

4. I quote and translate the Masoretic text of Qohelet. There are no relevant deviations in the other ancient textual traditions.

5. For God as the giver of prosperity, see also Qoh. 5.18; 6.2.

6. McNeile 1904: 24–5.

7. Reference was made to the correspondence between Qoh. 2.26 and the traditional wisdom in Prov. 13.22; 28.8; Job 27.16–17.

last influential representative was Aarre Lauha, who repeated the view, with some modifications, in 1978.<sup>8</sup>

The interpretation became obsolete because it has a disadvantage, especially for 2.26, the verse on which I concentrate. The phrase *גם זה הבל ורעות רוח* at the end of 2.26 suggests that the preceding phrases express something absurd, not an orthodox retribution theology.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, those who regarded most of 2.26 as a secondary insertion by a pious redactor could not see the phrase *גם זה הבל ורעות רוח* as an addition by the same redactor. They were forced to assume that the composition of the end of Qohelet 2 was quite a complex process. McNeile solved the problem by suggesting that *גם זה הבל ורעות רוח* is an even later addition to the insertion of the pious redactor. Lauha saw the phrase *גם זה הבל ורעות רוח* as original and the rest of 2.24b–6 as a long insertion, added clumsily by the pious redactor.<sup>10</sup>

In more recent scholarly literature, this approach is regarded as contestable and outdated. The newer generations of exegetes believe it is better to try to understand texts in their transmitted form. They attempt to retrieve the coherence of a given text before jumping to the conclusion that the text is incoherent.

This newer approach led to the assumption that Qohelet 2.26 must describe an absurd aspect of life, as the concluding phrase demonstrates. Several verses in the preceding passage are in line with this interpretation, since they refer also to incomprehensible retribution.<sup>11</sup>

This left exegetes to ask why Qohelet regards it as absurd when good people receive good things and bad people receive bad things. The solution that they found is to assume that in Qohelet 2.26 and 7.26 the words *טוב* 'good' and *חוטא* 'sinner' do not have the moral connotations that they have in other contexts. In their translations of these verses, they replaced the expression 'who is good before God' by 'who pleases God' or 'God's favourite'. Also, they preferred to translate *חוטא* with 'the unfortunate' or 'one who is offensive', without moral connotations.<sup>12</sup> Some suggest that the terminology implies that God's determination of the fate of humans is arbitrary.<sup>13</sup>

The non-moral interpretation of *טוב* and *חוטא* in Qohelet 2.26 and 7.26 has become widespread. Also the latter verse is assumed to refer to divine preferences without moral aspects: God saves men who please him from the hands of the

8. Lauha 1978: 6–7, 40, 58, 139, 142. A recent representative is Pinker 2010, who, however, considers it possible that 2.26 is a quote that Qohelet rejects.

9. Also in Qoh. 4.4 and 6.9 (cf. 4.16), the phrase *גם זה הבל ורעות רוח* is used as an expression of absurdity. The expression *הבל ורעות רוח* occurs also in Qoh. 1.14; 2.11, 17.

10. McNeile 1904: 24, 61; Lauha 1978: 40, 58.

11. Fox 1989: 188: 'Furthermore, Qohelet has just said that the fortunate recipient may be a fool (2:19), while the unfortunate man may toil in wisdom (v. 21).'

12. E.g. Fox 1989: 188–9; Fox 2004: 19, 52; Krüger 2004: 58; Schoors 2013: 217–19, 571. Cf. already the Dutch NBG translation (1951) and Gordis 1951: 142, 217.

13. E.g. Braun 1973: 51–3; Müller 1986: 11–12.

wicked woman<sup>14</sup> and he abandons those who displease him, but the reasons for his gracious or aloof attitude are unknown.

