

READING ECCLESIASTES  
FROM ASIA AND PASIFIKA

SBL Press

# INTERNATIONAL VOICES IN BIBLICAL STUDIES

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Edited by  
Jione Havea and Peter H. W. Lau

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## PREFACE

The life of this collection began under trees and in corridors during the breaks of the 2015 meeting of the Oceania Biblical Studies Association (OBSA) at Piula, Samoa, and the 2016 joint meeting of the Society of Asian Biblical Studies (SABS) with the Society of Biblical Literature (International SBL) at Seoul, South Korea. Several of the contributors were at those gatherings and others joined as we began the long journey of submission, revision, and editing.

After an opening chapter on contextual biblical interpretation, the essays follow the order of the Ecclesiastes texts under study, with the last three essays reading the whole book crosstextually with Asian scriptures and philosophies. Unless noted otherwise, *Qoheleth* is used in the following essays to refer to the author or speaker, and *Ecclesiastes* to the text or book.

This collection follows upon another IVBS collection, *Reading Ruth in Asia* (2015), with new twists: other scriptures are engaged; Asia opens up to Palestine and Pakistan; and Pasifika comes not as the ignored tail of the Asia-Pacific region. In this collection, Asia and Pasifika are collectives in the *Moana* (a native Pasifika name for the sea that links us all).

This collection, also, is an invitation for more readings and more twists from within and beyond Asia and Pasifika.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
BDB	Brown, Francis, with S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs. 1996. <i>The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic; Coded with the Numbering System from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible</i> . Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> . 2012. Edited by Karl Elliger. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CC	Continental Commentary
ESV	English Standard Version
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
ITC	International Theological Commentary
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JESHO	Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>JTI</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Interpretation</i>
KJV	King James Version
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
MT	Masoretic Text
NAB	New American Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIV	New International Version
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society Tanakh

NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBSA	Oceania Biblical Studies Association
SABS	Society of Asian Biblical Studies
SCS	Septuagint and Cognate Studies Series
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SR	Studies in Religion
<i>TDOT</i>	Botterweck, G. Johannes, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds. 1974–2006. <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Translated by John T. Willis et al. 15 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

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## CONTEXT MATTERS: READING FROM ASIA AND PASIFIKA

Jione Havea and Peter H. W. Lau

We extend Qoheleth's question in Eccl 3:9 to the toils of biblical critics: is there gain in reading? We (hereafter, our "we" includes those who come along without needing to agree with all of our reasoning) respond in the affirmative: yes, biblical critics have something to gain from reading. Some readings (including some of our own) are more vain than others, but the task of reading is not total vanity. What we gain varies—we gain joy, pleasure, enlightenment, pain, frustration, confusion, and even despair—but gain we certainly achieve. Our affirmative response is therefore not only with respect to the (utilitarian) fruits of reading, but also with (optimistic) respect to the process of reading. By design as well as by accident, the process of reading is gainful. In this affirmation we take the process of reading as an intentional (there is something to gain) rather than a revelational (there is something to receive) exercise. Reading is political.

Under the sun, reading is unending for though "words are wearisome ... the eye [of readers] is not satisfied with seeing or the ear filled with hearing" (Eccl 1:8). Reading that rises out of dissatisfaction is restless. A generation comes, and round and round go the wind of change, pushing streams of consciousness into, without filling, the sea of readings (cf. Eccl 1:4–7). As such, the toil of readers is ongoing and unending. In fact, reading needs to be restless because no one is "like the wise person and who knows the interpretation of a matter/word" (Eccl 8:1). Like "the sun [which] rises and ... goes down, and hurries to the place where it [will again] rise" (Eccl 1:5), readers from different parts of the world return, again and again, to the same texts because we have something to gain from our toils. Indeed, we return to the texts that others have read before because we are not satisfied, we are restless, and we expect to gain something from reading (toiling) for ourselves.

To give a sense of what one might gain from this collection of essays, bearing in mind that gaining or losing is a matter of judgment (what is seen as gain by one

reader may be seen as loss by another), we reflect on three assumptions that shape our toil with biblical texts and in the process locate the essays in this collection as well as past readings of Ecclesiastes in the linked region of Asia and Pasifika:<sup>1</sup>

- Texts are responses;
- Interpretations are contextual;
- Contextual interpretations hold texts open.

