

"Of Making Many Books there is no End" Eccles 12.12 or The Challenge of Dangerous Writings from Solomon to Strong

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Introduction

I am not a librarian but I love books, I write books and I read books. One of the great discoveries of my life is that books are dangerous and that librarians can be even more dangerous. But that discovery came quite late in my life. When I said to my father that I wanted to go to high school, he said I was 'bloody mad'. He said I would need to ride my 'bloody bicycle' ten miles to town and ten miles home. Which I did! In Year 12, my high school English teacher said 'Habel, your English is hopeless. You will never write anything!' At 30, after I completed a PhD, I discovered I could write. But I discovered so much more. Books can be dangerous.

Wisdom – Dangerous Books in the Library

'Of making many books there is no end'! How ironic! How arrogant! As the author of Ecclesiastes, known as Koheleth or Qoheleth, is finishing his own book he complains about the writing of too many other books. He does not make a pitch for people to buy his latest tome and be enlightened about the meaning of life. Instead he maintains that *'of making many books there is no end'* and adds, 'and studying them too much is a pain in the proverbial'!

Proverbial happens to be the operative word. Qoheleth, who claims to speak for King Solomon, is a collector of proverbs, wise sayings of the ancient world. Solomon, you may recall, was the first librarian in the biblical tradition. He is the one who gathered proverbs and attracted the wise and the famous from nearby countries to hear his royal lectures on life. Being ambitious by nature, Solomon attempted to establish a realm that would be hailed as a genuine monarchy. That means not only an ostentatious palace and a heavy taxation system, but also a wisdom school; a school for the elite, where men (not

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women) are trained to be counsellors, ambassadors and judges. A library was an integral part of an ancient wisdom school.

In such a society, only those identified as the wise could read and write. As part of a monarchy competing with nearby monarchies, wisdom literature was not confined to the tradition of old man Moses. Proverbs and wisdom writings came from Egypt, Babylon and beyond—wherever Solomon's ships sailed or his mercenaries meandered. In one of the books in that library of books, a volume we call the Book of Proverbs, there is a collection of proverbs entitled Thirty Sayings (21.17, 20). Now we know that this collection of sayings comes from Egypt, taken from a collection known as the Teaching of Amenemope.

Such books are dangerous! They reflect views of life, nature and society that are not derived from Moses or the prophets. They reflect the wisdom of the world, of people abroad. Wisdom writings are dangerous because they have a radically different orientation to that espoused by the prophets and priests of Israel. And, because they are collected from far and wide, they may include the experience of those who could not read or write—the ordinary people. So, to make the library called Proverbs acceptable, the politically correct editors of the day added that 'wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord'. Wisdom sayings, however, have their origins in lands where the fear of the Lord of Israel was an unknown. Wisdom books are different and dangerous.

I recall my youth on the farm in Yulecart, Victoria. Yulecart was a rather anti-intellectual community comprised of down-to-Earth farmers. Books were not part of our lives. In our home we had a Bible and a devotion book, nothing more—no Dickens and no Donald Duck. In the one room primary school there was no library—at least not one that I recall using! Books were for the elite, the educated, the

'toffs' as I my father called them. I grew up playing with earthworms, not books.

Of course, we knew wise ways to survive on a farm. 'Red sky in the morning, farmer's warning. Red sky at night, farmer's delight'. 'Check for spiders before you sit on the dunny!' Or 'When the hot North wind blows, sit on the veranda and watch the horizon for bush fires'. Books are almost as dangerous as bush fires. Read them and you begin to think you are somebody—a 'bloody toff', as my father would say.

The context of Qoheleth's statement about making many books is not only about becoming wise, but also about the art of studying and organising many proverbs. In other words, Qoheleth claims to be a librarian. He asserts that proverbs from the wise can function as goads, prodding people in the proverbial so that they come to their senses and see life as it really is. (Eccles. 12.11)

Then comes his warning! Accepting the prodding of proverbs is one thing; making many books, however, is another. That is dangerous! As if the whole worldview of wisdom was not problem enough, the business of making books is even more problematic. Is Qoheleth's own book designed to illustrate his point?

The Book of Ecclesiastes has been described as pessimistic, realistic, cynical and even depressing. We all know the classic opening of the book: 'Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!' In Hebrew, the original reads, 'hebel of hebels! All is hebel! Hebel means wind, emptiness, vanity, nothing! In the end, life amounts to nothing, to hebel.

Ecclesiastes, I would argue, is not just another collection of wisdom sayings, another wisdom book. Ecclesiastes is tantamount to a subversive expose of the wise sayings, or rather, the wisdom library of that day, to demonstrate how dangerous

they are. What happens when you really take these books seriously and do not get seduced by a popular success ideology? A life of rich blessing and success? No, a realisation that ultimately everything ends in nothing! Humans and animals all end up dead.

