

ECCLESIASTES

Barbara M. Leung Lai

Readings Readings Readings Readings Readings Readings



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Readings: A New Biblical Commentary

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*In Memory of my Fellow Pilgrims—
those who had fought the good fight,
those who had finished the race,
and had kept the faith.
(2 Timothy 4.7)*

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Life itself is complex and enigmatic. For some, embracing coexisting polar tensions seems to be part of life's challenge. I am writing this preface while cruising the Mediterranean at the beginning of the Israel–Hamas war. The tragic loss of more than five hundred innocent lives due to the hospital blast and its aftermath have saddened my heart enormously. To say the least, I am disturbed by what is happening in Israel and Gaza and elsewhere in the world. Hatred, revenge, the loss of human dignity and the right to survive—all these have shaken our worldview to its core and provoke us to rethink what it means to be human. Yet, at the same time, I am doing the things that an average cruise passenger would do—eat, drink and be merry; doing things you would not normally do in real life: no-guilt three desserts a day; dancing with the crowd till midnight; and keep reminding myself that 'I am on vacation'. After all, we are encouraged to do exactly what Qohelet is urging us to do—'This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot' (5.18 [MT 17]). Certainly, this is our 'lot', a gift from God; and there is a time for everything—'a time to mourn and a time to dance; a time for war and a time for peace' (3.4b, 8b). However, we do wish life were that simple—in that time and season are marked with clear boundaries with no overlapping or blurring transitions. I believe Eccl. 3.4, 8; 5.18 [MT 17] are truths, but in no way can they represent the *whole* truth of humanity's collective lived experience under the sun. Qohelet ponders the meaning of life self-engagingly and finds it utterly absurd! He struggles and is greatly distressed. And so am I.

As an ancient text on life experience and exploration of life and its meaning, Ecclesiastes does speak profoundly to us today. It provides the flesh-and-blood slices of reality that we all face at different seasons of our lives. I am immensely motivated to journey with my audience to dive in its immersed paradoxes and resurface with a more balanced view of its core message about how to live. My lifelong love for wisdom literature has been significantly deepened with this endeavour—writing a commentary for first-time readers of Ecclesiastes.

It has been my desire to write a book for a commemorative purpose after my retirement from full-time teaching. Personally, I find it very fitting to dedicate this commentary in memory of my dear friends—the cloud of witnesses whose lives have powerfully imparted to me the wisdom about the hows of embracing life with all its realities.

I am grateful to Jeremy Clines of Sheffield Phoenix Press for accepting to publish my book for the Readings Series. Tyndale students of my advanced Bible elective class on Ecclesiastes had contributed their significant efforts in test-reading the book dialogically through voice analysis. The Leung sisters and members of my cell group have been a constant support for this project, particularly when I faced my own challenging times. On top of a demanding job and as the parent of two young children, I have been assisted by my son Eusebius, who has graciously devoted his time in proofreading the drafts. Warren, the love of my life, has passionately stood by me. For his interest and active participation in my writings, and always lending an ear to listen to my ‘ah-ha!’ moments, I offer my deep appreciation.

Barbara M. Leung Lai
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