

Contemplation as an alternative to curiosity: St Bonaventure on Ecclesiastes 1:3–11

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Abstract

This article seeks to offer a christological interpretation of the opening poem in Ecclesiastes (1:3–11) through engagement with St Bonaventure's exegesis of the passage. It begins with a brief survey of contemporary treatments of the passage, which are characterised by an emphasis on cosmic monotony as an illustration of the futility of human labour. Then, it examines the Seraphic Doctor's version of the *contemptus mundi* interpretation of the book, relating it to his metaphysics of emanation, exemplarity and consummation. It will be suggested that Bonaventure's version of *contemptus mundi* informs an alternative interpretation to the critical status quo.

In his exegesis of the opening poem, Bonaventure begins by describing three kinds of existence: existence in the eternal and unchanging Word, material existence in the cosmos, and abstract existence in the mind. While Bonaventure does not consider existence in the Word in relation to Ecclesiastes 1:3–11, because such existence is not subject to the vanity of mutability, the conclusion of the article will propose that such existence is in view in the text. When Bonaventure considers material existence, his metaphysics will not allow him to read the cosmological motion in Ecclesiastes 1:5–7 as monotonous, but rather as creaturely movement which invites contemplation. When he considers abstract existence, he contrasts the movement of heavenly and elemental creatures with the dissatisfaction of human perception, constrained by curiosity, the vice which characterises the protagonist's pursuits in Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:26. Thus, it will be suggested from Bonaventure's exegesis that the problem in Ecclesiastes 1:3–11 is not an oppressively monotonous universe which shows humans how pointless their own movement is, but rather humanity's failing to treat the cosmos as a book which speaks of God.

In the article's final section, a relationship between the contemplative reading of Ecclesiastes 1:3–11 and Bonaventure's *Itinerarium* will be outlined. The consideration of material existence in Ecclesiastes 1:4–7 will be related to contemplation through vestiges. Then a contrast between the perceptual rupture of Ecclesiastes 1:8–11 and contemplation through the divine image in humanity will be shown. Finally, a christological reading of Ecclesiastes 1:10a will be offered, suggesting that this verse gestures towards the incarnate Word, who

reforms the divine image in humanity and thus places humanity back on course towards similitude. It will be suggested in closing that, in signalling this hope, Ecclesiastes 1:10a prepares one for the union with Christ which Song of Songs depicts.

Keywords: Bonaventure, contemplation, contempt, curiosity, Ecclesiastes, vanity.

Introduction

This article stems from an interest in the theology of St Bonaventure's biblical commentaries and how his exegesis might challenge critical readings of scripture, particularly Ecclesiastes. Its aim, then, is with Bonaventure's help to suggest that the opening poem of Ecclesiastes (1:3–11), rather than being a reflection on the oppressive monotony of cosmological movement, is an invitation to contemplation as an alternative to the vice of curiosity. It will begin with a brief survey of contemporary treatments of Ecclesiastes 1:3–11, before showing how the Seraphic Doctor's reading of the poem in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*¹ offers a different interpretation which reflects his theological-metaphysical vision and finds its roots in his nuanced *contemptus mundi* reading of the whole book. It will then show that Bonaventure's exegesis also takes an ethical turn by promoting contemplation as the cure for the curiosity which constrains human perception. In the final section, the article will draw connections between this contemplative reading and Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*.² It will conclude by offering a christological move that Bonaventure does not make, but which is nonetheless resonant with his theology.

Contemporary interpretations of Ecclesiastes 1:3–11

Ecclesiastes 1:3–11 comes just after the frame-narrator's³ summary of Qoheleth's message in the quotation of the superlative phrase, 'vanity of

¹ Bonaventure, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, Works of St Bonaventure, vol. 7, ed. Robert J. Karris and Campion Murray (St Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, Franciscan Institute, St Bonaventure University, 2005). The critical Latin edn is in the Quaracchi edn of Bonaventure's works: *Commentarius in librum Ecclesiastae*, in *S. Bonaventurae Commentarii in Sacram Scripturam*, vol. 6 (Karachi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1893), pp. 1–99. This article will designate references from volumes within the Quaracchi edn 'QuarEd'.

² Bonaventure, 'The Soul's Journey into God', in *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, the Life of St Francis, The Classics of Western Spirituality*, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978); QuarEd, vol. 5, pp. 293–316.

³ For a full description of the function of the frame-narrator in Ecclesiastes, see Michael V. Fox, 'Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet', *Hebrew Union College Annual* 48 (1977), pp. 83–106.

vanities', in 1:2 (which forms an *inclusio* with a nearly identical quotation in 12:8). The poem immediately precedes Qoheleth's self-introduction in 1:12 and the ensuing royal autobiography which terminates at 2:26.⁴ If one may use a single word to characterise the majority of contemporary depictions of the message of Ecclesiastes 1:3–11, that word would be 'monotony'.⁵ If the question in 1:3 concerning the profitability of human labour implies a negative answer, and if Qoheleth is soon to offer an ironic account of his kingly pursuits, then surely the depiction of the four elements of ancient cosmology in 1:5–7 is not that of a nature poem in the style of Psalm 19. One need only compare the exultant sun of Psalm 19:5 with the panting sun of Ecclesiastes 1:5 for verification of this contrast. Instead of evoking praise, these cosmological elements illustrate the fruitlessness of humanity's never-ending need for novelty, a fruitlessness which Qoheleth articulates in the latter portion of the poem (1:8–11).⁶ Though cosmological motion momentarily presents an illusion of change, it is in fact monotonous; and humans might as well stop expecting to discover anything new within the drudgery of cosmic regularity.