### Texts Are Responses

We read texts as *responses to something*—such as other texts, stories, events, episodes, dreams, revelations, conversations, and so forth. Texts are both evidences of and instruments for being connected or for violating connections (as fake news does in the so-called posttruth age), and so it is difficult to conceive of a text that started as prime mover or original. We here again borrow the words of Qoheleth, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9c). We do not deny that there are prime, foundational, and original movers, but we maintain that texts, especially scriptural texts, are not among those. Texts are responses (or  $n+1$ ) rather than originals.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, texts are transition-points between something ( $n$  or ground zero) and the next-something. Therefore, to revoke a theological illusion, no text is *ex nihilo* (out of nothing).

Responses come in many shapes and temperaments. Some responses affirm and endorse, some challenge and resist, some ridicule and reject, some rewrite and unravel, some sidestep and ignore, and some offer a different mix of the abovementioned responses. To again appropriate Qoheleth, there is a response for everything under the heavens, and a time for every text (cf. Eccl 3:1). Add interpreters and interpretations to this range, and we have a ripple (or spiral): texts are responses to something, and interpretations are responses to texts (see the next section) and to lived joys and anxieties.

We acknowledge, we must confess, that our views are influenced by the relational cultures of (but not unique to) Asia and Pasifika. We live because of and for relations (which involves responsibilities or *tautua*, see Brian Fiu Kolia, in this collection), and so we imagine texts and interpretations to be drifts in the ripple of relations between individuals, creatures, and nations (see Sarah W. Ayub, in this collection). We conceive this ripple in relation to “talanoa,” a word in several native Pasifika languages that refers to the (three in one) triad of *story, telling, and*

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<sup>1</sup> We refer to our region as “Asia and Pasifika” instead of the hyphenated “Asia-Pacific” out of respect to the many differences within as well as between Asia and Pasifika and also because Pasifika is often disregarded and belittled in conversations about Asia-Pasifika. While there are more Asian contributors in this collection, we have some restless Pasifika contributors as well.

<sup>2</sup> Shifting to a related platform, it is unfair to expect what we sometimes demand of students—to be original, as if there is something new under the sun.

*conversation* (see Havea 2013). In the world of talanoa, a *story* (talanoa) dies without someone *telling* (talanoa) it and holding *conversation* (talanoa) around it; a *telling* (talanoa) is an occasion for taking control (or telling off) when the teller does not respect the *story* (talanoa) or give room for *conversation* (talanoa); and a *conversation* (talanoa) is empty without a *story* (talanoa) and someone *telling* (talanoa) it. In talanoa cultures, there is no separation between story, telling, and conversation. Our invitation to read texts as responses comes with the vibes of talanoa; we treat texts as (at once) story, telling, conversation. We also invite readers to treat this collection of essays as talanoa, with proper respect due to Qoheleth for bringing many insights—as “goads” and “nails”—from different wisdom settings into one collection (cf. Eccl 12:9–11).

Texts are not like the Niua Fo’ou (an island at the north of the Tonga islands) native grub *’ofato*, which live in and bore through decomposed logs but do not cross each other’s path.<sup>3</sup> Compared to the *’ofato*, texts (responses, talanoa) step into the paths of other texts, other stories, other events, and other somethings. We may not know exactly to what texts are responding, but seeing texts as responses is inviting—it invites readers to enter the text’s ripple of relations and to even make the text jump through the covers of the book. Indeed, reading involves making texts jump out of (in most cases) the black marks on white leaves and screens.

Reading texts as responses affirms that texts are purposeful and contextual, silently waiting to tell something to querying eyes. We take texts that reveal something about distant beings (divine or otherwise) or future events as responses as well. They are responses to the need of the transcendent or distant to be known and/or the need of humans to know someone or something that is hidden, absent and/or yet to arrive.<sup>4</sup> But texts do not speak on their own (cf. Spivak 1988). Interpreters make texts speak in different contexts, and being able to do so is part of the gain in reading (toiling). Put another way, interpreters put texts upon the waters and expect that after many days they will get the texts back with much *interests* (in the ideological, “fruit of labor” or investment senses; cf. Eccl 11:1).

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<sup>3</sup> Natives say that if a grub is visible to other grubs, it will die. The *’ofato* has thus become a figure for neighbors who do not get along or who do not help one another.

