

## Biblical Scholarship New and Old: Learning from the Past

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### Introduction

STUDENTS IN AMERICA are often warned about the tendency of American scholars to be “provincial,” that is, to stay complacently within the questions, answers, and assumptions of their own country. We must learn to be aware of our colleagues in Europe, especially those in the German- and French-speaking countries. There is however another kind of provincialism not often mentioned: The tendency we all share to stay complacently within the issues and assumptions of our own time in history. By learning to think with the authors of several ages, we form a frame within which to judge both our age and theirs, rather than letting our own age be our frame of judgment. As Roland Murphy states,

How many far-fetched theories have been hazarded by modern writers who are locked up in their own crippling presuppositions? Even the vagaries and extravagances of ancient exegesis can have a sobering effect on current scholarship. . . . As David Steinmetz . . . has remarked, “The principal value of precritical exegesis is that it is not modern exegesis. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

That temporal provincialism is indeed a problem in the biblical guild can be seen by looking at how contemporary scholars treat the history of interpretation. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (NJBC), for example, has a fourteen-page article devoted to the history of interpretation of the

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Dallas: Word, 1992), lv–lvi.

Old Testament, but the title of the article limits the discussion to *modern* interpretation. The article begins this way:

The modern era of biblical interpretation may be said to have begun ca. 1650. Until that date most Christian exegesis viewed the Bible as a heaven-sent collection of writings, a report of events that were independent of their cultural and historical milieu. A narrow view of inspiration neglected the role of the sacred writer in the composition of the books and ignored the possibility of development in Old Testament revelation. The criticism of that era was dogmatic and theological. There were, of course, individuals who questioned one or the other traditional viewpoint, but these isolated scholars failed to capture the attention of their contemporaries.

By 1650, however, fresh intellectual currents had gathered sufficient impetus to alter the biblical sciences.<sup>2</sup>

This finishes the *NJBC*'s description of 1,650 years of interpretation, all the many centuries before the exegetes who walked in darkness saw a great light.

To do justice to the *NJBC*, there is in fact another fifteen-page article, this one on the history of interpretation of the New Testament, in which the first 1,650 years of exegesis gets a little over a quarter of a page. But there again we find signs of provincialism: The title of the article restricts the discussion to *modern* interpretation, and after listing exegetes up to Augustine who contributed to New Testament criticism, the period from A.D. 430 to A.D. 1483 is leapt over by the following comment: "Although the Middle Ages, especially the great Scholastic period, contributed to the better understanding of Scripture, the contributions to real NT criticism were not major."<sup>3</sup>

Were the author of this article to read commentaries from the time, or a chapter from a history of biblical studies in the Middle Ages, his impression would probably change. The thirteenth century was an exciting time to be an interpreter of Scripture. Biblical studies were moving from the monasteries to the schools, the works of Aristotle were being re-introduced into Europe, and the new mendicant religious orders were leading the way in a gospel-driven intellectual revolution;<sup>4</sup> these converging forces were accompanied by an explosion of theoretical and technical

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<sup>2</sup> *The New Jerome Bible Commentary (NJBC)* 69:3, 1114.

<sup>3</sup> *NJBC* 70:3, 1131; cf. 71:39–40, 1155, which offers some history of "spiritual" exegesis.

<sup>4</sup> M. D. Chenu, *Toward Understanding St. Thomas* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964), 234–37, 241–32.

innovations, including concordances, Bible dictionaries, renewed interest in and knowledge of Hebrew and Greek, interlinear and facing-page Hebrew–Latin Bibles, and the chapter and verse divisions we use today.<sup>5</sup>

The University of Paris took a particular descendent of Jerome's Vulgate as their standard text, due to its unavoidable interconnection with the glosses, and it was (as they acknowledged) in a sad state, full of corruptions and interpolations.<sup>6</sup> Even the original Vulgate translation was based a limited number of manuscripts.<sup>7</sup> However, an enormous cooperative labor by Dominican exegetes produced the *correctoria*, long lists of variant readings and amendments to the text gathered from older Latin Bibles, the comments of the Church Fathers, and from the original Greek and Hebrew languages with the assistance of contemporary Jews; and as the thirteenth century progresses we see scriptural references become much more precise than before.<sup>8</sup> It was only the beginnings of textual criticism as we have it today, but it was a significant advance over the previous centuries.<sup>9</sup>

In the first half of this essay, I will attempt an overview of and reflection on an influential commentary from the Middle Ages;<sup>10</sup> I will complete my reflections in the second half by looking at medieval and modern commentary side-by-side. My purpose is not to rank them but

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 329–55. The focus of this essay is on Bonaventure's commentary on Ecclesiastes. As Robert J. Karris has demonstrated with respect to the commentary on Luke, Bonaventure relied more on his tremendous memory for scriptural citations than on a concordance, often making connections that could not be made by word searches. See Karris, "Bonaventure and Talbert on Luke 8:26–39: Christology, Discipleship, and Evangelization," *Perspectives in Religious Study (PRSt)* 28 (2002): 59–63.