It is beyond doubt that the adjective טוב can be used in a non-moral sense. Both the moral and the non-moral sense occur in the book of Qohelet.<sup>15</sup> However, the assumption that חטא can have a non-moral sense is not self-evident. Admitting that חטא virtually always has the moral meaning ‘to sin’, Michael Fox explains his non-moral interpretation of the verb in Qohelet 2.26 as follows:

While most sages take it for granted that God is offended only by sin or moral folly, Qohelet believes that God (like a human ruler) may treat a person as offensive for inexplicable reasons and not necessarily because of actual sin or folly.<sup>16</sup>

Some exegetes assume the non-moral meaning ‘to miss (the mark)’ for חטא in Qohelet 2.26 and 7.26 and suggest that this is also the original meaning of the verb.<sup>17</sup> Fox, however, argues that the verb always denotes a component of offensiveness to someone.<sup>18</sup> Others see no reason to believe that the original meaning was different from ‘to sin’. They point out that ‘to sin’ is the predominant meaning, also in Qohelet, and that the meaning ‘to miss (the mark)’ is possible in only a few marginal and unclear cases.<sup>19</sup> In his extensive discussion, Tilmann Zimmer adds a second argument:

Secondly, it seems unlikely that here, without any preparation, this connoted term brings to the mind of the reader/listener the original meaning, especially since in other places Kohelet definitely uses the root חט in the sense of *sin/guilt*.<sup>20</sup>

I regard these arguments as convincing. In the other passages in Qohelet where טוב and חטא occur in antithetic parallelism (7.20; 9.2; cf. 8.12), both terms are

14. It is uncertain whether the negative attitude relates towards women in general, or to a certain woman or a specific type of women. Cf. Krüger 2004: 145; Schoors 2013: 574.

15. For the non-moral sense of טוב, see e.g. Qoh. 2.1; 3.13; 4.3, 6, 9; 7.1–3; 11.7. The word undoubtedly has a moral sense in Qoh. 7.20; 9.2; 12.14.

16. Fox 1989: 189.

17. E.g. Gordis 1951: 217; Schoors 2004: 225–7; Schoors 2013: 218n. 103. Cf. HALOT, 903.

18. Fox 1989: 189.

19. Esp. Koch 1980: 310–11, who refers to Akk. *ḥatû* (G) ‘to do wrong’ and Whybray 1989: 64–5.

20. Zimmer 1999: 191: ‘Zum zweiten erscheint es unwahrscheinlich, daß der Leser/Hörer bei einem derart markant besetzten Begriff ohne jede Vorbereitung hier die ursprüngliche Bedeutung assoziiert, zumal Kohelet die Wurzel חט an anderen Stellen durchaus in der Bedeutung *Sünde/Schuld* verwendet.’

used in the moral sense.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, it is best to assume the same sense in 2.26 and 7.26 as well and to translate חוטא with ‘sinner’.

This means, of course, that the problem of how it can be absurd that God rewards the good one and punishes the sinner remains to be solved. Zimmer suggests that Qohelet in 2.26 consciously gives a traditional description of the assumed causal relationship between behaviour and reward. The aim of his somewhat simplistic description was to offend the readers and to give them food for thought.<sup>22</sup>

My own solution is different. I assume that in Qohelet 2.26 and 7.26 the words חוטא and חטא have a moral sense, but that God’s moral considerations are assumed to differ from human considerations about what is good or bad. Biblical scholars may find this a strange idea, but I will show that in two extra-biblical texts that show ideological correspondences with Qohelet this is not a strange idea at all. The texts are the Babylonian poem *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* and the Ugaritic Legend of Aqhat. Unfortunately, these passages have been overlooked in the exegesis of Qohelet 2.26 and 7.26.

