Johnston, Robert K.

*Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes through the Lens of Contemporary Film*


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While the release of Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* has served to refocus the academy’s attention on the specific genre of the “Bible film,” it is quite clear that scholarly interest in the interdisciplinary exploration of film and Bible/theology more broadly has been growing steadily in recent years. One of the best examples of this burgeoning interest is the work of Robert Johnston, professor of theology and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary. In light of the recent publication of both *Finding God at the Movies* (co-authored with Catherine Barsotti) and the volume reviewed here (both Baker, 2004), it would be difficult to deny that Johnston’s voice has now become one of the more prominent ones in the emerging discussion.

That the voice we hear in *Useless Beauty* is substantially the same as that encountered in Johnston’s earlier contribution, *Reel Spirituality* (Baker 2000), will be obvious to anyone familiar with the latter. There Johnston offers theological readings of films that he hopes will help Christians to see the value of the contemporary cinema as a resource for theological reflection. *Useless Beauty* works from the same premise but is more narrow in focus, bringing the biblical book of Ecclesiastes and a more limited selection of recent films into what he hopes will be fruitful “dialogue”—a methodological metaphor that has been carried over from the earlier work. What kind of dialogue Johnston envisions is
made clear in both books by his invocation of Kreitzer’s concept of “reversing the hermeneutical flow” with its commitment to allowing contemporary film not merely to reflect theology but actually to inform it.

Given the frequency with which Ecclesiastes is mentioned in his earlier volume and the number of films with which it is brought into conversation (Shawshank Redemption, the films of Peter Weir, American Beauty, and Crimes and Misdemeanors), Johnston’s decision to devote an entire volume to Ecclesiastes and the contemporary cinema is not entirely surprising. But while Johnston’s discussions of the latter two films here do, in fact, take their lead from those found in his earlier book, the bulk of Useless Beauty had its genesis in a Cambridge conference on “Cinematic Wisdom and the Book of Ecclesiastes.”

Aware that the connection between cinematic wisdom and Ecclesiastes may not be immediately obvious to all his readers, Johnston begins with a short apologia for his project. For Johnston, the juxtaposition of contemporary cinema’s embrace of paradox with the failure of traditional biblical scholarship to deal meaningfully with the correspondingly contradictory nature of Ecclesiastes leads to the proposition that “contemporary movies afford interpreters a deeper access to Ecclesiastes’ center of power and meaning than does much of mainstream Old Testament scholarship.” At the same time, Johnston suggests that the interpretation of the films he has chosen will also be aided and enlightened through a comparison with Ecclesiastes. By setting forth both aspects of his thesis with such commendable clarity, Johnston invites both students of film and the Old Testament to examine what follows and assay the results.

Johnston begins with two of world cinema’s great auteurs, Japan’s Akira Kurosawa and America’s Woody Allen. As he does throughout the volume, Johnston introduces both the directors and their films (in this case, Ikiru and Crimes and Misdemeanors, respectively), dwelling at greater length in this instance on Kurosawa than Allen, understandably assuming that the former may well be less known to most of his readers than the latter. According to Johnston, what these two films in particular share with Ecclesiastes is the existentialist strain detected by Fox and others in this biblical book. Encouraged by Fox’s connecting of Qohelet and Camus, Johnston argues that in their own way, Ikiru and Crimes and Misdemeanors reflect Ecclesiastes’ struggle with the lurking shadow of death, the meaninglessness of life, and the importance of finding joy in the midst of it. On the other hand, according to Johnston, both Kurosawa and Allen also depart from the vision of the Old Testament sage. While sharing Qohelet’s existential angst, Ikiru finally lacks Qohelet’s understanding that meaning is not something to be created through action but is instead a gift from the Creator (49). And whereas Allen’s Crimes and Misdemeanors suggests the importance of creating meaning because none
really exists, Johnston argues that Qohelet’s advice to his readers is to savor life in the absence of conventional wisdom.

Johnston sees in American Beauty (Mendes, 1999) an even fuller analogue to Qohelet. He observes that both the film and the biblical text begin with poetic reflections on life’s vanity and end with similar reflections on its beauty (66). Furthermore, their mutual interest in the importance of “seeing” is expressed in Qohelet through the frequent use of the verb ra’ah “to see” and in Mendes’ film (and Ball’s screenplay) through specific elements in the mise-en-scène and especially the artifice of the hand-held camera. According to Johnson, then, both Qohelet and the film encourage us to look more closely at the paradox of life in all of its bleakness and its beauty.

In Paul Thomas Anderson’s Magnolia, and perhaps most obviously in the creative use of Aimee Mann’s song “Wise Up” at its end, Johnston sees a parallel to Qohelet’s call to a different kind of wisdom—a wisdom that recognizes the vanity of money, fame, pleasure, superficial knowledge, and even power. Invoking Eccl 9:9 with its encouragement to “enjoy life with the one you have…,” Johnston suggests that “what remains in Magnolia when all else is recognized as ‘chasing the wind’ (2:17), are relationships” (83). Not for the first time in the volume, nor for the last, Johnston turns to Eccl 4:9–11 (“Two are better off than one…”) in order to establish the importance of relationships in Ecclesiastes, though the reader may be left wondering whether they really are as important to Qohelet as they are to the writers and directors of the films Johnston analyzes.