For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so does the other. They all have the same breath and humans have no advantage over the animals; all is hebel (vanity). Eccl.3.19

My task here is not to interpret the Book of Ecclesiastes, but to highlight that this dangerous book is found in the Bible. This book is the epitome of wisdom books that highlight the danger of books with an alternative perspective on God, nature and life. This book, like the Book of Job, illustrates that libraries are full of dangerous books, and that such books deserve to be read on their own terms rather than interpreted in the light of all the acceptable writings.

So my challenge to librarians is not to hide these books under a bushel, but to recognise the alternative and dangerous books, that reflect the wisdom of the real world, preserved in our traditions, even in the Bible, as an integral part of a library. Your role, I suggest, is to uncover such books.

'Of making many books there is not end, but if you are foolish enough to study the hidden ones critically you may become wise.'

Truth – Dangerous Books outside the Library

John's Gospel closes with a statement about books similar to that of Koheleth, but with a rather different twist.

This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them down, and we know that his testimony is true. But there

are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world could not contain the books that would be written. (John 21.24-25)

Books, books and more books! The book problem has intensified. It is not simply a question of books without end; the books about Jesus could fill the whole world.

The real issue arising from John's Gospel, however, is not the vast array of unwritten books about Jesus' life, but the assertion that his testimony is true. John's version claims to be truth. Luke similarly begins his Gospel with a claim that he has done the necessary research about Jesus, written an orderly account of Jesus' life and 'investigated everything carefully', so that you may 'know the truth' concerning the things in his book. (Luke 1.1-4)

The task of preserving the tradition, or more specifically the truth, has been one of the functions of libraries, a sacred trust from our religious ancestors—the very apostles of Jesus Christ. The truth, it seems, needs to be protected by outside forces that present a different perspective. The Old Testament is a canon, that is, a library of books that were considered true, valid and inspired by God. That library of books was closed at the Council of Jamnia in 70 CE.

It seems that the closure of the Hebrew canon/library was due, in part, to the pressure of the Christian community which claimed new writings were also true. The debate about what books were acceptable in the library of Hebrew Scriptures, however, had been going on for some time. How did Ecclesiastes get into the canon? Books like Ecclesiastes were under dispute because they were dangerous. In the end, it seems, Ecclesiastes was accepted because of the first verse, which refers to Solomon, and the last two verses, which refer to keeping the commandments. Framed by the language of orthodox truth

they could be included in the library we call the Old Testament.

Now, of course, there are numerous books about Jesus that were written and were not included in the New Testament. They present a very different Jesus. They too are considered dangerous. Works like The Gospel of Thomas are filled with mysteries and secrets not revealed in the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus, for example, takes Thomas aside and speaks three words to him. When the other disciples ask what Jesus said, he replied that they would take up stones and cast them at him if he dared reveal the secret. (Gaertner, 119)

We now know that there were about thirty Gospels, of which the recently discovered Gospel of Judas is a choice example. Many of these Gospels were written from a Gnostic perspective reflected in the famous 3rd century library of Nag Hammadi in Egypt. Whole libraries could be dangerous if they threatened the orthodox tradition.

The same thing has happened throughout the history of the Christian Church. Books which have been inconsistent with the truth as understood by a given community have been excluded as dangerous. Such books do not reflect the pure truth and are therefore dangerous. In my tradition, the true understanding of things was known as Die Reine Lehre, the pure teaching that was to be preserved at all costs.

When I was at the Seminary here in Australia, we rarely explored the books of the library. We had our approved texts, our Bibles and the notes from our orthodox lecturers. And while we had a boring unit called Encyclopaedia and Methodology, the focus was on the faithful authors from the past. None of the more recent writers, such as Barth and Bultmann, were recommended for consideration. And, at that time, almost no one from our own Australian Lutheran Church had published anything other than a sermon or two. Our lecturers used our library to preserve the

tradition and keep our testimony true.

At some points in the history of the church, books were burned, books were banned and books were hidden. The challenge for libraries today is to explore both the traditions that were considered truth and those which were excluded as heresy or fantasy. The very nature of the beliefs and teaching of the church today is related to the literature which was excluded. We define ourselves over against what threatens us.

Does your library have a heresy section, a collection of all those dangerous books which the church has hidden or banned?