William P. Brown's comment on this passage provides a contrastive point from which to introduce Bonaventure's exegesis as a viable alternative to the interpretative status quo: 'The whole world is a scene of incessant movement and activity. But is it purposeful? Qoheleth asks. For all the constant motion that characterizes the cosmos, one would think that something is being accomplished. But no.'⁷ The notion of a purposeless cosmos is foreign to

⁴ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, trans. James D. Martin (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 226, proposes that Ecclesiastes follows the genre of an ancient Near Eastern royal autobiography. However, given the presence of other genres and passages such as 9:13–18 which seem to offer a critique of the monarchy, it is preferable to understand the royal autobiography mainly to characterise 1:12–2:26.

⁵ See for instance, James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), p. 64; Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary, 23A (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1992), p. 9; C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, 18c (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 112; William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000), p. 24; Elsa Tamez, *When the Horizons Close: Rereading Ecclesiastes*, trans. Margaret Wilde (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), p. 41; and Daniel J. Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), p. 128, all of whom use the language of monotony.

⁶ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 7–10; but cf. R. N. Whybray, 'Ecclesiastes 1.5–7 and the Wonders of Nature', *JSOT* 13/41 (1988), pp. 105–12, for an alternative critical interpretation.

⁷ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 23. See also Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), p. 346, which calls the movement 'pointless'.

Bonaventure's metaphysics of emanation, exemplarity and consummation, with Christ at the centre of each movement.⁸ How then does Bonaventure's proposal regarding this passage differ from that in Brown's summary; and how does Bonaventure reconcile this proposal with the negative assessment of humanity's condition in the latter half of the poem? Answering this question will first involve examining his approach to *contemptus mundi* in Ecclesiastes.

Contemptus mundi in Bonaventure's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*

The *contemptus mundi* tradition of Ecclesiastes interpretation finds its roots in Jerome's translation of and commentary on Ecclesiastes.⁹ Jerome translates the *Leitwort* *הבל* with the Latin *vanitas*. While, at a literal level, the Hebrew term connotes the concrete metaphor, 'mere breath',¹⁰ Jerome follows the example of the LXX (which translates *הבל* with *ματαιότης*) in rendering a translation which involves more abstract conclusions, probably entailing negative connotations. If *vanitas* does entail a negative judgement, and if all is *vanitas* (1:2; 12:8), what kind of judgement is Solomon¹¹ casting on creation?

Several early Christian interpreters suggest that Solomon is calling the reader to despise the vain world. In Origen's well-known schema for reading the traditionally Solomonic wisdom *corpus*, Ecclesiastes serves the purpose of teaching one to renounce the world and long for things eternal.¹² John of Damascus, in his *Barlaam and Joseph*, appropriates this suggestion severely: '[it is the] world we have been taught to love not at all but rather to hate it with all our heart'.¹³ While readings like Damascene's give Luther reason to draw

⁸ Iliia Delio, in *Simply Bonaventure: An Introduction to his Life, Thought, and Writings* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2001), p. 12, suggests that this metaphysical vision forms the 'essence of [Bonaventure's] thought'. She quotes his *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, where he says that the whole of his metaphysics is about emanation (*de emanatione*), exemplarity (*de exemplaritate*) and consummation (*de consummatione*). See QuarEd, vol. 5, p. 332. For a brief but helpful summary of Bonaventure's metaphysics, see the introduction of Zachary Hayes to Bonaventure, *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology*, Works of St Bonaventure, vol. 1, trans. Zachary Hayes (St Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, Franciscan Institute, St Bonaventure University, 1996), esp. pp. 6–8.

⁹ Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 101.

¹⁰ Alter, *Wisdom Books*, p. 346.

¹¹ Though this article assumes with most modern commentators that Solomon is not the actual author of Ecclesiastes, it nonetheless assumes that Qoheleth clothes himself in a Solomonic guise (Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 11). It will also take the figure of Solomon to be the protagonist of Ecclesiastes in order to be consistent with Bonaventure's assumption concerning authorship of the book.

¹² Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, Ancient Christian Writers, 26, trans. R. P. Lawson (New York: Newman Press, 1957), p. 44.

¹³ Christianson, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 103.

a caricature of this interpretative tradition,¹⁴ some who propose versions of *contemptus mundi* offer more complex renditions than Luther allows; and Eric S. Christianson suggests that Bonaventure's contribution is the most nuanced of all.¹⁵

When one encounters Bonaventure's treatment of Ecclesiastes, one senses a tension between desiring to uphold *contemptus mundi* on the one hand, and on the other hand desiring to maintain the creation theology which permeates the rest of his works. In the introduction to the commentary, after describing the path to blessedness that it is the sage's duty to teach, and the role of Ecclesiastes in wisdom education (following Origen), the Seraphic Doctor employs an Aristotelian framework in articulating the 'fourfold cause' of the book. In naming the final cause, he plainly states that the 'aim of the book is the contempt of present realities'. The material cause is present realities 'in so far as they are vanities'. The formal cause is the weighing by a preacher of the opinions of both the wise and the foolish in order to convey to listeners the one truth. Finally, the efficient cause is the experience of Solomon himself, who took part in the vanities he describes.¹⁶ This list of causes ought to beg several questions for those listening. What is the meaning of *contemptus mundi*, given the goodness of creation? How can *vanitas*, which implies nothingness, be a matter of study? Why would a sage consider the teaching of fools? How is a carnal man like Solomon able to possess the *ethos* of the sage *par excellence*?¹⁷

Bonaventure's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* belongs to the period of his scholastic work at the University of Paris. Therefore, it includes both literal and spiritual readings of the text (with heavy emphasis on the literal reading) and disputations on matters of interpretation. The commentary contains thirty-four *quaestiones*, which comprise around a third of his exegesis of Ecclesiastes. The *quaestiones* cover a range of issues from natural science to hermeneutical method; and they 'show Bonaventure at his creative best'.¹⁸ The opening *quaestio* is of crucial importance for understanding how Bonaventure reconciles *contemptus mundi* with his metaphysics.