### *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi*

The Babylonian Poem of the Righteous Sufferer, often designated as *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* ‘I will praise the Lord of Wisdom’ after its opening words, probably dates from the last centuries of the second millennium BCE.<sup>23</sup> The protagonist, Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan, praises and thanks Marduk, the Lord of Wisdom, because this god has saved him from his distress. However, Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan also looks back upon his misery and describes what he thought before Marduk saved him. He regarded his misfortune as undeserved, because he had been keen to fulfil all the social and religious obligations to which he, as servant of the king, was bound. However, the gods seemed to treat him as if he were impious and negligent.<sup>24</sup>

In their recent edition of the text, Amar Annus and Alan Lenzi describe the passage that is relevant for the interpretation of Qohelet 2.26 and 7.26 as ‘the earliest recorded statement of seminal agnosticism.’<sup>25</sup> Having described his scrupulous adherence to his duties, the righteous sufferer says:

*lu-u i-de ki-i it-ti DINGIR i-ta-am-gur an-na-a-ti*  
*ša dam-qat ra-ma-nu-uš a-na DINGIR gul-lul-tum*  
*ša ina šà-bi-šú mu-us-su-kàt UGU DINGIR-šú dam-qat*  
*a-a-ú tē-em DINGIR.MEŠ qé-reb AN-e i-lam-mad*

21. Cf. Schoors 2004: 227–8.

22. Zimmer 1999: 191.

23. Annus and Lenzi 2010: xviii–xix.

24. *Ludlul* II: 12–22; Annus and Lenzi 2010: 19.

25. Annus and Lenzi 2010: xxi.

*mi-lik šá an-za-nun-ze-e i-ḥa-ak-kim man-nu*  
*e-ka-a-ma il-ma-da a-lak-ti DINGIR.MEŠ a-pa-a-ti*<sup>26</sup>

I wish I knew that these things were pleasing to the god!  
 What seems good to oneself is a sin to the god.  
 What in one's own heart seems despicable is good to one's god.  
 Who can learn the reasoning of the gods in heaven?  
 Who can grasp the intentions of the depths?  
 Where might mortals have learned the way of the gods?

The Babylonian sufferer contemplated the possibility that the gods regard as a 'sin' (*gullultum*) what humans see as 'good' (*damqat*) and that the gods regard as 'good' (*damqat*) what humans reject (*mussukat*, 'despicable'). In his commentary, Karel van der Toorn rightly notes:

This passage combines the familiar notion of the remoteness of the gods (they are either in heaven or in the subterranean depths) with doubts about the validity of our moral values. How can we be sure that the gods use the same yardstick that we do when it comes to measuring a man's integrity?<sup>27</sup>

Not only humans but also the gods have their moral considerations, but the human and the divine morals may differ from each other. Of course, the decisions of the gods are driven by their own morals, but the righteous sufferer does not suggest that the divine judgements are arbitrary, only that they are different. The gods may be consistent in seeing human deeds as sinful or virtuous.

The righteous sufferer assumes that both gods and humans regard certain kinds of human behaviour as 'good'. It may be significant that he supposes that humans may see behaviour as 'despicable', whereas only the gods are assumed to label human deeds as a 'sin'.

### *The Legend of Aqhat*

The second extra-biblical text suggesting that divine considerations about what is proper and improper may differ considerably from human morals is the Ugaritic legend of Aqhat (KTU 1.17–19), which dates from the end of the thirteenth century BCE. Despite the differing genres, scholars have observed several parallels between this epic poem and the much younger book of Qohelet. For instance, in both compositions we find pessimistic considerations about the inevitability of death.<sup>28</sup> The idea that the gods may strike righteous people with disasters is also

26. *Ludlul* II: 33–8; Annus and Lenzi 2010: 20.

27. Van der Toorn 2003: 80.

28. Compare KTU 1.17.vi: 35–8 with Qoh. 2.14–16; 3.19–20; 9.2–6.

prominent in the Aqhat legend. Aqhat's father King Dani'il is righteous, but is struck by misfortune.<sup>29</sup>

According to the legend, the prince Aqhat owns a bow that is so beautiful that the goddess 'Anat wants it desperately. After Aqhat has rejected her offer to give him gold and silver or even eternal life in exchange for the bow, the goddess warns Aqhat, suggesting that he is culpable of *pš'* 'transgression' and *g'an* 'presumption'.<sup>30</sup> She threatens him as follows:

*hm laqryk bntb pš' |*  
*[xxxxx]x bntb g'an*  
*ʾašqlk tħt | [p'ny]*  
*[xxx]tk n'mn 'mq nšm |*<sup>31</sup>

If ever I encounter you on the path of transgression,  
 [find you?] on the path of presumption,  
 I shall cause you to fall under [my feet],  
 [I shall ....] you, o handsome one, toughest of men.