<sup>6</sup> Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1952), 331.

<sup>7</sup> See *NJBC* 68:139 and 147, 1101–2.

<sup>8</sup> Smalley, 270, 334–36.

<sup>9</sup> While Bonaventure's commentary on Ecclesiastes is innovative in several ways, it does not seem to have taken advantage of the linguistic advances described here: He mentions variant readings found outside the Vulgate only four times (commenting on 1:17, 4:4, and two variations in 10:4), even though the older commentaries he relied upon included more information about such variants. See Dominic Vincent Monti, *Bonaventure's Interpretation of Scripture in His Exegetical Works* (Ph.D. diss., The University of Chicago, 1979), 94–95.

<sup>10</sup> This seems to be the most neglected of periods. Relevant to the author and commentary I will discuss, see Monti, *Bonaventure's Interpretation*, 3–4: "In fact, out of the 4,800 items included in a comprehensive bibliography of Bonaventuran research during the years 1850–1973, fewer than ten deal specifically with his biblical commentaries, which comprise two of the nine folio volumes of the Quaracchi edition of his works."

to contrast them, not to have a “duel of the commentaries” but rather a dialogue of the commentators.<sup>11</sup>

### Bonaventure on Ecclesiastes

For this purpose, I have chosen a commentary on Ecclesiastes by St. Bonaventure. His commentary on Ecclesiastes was a “classic,” according to Beryl Smalley, who writes, “I have seen a large number of postills on Ecclesiastes of the later thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries: all quote Bonaventure and all quote him anonymously.”<sup>12</sup>

Some have thought that Bonaventure’s *Commentarius in Ecclesiasticam* dates from the point in his studies when he was giving cursory commentary for beginning students. However, as Smalley has noticed, his commentary does not quite meet the usual description of these cursory commentaries: As a rule they are unoriginal, staying close to the accepted glosses and commentators, and necessarily sketchy, while Bonaventure’s postill on Ecclesiastes is in many respects original, even trend-setting, and thorough to the point of being exhaustive.<sup>13</sup> For whatever reason, he singled out Ecclesiastes for special attention, leading others to conclude that the commentary dates from his later years as a master.<sup>14</sup>

Bonaventure shows close dependence on St. Jerome, Hugh of St. Cher, and the traditional anonymous glosses, in addition to his original achievements. I will not take up space in this short paper with identifying which aspects are original to Bonaventure and which are part of the tradition.<sup>15</sup>

### The Prologue<sup>16</sup>

The prologue begins with a quotation from Ps 39:5 (40:5), “Blessed the man whose hope is the name of the Lord, and has not had regard for

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<sup>11</sup> At the same time as this article was being written, Karris was working on a similar comparison between Bonaventure and Charles H. Talbert. However, Karris’s aim was to find points of contact between Talbert’s narrative criticism and Bonaventure’s approach to show what medievals and moderns can have in common; the aim of this article is to contrast Bonaventure’s approach with historical criticism to show where medievals and moderns could learn from one another. See Karris, 57–66.

<sup>12</sup> Smalley, 274.

<sup>13</sup> Roland E. Murphy, ed., *Medieval Exegesis of Wisdom Literature: Essays by Beryl Smalley* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 40, 43, 45.

<sup>14</sup> Monti, *Bonaventure’s Interpretation*, 82–83.

<sup>15</sup> For a good overview of Bonaventure’s sources, see *ibid.*, 98–99.

<sup>16</sup> For my research, I have used the Peltier edition of Bonaventure’s *opera*, published in Paris in 1867. The commentary on Ecclesiastes is found in volume nine.

vanities, and lying follies.”<sup>17</sup> (It was customary to begin the prologue to a commentary with a quotation, meant to bring out the chief themes of the book at hand, from elsewhere in Scripture.) There follows a long, stirring, and heavily theological discourse on why the man who hopes in the Lord has beatitude or blessedness, while the man who sets his heart on the vanities of the world is himself rendered vain, in the sense of “empty” or “futile.” This section lays the remote intellectual foundations for understanding the theology of Ecclesiastes, introducing the ideas of beatitude and vanity, eternal and temporal, God and the world; the book of Ecclesiastes itself is not mentioned.

Bonaventure moves into Ecclesiastes by noting that the wise man’s chief concern is to teach people the way to beatitude.<sup>18</sup> This sets up an exposition of the “final cause” of the book. Shortly before the composition of this commentary, it had become the custom to use Aristotle’s “four causes” to analyze and introduce a book of Scripture: material, efficient, formal, final. Since these four causes can be found anytime something comes into being, and since all causes of coming to be can be grouped under these four headings, the medievals learned to use them as a tool for organizing thoughts and writings. Hence Bonaventure begins his proximate treatment of the book of Ecclesiastes by walking through its four causes.