Bonaventure resolves the question of the meaning of *contemptus mundi* by use of an important simile. On the way to this simile, he first supports the

¹⁴ Martin Luther, 'Notes on Ecclesiastes', in *Luther's Works*, vol. 15, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (St Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), pp. 4–5.

¹⁵ Christianson, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 103.

¹⁶ Bonaventure, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 75–6.

¹⁷ These questions summarise the content of *Quaestio* 1. See Bonaventure, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 77–87.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13. Karris's introduction contains a helpful summary of the function and content of Bonaventure's *quaestiones* (pp. 11–23).

claim that the final cause of Ecclesiastes is *contemptus mundi* with two verses from the New Testament. James 4:4 asserts that friendship with the world is enmity towards God, whilst 1 John 2:5 exhorts the reader not to love the world or the things in it. Yet, the *quaestio's sed contra* also employs scripture. Bonaventure probably alludes to Sirach 9:24 when he says that praising a work means praising the worker, whilst despising a work likewise reflects back on the worker. Also, Proverbs 16:4 says that the Lord made all things for the Lord's self. This verse suggests that 'all things are directed toward God'; and whatever is directed towards its goal, who is God, one ought not despise but rather love.¹⁹

Though Bonaventure does not explicitly employ the language of emanation, exemplarity and consummation here, the *sed contra* reflects his metaphysical vision. To condemn the world without qualification would seem objectionable first because the world emanates from the triune God as the objectification of God's self-knowledge, the exemplar of which is the eternal Word.²⁰ The beautifully ordered cosmos bears the trinitarian imprint, specifically in vestige, image and similitude.²¹ At the same time, the Lord has appointed this cosmos for God's self. This direction of all things towards God as their goal is what the theme of consummation is about in Bonaventure's metaphysics.²² Therefore, to despise the work of creation is to despise the creator from whom the creation emanates and to deny the mediatory function of humanity to aid creation towards its consummation in God, which is creation's final goal (though creation in turn aids humanity towards its own consummation in God).²³ If the *sed contra* is accurate, how then does Bonaventure reconcile the truth of creation's goodness with *contemptus mundi* and the scriptural evidence for it (James 4:4; 1 John 2:5)?

In his reply, the Seraphic Doctor does not directly counter the *sed contra*, precisely because the verses he quotes reflect his own metaphysical vision. Therefore, consistent with his style, he clarifies 'contempt' as having a

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 77.

²⁰ In his introduction to Bonaventure's trinitarian theology, Hayes uses the phrase, 'the objectification of the self-knowledge of God', to describe the symbolic nature of the world in Bonaventure's theology. See Bonaventure, *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity*, Works of St Bonaventure, vol. 3, trans. Zachary Hayes (St Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, Franciscan Institute, St Bonaventure University, 1979), p. 46.

²¹ Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, Works of St Bonaventure, vol. 9, trans. Dominic V. Monti (St Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, Franciscan Institute, St Bonaventure University, 2005), p. 96.

²² Bonaventure, *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology*, p. 1 (this reference is in Hayes's introduction to the work).

²³ Delio, *Simply Bonaventure*, pp. 59, 68.

twofold meaning, which the twofold meaning of love first implies. Before this clarification, however, he borrows a simile from Augustine and Hugh of St Victor²⁴ in order to resolve the contradiction between *contemptus mundi* and its objections.

Bonaventure says that the world is like a wedding ring, which the bridegroom (God) gives to the soul itself. Now, the bride can respond to this gift with a twofold love. She can love the ring in an adulterous way by loving it more than the ring's giver. In this adulterous love, the ring becomes its own end, an idol. Yet, the bride can love the ring in a chaste way, as a memento of her husband. She loves the ring on account of its giver, not as an end in itself. Thus, she orders her affection for the ring to her affection for its giver.²⁵ To put this twofold love for the ring in the context of Bonaventure's metaphysics, if the ring is the world and the bride the soul, chaste love for the world is only possible upon recognition of the world as a gift emanating from, reflecting back upon and finally ordered to the world's giver, the triune God. To love the world in its symbolic significance is to love the one of whom the world is an icon. To love the world in itself, on the other hand, is adulterous and flows from a consideration of the world that expropriates the world from its giver. Curiosity is the vice that corresponds to this expropriation;²⁶ and it shall enter this article more explicitly later.