<sup>4</sup> Texts could be responses to fleeting memories, irritating customs, life situations, material representations, imagined realities, and even to business narratives (see, e.g., Denning 2005). Some intertextual and contrapuntal critics justify their reading habits with the assertion that “no text is an island,” which makes sense to readers who romanticize what it means to be islanders and who do not know what it means to live and survive on islands. Out of respect to islands and islanders, we prefer some other expression like “no text is unoccupied,” “no text is network free,” “no text is self-satisfying,” or something along those lines.

### Interpretations are Contextual

Claiming that *all interpretations are contextual* is common and even unchallenged nowadays, as the members of the “Crossing Borders: Biblical Studies from the Four Corners of the World” panel at the opening event of the 2016 international meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature at Seoul (South Korea) showed. Contextual biblical interpretation is alive and well both in the global north and in the global south; contextual biblical interpretation is not limited to only one or two, but to all four, corners of the world. One finds similar affirmation in two publications that review the past, present, and future of biblical studies (see Boer and Segovia 2012; Liew 2018). Contextual biblical interpretation is here to stay, notwithstanding that there is no consensus on what it involves and what it entails.

Interpretations are the fruits of reading (toiling), and they are unavoidably ideological and political. Interpretations are conditioned by the roots, agendas, orientations, and insecurities of the interpreters, and consequently no interpretation is free of subjectivity. No interpretation is free of context or is innocent; no reading is free of adding meaning to the text. As Rudolf Bultmann and many others have concluded, no interpreter is free of presuppositions, and we add, to paraphrase José S. Croatto, exegesis is always already eisegesis (Croatto 1981, 1–4). Put simply, all interpretations are contexted (rooted in particular contexts; see Havea 2013).

Because interpretations are contexted, no interpretation has universal relevance. This is a motivating conviction for this collection: many western and northern readings do not speak to us in Asia and Pasifika, so we need to read Ecclesiastes for ourselves. And we share our readings beyond the borders of Asia and Pasifika because we expect that they will make sense to others beyond our shores. Yet, the fact that our readings are contexted means that they will not make sense to everyone. So the underside of the motivation for this collection is humbling: like the dominant and the orientalist readings, our readings from Asia and Pasifika do not have universal relevance. And to be fair, there are more to Asia and Pasifika than are presented in this collection of essays. We do not pretend to be universal or to be totalizing of our region. The fruits of our reading (toiling) will not appeal to all readers (workers), near and far, in the field of biblical interpretation.

Our claim is simple, in three steps: interpreters are all contexted, and all interpretations are contextual but in different ways. As we indicated above, there are various ways of doing contextual biblical interpretation. Evident in this collection of essays are three general approaches to doing contextual biblical interpretation.

## Approaches

First, the dominant approach to contextual biblical interpretation is where the interpreter explains what a biblical text means for and/or how it applies to a context. The interpreter may use a word, concept, practice, or text from the local context to enable the explanation and application to happen. All of the contributors to this collection show some evidence of this approach, but they differ with respect to context and agenda. And when different contributors reflect on the same text, they reach different interpretations. This is expected, for context matters in the toiling of interpreters *and* interpreters read from and for different contexts.

A few scholars have used this approach previously to read Ecclesiastes. Emanuel Gerrit Singgih (2001) published a commentary on Ecclesiastes in Indonesian (English translation: “Living under the Shadows of Death: An Interpretation of the Book of Ecclesiastes”) using a combination of Western interpretive methods (historical- and literary-critical) and applied it to the Indonesian context. K. Jesurathnam (2011) summarized elements of social justice in the wisdom books, then applied them to God’s mission among the marginalized Dalit community in India. Elaine Goh has presented three readings of passages from Ecclesiastes from an Asian perspective. Goh (2016a) read Ecclesiastes (3:16–17; 4:1–3; and 10:16–20) from a political perspective, keeping in mind the original ancient Near Eastern context as well as the Malaysian context. Peter H. W. Lau’s chapter in this collection can be viewed as a complement to Goh’s reading, since it focuses on another passage in Ecclesiastes with political overtones (8:1–9). Goh (2017) also read Ecclesiastes (3:1–15; 7:15–22; and 11:1–6) within the context of salvation history from the Old Testament through to the New Testament. She also suggested some implications of Ecclesiastes’ view of time, righteousness, and human ignorance for a Christian audience in an Asian Chinese context. Finally, Goh (2016b) applied Eccl 3:16–17 to the Malaysian court ruling that banned the use of the name “Allah” in Christian publications.

