

# Nothing new under the sun: the Five Scrolls read Houellebecq

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/tjx](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/tjx)**John Goldingay**

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**Abstract**

The novels of Michel Houellebecq and the Five Scrolls in the Jewish Scriptures are mutually illuminating in their portrayal of human life in the context of a secular or post-secular world with its wistfulness about meaning and about God.

**Keywords**

Ecclesiastes, Five Scrolls, Houellebecq, Iris Murdoch, meaning, Sixties

During the day, I have been working on the group of five short Jewish compositions called the Scrolls, the Megilloth, which appear together in the Jewish Scriptures but are scattered about in the Christian Old Testament. In the evening, I have been reading the novels of Michel Houellebecq, the star contemporary French novelist, the *enfant terrible* of French letters (though on his way to being the *vieil homme terrible*).<sup>1</sup> Not only have I kept feeling that the Five Scrolls and the novels interact with each other. They also interact in serendipitous ways with other works. A few months ago the BBC repeated its dramatization of Jean-Paul Sartre's series of novels *The Roads to Freedom* from the 1940s, first shown in 1970.<sup>2</sup> The past year has seen the publication of two studies of the four women who threatened to revolutionize Oxford philosophy and ethics in the period between those years, *The Women Are Up To Something* by Benjamin Lipscomb<sup>3</sup> and *Metaphysical Animals* by Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman.<sup>4</sup> Reading one of those studies sent me back to Iris Murdoch's novels, including *The Time of*

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*the Angels* from 1966.<sup>5</sup> Which then reminded me of Peter Berger's *A Rumor of Angels* from 1969.<sup>6</sup> And I began to think that the Sixties have come back to haunt us. Or perhaps they never went away.

Houellebecq is a writer whose novels sell in translation in English, German and Italian – and many other languages. They have marvellously inventive plots. In one, France elects a Muslim as president and the Sorbonne becomes the Islamic University of the Sorbonne. In another, Houellebecq himself becomes one of his characters, and gets murdered and dismembered. Also inventive in the novels are the main characters, and they are at least as thought-provoking. They embody, acknowledge and bring into focus questions about being a human being in a secular – or post-secular – world.

Houellebecq's 'heroes' are gloomy. Three features are especially striking. Their lives seem aimless and empty. They have jobs such as university professor that look as if they should be worthwhile and fulfilling, but aren't. They live alone and they have only shallow friendships. A second feature is that they have loads of sex, but it's simply a physical indulgence. No relationship is involved. The descriptions of sex include much detailed anatomical and physiological information that told me more about male anatomy and physiology than I knew, let alone more about female anatomy and physiology. And then, third, Houellebecq keeps coming back to God and religion, with a certain wistfulness.

By comparison and contrast, the novels kept making me think about the Five Scrolls. In the Septuagint, and thus in the English Bible, they are scattered about, though in intelligible ways – Ruth and Esther with the narratives; Lamentations following Jeremiah because it belongs in the context of which he speaks but also because Jeremiah was the assumed author; Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs with Proverbs because they are the three quasi-Solomonic books. When the order of the Hebrew Bible more or less settled down in the Middle Ages, however, the five came to form a group. Each of them is read in the synagogue once a year, and in the Hebrew Bible they come in the chronological order in which they are read at festivals: Song of Songs at Passover, Ruth at Pentecost, Lamentations at Tisha B'Av, Ecclesiastes at Sukkot, Esther at Purim. In themselves, however, these five works are all outliers in relation to the rest of the Scriptures. A scroll that focuses on a sexual relationship? A story about how a Moabite becomes David's great-grandmother? A collection of protests at God punishing a wayward city? A declaration about the pointlessness of everything that you thought made life worth living? A story about the Jewish people escaping genocide through some coincidences and through a girl using her looks, and then eventually engaging in slaughter themselves? And no reference to the exodus or the Torah or the Prophets or the Messiah?

The two stories among the Scrolls have marvellously inventive plots, too. In Esther, the eponymous heroine saves her people from a Holocaust through joining the emperor's harem and arranging a series of dinner parties for him, though in the outworking of the rescue a key part is also played by the emperor's being unable to sleep one night. In Ruth, the eponymous heroine and her mother-in-law lose the

men in their life to a series of unspecified calamities, and get a potential rescuer into bed with the heroine in order to manipulate their way into a new life that issues in the birth of King David's grandfather.

So Houellebecq made me think more and see more about the Scrolls, and the Scrolls made me think more and see more about Houellebecq.

The Scrolls all appear in the last section of the Jewish Bible, and they come from a period when Israel had lost its independence and when its people were scattered among the surrounding nations. To judge from other works within these Scriptures, such as Chronicles, this time – and the people's life experience – is not one that makes everyone gloomy, but these five works look as if they raise some pressing questions. Ecclesiastes does it most clearly, and it is the most Houellebecq-like. It is Ecclesiastes who declares that there is nothing new under the sun. The work is a pretend memoir by King Solomon, the obverse of a piece of autofiction, or something like an episode from *The Crown*. Solomon was the man who had everything: achievements, opportunity for indulgence, fame, wealth, women... How might Solomon think of it? Ecclesiastes's answer is Houellebecqian. It's all pointless. 'Turn, turn, turn,' The Byrds sang in the Sixties in a song by Pete Seeger based on Ecclesiastes. When they sang about there being a time for everything, the implication was positive. Ecclesiastes's inference that it was not so positive is Houellebecq's.