Using Aristotle's method of implication, Bonaventure suggests that this twofold love implies its opposite, a twofold contempt. Ingratitude characterises the first kind of contempt, which, in Bonaventure's analogy, is to consider the ring poor and ugly. Like adulterous love, this contempt involves a failure to recognise the ring's features as reflecting the giver. Yet, whereas in adulterous love, the bride considers the beauty of the ring apart from the bridegroom, in unthankful contempt, the bride now fails to notice the beauty of the ring at all, again considering it apart from the bridegroom. There is, however, a proper contempt for the ring. This contempt regards the ring as almost nothing compared to the love of the bridegroom; and in turn, this contempt gives glory to the ring's giver.²⁷ Whilst chaste love for the ring regards it as a memento of the husband, proper contempt for the ring allows the ring as memento to turn one's thoughts to the giver in such

²⁴ Bonaventure, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 77. In fn. 33 (pp. 77–8) the editors comment that whilst the Quaracchi editors offer substantial quotations from Hugh of St Victor's *Soliloquium de Arrha animae* and Augustine's Sermon 85, neither quotation actually mentions the image of the wedding ring, though both refer to adultery.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 77–8.

²⁶ Paul J. Griffiths, 'The Vice of Curiosity', *Pro Ecclesia*, 15/1 (2006), p. 54.

²⁷ St Bonaventure, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 78–9.

a way that the affection for the giver eclipses the (rightly ordered) affection for the ring. In comparison to the love for the giver that the love for the ring evokes, the love for the ring is almost nothing. Yet, this near-nothingness of the bride's affection for the ring also shows the ring's contingency as gift from the giver.

The connection between the wedding ring analogy and Bonaventure's metaphysics with regard to the meaning of 'contempt' makes Bonaventure's resolution clearest. Merely to condemn the world as an end in itself is once again to expropriate knowledge of it from knowledge of its creator. Like curiosity, this simple contempt fails to contemplate the world's iconic significance, only this time despising it rather than loving it adulterously. Both cases, curiosity and contempt, come from a perceptual rupture which traces its roots to the Fall.²⁸ On the other hand, proper contempt of the world makes use of the world as a means to delight in the creator whom the world symbolises,²⁹ in such a way as to eclipse affection for the world. In Bonaventure's account, humans love creation most when their love for it looks like hatred in comparison to their love for the creator.

To summarise Bonaventure's resolution to this first part of *Quaestio* 1 in terms of his metaphysics, chaste love for the world means recognising its emanation from God whilst proper contempt of the world means recognising its consummate end in God, an end which should likewise bring the image-bearer who delights in the creator of the cosmos to beatific similitude.³⁰ If this modified version of *contemptus mundi* is the final cause of Ecclesiastes, then it will behoove the reader repeatedly to ask not only how this penitential book guides one negatively to *contemptus mundi*, but also how the book encourages the necessary positive aspect of *contemptus mundi*, simply love for the creator. This notion of *contemptus mundi* orientates Bonaventure's exegesis of the book's opening poem.

²⁸ See St Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, p. 98, where the Seraphic Doctor says, 'But the eye of contemplation [part of the "triple eye," the first two being "the eye of the flesh" and "the eye of reason"] does not function perfectly except through glory, which human beings have lost through sin, although they may recover this through grace and faith and the understanding of the Scriptures.'

²⁹ Here a connection is being drawn between Bonaventure's version of *contemptus mundi* and Augustine's use of *usus* and *fruitio*. See Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: OUP, 1995), pp. 14–17. Bonaventure has already displayed an Augustinian influence in his general introduction to the commentary, where he distinguishes between eternal and temporal goods, charity and inordinate desire, Jerusalem and Babylon, true and false blessedness, and finally love and contempt (Bonaventure, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 65–7).

³⁰ Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, p. 98.

St Bonaventure's exegesis of Ecclesiastes 1:3–11

Bonaventure employs Hugh of St Victor's notion of a triplex *vanitas* in order to clarify the multiple nuances of *vanitas* throughout Ecclesiastes and to structure the book's treatise thematically.³¹ The vanity of mutability is the theme of Ecclesiastes 1:3–3:15; the vanity of sin is the theme of 3:16–7:23; and the vanity of guilt is the theme of 7:24–12:7.³² The first major division has two primary parts. The first (1:3–2:26) has to do with the vanity of mutability from the point of view of change itself. The second (3:1–15) has to do with mutability from the point of view of a designated time for everything. In the first part, there are two subunits. The first (1:3–11) shows mutability in the being of creatures, whilst the second subunit exposes the rupture in humanity's dealings with mutable creatures by describing the ramifications of Solomon's curiosity.³³

The poem in 1:3–11 is both an introduction to the book and a kind of 'mini-Ecclesiastes' in that it 'powerfully evokes the issues that Qohelet will struggle with as he seeks to explore the meaning of labor and life itself'.³⁴ Ecclesiastes 1:3 introduces what the author intends to show in the course of proving the material cause (the vanity of present things), namely, that no amount of labour can liberate humans from the condition of being subject to change.³⁵ Thus, like critical scholars, Bonaventure reads 1:3 as a rhetorical question implying a negative answer. Yet, what is interesting about his take on 1:3 is that the problem for humanity is not the world, but how humans deal with the mutable world God has given them.

Bonaventure begins his exegesis of Ecclesiastes 1:4–11 by proving the changeableness of creatures in their existence as creatures. Creatures exist in three ways. First, they exist 'in the Word by reason of exemplarity', a way of existing which does not end or change, meaning that there can be no vanity in it.³⁶ This mode of existence is that which exists in the eternal Word, the internal self-expression of the triune God who expresses the ideals of the Father. This Word is the eternal exemplar of all created things.³⁷ Because the subject matter of Ecclesiastes is vanity, which involves changeability, Bonaventure does not explicitly read the poem as containing an invitation to contemplate this kind of existence, though his remarks on creation will implicitly contain such an invitation.