We make special mention here of the contribution by Anton Deik in this collection because it brings attention to the occupied and overlooked context of Palestine, the homeland of the Bible, as well as gives us an opportunity (in the ripple of the late Palestinian thinker Edward Said’s critique of orientalism [see Said 2003], coined from a label associated with our region—the Orient) to welcome Palestine as a part of Asia. Because Palestine continues to suffer under the politics of orientalism, we see Palestine in the shadows of the Orient (extended in this work to Asia and Pasifika) where many lands are still under occupation (see Jione Havea in this collection).

One of the challenges with this approach to biblical contextual interpretation is that it permits interpreters to privilege the (foreign) biblical text over against the (local, native, indigenous) context, so that one’s interpretation (toiling) could become a colonizing exercise. As in the missionary era, cultural (mis)appropriation is a potential: the contextual biblical interpreter is tempted to submit the

context (and whatever local concept and wisdom one uses to contextualize the text) to the authority of the text. This is a challenge for all biblical interpreters (see also Havea 2011), and it helps to be reminded that the fruits of interpretation could constrain (see Laila Vijayan in this collection), suppress (see Peter H. W. Lau in this collection), exile (see Tau‘alofa Anga‘aelangi in this collection) and colonize (see Anton Deik in this collection).

A second approach to contextual biblical interpretation involves intertextual, contrapuntal, and cross-scriptural reading. This has been a relatively popular approach to interpreting Ecclesiastes. For instance, Peter K. H. Lee (1987) read Ecclesiastes in light of the eleventh century CE poetry of Su Ting-P’o, and R. Christopher Heard (1996) read Ecclesiastes intertextually with the popular Chinese classic text *Dao de Jing* (ca. sixth century BCE). John Jarick (2000) used concepts from the Chinese “Book of Changes,” the *I Ching*, to read Ecclesiastes, and Graham S. Ogden (2007) discussed the intersections between Chinese wisdom literature and Ecclesiastes, although he did not apply this approach in the body of his commentary. A more sustained cross-textual reading was provided by Jayādvaīta Swami (2015), who placed Ecclesiastes in dialogue with the Bhagavad-gītā (from the Hindu epic poem the Mahābhārata). Finally, Seree Lorgunpai (2016) used categories from Thai Buddhism, Wei Huang (2009) interpreted *h’lm* through a Chinese Buddhist perspective, Huang (2018) provided a cross-textual reading of Ecclesiastes with the Chinese Buddhist text *Heart Sutra* (ca. seventh century CE), and Goh (2019) read Ecclesiastes cross-textually with the *Analects*.

While intertextual and contrapuntal readings are common in the worldwide web of biblical studies, given the advances in literary and postcolonial criticisms, cross-scriptural reading is a significant contribution of this collection especially with respect to Chinese (see Clement Tsz Ming Tong, Elaine W. F. Goh, and Sehee Kim in this collection) and Tamil (see D. Gnanaraj and M. Alroy Mascenghe, in this collection) literature. Asia is a hotspot for cross-scriptural reading, and these authors avoid submitting the Asian literature under the authority of the biblical text (even though one could argue that the Bible too is Asian scripture). In general, the leaning of these authors is to read Ecclesiastes in the lights of Asian literature (as opposed to using Asian literature as illustrations for the biblical text).

The attention of the contributors is not confined to written texts. There are engagements with oral cultures as well (see Brian Fiu Kolia and Mariana Waqa, in this collection). As a collective, the contributors do not parade the ghosts of nativism (e.g., that only Chinese scholars could write on Chinese literature) or fall into the trap of exoticization. There are sharp criticisms of cultural (e.g., Kolia), ecclesial (e.g., Anga‘aelangi) and scriptural (e.g., Vijayan) heritages and bearings.

A third approach to contextual biblical interpretation involves affirming by unraveling, talking or pushing back at, the biblical text(s). For instance, Choan-Seng Song (1999) read Eccl 3:1–8 from the perspective of the marginalized *burakumin* in Japan. Instead of resignation as the response, he follows a 1922



*burakumin* manifesto in calling for change in Japan, to right previous wrongs, and to “build a society of justice and love” (92).