### *Final Cause*

The final cause of any book is the author’s purpose in writing. The wise man’s chief concern is to teach people the way to beatitude. And since—as Bonaventure has just argued at length—to arrive at beatitude one must love eternal things, despise temporal things, and lead a good life in interaction with a corrupt world, the wise Solomon produced three books: Proverbs, which teaches one to interact wisely with the world; Ecclesiastes, which teaches one to hold temporal things in contempt; and the Song of Songs, which teaches one to love heavenly things.<sup>19</sup>

Modern scholars have abandoned the notion that Solomon could have written Ecclesiastes, but there is still some profit in reflecting on Bonaventure’s approach to the problem of how the Wisdom books relate.

There is a sense in which the mind only sees what it already knows. In a dark room, the brain uses previous memory together with imagination to organize and flesh out a few glints of light here and there into an amazingly accurate picture; in a similar way, the mind uses its pool of previously held ideas to organize and flesh out incoming data. Living in

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 579.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 582.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

an age shaped by Darwin and Hegel, we look at the books of Solomon and see evolution and history. Proverbs, think many modern scholars, was an earlier stage, and then disillusionment with the optimistic viewpoint presented there led to the darker and more realistic views of Ecclesiastes. Bonaventure, however, living in a world shaped by Augustine and Francis, looks at these same books and sees mystical theology. Everyone who is serious about the spiritual life experiences the tension of being in the world but not of it.

A very rough analogy would be to compare Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* with the *Imitation of Christ*. The first is all about knowledge and how to get it; the second says repeatedly that the pursuit of knowledge is a snare and a pitfall. Both are true, both have been received into the stream of Catholic tradition, and one individual can even read them both and eventually hold them together in a single view (although it is very difficult to imagine one individual *writing* them both). This does not supplant the historical approach to the problem, but it does supplement it. It can be helpful to read an author whose mental interpretive filters are not the same as our own.

#### *Material Cause*

At a crude level, of course, the material cause of a book is the parchment and ink (or equivalents thereof) out of which it is made. But Bonaventure is thinking of the book as an intellectual product in the mind of its author and its readers rather than as a physical product, so the "stuff" the book is made of is its subject matter. The material cause of the book is what it is about.

Ecclesiastes is about the vanity of things.<sup>20</sup> Bonaventure spends a fair amount of time unpacking the idea of "vanity," or emptiness, futility, falsehood, which is opposed to fullness of being, to "truth" in the metaphysical sense.<sup>21</sup> He distinguishes three kinds of vanity: the vanity of mutability, the vanity of guilt, and the vanity of punishment. The first vanity arises from the changeableness of created things, and means nothing more than that created things do not have the absolute fullness of being that God does; in itself this is a good thing, because the world is not supposed to be God anyway. The second vanity comes into play when a person clings to the changeable world and so is drawn into sin, which is both "empty" in the sense that it is lacking in being and "futile" in the sense that it can come to no good; this vanity is an evil, definitely

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 582–84. The root meaning of *vanitas* is "emptiness," from which it comes to denote an illusory or unsubstantial quality, falseness, and pointlessness.

not the way things are supposed to be. The third vanity consists in the punishments due to sin (by which Bonaventure seems to mean original sin rather than a particular personal sin), such as death and concupiscence. This kind of vanity leads to futility in actions, and is also an evil, at least for the person suffering it. Each vanity flows from the one before it: The vanity of mutability leads to the vanity of sin, and this in turn leads to the vanity of punishment.

#### *Formal Cause*

The formal cause is what gives a thing its particular nature, what puts it in a species. What makes a book be a particular kind of book is not what it is about but rather the way in which it is written, whether as a play or as a poem, as a treatise or a tragedy. When we ask about the formal cause of a book, we are asking about the way in which it is written. In modern terms, this would be the genre.

According to Bonaventure, Ecclesiastes speaks in a manner “unique among the other books”: He speaks as one who solemnly proclaims serious truths,<sup>22</sup> setting forth different opinions, speaking here in the manner of a wise man, and there in the manner of a fool, so that out of the clash of different opinions a single truth may become clear in the minds of the audience.<sup>23</sup>

A modern might then request a color-coded text in which the wise man speaks in red letters or something of that sort. Bonaventure means something more subtle than that. He does not mean that Ecclesiastes is a patchwork of different people speaking with no indication as to who they are, but that there is one wise man speaking who sometimes speaks as though he were a fool. Roland Murphy has recourse to a similar interpretation when he argues that Eccl 8:12b should remain a part of the original work: “But one can allow it to remain as part of the work if one recognizes that he is repeating, even quoting, the traditional doctrine that he does not adhere to.”<sup>24</sup> Usually Bonaventure avoids leaning on this method, preferring instead to interpret everything (including 8:12b) as spoken in the author’s own voice.<sup>25</sup>

A good example of Bonaventure’s preference is his commentary on Eccl 5:17. After presenting the traditional view that the author speaks

<sup>22</sup> At least, that seems to be the import of the word *concionator*, Jerome’s translation of the word *qoheleth*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 582.