The nature of a novel is generally not to tell the reader what to think about its theme. Nor is it necessarily to reveal what the author thinks or to entitle one to make inferences about the person of the author, although the existence of Houellebecq's other writings and pronouncements strengthens the temptation. This elusiveness also applies to Esther and Ruth, and readers draw different inferences from these works. Actually, the same is true about Ecclesiastes. Is its author someone gloomy about life who is looking for 'Reasons to be cheerful'? That was Ian Dury in the 1970s, who had found some reasons: John Coltrane, a drop of claret, Woody Allen, yellow socks, the NHS – but Dury still wanted to get back into bed. More likely, in my view, the author of Ecclesiastes is someone who thinks people are too cheerful and are not facing the facts about life, especially the fact that we are all going to die, which puts all those other things in perspective. Oddly enough, the point is then the converse of 'Reasons to be cheerful', which was written after someone in Dury's entourage had a near-death experience. Also oddly enough, *The Economist* recently wondered whether there were 'reasons to be cheerful' in the ascent of Rishi Sunak.

Either way, Ecclesiastes has several sorts of answer to its implicit question, all of which interact with Houellebecq. Six times it provides some 'reasons', of which the most elaborate is: eat something simple, drink a glass of wine, make yourself look nice, enjoy your life with your wife, and do what you need to do. In other words, don't think that those indulgences somehow solve the problem of meaning, but don't undervalue them either.

Houellebecq's most recent novel is *Anéantir*,<sup>7</sup> which has unaccountably not yet been translated into English as it has been into German and Italian. The title,

implying something like ‘annihilation’, perhaps makes it not surprising that Houellebecq says it will be his last (but you can hardly trust a statement of that kind from Houellebecq). As reviewers have noted, however, the novel is a surprise because it ends up with a more personal relationship and more tenderness and thus a more positive closing note than Houellebecq normally allows. It also brings him cheek by jowl to another of the Scrolls, *Song of Songs*, which resembles Houellebecq in its enthusiasm about sex, but contrasts with the previous Houellebecq novels in setting sex in the context of relationship.

This has troubled reviewers who have liked Houellebecq’s insistence that we face facts, an insistence he shares with Ecclesiastes. The Ecclesiastes scroll almost closes with the observation that facing facts hurts in the way that spurs hurt a horse, but that facing facts is still a good idea, as spurs are. Its other closing answer to its implicit question about how we might live in a context where we cannot discover the ultimate meaning of the world is: live in awe of God and do what he says.

Arguably, then, Ecclesiastes is not so different from Houellebecq, or the other way around. The point about not inferring what the novelist thinks or what makes the novelist tick applies to Iris Murdoch, though it is tempting to read her novels in light of her philosophical works and vice versa, as is the case with Houellebecq and his other pronouncements. Even if one resists that temptation, Murdoch is sometimes quite patent in her novels. When I stumbled back on *The Time of the Angels*, I found a review quoted on the blurb describing it as ‘certainly her best’. But other reviewers have thought it too obviously philosophical, its characters the vehicles for religious and philosophical views. The characters are indeed not very real (less real than Houellebecq’s?!). But for better or for worse, in this way they can become the embodiments of philosophical and religious views and questions. For Murdoch’s ‘hero’ in *The Time of the Angels*, this ‘time’ is one when the angels have been released, after the death of God in the 1960s, and they are not good angels. For Peter Berger, the rumour of angels lay in the indications that people really presuppose the reality of God even when they don’t realize it. Houellebecq’s characters wish they could. They sometimes use the phrase ‘Thank God’ a lot, as if they wish there were someone to thank for things. In *The Possibility of an Island*,<sup>8</sup> one of his characters notes how less than a generation had seen the massive, amazing, collapse of religious belief in Catholic Europe. ‘No one believed in God anymore.’ The novel contemplates the possible birth of a new religion, but not in a way that suggests readers should take it seriously.

But Houellebecq is wistful, like Murdoch, and like Ecclesiastes.

## Notes

1. For example, M. Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory* (London: Vintage, 2012); *Serotonin* (London: Vintage, 2020); *Submission* (London: Vintage, 2016).
2. J.-P. Sartre, *The Age of Reason* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970); *The Reprieve* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970); *Iron in the Soul* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).

3. B. J. B. Lipscomb, *The Women Are Up To Something* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2022).
4. C. M. Cumhaill and R. Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals: how four women brought philosophy back to life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2022).
5. I. Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels* (London: Vintage, 2002).
6. P. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: modern society and the rediscovery of the supernatural* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1969).
7. M. Houellebecq, *Anéantir* (Paris: Flammarion, 2022).
8. M. Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island* (New York NY: Knopf, 2005).

### **Author biography**

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