³¹ Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 29.

³² Bonaventure, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 96.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 97–8.

³⁴ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 112.

³⁵ Bonaventure, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 98.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³⁷ Delio, *Simply Bonaventure*, pp. 46–8.

Creatures also possess changeability as participants in the material world, where their motion makes them subject to the vanity of mutability.³⁸ Bonaventure treats this second type of existence in his exegesis of 1:4–7. Three types of creatures show themselves to be mutable in this passage, namely, rational, heavenly and elemental.³⁹ Verse 4 refers to the material mutability of rational creatures, saying, ‘A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth stands forever’. By reading the going and coming of the generations as referring to the mutability of rational creatures, Bonaventure is in part proving his answer to the question in 1:3. The inability of humans to liberate themselves from being subject to change is evident in the perpetual flux of human generations. Bonaventure supports his interpretation with Sirach 14:19 and James 4:15, both of which speak to the transience of human existence. Yet something does remain of fading generations of people. Displaying the influence of both Genesis and hylomorphism,⁴⁰ Bonaventure says that when humans’ bodies decay, they do not return to nothingness, but rather become part of the earth. Hence the earth ‘stands forever, as the matter into which we break down’. Psalm 103:5 and Proverbs 8:29, which speak to the surety of the earthly foundations God has established, support this reading of the latter half of Ecclesiastes 1:4.⁴¹

Though Bonaventure reads this passage as part of the larger section on the vanity of mutability, which is ‘natural and appropriate’,⁴² he seems to anticipate the vanity of guilt in describing the movement of rational creatures, just as he will anticipate the vanity of sin in 1:8–11. Thus, one might read this poem as introducing the totality of the *triplex vanitas*. The anticipation of the vanity of guilt is evident in a common use of Genesis 3:19, a postlapsarian verse in which God declares to Adam that he is dust and shall return to dust at death, to explicate both 1:4 and 12:7.⁴³ Ecclesiastes 12:7 most explicitly refers to the death which results from the guilt of sin, in language reminiscent of Genesis 3:19. In spite of the way the heavenly and elemental movements of Ecclesiastes 1:5–7 speak as words from God, 1:4 already gestures towards the death that results from humans misreading the words and failing to recognise their proper place in the cosmos. Again, the problem in the opening poem is not creaturely movement, but humanity’s interpretation of it.

³⁸ Bonaventure, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 97.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁴⁰ For a brief summary of the influence of hylomorphism on Bonaventure, see Delio, *Simply Bonaventure* pp. 57–8.

⁴¹ Bonaventure, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 99.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 74, quoting Hugh of St Victor.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 99, 411.

The latter half of 1:4 should provoke questions for those who both affirm the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and anticipate the passing away of heaven and earth in the last days. In *Quaestio* 3, part II, an interlocutor asks how the earth stands forever (in Hebrew, לעולם) if it will pass away and there will be a new earth (Matt 24:35; Rev 21:1). Bonaventure answers by suggesting that the earth stands in two ways: with regard to substance and with regard to appearance. In terms of the former, the earth indeed will stand forever; but in terms of the latter, it will pass away (1 Cor 7:31).⁴⁴ If this first reply solves the problem with the language of the earth's standing, there is still a question concerning the meaning of 'eternity'. Given the popularity of the Aristotelian doctrine of the eternity of the world, Bonaventure is keen also to distinguish between different nuances of 'eternity'. When the term refers to something with no beginning or end, it can only apply to God. Yet, it can also refer to a body of which the substance never ends; and this is the meaning in Ecclesiastes 1:4.⁴⁵ Thus, rational creatures subject to mutability will remain part of the earth even after death as they return to dust. Whilst this depiction of rational creatures anticipates the final verse of the book's 'treatise' (12:7), what immediately follows is a reflection on other mutable creatures who more readily move according to the vanity of mutability, whilst also awaiting the eternal and incarnate Word who will lead them to glory.⁴⁶

According to Bonaventure, Ecclesiastes 1:5–6a has to do with heavenly creatures subject to change, specifically the sun. 1:5–6a shows that the sun never rests. Once it rises, it already begins to move towards its setting, hence the phrase, 'returns to its place'. Yet, once it sets, the sun continues southward (then northward) round again, not remaining at any central place.⁴⁷ In his exegesis of this section, and in his use of Aristotle in answering its associated questions,⁴⁸ Bonaventure shows this section to be an invitation to natural philosophy. He quotes Hugh of St Victor, who reads this section as referring to both daily and annual movements of the sun.⁴⁹ For those who pay careful attention to the sun's constant movement, they can recognise both daily patterns and the equinoxes. In either case, the sun, 'by its nature', is never

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 106.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 106–7.

⁴⁶ Bonaventure makes a connection between the vanity of mutability and that which Paul ascribes to creation in Rom 8:20 (Bonaventure, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 94). This sentence alludes to the hope of creation in Rom 8.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 99.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 107–9.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 99–100.

still. It is constantly in motion because of its creatureliness; and it only stops by a miracle, as in Joshua 10:12.⁵⁰

The movements of the elements of air and water also invite scientific observation. Among other interpretations, v. 6b could refer either to the movement that air makes or, following Aristotle, the movement of vapour in the air which in turn moves the air. Yet, as Psalm 134:7 intimates in declaring that God brings forth winds out of God's stores, God hides the precise cause of the vapour's returning in its circuits to the earth from human perception.⁵¹ Like the sun, water does not have a fixed place. All water moves towards the sea, yet its movement does not stop at the sea, because the sea is not full. The reason the sea is not full is because 'in a hidden way', rivers flow back out to the place from which they came, only to 'return openly'. Their movement, like the wind, is circuitous. The water's movement appears before its viewer's eyes as something worthy of admiration (*videtur mirabile*).⁵² This aesthetic judgement of Bonaventure shows that he does not interpret this circuitous movement as an exercise in monotony, but as a cause for wonder.

