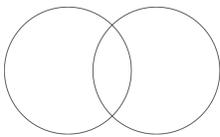


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The Already Not Yet: Life as a Divine Dichotomy

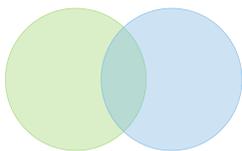
Ecclesiastes 8:10-15; Romans 8:18-25

The classroom was hushed. Only the furious clacking of computer keys could be heard, the staccatic accompaniment to the brilliant voice of our professor¹. Every word was a revelation, her quiet passion contagious. And then she drew this.



A simple Venn diagram that revolutionized my understanding of Paul, of tragedy, of hope.

Before I begin, let me explain. This diagram is the visual representation of the theological concept: the “Already Not Yet,” which I will delve into in a bit. But for now, what you need to know is this: the green side represents the world as it was before Christ, the blue represents the world as it will be when creation is fully redeemed by God. And the intersection... well the intersection is our current reality.



¹ Dr Lisa Bowens; Paul as an Apocalyptic Thinker course, PTS 2021.

Now, let me back up — way back, a few thousand years. Our first reading today was from the book of Ecclesiastes. It's a fascinating book, in which the author grapples with the inequity of life: the wicked who live long lives, while the good die young (Ecc 7:15), “the righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve” (Ecc 8:14b). The author finally seems to throw up their hands, declaring that all is vanity.

But, the Hebrew word used here, while often translated as vanity or meaningless, is הבל *hevel*, and it literally means a breath or vapor or mist. The first use of the word *hevel* in the Bible is the name Abel, as in Cain and Abel. This word *hevel* is actually Abel's name.

For those unfamiliar, Abel was the first documented murder in the Bible: slaughtered by his brother Cain in a crime of jealous fury, Abel's life seemed as brief as mist. Snuffed out by the senselessness of violence, he was here, and then he was gone (Genesis 4:1-16).

After this, in an almost a poetic tribute, his name, *hevel*, is used throughout the Old Testament to describe that which is fleeting, destined for transience. This sentiment, familiar to the ancient hearers, when used in the book of Ecclesiastes is a reminder and acknowledgment of a tension: the world as we long for it to be, contrasted with the world as it is. These injustices finally declared *hevel*.

This dichotomy is not limited to one book but permeates much of the Bible. In Paul's letters, he explores this vein through a Christological lens: the promises of Christ fulfilled, but not yet fulfilled. This is the paradox called the “Already Not Yet”: a theological concept that the world as it will be in the coming Kingdom of God has crashed into the world as it was before the

in-breaking of God through Christ. Remember that Venn diagram. We are squarely located in the middle. Both realities coexisting in tension. The Kingdom has come, and yet the world is still fully drenched in that which was before.

We experience this paradox throughout Paul's writing:

He states that we already adopted in Christ (Romans 8:15), but not yet adopted (Romans 8:23);

Already redeemed in Christ (Ephesians 1:7), but not yet redeemed (Ephesians 4:30);

Already sanctified in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:2), but not yet sanctified (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24);

Already saved in Christ (Ephesians 2:8), but not yet saved (Romans 5:9);

Already raised with Christ (Ephesians 2:6), but not yet raised (1 Corinthians 15:52).

And while our practical sensibilities try to reject this dichotomy, deep down, I think we know it's real. That both realities are true. The Old Age, with its seeming dominance of evil and sin, of slavery, of death, of the oppressive status quo, coexisting with the New Age: Creation redeemed, the authority of grace, and freedom and life under the power of God through the Spirit of Christ.

We see both as through a bifocal lens: the enslavement of the Old Age, and God's invading and liberating New Creation. And this bifocal vision has helped me to begin to better comprehend the Ecclesiastical tension of our lived experience:

Why do terrible things happen?

How can God's kingdom fit into a world overwhelmed with pain and injustice?

How is life not just a series of meaninglessly fleeting moments?

As my mother lay in her hospital bed — this vibrant, healthy woman now suddenly overwhelmed with an onslaught of medical conditions and diagnoses — I found myself reading a lot of Ecclesiastes. I was drawn to the language of the unfair hand, of vainly swirling vapor and mist. But at the same time, that image of the chalk Venn diagram kept subverting my thoughts.

And I began to wonder — what *can* coexist? Can joy live alongside sorrow — as a yin and yang, opposing forces residing simultaneously in our lives? Even as my mind wrestled with this abstract concept, my soul well knew the truth of this paradox. While in those hospital days there logically seemed no space for happiness, still there was a quiet persistent peace — a peace uninvited, an invasion on my sorrow.

And that invasive hope is exactly what I gleaned from the “Already Not Yet”. Yes, this world is full of tragedy, but in an astounding Divine dissonance, that tragedy coexists with hope. This seeming impossibility hints that there is more happening here than we see — as though God interjects beauty into the horrific to remind us of God’s presence — a presence that is actively and unfalteringly usurping the world as it was. A presence that is overtaking the Powers that be, ushering in the world as it will be, pulling all of creation into the eternal Kingdom of God.

Through Christ, God has broken into this age, bringing with them the redemption of this existence:

Where the brevity of hevel is no longer the ruler - eternity is.

Where we are no longer slaves to this seeming futile fleeting life, but are co-conspirators with Christ, participating in bringing about the Kingdom come.

Now, just to clarify: this is the antithesis of the prosperity gospel — that understanding that if we are good enough, we will experience no pain. And this is not escapism — living as though our lives only matter inasmuch as they lead to an eventual propulsion from this world and into some cloud-laden kingdom somewhere else

No - This is a full acknowledgment of the fleeting, painful nature of existence, while simultaneously embracing the promise that the temporal is not all there is — that we live in the reality of the in-breaking kingdom... here. now. While we find ourselves confined to the middle of that Venn diagram, through Christ, we are emancipated through the promise of Divine adoption, of full redemption, of complete salvation.

As Paul stated in today's passage:

Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ... In hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. (Romans 8:18-21)

Take heart. Though our lives may seem as fleeting as mist, they are not meaningless. Through Christ's redemption, we have been claimed, adopted, and empowered to action. And

now, let us align ourselves with the Divine reclamation of our world as the children of the one true and eternal God.