Let me give you an example. I have with me two copies of The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses. The English edition, with the sub-title Moses' Magical Spirit-art known as Wonderful Arts, claims to come from the work of the old wise Hebrews and be taken from the 'Mosaic books of the Cabala and the Talmud for the good of mankind'. Let me give you one example:

If you want to cite and compel spirits to appear before you and render your obedience, then observe the following instructions:

1. Keep God's commands as much as you possibly can.
2. Build and trust solely on the might and power of God.
3. Continue your citations and do not cease even if the spirits do not appear at once.
4. Take special notice of the time, viz;
Monday night, from 11 until 3 o'clock
Tuesday night, from 10 until 2 o'clock
Wednesday night, from 12 until 3 o'clock
Thursday night, from 12 until 2 o'clock
Friday night, from 10 until 3 o'clock
Saturday night, from 10 until 12 o'clock
5. It must at the same time be new moon.
6. Complete the following circle, described in this work, on parchment, written with the blood of young white doves.
7. If you wish to undertake this operation,

be sure to consecrate the circle precisely.
(Moses, 1972,. 101)

The German edition, which is somewhat different in content, also claims to be sympathetic magic, that is, Moses' magical spirit-art, the secret of all secrets. The book was apparently brought to Australia by early German immigrants from Silesia who settled in the Barossa. In due course, the book was condemned by the church as 'The Witch's Bible'. As one article states, 'A brief dip into the pages of the Witch's Bible explains why it was considered so dangerous'. (Kirby, 1980, 13)

Spells from this book can cure warts, overcome madness, raise the dead and even increase the size of nipples. The article in question says that there are probably only three copies of the book left, but that spells have been used from the book as recently as 1974. In short, I have in my hands a rare and dangerous book from my hidden tradition.

My question is whether our libraries have dared to extend their boundaries to include such dangerous books as part of our heritage. Such books do not, of course, need to be as dramatic as the Witch's Bible.

'Of making many books there is no end, but if you are faithful enough to ban some, the truth you seek may well elude you'.

Word – Books become Dangerous when Read

Ecclesiastes and the wisdom books represent a dangerous collection hidden inside the library we call the Bible. The Gospel of Judas, and many other such books that have been excluded from the Bible or an accepted religious tradition, are also considered dangerous. They are declared heresy, untrue, fit for burning.

What about the volumes we have recognised at the core of our tradition,

the very books we have read and re-read, from our childhood to our dotage? Are they also dangerous? Especially if we read them with new eyes!

Jesus stood up to read and the book of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me
To bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release
to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free
To proclaim the year of the Lord's
favour".*

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of all the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing". (Luke 4.17-20)

After they heard Jesus reading of the text, all hell broke loose. This man was daring to read the text afresh and say it applied to him, to people in prison here and now, to the poor in Palestine. Dangerous! He claimed the Spirit of God was at work in him to liberate poor and oppressed people! Very dangerous!

So they took Jesus outside and tried to throw him off the cliff! Dangerous indeed! The danger, it seems, is in how we read as much as in what we read! The words of a book—indeed of a whole library—are basically constant. The danger arises when people have the courage or the condition that moves them to read those same words with new eyes. The words Jesus read had been read a thousand times before. Suddenly these same words become a time bomb.

The way we interpret is known as hermeneutics. Sometimes it is viewed as a skill, sometimes an art and sometimes a necessity.

I did not really discover the explosive nature of books until I went to the USA in 1955! Prior to that time there were essentially two ways of reading the words—the correct Lutheran way and the wrong way—the Roman way! In the USA, I discovered not only a world of books, libraries within libraries, but different worlds in which I could read these same books in many different ways.

The dangerous part of my hermeneutical journey began in 1964 when I was asked to address all the Lutheran bishops on what a historical critical reading of Genesis three might look like, taking into account the ancient Near Eastern context of the writing.

The assumption of the invitees was that I, as a good young Lutheran, who had a chance to make a good impression before the big boys, would expose the evils of the historical critical method. My mistake first of all was to confront these old listeners with classic Lutheran hermeneutics and then proceed to show that an historical-cultural reading of the text was not inconsistent with Lutheran hermeneutics.

Now that was dumb and dangerous. I was accused of heresy. The presentation was printed in a small volume which became known as 'the green dragon'! At one conference in Iowa West, not one of the clergy present, other than a few former students, actually spoke to me before or after I defended my paper. I was ostracised! Genesis three is dangerous—if you dare to read it in terms of its own culture. If you read my green dragon, 40 years later, it seems so tame! (Habel, 1965)

During the forty years that have followed, I have read Genesis three and numerous other books from numerous perspectives, aware of the specific hermeneutic implied. These orientations include:

- ANE cultural perspective
- Literary and source critical

approaches

- Rhetorical and tradition criticism
- History of Religions perspective
- Indigenous theology approach
- Dalit liberation perspective
- Feminist hermeneutics

In exploring all these approaches designed to interpret the library of the Bible and beyond, I was following the principles and models that had preceded me, even if they got me into trouble.

Within the last ten years, I have been one of the pioneers of a new approach which has come to be known as ecological hermeneutics. I am proud to say that a team of scholars here in Adelaide has worked with me in developing a hermeneutic that has been recognised internationally. The five volume series known as The Earth Bible represents the original foray into this field. Once again, there is a danger in reading with eyes that have never really been open in modern times.

