

## **Getting Started with Ecclesiastes: Coming to Grips with Mortality**

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### **Introduction**

Ecclesiastes presents the reader with alternately disturbing and oddly reassuring realities. While scholars differ as to whether these views are a comfortable fit with “orthodoxy” and debate how to label and understand the various attitudes expressed, Ecclesiastes unquestionably speaks to the frustrating and tedious nature of much of our existence, the anguish over the brevity of life and finality of death, and the pain of incessant injustice.

### **The Key Phrase**

The phrase that frames the message (1:2 and 12:8) is variously translated as “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity!” (KJV) or “Meaningless! Meaningless!... Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless” (NIV). The Hebrew word, *hevel*, translated “vanity” or “meaningless,” means literally “vapor” or “breath” and is used more than 30 times in the book. It is an appropriate metaphor for life itself – here and gone. While this is a sobering thought, it does not necessarily follow that everything is “meaningless.” That would suggest that all human endeavors are futile and have no value. Instead, *hevel* expresses frustration at the fleeting nature of all aspects of life that are, in fact, profoundly meaningful albeit painfully temporary. “Elusive” or “transient” might be a good translation of the word.

### **Recurring Expressions**

Several additional phrases appear repeatedly. “I saw” is characteristically followed by a keen observation about the way things are. Second, most of the book speaks from the perspective “under the sun” or “under heaven.” The writer observed the complex and often perverse functioning of the universe as a result of the fall (cf. Rom 8:20-21). Thus, the text speaks frankly in terms that sound pessimistic, wounded, and even fatalistic. A third phrase is “chasing after the wind,” an apt metaphor that is used in conjunction with *hevel* to describe an enterprise that yields no tangible results. Both sun and wind appear in the poem in chapter 1, thus setting the stage for these recurring figures. The author also repeatedly poses the rhetorical question: “what profit...?” or “what good...?” in conjunction with human enterprises. Finally, the refrain, “eat, drink, and be satisfied,” urges the immediate appreciation and enjoyment of what is present and known, wholesome advice in light of the uncertainty of all that is yet to come.

### **Title, Authorship, and Date of Composition**

The Hebrew title of the text is *Qohelet* which is related to *qahal*, meaning “assembly” or “congregation.” The name Ecclesiastes comes from the Greek translation, referring to one who gathers the *ecclesia* or church. Qohelet was likely the one who addressed the congregation; in other words, a preacher or teacher. In light of what is said in the text, this is a rather interesting “sermon”!

Who was this Preacher? The reader is supposed to think of Solomon, the paradigmatic wisdom figure, investigating “all that is done under heaven” (1:13) and contemplating the pitfalls of his own chosen course. Qohelet’s wealth and status enabled him to engage in varied projects (2:4-9) that required the kind of wealth that Solomon amassed (2 Chr 9). Three times (1:17; 2:3; 2:12) Qohelet indicated that his research program ranged into areas of folly as well as wisdom. His attitude toward women appears to have been part of that folly (2:8; cf. 1 Kng 11:1-8). He is called “son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1), “king over Israel in Jerusalem” (1:12), and refers to his being wiser than anyone who had ruled over Jerusalem prior to his time (1:16).

Even though the reader is clearly supposed to be thinking of Solomon, most scholars suggest that the book was composed significantly later. The Hebrew language forms are noticeably different from any other biblical Hebrew and the text includes Persian loanwords. *Qohelet*, used only in this book, is a feminine noun form. There are possible literary parallels with the public and challenging preaching of the Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 1:20-33.

### **Thematic Emphasis: The Human Crisis**

In a nutshell: no human enterprise, no matter how earnest and valuable, is sufficient to meet life’s ultimate needs. “Under the sun,” the following are true: the more knowledge one has, the more grief (1:18); even after expending a life’s effort, the very things striven for must be left upon death (2:18-23; 4:7-8; 5:10-15); pleasure provides no lasting satisfaction and yet the desire for pleasure is insatiable (1:17; 2:1-3, 10-11; 6:7); the injustices of life are inescapable (4:1-2; 5:8-9); in the face of inevitable death, there is a lack of lasting personal importance (2:15-16; 3:18-20; 9:11-12). Death threads its way through Qohelet’s reflections; that which is deemed substantial is but breath - in each case death ends it.

The pain of knowledge is evident. God has laid an “evil matter on humankind” (1:13), and some things are irreparably twisted (1:15). After the introductory first chapter and the description of his own pursuits, Qohelet’s response to the inevitability of death and the apparent futility of hard work intensifies: he expresses hatred for *life* and its inevitable stresses (2:17-26). All are evil and a vapor because that for which everyone labors passes out of one’s control, a crisis of significant proportions. The emotional anguish associated with the entire enterprise is palpable. Qohelet remarks on the tainted motives, envy and lack of contentment, that prompt all human achievement and drive a person to endless striving. And yet the fool who does not work but folds his hands, “devours his flesh” (4:5).