In this volume this approach is used differently by Kolia (from a diasporic situation) as compared to Havea (who problematizes the so-called final form of the text). Both readers push back at the biblical text(s), but neither one rejects or walks away from the bible.

To push back at the biblical text(s) or biblical tradition(s) is not encouraged in scholarships that discuss the reception of the bible or among readers who toil within scholarly or faith communities. In light of the latter, it is noteworthy that while several of the contributors write from within faith communities and commitments, including Kolia and Havea, they do not shy away from making critical observations (on gender discrimination, see Vijayan, and on the government, see Lau, Ayub, and Anga‘aelangi) relating to Ecclesiastes. Reading within academic or faith communities is not an excuse to be uncritical about both the Bible and one’s context.

## Biases

Contextual biblical interpretation has received unfair (unwritten) critiques, in our humble opinion, around the issues of methodology and politics. At this juncture, we offer two observations on how this collection may respond to such critiques.

First, on methodology. No matter how one approaches or does contextual biblical interpretation, it is not appreciated alongside the two clusters of mainline methods of biblical criticism—literary and historical criticisms. The preference (read: bias) for the mainline methods is alive and strong in, for example, the operations of the Society of Biblical Literature, the foremost international association of biblical scholars. When the gatekeepers of the mainline methods serve on steering committees and editorial boards and they are rigid about proper (i.e., mainline, traditional) methodology, the inspirations among self-proclaimed contextual critics are quickly extinguished. The upshots are, on the one hand, that the number of underrepresented and minoritized biblical scholars grows, and, on the other hand, that the number of minority biblical scholars who put on, love, and defend Franz Fanon’s metaphorical white mask increases even more. In these scenarios, the general assumption is that contextual biblical scholars do not (know how to) do the mainline or proper methods of biblical criticism.

To the contrary, all of the essays in this openly contextual collection use some version of the mainline or proper methods to biblical criticism (see esp. Lau and Kim). In our experience, we find contextual biblical critics using mainline methods (to look *behind* and *into* the text) whereas mainline biblical critics do not wander into the fields of contextual interpretation (to look *in front of* the text). The problem therefore is not with contextual biblical critics but with the strictly mainline biblical critics. We offer this observation as our push back at critics who assume that if one does contextual reading then one does not use the traditional

and scholarly methods. In fact, all of the essays in this collection make use of historical, literary, and cultural criticisms, but not in a rigid manner.

Taking a step back, we admit that the reverse is also true: Society of Biblical Literature groups and publication ventures that are intentional about experimental and contextual works hesitate to consider proposals that exhibit full-fledged mainline methodologies, or, at the other extreme, they are selective about which contexts to engage. So proposals relating to Palestine or Pakistan (see Ayub and Deik in this collection), for example, are refused more easily as compared to proposals relating to less controversial contexts. Unfortunately, cultural and academic politics play a role in the decisions which committees and boards that are supposed to be contextual and experimental make.

There are two facets we wish to stress here with respect to methodology: the first facet is that pitting historical and literary criticisms over against contextual biblical interpretation is unfair because these are not blockaded from each other. One does not defile the discipline by adding contextual interpretation to one's literary and/or historical reading. And one's contextual interpretation is shallow without literary and historical readings as well. The second facet is that methodology has been used to erect a political arena so that, in other words, what happens in the reading room overflows into the board room. In this regard, what's important in Qoheleth's question "Who knows the interpretation of a matter?" (Ecc 8:1) is not the interpretation reached (whether it is valid or not, sound or otherwise) but *who* knows the interpretation, which is determined by *how* (method) one knows. This is the main reason why readers from alternative reading rooms do not get a proper hearing in the board room (the world of *who's who*).

The foregoing brings us to our second observation, on the upshot of interpretation. There is a strong element of advocacy in this collection, for example, for the migrants and exiled (Kolia, Anga'aelangi), women (Vijayan, Waqa, Goh), climate victims (Havea), Palestine and Palestinians (Deik), Pakistan and its diverse people (Ayub), West Papua (Havea), the wisdom cultures of Oceania (Waqa), China (Tong, Goh, Kim) and Tamil (Gnanaraj, Mascrenge), and the operations of governments (Lau, Anga'aelangi). In the lights of this collection, we are therefore inclined to portray contextual biblical interpretation as *naturally* leading to advocacy. Readers who sit on the sideline are not contextual enough.