<sup>24</sup> Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 56.

<sup>25</sup> Bonaventure, 649–50.

here in the voice of an Epicurean, he goes on to suggest that the author may be speaking in his own voice:

But nonetheless to understand the things he says, two things should be noted, namely the reason and manner of speaking. . . . [S]ome things he says truly, but other things ironically . . . some things he says approvingly, but in others he is merely recounting what he himself has done. . . . Likewise, some of the things he says recount what he has thought. And he uses this manner of speech often in this book, like a man telling the story of his temptations. Hence this book was, as it were, a kind of meditation of Solomon. And just as a man changes from one meditation to a different opinion on the basis of different considerations, as when he thinks something is good, and afterwards thinks differently about it, so Solomon tells the story [of his thoughts in this book].<sup>26</sup>

### *Efficient Cause*

As was said above, the efficient cause of a book is the author, and for Bonaventure, as for all premodern commentators, the author of Ecclesiastes is Solomon. Despite this sharp disagreement with modern historical-critical exegesis, however, it is interesting to see how he approaches the question of authorship.

In favor of Solomonic authorship, he argues that Solomon was the most suitable person to write the book. After all, Ecclesiastes contains severe condemnations of riches, and honor, and the pursuit of knowledge, so the person condemning should be someone who has experience of these things. If a poor man condemned riches, who would believe him? So our author needs to be someone who was powerful, rich, pleasure-seeking, and a pursuer of knowledge. But we know of no one more powerful, rich, pleasure-seeking, and wise than Solomon, so he is the best candidate.<sup>27</sup>

Against Solomonic authorship, Bonaventure points out that it is not helpful for a sinner to condemn sin: It is more a source of scandal than of edification. Furthermore, it would seem to be a sin for Solomon to write the book, the sin of hypocrisy.<sup>28</sup>

He defends Solomon first by pointing to the traditional idea that Solomon repented at the end of his life, and wrote Ecclesiastes as a result. But even if he did not, Bonaventure argues, the Holy Spirit can speak true things through both good men and bad, as Christ implies when he

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 628–29.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 582–83.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 585.

instructs the people to do what the Pharisees say but not what they do. Knowing that the book was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we do not need to bother ourselves about the moral quality of the man who wrote it. As for the problem of hypocrisy, he points out that Solomon was given the gift of wisdom in a rather impressive manner, and so he had a duty to use it for the people. It would have been a sin *not* to use his wisdom.<sup>29</sup>

### *The Commentary*

To describe the commentary itself in detail would require many, many pages, so I will limit my remarks to Bonaventure's division of the text of Ecclesiastes, which actually gives a good sketch of the commentary as a whole.

The three main parts of Ecclesiastes are, of course, the title (1:1), the body of the text (1:2–12:8), and the epilogue (12:9–14). Bonaventure does not consider the possibility that someone besides Solomon added these parts.<sup>30</sup>

More interesting is the body of the text. First, the author sets out his thesis (1:2), namely that "all things are vanity." Then he spends almost all of the body proving his thesis. Lastly, he concludes by restating the thesis (12:8). This way of viewing the text is consonant with the view that the author writes as a *concionator*, trying to persuade his audience by various arguments.<sup>31</sup>

The proofs of the thesis fall into three parts. Bringing his analysis of vanity into play, Bonaventure says that the first part is about the vanity of mutability (1:3–3:15), the second part about the vanity of guilt (3:16–7:23), and the third part about the vanity of punishment (7:24–12:7).<sup>32</sup> Although it is not clear to me that 7:24 is the right division point, the division of the text into these three categories is surprisingly convincing. The first part of Ecclesiastes does speak about things which are neither good nor bad in themselves, like the unceasing change of the sea, and the passing of times and seasons. Then the author begins in 3:16 to speak about the evil things that men do. At some point, whether 7:24 or elsewhere, he transitions to speaking about the evils that men suffer, concluding with death in chapter 12.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 585–86. He notes that the title manifests the efficient cause of the book, the body of the text manifests the material and formal causes, and the epilogue manifests the final cause.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 587.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 588.