### **Counterpoint: What God Has Given**

Nevertheless, a new perspective is gained in God’s presence. Because Qohelet’s world is intolerably dark, the faint glimmers of light when God is mentioned are all the more

tantalizing. God *does* supply what humankind needs, notably time and stability (3:1-14), knowledge, work, pleasure, and relationships (2:24-26; 4:9-12; 5:18-20, 9:9). At the crux of this counterpoint lies the ultimate paradox. Hope and meaning are found in the prospect of judgment (3:17; 11:9). Nothing is trivial, no injustice will be overlooked forever, and fear of the Judge will be the best security (12:13-14).

After the despair expressed in chapter 2, the poem in chapter 3 imparts confidence that there *is* order to all circumstances. It encompasses the entirety of human experience, commencing with the extreme points of birth and death. Events parallel to starting and stopping life come next -- planting and uprooting; killing and healing. Work in the fields and the home, relationships, and emotional responses are all represented. The very structure of the poetry conveys the message: life's experiences are balanced and both good and evil are to be expected. Nevertheless, these good and evil counterpoints are not presented with uncompromising rigidity. On the contrary, the aspects that are good switch positions with those that are evil as the poetry develops. That is reflective of the experienced uncertainty as humankind progresses from milestone to milestone in the time-bound sphere. The closure to the list has the significant pairing of love and hate, followed by war and peace.

Then comes another paradox (3:11-14): while there is a profound sense of eternity planted deep in the hearts of humankind, it is still impossible to *know* anything beyond the present. Nevertheless, there is a clarion call to trust God and to act in accordance with belief in God's providential ordering of events. The premise that what God does will endure forever introduces a forceful moral component into the way humankind chooses to deal with the vicissitudes of life. People are to fear God because the injustices of past, present, and future will be brought to judgment.

### **Structure**

Counterpoint. As is evident from the preceding summary, there is a constant counterpoint in Ecclesiastes between the presentation of a transitory and pain-ridden life "under the sun" with its vexation, frustration, failure, despair, and injustices, and life that acknowledges the divine Presence. While the former attitude is a steady and sometime overpowering drumbeat, interspersed throughout the book are acknowledgements of the presence of God and His provision for humankind (2:24-26; 3:11-17; 5:1-7, 18-20; 8:12-17; 9:7-9; 11:5; 12:7, 13-14). This overarching literary structure helps to convey the message that is also clearly articulated in words. This is conceptual parallelism on a large scale with the themes repeated over and over, just like breathing (*hevel*).

Inclusio. At the same time, Ecclesiastes has a series of bookends at the beginning and the end. The introduction (1:1) briefly mentions Qohelet, son of David, king in Jerusalem. The epilogue (12:9-14) is more expansive and describes Qohelet's teaching, careful reflection,

and writing skills while poking a bit of fun at the never-ending nature of the “academic” pursuit (12:12b). Moving inward from those remote endpoints are the superlative framing phrases ascribing the permanence of vapor to all human endeavors: all is utterly *hevel* (1:2 and 12:8).

In the next *inclusio*, the poem in 1:3-11 introduces the varied sources of personal anguish while the greatest enemy, death, is poignantly described in 12:1-7. The opening reflections of the Preacher/Teacher are laden with the heaviness of living in a fallen world. Weariness and endless toil are foremost among them, a clear reflection of the curse pronounced on the ground and human effort (Gen 3:17-19). The intrinsic lack of satisfaction and constant desire for “something more” are pitted against monotony from every perceivable direction. Finally, the ultimate insult to the rigor of laboring through life is the anonymity that death brings. Nevertheless, there is another side to the picture even at this point. While the repetitive nature of existence does lead to *ennui* and frustration, it also bespeaks stability. That the natural world is indeed predictable has a degree of assurance in the face of uncertainty, especially the uncertainty associated with death.

This initial poem is mirrored by the masterpiece at the end (12:1-7). The youthful audience of Qohelet is urged to think ahead to the grim task of navigating through old age. The metaphors for physical disintegration and death are heart-rending. These are the days in which no pleasure is found, when vision dims into darkness, limbs once strong give way, teeth fall out and hearing fades, sleep escapes, all desire is gone, and terrors invade because of frailty. The vessel bearing life is shattered and returns to dust (cf. Gen 3:19). At this extremity, Qohelet extends a profound source of hope; the spirit goes into the care of God who gave it. This is the closing answer to all the expressed despair at the prospect of death.