Having opened his volume with Kurosawa’s Ikiru, Johnston’s discussion of German Thomas Tykwer’s art-house hit Run Lola Run (1999) seems to reinforce his tacit claim that the themes of Ecclesiastes that he finds to be so prevalent in select contemporary American films are also to be found beyond the borders of Hollywood. Unfortunately, his reading of the film struggles to substantiate this claim, referring to the text of Ecclesiastes less frequently and more tangentially than in preceding discussions. While Johnston amply illustrates, for instance, the ways in which coincidence and fate intertwine with each other and propel the characters in Tykwer’s film in new and finally irresistible directions, the film’s retelling of a single story three times to “show how random circumstances encourage new choices [that] alter the fate of the characters in the process” seems to this reader to be a rather unconvincing illustration of Qohelet’s conviction that what has happened will happen again and that there’s nothing new under the sun (Eccl 1:9). Johnston’s efforts to connect this same sentiment in Ecclesiastes with examples of the narrative device of repetition in Forster’s Monster’s Ball (2001) likewise seem slightly forced. Again, this film’s obvious focus on relationships, good and bad, healthy and destructive, repeatedly lead Johnston back to Eccl 4:9–11.
Though different in many ways from both *Monster’s Ball* and each other, Alexander Payne’s recent films, *Election* (1999) and *About Schmidt* (2002), offer Johnston a final opportunity to make his case for the mutual illumination of cinematic wisdom and the book of Ecclesiastes. He suggests that, like the latter, Payne’s political satire seems intent on calling into question and even ridiculing those who think that they can figure life out, let alone control their own destiny. In *Election*, the illustration of Ecclesiastes’ perspective on the cyclical nature of life (1:9) is furnished by the example of Mr. McAllister, the teacher who has achieved much but is a prisoner of routine. Perhaps more convincing is Johnston’s reading of *About Schmidt*, starring Jack Nicholson as a retired widower who travels across the country to stop his daughter’s wedding and rediscovers himself in the process. Like Qohelet, Schmidt looks back on his life and laments how little he has accomplished despite his apparent success (157). Again Johnston highlights the film’s reflection on relationships as Schmidt mourns, in his own way, the loss of his wife, a person whose companionship and love Qohelet urges his reader to enjoy. In one of the film’s more poignant moments, Schmidt sits on top of his RV, looks up into the heavens, and shares his heart and innermost thoughts not with God (despite crossing himself when a shooting star streaks by) but his wife. In characterizing this as a “holy moment,” Johnston highlights one of the questions that has often vexed readers of Qohelet: Where is God in all of this?

With respect to Johnston’s volume, the answer to this question is to be found primarily in his discussion of M. Night Shyamalan’s *Signs* (2002). With an ex-pastor as a protagonist and its frequent references to faith, *Signs* poses theological questions in the midst of an extraterrestrial mystery surrounding crop circles and things that go bump in the night. Johnston’s discussion of the overt theological interest in *Signs* prompts him to draw out, in a short digression, what he sees as the comparable concerns present in the rest of the films he takes up. That his digression at this point is short and largely unpersuasive reflects what Johnston eventually admits in the conclusion to his book: these films have little time for God. Ironically, Johnston’s reading of the one film that does (*Signs*) might arguably point to a parallel not with Qohelet but Job, who like Gibson’s character in the film, loses “everything” and rages at God, until finally having been confronted with God’s created order, he is restored.

Given the films’ evident disinterest in the divine, then, it is hardly surprising that references to the fear of God and the epilogue of Ecclesiastes are few and far between in Johnston’s work. Indeed, Johnston’s fidelity to and close reading of his chosen films is a strength of the project. His familiarity with both the movies themselves and the popular and scholarly discourse they have generated provides an admirable model for those biblical scholars and theologians brave enough to explore this interdisciplinary space. One of the challenges faced not just by Johnston, but by any who write about film is how
best to do so. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a motion picture is obviously worth many more and sometimes far more than there is space or patience for. Perhaps inevitably, then, Johnston devotes considerable effort to describing the films he references while at the same time drawing Ecclesiastes into dialogue with them.

That Ecclesiastes’ contribution to the conversation is sporadic at times and often limited to a single verse cited in isolation is perhaps defensible on the grounds that Ecclesiastes itself has often been seen as a rather anecdotal collection of wisdom sayings. A more fundamental reason for the disjointed nature of the conversation Johnston attempts to create, though, may be that while film is (generally and in the case of Johnston’s examples, entirely) narratival, Qohelet’s text is only tangentially and retrospectively so. As a result, Johnston’s comparison is necessarily obliged to work not so much with plot and character as with common themes and motifs. What he well illustrates in this volume is that a selection of recent films resonates with several of the themes and motifs that have been traditionally identified in the book of Ecclesiastes, such as the finitude of humanity, the inscrutability of the moral order, the difficulty of knowing what humans are to do, and the wisdom of accepting life’s small joys as they come, in part because the rest proves to be a chasing of the wind. For those familiar with the history of Western thought, such a resonance (which is not to say dependence or even influence) will not be surprising, for it is a hallmark of the wisdom tradition that many of its insights are derived from an experience that transcends the boundaries that marked Israel’s particular theological proclivities.

The question of wisdom’s relationship to these theological traditions is one that has, of course, long exercised critical commentators on Ecclesiastes, with many sensing that Qohelet’s penetrating analysis of the absurdity of life and his encouragement to therefore seize the day is somehow at odds with Ecclesiastes’ final encouragement to fear God and keep his commandments (12:13–14). The failure of this pericope and other theologically oriented texts in Ecclesiastes to find a meaningful place in the conversation between the latter and Johnston’s films suggests that were they to read it, contemporary film-makers might well be as skeptical of the book’s “happy ending” as many of their counterparts in the academy have been.