The section about the vanity of guilt is rather long, because unlike the vanity of mutability, this vanity is *not* the way things are supposed to be. So after the author sets out the vanity itself (3:16–4:16), he then spends a lot of time setting out a remedy against it (4:17–7:23). Bonaventure sees him as setting out three kinds of guilt, namely malice (3:16ff.), avarice (4:1ff.), and imprudence (4:13ff), and then setting out remedies in the same order, namely against malice (4:17ff), avarice (5:9ff), and imprudence (6:8ff).<sup>33</sup>

A couple of points for reflection occur here. First, Bonaventure sees the author of Ecclesiastes as being—at a certain level at least—very clear in his ideas and organized in his approach, rather than confused and wandering. These seem to be the two options: Given so convoluted a text, the author is either very organized or very disorganized. However, this should not be taken too far. If you pursue Bonaventure’s division to a certain level of detail, the author’s more human side emerges, with brief tangents, outbursts of emotion, and so on, as in 8:15, where he says that the author speaks “as a man who is disturbed.”<sup>34</sup>

Second, Bonaventure does not seem to have many literary techniques in his text—divisional tool bag. For example, he does not consider using repeated phrases as a clue to the division, and he obviously does not have the linguistic training to pursue a numerological argument of the sort proposed by Addison and Wright.<sup>35</sup> He is forced to rely exclusively on a good grasp of the theme at hand and his tremendous ability to follow an argument.<sup>36</sup> These limitations seem to be genuine limitations in training rather than results of premodern theological convictions about inspiration, because he seems quite ready to use the methods of textual division he learned in the study of Aristotle’s corpus, which he certainly did not regard as inspired.

Bonaventure’s commentary on Ecclesiastes is thus heavily theological: He is more concerned that Ecclesiastes be written under the inspiration of the Spirit than that it be written by a morally upright man; the subject of Ecclesiastes is one you can find in a book of devotions; the division of the text is according to a theological analysis of vanity. He obviously operates on the assumption that—to rephrase a common line—theology is the soul of Scripture.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 613, 621 & 632.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 651.

<sup>35</sup> See Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xxxviii.

<sup>36</sup> Or as Karris somewhat more positively puts it (“Bonaventure and Talbert,” 59), he relied on “the insights of previous commentators, the Scriptures themselves, a keen literary sense, a compendious memory, a brilliant intellect, and a profound faith—excellent tools, it would seem, for any exegete.”

### Death and Afterlife in Ecclesiastes

We are now prepared to address in more detail a particular theme in the commentary the theme of Ecclesiastes' view of life after death. I will compare Bonaventure's approach with that of a contemporary scholar so that, by setting modern and medieval side-by-side, we can get a sharper picture of both. Our modern representative is Father Roland Murphy, whose recent death was sad news indeed for Catholic biblical scholarship.

#### *Murphy on Death and Afterlife in Ecclesiastes*

In the introduction to his work, Murphy offers a quick overview of Qoheleth's views on death.<sup>37</sup> While ancient Israelites were remarkably resigned to death overall, Qoheleth simply cannot reconcile himself to it. They apparently found solace in the thought that they lived on in others' memory (Prov 10:7) and in their own posterity, but Qoheleth denies that there will be any memory (Eccl 1:11; 2:16), and wonders whether his heir will be wise or disastrously foolish (2:18–19). Although he thinks that death would be preferable to certain extreme situations (4:2–3; 6:1–6), otherwise it is entirely unwelcome, as the lugubrious tone of 12:1–7 shows. Death is the complete opposite of the only good Qoheleth can find, the life of pleasure; after death there is nothing (9:10).

Murphy's commentary on particular passages fleshes out this summary of Qoheleth's view of death and afterlife. His comments on each passage are divided into three parts: first the "notes," a verse-by-verse analysis of textual-critical issues, grammatical questions, and other such things that would disrupt the flow of a commentary on the meaning; second the "comment," another verse-by-verse analysis, this time of the meaning and import of the text; and lastly, the "explanation," in which he takes a "wide-angle" view of the text, summarizing the main points and placing it within the flow of the book as a whole.

While I will not present everything Murphy has to say about the theme of death and afterlife in Ecclesiastes, what I present will be representative of the whole.

#### *Ecclesiastes 3:16–21*<sup>38</sup>

Qoheleth bemoans the fact that human justice is corrupt, and in the worst of places—public justice. While he clearly affirms that God will

<sup>37</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lxvii–lxix.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 37–38.

judge both the good and the wicked, it is far from clear what form he thinks that judgment will take. “He did not deny that God is just,” Murphy says, “but he saw no evidence for it. The divine judgment, so often affirmed in his biblical tradition, was something he could not deny, but it appeared useless in reality.”<sup>39</sup>

Murphy finds it hard to see the connection between vv. 17 and 18. Perhaps Qoheleth means that human injustice shows that men are beasts despite the divine judgment.

The description of death in v. 19 is rooted in Gen 2:7 and Ps 104:29–30. The statement in v. 21—“Who knows if the life-breath of humans goes upwards, and if the life-breath of animals goes down into the earth?”—is equivalent to a denial: There is no distinction in fate between the life-breath of man and the life-breath of animals. Although Murphy is not sure what exact position is being denied, he is sure that the proposition denied here is not the same as the proposition affirmed in 12:7, namely that “the life-breath returns to God who gave it.” The hopeful-sounding affirmation of 12:7 does nothing to mitigate the gloomy view of 3:21.

