James Limburg, Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, offers us the mature fruit of many decades of study, prayer, and teaching based on this enigmatic wisdom book. His popular-level commentary on Ecclesiastes complements Eerdmans’ more academic offerings, including those of Michael V. Fox (1999) and Tremper Longman III (NICOT, 1998).

Ever alert to the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the book, Limburg reminds us that Ecclesiastes is called “Qoheleth” in Hebrew, for which he prefers the translation “The Teacher.” His study approaches this ancient Jewish teacher through the hopes and fears expressed in popular culture and piety.

The cover illustration by Susan Seavitt features an image composed of quick, light strokes on canvas. We see a father, mother, and child reaping a harvest of grain, fruit, and grapes while dancing and praying. It presents an appropriately positive but ambiguous invitation to Limburg’s primary themes. He emphasizes the Teacher’s exhortations to receive with thankfulness the gifts of God in the here and now, while being content with basic human fellowship and the work of our hands.
Limburg’s interaction with the text is at once reverent, creative, and engaging. His aim is to impart his interest in the book’s “offbeat” message to a wider audience, likening his delight in sharing its treasures to one who gives a special friend a tour of one’s favorite back-street bookstore. “Ecclesiastes is not helpful for everyone. But it does have an honest, invigorating, often surprising word for many persons” (2). His voice might be described as colloquial, philosophical, and pastoral. His reflections are seasoned with many anecdotes gleaned from teaching courses and leading retreats based on Ecclesiastes.

The author grabbed my attention in the preface with the story and photograph of his Lutheran grandfather’s tombstone in a small South Dakota church graveyard. It was engraved with the simple inscription in German: “Leichen Text: Pred. 7:2” (“Funeral Text: Eccl 7:2). My grandmother was also a South Dakota Lutheran, so I imagined myself joining Limburg as a long-lost cousin for one of his “back-street bookshop tours.”

While Professor Limburg’s erudition is less on display here than in some of his other works, it is apparent in the background. Technical and Hebrew terms are carefully explained. Discussions about authorship, dating, and textual and higher-critical issues are dealt with only in passing, but without being superficial. Footnotes are kept to a bare minimum, and there is no index.

His early treatment of the key term hebel (“vanity,” “nothingness,” “smoke,” “breath,” etc.) is especially helpful. Limburg is at his best when he is describing the visual imagery of blowing cigar smoke in his classroom and the musical impressions of a deep drone note or “pedal point” of an organ piece to illustrate the nature of the universal groan, “vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”

Baby-boomer exegetes could easily predict Limburg’s almost mandatory references to singer-songwriter Pete Seeger’s rendition of Eccl 3 (“Turn, Turn, Turn”), but by the end of chapter 2 (whose title is taken from Peggy Lee’s song, “Is That All There Is?”) I was asking the same question about the present volume. I wondered how relevant Pete and Peggy, Porgy and Bess, Marshall Dillon, and Buffy Saint Marie were to “contemporary popular culture.” Should they receive more attention than a dozen or more English-language interpreters of Qoheleth who have published important works during the past decade? What about the lack of quotations from patristic and medieval interpreters of Ecclesiastes? Limburg does point readers to see the bibliographies of “Fox, Horne, and Krüger” and to “search also ‘Ecclesiastes’ on the Internet, which lists more than 200,000 entries” (5).

A review of the chapter titles illustrates his style and the thrust of his argument. There are seven questions and a final statement. Chapter 1 asks the big question, “What’s It All

An example of Limburg’s Christian and canonical hermeneutic is found in his discussion of Qoheleth and the afterlife. He does not hesitate to summarize and quote from Hebrew and Christian texts that make more explicit reference to the promise of eternal life (97–102). These are proposed as a necessary corrective to the self-limited worldview of Ecclesiastes that might otherwise lead one away from a hope-filled, Christocentric orientation to life, death, judgment, heaven, and hell.

True to his Lutheran heritage, Limburg gives particular emphasis to the writings of Martin Luther, Gerhard von Rad, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Chapter 1 begins with an epigraph by Luther, and his Notes on Ecclesiastes is the most prominently quoted secondary source. Limburg uses Luther’s characterization of St. Jerome’s interpretation of Ecclesiastes as a foil for championing the “counterpoint of joy” over the “pedal point” of vanity. Jerome is portrayed as one who misread Ecclesiastes by encouraging contempt of and retreat from the world. Luther’s call, by way of contrast, was for joyfully embracing the present life “under the sun” as a more authentic New Testament response.

I am not sure this characterization does justice to the full scope of Jerome’s mature thought and writings. In an allusion to Ecclesiastes, Jerome echoes Paul in Phil 3, Gal. 2 and Rom 8: “But one who has come to regard all the splendor of the world as off-scourings, and to hold all things under the sun as vain, that he may win Christ; one who has died with his Lord and risen again, and has crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts; he will boldly cry out: ‘Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?’” (Letter to Eustochium 39). As an apologist for consecrated virginity for the few and Christian marriage for the many, Jerome exalts the love of Christ as the preeminent value and goal for all believers.

Martin Luther is given the last word in the concluding paragraph of the book: “The important thing is that we have a tranquil and quiet heart and a mind filled with joy, that is, that we be content with the Word and the work of God. Thus in the verses that follow he exhorts us (9:7–9) to eat and drink and enjoy life with the wife of our youth…. This is in accord with the saying of Christ (Matt. 6:34: ‘The day’s own trouble is sufficient for the day’).” One could argue that Luther was overreacting to his former monastic life of asceticism and celibacy in his reading of Ecclesiastes. Similarly, Jerome may have been too quick to find prooftexts for the evolving monasticism of his own day. In any case, Limburg is to be commended for reminding new generations of readers that Ecclesiastes
helps us ask the most important questions of life, while forcing us to look to the rest of Scripture for the answers.

If asked for a popular introduction to Ecclesiastes for a Bible study group or personal spiritual reading, I might well recommend this book along with the similarly accessible and penetrating *Three Philosophies of Life* by Peter Kreeft (Ignatius Press, 1989). The latter work introduces, in order, the books of Ecclesiastes (“Life as Vanity”), Job (“Life as Suffering”), and Song of Songs (“Life as Love”). Kreeft’s perception of Ecclesiastes is that it is “a great, great book, because it explores, deeply and uncompromisingly, a great, great question: What are our lives here under the sun for? … The only greater book than this would have to be a book that gave the greatest answer in the world—a book like the next book in the Bible, the Song of Songs. The philosopher asks the question, but the lover answers it. The head thinks, but the heart sings” (58).

*Encountering Ecclesiastes* delivers what is promised: a popular introduction to the grand themes and questions posed by the Teacher. Those who came of age in the United States during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s will be especially attuned to Limburg’s cultural allusions. His alliterative summary of Ecclesiastes’ central lessons will resonate with a broad range of Jewish and Christian readers: *revere* God and keep his commandments, *remember* your Creator, and *rejoice* in the good gifts of God.