Reading the movements of heavenly and elemental creatures not as monotonous, but wonderful, enables Bonaventure to render a spiritual interpretation of those bodies' movements which complements the literal interpretation. The spiritual interpretation presents these creatures in their vestigial significance. 'The sun is Christ'.⁵³ The 'Spirit surveying' is not only the wind, but also the Holy Spirit, who examines everything by causing humans to search everything, even the deep things of God.⁵⁴ The waters represent both the fontal fullness of God and the corresponding response of humans.⁵⁵ Bonaventure's interpretation, flowing from his version of *contemptus mundi*, informs and is informed by his theology of creation; and it challenges the far too easy pessimistic readings of Ecclesiastes. Yet, it is evident in his exegesis of Ecclesiastes 1:8–11 that he does not move too far towards a totally positive interpretation of the book.

Creatures also exist as abstractions in the human mind, where they are once again subject to the vanity of mutability; and Bonaventure treats this third type of existence in his exegesis of Ecclesiastes 1:8–11. If 1:4 gestures towards the vanity of guilt, then 1:8–11 gestures towards the vanity of sin by

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 100–1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 101–2; QuarEd, vol. 6, p. 13.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 103–4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 104–5.

declaring the vice of curiosity to be the reason for dissatisfaction in 1:8. From Augustine's treatment of *curiositas* in multiple works, Paul J. Griffiths detects three features of the vice: the thirst for novelty, the tendency of the *curiosi* to be loquacious and the desire to have sole propriety of knowledge.⁵⁶ At least two of these features, loquacity and the desire for novelty, are already present in the book's introductory poem. Since the curiosity in 1:8 is the vice which resists the contemplation which 1:5–7 invites, it is worth paying particular attention to curiosity's role in this final section of Qoheleth's opening poem.

In his exegesis of Ecclesiastes 1:8b–10, Bonaventure says that the ear is not filled with hearing because it 'itches to hear novelties and curiosities'.⁵⁷ Not only does Bonaventure pair *curiositas* with the notion of novelty, but he also says that the reason for unfilled ears (and unsatisfied eyes) is that neither eyes nor ears perceive that which is truly satisfying. The person in question is not blind or deaf in the physiological sense. Rather, the eye and ear are unsatisfied with what they sense within the motions 'under the sun'. Bonaventure says that 'we cannot be refreshed in these matters because the eye and ear want to learn new things. But nothing stays new, and therefore, the ear and eye do not find satisfaction in anything'.⁵⁸ Once the *curiosus* has acquired knowledge of an object, the object loses its novelty because the *curiosus* has quickly moved her or his glance from the newly old object to another, in a vicious cycle.

Bonaventure suggests from Ecclesiastes 1:8b–10 a syllogistic proof. In this proof, the major premise is that the eye and ear want to learn new things. If for Augustine the Manichees are the principal *curiosi*,⁵⁹ the paradigmatic example of the obsession for learning new things for Bonaventure comes from the example of the depiction of the Athenians in Acts 17:21, who 'employed themselves in nothing else but either telling or hearing some new thing'.⁶⁰ In drawing this connection, Bonaventure is probably hinting at the tensions arising from Aristotle's controversial popularity at the University of Paris, warning his students in turn not to let curiosity take them captive, but to cling to God's wisdom. The minor premise is that there is nothing new in being or becoming; and Bonaventure derives this from Ecclesiastes 1:9a. He applies simple conversions to both of these phrases, concluding that what is in the future has already been, and what has to be done

⁵⁶ Griffiths, 'Vice of Curiosity', pp. 52–6.

⁵⁷ Bonaventure, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 111.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁵⁹ Griffiths, 'Vice of Curiosity', p. 53.

⁶⁰ Bonaventure, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 112.

in the future has already been done. From these premises, Bonaventure draws the conclusion that there is nothing new under the sun (Eccl 1:9b).⁶¹ Therefore, one is unable to say or hear anything new. The Athenians will never find satisfaction for their intellectual appetites if what they desire is novelty.

In *Quaestio* 4, part III, Bonaventure's interlocutor asks what Solomon means by saying that there is 'nothing new under the sun'. The *sed contra* quotes Jeremiah 31:22, where the writer says that the Lord will do a new thing upon the earth, and Revelation 21:1 (which also features in *Quaestio* 3), where John reports seeing a new heaven and a new earth. Also, it seems erroneous to suggest that things move in such a circular way as to end up the same as they were. Bonaventure answers that '[w]hat concerns the working, conservation, repair, and glorification of the world is above nature and so is not *under the sun* or under time. These are above time with the exception of propagation, and so he is speaking only of this.'⁶² If the adjective, 'new', refers to what has not been before, then it is impossible for propagation to produce anything new, as it 'always produces similar from similar'.⁶³ In other words, only God, who is distinct from creation and 'above the sun', is able to produce something genuinely new. Curiosity is the vice which expects to find this kind of newness in the works 'under the sun' rather than in the works of God.