*Ecclesiastes 9:4–10*<sup>40</sup>

The comparison in v. 4 of a living dog with a dead lion is heavily ironic, especially given the low value of dogs in the ancient Middle East. Love, hatred, and jealousy are rhymed in the Hebrew of v. 6. Starting in v. 7, Qoheleth draws a *carpe diem* conclusion which is very closely parallel to a passage in the epic of Gilgamesh.<sup>41</sup> These learned details are certainly not what one could find in Bonaventure’s commentary, since Bonaventure does not seem to have known Hebrew and was certainly not familiar with the epic of Gilgamesh, but it is difficult to see exactly what they add with respect to the meaning of the text.

Verse 10, says Murphy, “is motivated by a dour but realistic perspective: in Sheol there is no real activity or life, so act now! This description of Sheol is classic; it portrays a state of non-life.”

*Ecclesiastes 12:7*<sup>42</sup>

The process described in this verse is a reversal of Gen 2:7. “This is a picture of dissolution, not of immortality, as if there were a *reditus animae ad Deum*, “return of the soul to God.” Qoheleth is not even talking about

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 92–93.

<sup>41</sup> ANET, 90.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 120.

a “soul,” but about the “life-breath,” which Murphy says is “a totally different category of thought.”<sup>43</sup> In a polemical context, Qoheleth denied that there is any distinction between the life-breath of men and that of animals (3:21), but he certainly shares with the rest of the Old Testament the conviction that God is the possessor and giver of life, that is, the life-breath. (Cf. Ps 104:29–30; Job 33:4; 34:15.)

From what we have seen of Murphy’s commentary, Qoheleth was a dour individual who had no use for the consolations faith was supposed to offer in the face of difficulties. Although he was confused about many things, he was quite clear in his opposition to an unknown philosophy that seems to have leaned in the direction of a special postmortem fate for mankind. For Qoheleth, there is nothing after this life—at least, nothing to speak of—and death is simply a negative.

### *Bonaventure on Death and Afterlife in Ecclesiastes*

Bonaventure does not have a section that summarizes the theme of death in Ecclesiastes. I will pull together the main points after we have looked at his commentary on particular passages. His commentary on each passage is divided into two or sometimes three parts: First, he explains the literal sense as briefly and clearly as possible; next he explains the spiritual sense of the text; lastly he takes up doctrinal or exegetical questions that arise from the text, dealing with them in the classic Scholastic “question” format. This separation of the tasks to be accomplished was one of Bonaventure’s major innovations, and later commentators on Ecclesiastes followed his example.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> The point is well-taken, but “a totally different category of thought” is a bit of an overstatement. Our western notion of “soul” was decisively shaped by the tradition of Greek philosophy, which started with just such vague notions as “life-breath” (the original meaning of *pneuma* is after all “breath” or “wind”). The later tradition shaped and refined the early, imprecise attempts at stating the nature of the soul, but always in definite continuity with them. For a clear example of this continuity, see Aristotle’s *On the Soul*, Bk. 1, esp. chap. 2.

<sup>44</sup> The emphasis in this commentary falls decidedly on the literal sense. Bonaventure offers a spiritual interpretation for 13 passages (1:5–7; 2:4–7; 3:2–8; 4:9–12; 4:13–16; 9:4–10; 9:12; 9:14–15; 11:1–7; 12:1–2; 12:3–7), in accord with his general principle that a spiritual sense is only appropriate when the text in question does not have a direct bearing on faith or morals; cf. Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, trans. Jose de Vinck (Paris: St. Anthony Guild, 1963), 19. In contrast to this, there are 83 “questions” dealing with exegetical or doctrinal difficulties arising from the literal sense; altogether, these “questions” make up about 25 percent of the text of Bonaventure’s commentary. See Monti, *Bonaventure’s Interpretation*, 100–101.

*Ecclesiastes 3:16–21*<sup>45</sup>

To begin, Solomon bemoans the perversion of justice by rulers. This leads him to look for God’s judgment; Bonaventure says that the “judgment” can be taken either to mean the time of judgment for each man, or the general time when all things will be revealed.

Having described the evil, Solomon then discusses why things are the way they are now: God is testing men by making them very much like beasts. Evil men, seeing that their lives are like the beasts’, will become like the beasts in behavior as well, while good men will persevere and live spiritually.

In the lines that follow, according to Bonaventure, Solomon illustrates in detail the likeness between men and beasts. After showing the similarity, he says that the difference (the spiritual element in man) is very difficult to discern. Those who have faith know about the difference, and 12:7 is said in their person (“the spirit returns to God”); but those without faith have great difficulty discovering any difference, and 9:3 is said in their person (“one fate comes to all”).