Ecological hermeneutics essentially means reading the book from the perspective of Earth and the Earth community. My task here is not to elaborate on this new approach. The point I would like to make is that many peoples in the past have been close to Earth, experienced Earth as a mother, known Earth as spiritual and learned to affirm with Job: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb (namely Earth) and naked I shall return there' (Job 1.21). Some peoples, like Indigenous Australians, read the landscape. Earth was their library and their source of meaning.

I wonder whether, if libraries were being created anew today, whether they might not consist of a series of rooms—of worlds within libraries. As I enter a room in such a library, I am being led to think, to explore and to read from a particular perspective.—the orientation of that world. As I enter the 'Woman' room I am given the visuals, the skills, the orientation, the emotions—whatever is needed—to read

the library from a feminist perspective. As I enter the 'Untouchable' room, I am immersed in Dait culture and learn the art of reading with a specific liberationist approach. As I enter the 'Earth' room, I am surrounded by nature and led to appreciate my connection with creation as I begin to employ an ecological hermeneutic.

I could go on. In the eco-liturgies we have developed for *The Season of Creation*, we seek to engage worshippers with the creation of which they are a part. I have written the equivalent of two or three books on this subject. Alas, they are not in any library. They are now on the website as pieces of text that people can download. In a sense, websites are also dangerous because they steal what people have written and let them loose in that great library in the sky.

We may well pause, in conclusion, and wonder at the mystery of the human mind, the source of a million libraries, the source of words beyond counting. What lies behind the impulse to create libraries, to make many more books?

I want to close by citing a writer called Charles Strong, a symposium in whose honour we held here last week (July 7, 2006). Strong was a Scottish Presbyterian who was, I believe, a hundred years ahead of Bishop Spong — and considered dangerous. He was forced out of the Presbyterian Church in 1883 and in 1885 founded The Australian Church in Melbourne.

Strong's hermeneutic sought to avoid reading the text in search of doctrine and to explore the underlying spiritual dimension. His approach led him to oppose both the Boer War and World War II. More importantly, he dared to go behind all the approaches espoused until his time, and re-interpret Christianity as a vehicle for discerning the underlying Life and unifying Spirit at the core of the cosmos. He even anticipated much that we now

call ecological! Let me quote a section that might appeal to you as librarians:

One of the great discoveries of today is the unity of things. We used to conceive of the various objects in this world as distinct creations—vegetable and animal were distinct, and all the species of these were distinct, and the sun and the moon and the stars were also distinct creations. Then thought began to go deeper and dig down to the root of things, and these distinctions were lost, and all were seen to be branches of a great tree whose root was one. You enter the Public Library—all around you see divisions, thousands of books, each bound up separately, having a niche of its own. What seeming chaos! How bewildering! But look closer. The librarian has gone deeper than these divisions. See how he (sic!) has classified and arranged the mass. Here is Architecture, here Geology, here Chemistry, here History, and so on all around the library. Yes, and even there thought will not stop. The philosopher comes in, and not content with these divisions and classifications, he begins to dig deeper to see whether there is not a unity beneath art, religion, politics, history and other titles under which the books are arranged. Down he goes to see if there is not one root out of which all branches spring, till he stands face to face with that wonder of wonders, the Human Mind, and the underlying Thought out of which all things spring. Down he goes like some brave diver, till even the distinction between mind and matter seems to fade away, and nothing seems real but all-creative Thought, of which matter is but the transient form. (Strong 1894, 100)

The author of Ecclesiastes concluded that in the end all is hebel, nothing or vanity. For Strong, if you dig deep enough, ultimately behind all is thought, the Divine Mind.

'Of making many books there is no end, but if you are courageous enough to read them with the eyes of another you may see yourself as never before.'

Conclusion

Of making many books there is no end. And books are dangerous, books that we have hidden inside our libraries, including that library called the Bible. Even more dangerous may be those books we have excluded from the faithful as heretical, pagan and satanic. By far the greatest danger, however, lies in the hands of the librarian. Does the librarian simply classify books according to traditional categories or does he/she dare to open not only the books themselves, but the eyes of those who read? Is the librarian the servant of the hierarchy or an agent of learning?

More and more, it seems to me, modern students will just log on or drop in to the library and bypass the pious or the professor. Will you be there simply to locate books or to locate ways of reading books in a post-modern, post-denominational, post-heresy—yes even post-digital—age?

'Of the making of meaning from books there is no end!'

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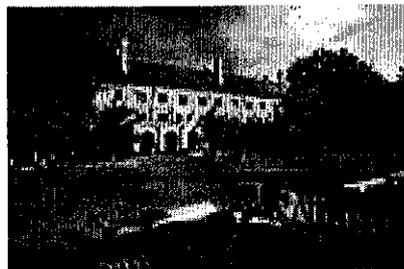
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