There is a connection between the dissatisfaction in humanity's quest for novelty under the sun in 1:8–11 and the epilogue's warning. According to Bonaventure, the warning given to 'my son' in the epilogue is a warning against *curiositas*. To the line, 'More than these, my son, require not' (Eccl 12:12), Bonaventure adds 'so that you always want to hear new things. For it is enough to know what is necessary.'⁶⁴ Bonaventure employs Sirach 3:22 to interpret this line in Ecclesiastes 12:12: 'Think always on the things that God has commanded you, and in many of God's works be not curious.'⁶⁵ What God commands and reveals is sufficient for the *studiosus*, but the *curiosus* dangerously attempts to plumb the depths of the unknown works of God. Thus the work of the *curiosus* is both '*unending and laborious*'.⁶⁶ There is no end to the making of books 'because the curious never have enough, but want to hear more, never wanting to hear what is old, but always what is new'.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., p. 117.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 425.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Again, the Athenians in Acts 17 serve as the prime example of obsession with novelty for Bonaventure.⁶⁸ Because things ‘under the sun’ are unsatisfying for the *concupiscentia oculorum*⁶⁹ of the *curiosi*, Athenian or otherwise, curiosity’s quest is not only unending, but also laborious: ‘And much study is an affliction of the flesh’ (Eccl 12:12).⁷⁰ It is important to emphasise how the quest of the *curiosus* not only wearies the mind, but also the flesh. Curiosity is physically harmful. The one who obsesses over *incognita* will lose sleep, only to discover that she or he still has made no progress in the search to master all kinds of knowledge.

A passage which Bonaventure uses to interpret both the epilogue and the opening poem is Ecclesiastes 8:16–17: ‘There are some who day and night take no sleep with their eyes. And I understand that a human being can find no reason for all those works of God that have been done under the sun.’ In his exegesis of the epilogue, Bonaventure uses these verses to illustrate the weariness that the study of the *curiosus* produces. In his treatment of the opening poem, he uses 8:17 to interpret 1:8a.⁷¹ The same Hebrew verbal root (עג) occurs in both 1:8 and 12:12 to depict the weariness which human attempts to perceive reality with verbal and written expressions involves. Loquacity has a way of wearying the chatterer. Whether chatter is present in speaking or the composing of countless books, it wearies the one whose mouth or pen forms the endless flow of words. The first instance of this verb occurs in a diagnosis of humanity’s perceptual struggle, whilst the second takes place in the context of a warning.

Thus, the architecture of Ecclesiastes involves introducing a wearisome perceptual struggle, illustrating that struggle with Solomon’s narration of his own experiences and observations, and warning the student not to succumb to the same *libido* for the *incognita*⁷² which has plagued humanity in general and Solomon in particular. Solomon’s life will illustrate the weariness which stems from an insatiable thirst to know the unknown. The fact that this diagnosis in Ecclesiastes 1:8–11 follows the meditation on cosmological movement in 1:5–7 seems to leave little room for hope, since ‘[c]uriosity precludes contemplation’.⁷³ However, the final section of this article will beg to differ.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Griffiths, ‘Vice of Curiosity’, p. 51.

⁷⁰ Bonaventure, Ecclesiastes, p. 426.

⁷¹ One could render Eccl 1:8a in English literally as, ‘All the words (מִירְבֵּדָה) are wearisome’. The explicit use of verbal language in 1:8a is significant for discussing the presence of loquacity in the opening poem.

⁷² Griffiths, ‘Vice of Curiosity’, pp. 50–1.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 53.

A call to contemplation of the divine Word

Thus far, this article has shown Bonaventure's *contemptus mundi* interpretation of Ecclesiastes to be consistent with his metaphysical vision, has offered his interpretation of the creaturely movement in Ecclesiastes 1:4–7 as an alternative to most contemporary critical readings, and has suggested from his exegesis that the perceptual rupture in 1:8–11 finds its roots in the vice of curiosity. In this final section, a relationship between Bonaventure's interpretation of 1:3–11 and his *Itinerarium* will be suggested. From this detection an interpretation of the opening poem of Ecclesiastes as an invitation to contemplation of the Word, through a proper reading of the book of creation and a reformation of human perception, will be offered.

In his *Itinerarium*, the Seraphic Doctor recounts his vision of the six-winged seraph at Mount La Verna, the same place where St Francis previously received the stigmata. Each of the seraph's six wings represents a stage on the path to illumination. This path 'begin[s] from creatures and lead[s] up to God, whom no one rightly enters except through the crucified'.⁷⁴ If one divides the six wings into pairs, one notices that the ascent of the soul to God begins at the level of vestiges, where the soul contemplates God in the universe and sensible world; then the ascent continues at the level of image, where one contemplates God through one's natural powers, which are eventually reformed by grace; and finally one ascends to similitude by contemplating God in God's unity and trinity.⁷⁵ Here it is suggested that Ecclesiastes 1:4–7 has to do with contemplation at the vestigial level; 1:8–11 has to do with disruption in contemplation at the level of the image; and 1:10 contains a clue as to how one might experience a reformation of the image through grace and be prepared for the similitude one encounters in Song of Songs.