In the “questions” on this section, Bonaventure raises the difficulty about the soul again: How can Solomon say “Who knows?” when there are abundant philosophical proofs of the immortality of the soul? To sharpen the point, Bonaventure runs quickly through a number of these proofs. In response to the objection, he says that, even though faith and philosophy are in agreement on this point, nevertheless without faith it is very, very difficult for philosophers to arrive at the truth. Even Plato, that stalwart defender of the soul’s immortality, erred by saying that animal souls are immortal—the *other* side of Solomon’s “who knows!”<sup>46</sup>

*Ecclesiastes 12:7*<sup>47</sup>

“The dust returns to the earth” means simply that the body disintegrates into ashes, in accord with Gen 3:19 and Sir 40:11. The spirit returns to God who gave it (Ps 32:15 Vg.); since God gave the spirit, the spirit gives back to God, like someone repaying a debt (2 Cor 5:10).<sup>48</sup>

It is interesting to note that while Murphy cites Gen 2:7, the creation account, Bonaventure looks to Gen 3:19, the curse after the fall. This fits with Bonaventure’s take on this part of Ecclesiastes. According to his division, this part treats of the “vanity of punishment,” and therefore deals

<sup>45</sup> Bonaventure, 613–15.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 615–16.

<sup>47</sup> An important point arises in 9:4–10 which I would rather save for the last, so I will turn now to 12:7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 678–79.

with death insofar as death is a punishment for sin—and I take it that he means original sin specifically. Already at 7:24, Solomon has been discussing the vanity of punishment, that is, the results of original sin, but up to 12:1 he was talking about punishment which is itself an occasion of sin, such as concupiscence. Here at last, after working slowly through the miseries of a fallen and sinful world which seems on every side to alienate man from his creator, Solomon finds a kind of punishment which actually calls us back to God: “Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the time of affliction comes” Death is indeed a negative in Ecclesiastes, as Murphy concludes, yet there is this one redeeming aspect to it.

Bonaventure also offers a spiritual interpretation of this passage: The “dust” refers to sinners, who are thrust into the “depths of infernal darkness” (this is a technical term, as will become clear below). He arrives at this interpretation by connecting “dust” to Ps 1:4 and “earth” to Prov 25:3.<sup>49</sup>

*Ecclesiastes 9:4–10*<sup>50</sup>

We go back now to the earlier passage. Here Solomon describes how men are led into a false sense of security because they do not see any providential difference between the fate of good men and the fate of evil men. This false sense of security then leads them into sin. First, he points out that no one can avoid death. Next, he describes how death puts one into a bad state. Lastly, he states the conclusion that would follow if indeed a man could not know whether what he does is pleasing to God, and whether there will be any reward for virtue.

In the “questions” on this passage, Bonaventure asks how Solomon could draw such an Epicurean conclusion. If we take the passage as being said in the person of an Epicurean, the answer is easy, of course; but Bonaventure prefers to take it all in the voice of Solomon. He says that Solomon draws the conclusion as what would follow if these premises were true, namely that a man cannot know whether what he does is pleasing to God and whether there will be any reward for virtue. Solomon himself does not hold these premises, but he draws the conclusion as a hypothetical “If X were, then Y would be.”<sup>51</sup>

But what about the statement that “the dead know nothing any more”? Surely this is not what we believe? In the commentary on the passage, Bonaventure simply notes that the act of knowing presupposes

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 681.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 655–56.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 657–58.

life, while the dead have neither life, nor motion, nor sense.<sup>52</sup> In the “questions,” he says further that Solomon means that the dead did not know the things of this world, nor were they in the memory of those in the world, nor did they have any affection for things of this world.<sup>53</sup>

What may seem odd to a modern reader is that Bonaventure not only accepts these gloomy views as Solomon’s, but accepts them himself as fact. He does not say that men of Solomon’s time *thought* the dead do not know about the things of this world; he simply says that dead men *did not* know about the things of this world. His comment on v. 10 reveals that the past tense “did not” is the key. Commenting on the line, “For there is neither work, nor reason, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the depth (*inferos*) to which you are going,” Bonaventure cites Job 10:22 to support the claim that “there is no reason there” in the “depth,” and then explains: “Sinners went there, *and everyone before the coming of Christ*, as regards the outer part”<sup>54</sup> (emphasis added).