In addition to the proverbial reading and board rooms, the contextual biblical interpreter is also concerned with what happens outside the gates of the academy and of the faith communities. Because this is one of the reasons why contextual biblical interpretation is not considered to be academic enough (in terms of Antonio Gramsci's understanding of "traditional intellectual"), the cost of advocacy (which Gramsci's "organic intellectuals" do) to one's academic career should be taken seriously (see further Gramsci 1971, 9). But also, the place of advocacy and organic approaches to biblical criticism need also to be highlighted, as foundations upon which contextual biblical interpretation stands. We are thinking of the advocacy undertaken in the works of traditioned scholars like Julius Wellhausen

(for the later priestly agenda), Martin Noth (for traditions that shape scripture), Norman Gottwald (for the Canaanites), Phyllis Trible (for victims of texts of terror), Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (for the feminist cause), and several others. Each of these examples need further explaining, but the point we want to make here is straightforward: advocacy and organic intellectuals are not an abomination in the history of biblical criticism.

So What?

We accept that we will not all agree on *how* to do contextual reading, in part because so much is (pre)determined by what we bring to the text as readers. We are thinking especially of how we view the Bible text, especially its authority in relation to context, and other written texts. But we can all still learn from each other's readings, the different insights that we bring into the text, and how we might live in response. We do not seek in this reflection to give a blueprint on how to do, or what passes as, contextual biblical interpretation. We leave that for the masters.

Our affirmation is straightforward: we all do contextual biblical interpretation but differently, and we need to learn from one another. And we bow out to the caution of Qoheleth: "Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh" (Eccl 12:12b).

### Interpretations Hold Texts Open

Even though the scriptures of Jewish and Christian communities are closed, so no new texts could be added, we argue that *interpretations open the canon up*. This is not such a controversial claim because we find several attempts within the canons to open things up, for example, the legal revisions in Exodus–Deuteronomy; the rewriting of history in Samuel–Kings and 1–2 Chronicles; the addition to and movement of books between the covers of the Hebrew, Catholic, and Orthodox canons; the multiple accounting in the gospels; and the multiplying teachings in the epistles. That is, the energy to pop open is within the compositions of canons (see also Adams 2019). The number and wording of the books in the canons may be closed, but intratextual references, appeals, and contestings bubble within to pop the lids of the canons, and the toiling of interpreters open canons up by adding layers of meanings as well as by shifting and (re)situating meanings from and into new contexts.

Contextual readings open texts up and shift meanings from and toward new contexts, the kinds of move expected of faithful exegetes. One might consequently argue that the reader who opens the text up and shifts meanings around is *reading*

*properly* and is at once *appropriately contextual*. We bring this assumption to Eccl 3:9–13.<sup>5</sup>

Three popular and traditional readings of Ecclesiastes lurk behind the reading of Eccl 3:9–13 that we propose here: (1) everything is vanity; (2) there is a time for gaining and a time for losing, for pulling down and for building up, (3) so the best thing to do is to enjoy (the gains of) life under the sun. The lot of humans is to enjoy and be at leisure, for we have no control over life which is in fact fleeting. In the eyes of these mainline readings, humans ought to relax, lay back, and accept what happens; in other words, in the romanticizing eyes of tourist minds, humans should seek to be like islanders.

Pete Seeger’s 1965 song “turn, turn, turn” performed by *The Byrds* extends Ecclesiastes to the preference for love and peace. Seeger was an activist and his song drew upon Ecclesiastes to make his call for ecological responsibility and for peace. The chorus comes out as a call for repentance and transformation with the repeated call to *turn, turn, turn*. There is a season for everything—*turn, turn, turn*; and there is a time for every purpose under the sun—*turn, turn, turn*. The third verse opens and pushes the texts of Ecclesiastes to the war-ridden days of the 60s:

A time of love, a time of hate  
A time of war, a time of peace

Seeger opens Ecclesiastes up and shifts it toward one of the struggles of his time—to end war and to embrace peace. Opening the text up through interpretation is not a privilege of biblical scholars only. Like trained biblical scholars, Seeger too gained a lot from his reading.

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<sup>5</sup> Contextual readings add variety and richness to the reading of the Bible. Owing to our specific contexts and circumstances, we all have reading blind spots. It takes readers from other contexts to enlighten us. We need readers from around the world to give us a fuller, global reading of the Bible.

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