One image which Bonaventure uses to describe creation is that of the book. Prior to the Fall, when the image of God in rational creatures became blemished, this book was legible to humans, 'suffic[ing] to enable [them] to perceive the light of divine Wisdom'.⁷⁶ The 'book of creation'⁷⁷ is made up of a multitude of words which trace their origin to and comprise an expression of the one divine Word.⁷⁸ In his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, when distinguishing between human and divine words in *Quaestio* 4, part II (on Eccl 1:8b), Bonaventure says, 'A divine word is every creature because each

⁷⁴ Bonaventure, 'The Soul's Journey into God', p. 55.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁷⁶ St Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, p. 97.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Delio, *Simply Bonaventure* p. 48.

creature speaks of God. This word the eye sees.⁷⁹ Bonaventure describes how these words speak of God in his spiritual interpretation of Ecclesiastes 1:5–7. Such an interpretation, however brief, illustrates the power of creaturely vestiges to draw one into the contemplation that Bonaventure will eventually describe in the first two steps of the *Itinerarium*.⁸⁰

Ecclesiastes 1:8–11 shows that, though the words in the book of creation speak of God, the eyes which see them are not satisfied, constrained as they are by curiosity. Until the incarnation, humanity gropes in darkness to find the reason for things, because humans are bent downward (*homo recurvatus*) in self-referential pursuits of knowledge.⁸¹ Bonaventure relates Ecclesiastes 7:30 to the cause of concupiscence, which, along with death, is characteristic of the vanity of guilt which stems from the vanity of sin. Though God made humans upright, one consequence of original sin is that they now look downward and constantly entangle themselves in an infinite number of questions, none of which find satisfactory answers.⁸² Their curious disposition distorts the image of God in them and makes them unable to infer the immutable Word from the mutable words of the book of creation; and thus they are not content to contemplate the Word through the words. The incarnate Word is the only one who will make the book of creation legible, so that fallen humans might again interpret its revelatory function. Humans also need the revelation of scripture to enable them to interpret creation in such a way.⁸³ If all scripture proclaims the eternal and incarnate Word,⁸⁴ might there be a ray of hope for the reformation of the divine image in humanity and the promise of similitude even within this diagnosis of humanity's sin and guilt in Ecclesiastes 1:8–11?

In his exegesis of Ecclesiastes 1:3–11, Bonaventure considers material and abstract existence, which have been related here to the first four steps in his *Itinerarium*. He does not consider the first kind of existence, which lies in the eternal Word, because the Word is not vain, and the material cause of Ecclesiastes is the vanity of present things under the sun. However, what if the

⁷⁹ Bonaventure, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, p. 115.

⁸⁰ Whilst the *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* belongs to Bonaventure's scholastic period, the *Itinerarium* (and his other mystical works) belongs to the next phase of Bonaventure's life, when he served as Minister General of the Franciscan Order. For a chronology of Bonaventure's life and work, see J. G. Bougerol, *Introduction to the Works of Bonaventure*, trans. José de Vinck (Paterson, NJ: St Anthony Guild Press, 1964), pp. 171–7.

⁸¹ Charles Carpenter, *Theology as the Road to Holiness in St Bonaventure* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 145.

⁸² Bonaventure, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, p. 287.

⁸³ Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, p. 98.

⁸⁴ Bonaventure, *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology*, pp. 45, 47.

Word who exists ‘above the sun’ in eternity and who enters life under the sun in the incarnation is in view as well? What if there is a clue to the reformation of the divine image in humans, which in turn makes them able to interpret the book of creation in accordance with its existence in the eternal Word? This article’s final paragraph shall attempt to elucidate such a clue and offer a christological version of *contemptus mundi* which invites contemplation of the Word through the book of creation.

In Hebrew, Ecclesiastes 1:10a says, *יש דבר שיאמר ראה זה חדש הוא*. One possible literal translation of this verse in English is, ‘There is a Word of whom one says, “Behold this one: new he is!”’ In the Vulgate, *verbum* is not used to translate *דבר* here.⁸⁵ Yet it is suggested that, if *verbum* were used, Bonaventure might read this verse christologically. If so, a christological interpretation within the broadly penitential reading of the whole book is that which gestures towards the Word who eternally exists ‘above the sun’ entering mutable creation as the incarnate Word to restore to fallen humanity its ability to read properly the book of creation. The incarnate Word, as he who comes from ‘above the sun’, is the only one with power to make all things new (Rev 21:5).⁸⁶ In the incarnate Word, the *curiosi* who have been waiting for the genuinely new whilst searching for novelty under the sun find rest from their unending labour (cf. Eccl 12:12). In this christological reading, the penitential Solomon invites the reader to contemplate the ‘true Solomon’ of the *Itinerarium*,⁸⁷ the Word who is God’s eternal Wisdom and in whom bearers of the divine image might also reach similitude. Thus, the penitential Solomon of Ecclesiastes also prepares the reader for the union with Christ that his Song expresses. Ecclesiastes, then, even read christologically, maintains its place in Origen’s schema, as a manual for proper *contemptus mundi*, which prepares one for beatific union with Christ.

⁸⁵ It should be added that neither does the LXX use *λόγος*, opting instead for the relative pronoun *ὅς*, thus interpreting the Hebrew as referring to a ‘thing’. However, it does translate *הדברים* in 1:8 with *οἱ λόγοι*.

⁸⁶ There are interesting linguistic connections between LXX Eccl 1:10 and the Greek of Rev 21:5. Unfortunately, there is not space in this article to explore these connections fully.

⁸⁷ Bonaventure, ‘The Soul’s Journey into God’, p. 54.