Bonaventure is referring to the *limbus patrum*, the “limbo” or “outer part” of the patriarchs. One finds the basic idea in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

Scripture calls the abode of the dead, to which the dead Christ went down, “hell”—*Sheol* in Hebrew or *Hades* in Greek—because those who are there are deprived of the vision of God. Such is the case for all the dead, whether evil or righteous, while they await the redeemer: which does not mean that their lot is identical, as Jesus shows through the parable of the poor man Lazarus who was received into “Abraham’s bosom.” . . . Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him.<sup>55</sup>

Before Christ’s death and resurrection, everyone without exception went to “Sheol,” or Hell. However, Sheol had several layers: Those who died in the state of grace went to the “outer part,” or *limbus* in Latin; those who died outside the state of grace went to the deepest part of Sheol, the “depth of infernal darkness,” as Bonaventure calls it. When Christ died and descended into Sheol, he did not free those in the deepest part,

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 655–56. “*Mortui vero nihil noverunt amplius, quia cognitio supponit vitam: et ita praecellunt in actu cognitionis viventes mortuos; non enim habent, nec motum, nec sensum. . . . ‘Qui descenderit ad inferos, non ascendet, nec revertetur ultra ad domum suam, nec cognoscet eum amplius locus eius.’ [Job 7:9.]*”

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 657.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 656.

<sup>55</sup> CCC, 633.

where the damned reside, but rather those in the outer part. These he released and brought with him into heaven.

This idea can be found in some passages of the New Testament, as in 1 Pet 3:18–19, 4:6, and John 5:25, while other passages merely hint at it, such as Phil 2:10. The early Christian authors Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian pass it on, and the Church Fathers as well.<sup>56</sup> Knowing that Bonaventure has the doctrine of the *limbus patrum* in the background helps to explain why he simply accepts Solomon's gloomy views of the afterlife as fact. Truth be told, there was not much to be said for being dead before Christ came. The ancient idea of the underworld as a shadowy realm of gibbering half-men may well be the way things were.<sup>57</sup>

### Concluding Reflections

Looking back on the two commentaries we have surveyed, we see different strengths in each. Murphy seems to be more historically aware, so to speak: He stops to question whether “breath” or “spirit” really means the same thing as “spirit” does for us today. When Qoheleth says that the spirit returns to God, is he *really* talking about the soul's relation to its creator? Murphy's linguistic skills are another strength. While Bonaventure chose not to use much of the linguistic and textual-critical data available to him, Murphy devotes a special section (the “notes”) to such matters. With such careful attention to ancient thought and language, Murphy measures up well against the words of Vatican II:

To rightly understand what the sacred author wished to assert in writing, one must give due attention both to the customary and native manners of perceiving, speaking, and narrating which were in force at the time of the hagiographer, and to the customs which were wont to be observed at that time in men's dealings with one another.<sup>58</sup>

Bonaventure's strength seems to lie in what one might call theological awareness. How do Ecclesiastes' statements about death and the state of souls after death relate to what the New Testament teaches, or for that matter to what theological or philosophical arguments can demonstrate? How does this treatment of death relate to the revealed cause of death,

<sup>56</sup> See the citations in Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Patrick Lynch (Rockford, IL: Tan, 1974), 192; see *ABD* 2:156.

<sup>57</sup> See the gloomy biblical passages quoted in Paul Heinisch, *The Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. William G. Heidt, OSB (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1955), 280–81.

<sup>58</sup> *Dei Verbum* 12; this and all other translations are my own.

namely the fall of Adam? Bonaventure measures up well against the next line of the document just quoted:

But, since Sacred Scripture must also be read and interpreted by the same Spirit by whom it was written, to rightly unearth the sense of the sacred texts one must attend no less diligently to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, with account being taken of the living tradition of the Church and of the analogy of faith.<sup>59</sup>

Just as each commentator has particular strengths, so each commentator has particular weaknesses. Bonaventure's heavily theological approach risks keeping Ecclesiastes on a leash, so to speak: In the attempt to fit Ecclesiastes into the analogy of faith, there is a danger that we will not allow the sacred text to challenge our way of thinking about the contents of that faith.

But there is also a weakness in Murphy's very historical approach. Perhaps the most striking difference between Bonaventure and Murphy is that the question of whether Ecclesiastes teaches truth or falsehood does not seem to occur to Murphy, while for Bonaventure it is a constant concern. For Bonaventure, if Ecclesiastes has a gloomy view of the afterlife, this has to be explained by reference to the *limbus patrum*; in fact, he has a special section of his commentary (the "questions") devoted mainly to this sort of question. For Murphy, if Ecclesiastes teaches that there is nothing after death—well, then that is what the author thought, and an exegete's job is to recover an accurate historical account of what the author thought.

This is the danger peculiar to the historical-critical approach: to make history itself the goal rather than the means of interpretation. Historical considerations are necessary as a means of interpreting Scripture, and this is the great strength of modern efforts. But at the same time, one must keep firmly in view that the ultimate *goal* of using historical considerations in exegesis is not to discover history, not to discover merely what a historical individual historically thought, but rather to discover "the truth which God wished to be recorded in the Sacred Letters for the sake of our salvation."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 11: "Since therefore everything which the inspired authors or hagiographers asserted must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, the books of Scripture must be confessed to teach firmly, faithfully, and without error the truth which God wished to be recorded in the Sacred Letters for the sake of our salvation."