Is prince Aqhat really sinful and presumptuous? The context leaves a different impression: 'Anat's behaviour is selfish and capricious and her anger, which will lead to Aqhat's horrific death, is unjustifiable. Aqhat is the legitimate owner of the bow. The narrator's sympathy is clearly on his side, not on the side of the goddess. Aqhat is right when he defies the deity and accuses her of fabricating lies about her ability to give eternal life.<sup>32</sup> Again we meet a deity and a human who disagree about what is proper and improper. In this case, however, the deity makes the impression of being driven by egoism and her labelling of Aqhat's behaviour as sinful is impulsive. This is completely different in the retrospective account of the Babylonian righteous sufferer, who suggested that the moral considerations of the gods are unknown to humans, not that the gods rule impulsively.

### Evaluation

It is time to establish what light the extra-biblical parallels shed on Qohelet 2.26. It is clear that *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, the Legend of Aqhat and the book of Qohelet

29. De Moor 2003: 142–8.

30. The words *pš'* and *g'an* are *hapax legomena* in the Ugaritic texts, but cf. Hebrew פשע 'transgression' (e.g. Lev. 16.16; Amos 3.14; 5.12; Mic. 1.5) and נאצו 'pride', 'presumption' (e.g. Hos. 5.5; Amos 6.8).

31. KTU 1.17.vi: 43–5. For the addition [p'ny], see KTU 1.19.iii: 3, 9–10, etc.

32. KTU 1.17.vi: 34–5. In KTU 1.18: i.17 the supreme god El seems to use the word *hnp* 'vice' to describe 'Anat's actions. It is possible that the narrator designated her behaviour with the same word in KTU 1.17.vi: 41–2; restored by De Moor (2003: 144n. 201).

have something in common. They all reckon with the possibility that a deity may dismiss human behaviour that humans themselves regard as right.

Only the relevant passage from *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* states explicitly that deities and humans may have their own distinctive ideas about which human behaviour is proper or improper. The tone in this passage is reflective. In view of his own distress, the protagonist's inability to know the will of the gods is extremely problematic, but the passage does not show signs of rebellion. Also, nothing suggests that the preferences of the gods might be arbitrary or impulsive.

The genre of the Aqhat legend is epic poetry. Here the idea that divine morals and human morals may differ is expressed only implicitly, in a narrative form. 'Anat has a deviant opinion about what is proper and improper. The reason why her perspective is different is obvious: the goddess is driven by egoism. She labels Aqhat's behaviour as sinful because he is not prepared to give her his bow. Aqhat knows 'Anat's intentions very well and is, therefore, rebellious and unwilling to obey.

In several passages in the book of Qohelet we find the idea that God's judgement of human behaviour is incomprehensible to humans. According to Qohelet 2.26 it is absurd that God rewards the person 'who is good before him' and punishes the 'sinner'. Apparently, Qohelet's assessment of who deserves reward and who deserves punishment would have been different.

Of course, the correspondences are too meagre to assume that *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* and the Legend of Aqhat exercised influence on the book of Qohelet. It is much likelier that the parallels go back to multiform streams of thought that existed through the ages.<sup>33</sup>

Despite that, the comparison of Qohelet 2.26 with the extra-biblical parallels is quite useful, since it opens our eyes to a possibility that was overlooked in the exegesis of Qohelet 2.26. Against the background of the passage from *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, it is justifiable to ask whether also in Qohelet 2.26 the divine morals are believed to differ from the human morals. Scholars assumed a non-moral sense for טוב and חוטא since they did not consider the possibility that a deity's moral assessments might differ from the human assessments. However, since *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* explicitly addresses this possibility, we may assume that both חוטא and טוב have a moral sense in Qohelet 2.26. The advantage of this interpretation is that it retains the usual, moral meaning of חטא.

Second, the extra-biblical parallels raise an important question about the intention of Qohelet 2.26: does the verse imply that God is arbitrary when assessing human behaviour, just like 'Anat? Or is God assumed to base his assessment on considerations that are unknown to humans but that might be consistent, like the gods that the Babylonian sufferer has in mind?

The protagonist of the Aqhat legend assumes a rebellious attitude towards the selfish and capricious deity. The protagonist of *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, however, has something in common with Qohelet. Like Qohelet, he sees life as incomprehensible,

33. See also the more conspicuous parallels between Qoh. 9.7–9 and the Old Babylonian version of an episode of the Gilgamesh Epic (c. 1800 BCE); cf. Krüger 2004: 172–3.

but seems to be resigned to the fact that the divine decisions are inexplicable. He does not suggest that the divine assessments are arbitrary or that the deity is driven by egoism.

Also the book of Qohelet does not show traces of rebellion against God. Norman Whybray rightly states with regard to Qohelet's attitude towards God: 'Qohelet never utters a word of reproach or hostility towards him.'<sup>34</sup> God is remote, transcendent and beyond human comprehension. He exceeds humans in every conceivable way and controls all events. However, Qohelet suggests that the pressing questions that these events raise with regard to God's guidance might be due to the limited knowledge and to the shortcomings of the humans, not to arbitrariness on the part of God.<sup>35</sup> Although God's rule of the world confuses him, Qohelet does not criticize it and sometimes even speaks quite positively about it: 'Everything he has made beautiful in its time' (3.11).

Of course, this speaking about God differs considerably from the way the Aqhat legend describes the arbitrariness of the goddess 'Anat. It is not justifiable to suppose that Qohelet 2.26 sees God's assessment of human deeds as arbitrary.<sup>36</sup> The translation of חוטא with 'the unfortunate' is not only contestable in view of the standard meaning of חטא, it is also in contrast with the way Qohelet speaks about God in the rest of his book. God's guidance is not arbitrary, but incomprehensible.

The fact that Qohelet uses the term חוטא 'sinner' for the person whose deeds God disapproves of is in line with his theology. For Qohelet it is clear who may decide who is a sinner: only God, not humans. In the case of the 'good' person, it was useful to indicate that he or she was assumed to be good לפני האלהים 'before God', not according to others. In the case of the sinner, however, such an explanatory addition was redundant. It is clear that a חוטא is a person who acts contrary to the morals of God. Also *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* suggests that the gods know what sinning (*gullultum*) implies, not the humans themselves.

However, Qohelet's attitude towards God's rule remains ambivalent: on the one hand he believes that God can judge human deeds better than humans themselves can. This is the positive side of the coin. But there is also a negative side: Qohelet sees that people who deserve reward suffer and that people who deserve punishment prosper. With the best will in the world he cannot understand why these people are judged differently by God.

It remains dubious whether Qohelet 7.26b expresses the comforting side of God's guidance or its confusing side. Unfortunately, the context is too unclear.

34. Whybray 1989: 27.

35. For Qohelet's image of God, see Whybray 1989: 27–30; Fox 1989: 123–9; Fox 2004: xxxi–xxxii; Zimmer 1999: 207–9; Krüger 2004: 2–3; Schoors 2003: 376–403; Schoors 2013: 21–2. When he admonishes the readers, Qohelet appears to have his own ideas about what is proper and improper, but, remarkably, even in his admonitions Qohelet stresses that the appropriate conduct of human beings consists primarily of the fear of God, which is in line with his theology; see Qoh. 3.14; 4.17–5.6; 7.18; 8.2–5, 12b–13; 11.9; 12.1, 13–14. Cf. Zimmer 1999: 190–216.

36. Against Braun 1973: 51–3; Müller 1986: 11–12. See note 13 above.



However, it is the negative side that emerges in Qohelet 2.26, as is shown by the expression *גם זה הבל ורעות רוח*. Qohelet cannot reject God's rule, but this verse shows that he cannot embrace it either. He is too open-minded to close doors that should remain open.