Evolution of Thought. Within these multiple frames, there is a slow evolution of thought throughout the book from raw anguish at the outset to a more mature outlook, even to the point of including two sets of tart, down-to-earth proverbs (7:1-14; 10:1-11:6). Qohelet moves from self-absorption to fear of the Lord, from frustration at life’s vexations to common sense.

Even when God is the primary objective of the quest (5:1-7), there are cautions for the one who seeks that encounter. It is a fool who approaches God with no sense of remorse over evil and with an excess of words. Qohelet twice uses the figure of dreams, which come and go haphazardly and are beyond conscious control, to illustrate the dangerous potential toward sin that lies in multiple words. The text is particularly emphatic about vows, words uttered with moral intent in the presence of God, and the necessity of carrying through on them. Recognizing that God is actively and personally responsive to words, Qohelet’s advice is simple and profound: Listen, and fear God.

### **Particular Interpretative Challenges**

7:15-18 Qohelet's statement in 7:15a sets the stage for the forthcoming observations: "I have seen *everything* in the days of my breath (*hevel*)." That included the apparent injustice of the righteous being cut off while the wicked live happily on. As a result, Qohelet offers up several warnings, the first of which seems initially to venture beyond proper orthodoxy. Why should someone avoid being "too righteous" or "overly wise"? The best interpretation of verse 16, however, cautions against working hard at righteousness for presentation's sake. Likewise, viewing oneself as wise, nay, wiser than others, is not advisable! Both of these, according to the end of verse 16, will result in the person being "confounded." That has all sorts of implications. Striving for righteousness and wisdom for the wrong motives easily results in pride and potentially abusive power.

The "conclusion" in verse 18 is ambiguous; neither of the options to be grasped and held on to is named. In sum, however, the person who fears God will (literally) "go forth with all of them." Perhaps one application of this is the realization that choices will never be easy – for lots of reasons. What does follow in verses 19 and 20 is a brief commentary on both attributes of wisdom and righteousness.

7:23-29 Qohelet is driven again to determine as much as possible about the depths of wisdom, all the while recognizing that it is impossibly far off (7:24). Ironically, Qohelet pursues the quest more systematically than ever: "I turned, I and my heart, to know and investigate and seek wisdom and accounting" (7:25a). Again this intention included a foray into the dark side of folly and madness, but now Qohelet links them with wickedness. The mention of folly, joined in Proverbs with the figure of an adulterous woman and the known experiences of Solomon, may have prompted the next rueful observations about the woman whose heart and hands are snares (verse 26). This is not the statement of a misogynist. Instead, it acknowledges from the perspective of the Solomon figure, the horrifying bondage of relationships with evil partners and is reminiscent of the good advice King Lemuel received from his mother (Prov 31:1-3). Avoiding this trap is dependent on one's relationship with God.

Qohelet's next utterance poses the incomprehensible riddle of being human. Driven to seek order, Qohelet meticulously sifts the data one by one, but still the results are impossible to categorize: "...one man (*adam*) from a thousand I found but a woman among all of these I did not find; only see, this I have found, that God made humankind (*ha'adam*) straight (or upright) but they sought many accountings" (7:28-29). In other words, the perversity of the human heart and mind complicates existence exceedingly; the very ambiguity of the poetry reinforces that conclusion.

### **Collections of Proverbs (7:1-14; 9:13-11:6)**

Death and mourning continue as persistent themes; they are better than the frivolity in which the author had engaged. Many of the proverbs are evaluative; recognition of something that is better implies the ability to discern between good and evil. Qohelet explores both wisdom and folly and concludes that wisdom and knowledge have a protective function that wealth does not have. Another glance at the matter from “above the sun” follows: God has ordained both good and evil and it is an exercise in futility and hubris to think that humans can change these things.

The second collection of proverbs is introduced by a narrative with a predictable twist; the wisdom of a poor man saved a city, and yet he was not remembered for his wisdom. Nevertheless, Qohelet recognizes the value of wisdom. The following memorable word pictures and tidbits of advice encapsulate keen observations about nature and human nature. The fool is prominent, illustrating characteristics to avoid. Reversals and ironies abound, chance is acknowledged, and yet there is also some degree of predictability in cause and effect sequences. There comes a point, however, beyond which advice and observation cannot penetrate. The mystery of God’s creation is likened to the miracle of life (“bones”) developing in the mother’s womb. Humankind is given the mandate to be active stewards of creation in spite of the fundamental inability to predict or control the outcomes of those endeavors.

### **Qohelet’s Reflections on Mortality**

Each of Qohelet’s observations has as its backdrop the inescapability of death. The same fate overtakes the wise and foolish; the righteous and the wicked all face the same encounter with death (2:15-16; 9:1-3). Humans as well as animals all return to dust (3:18-20). After being given the mandate to care for the earth (Gen 2:15), being reduced to dust was a searing reminder of the corruption of sin and death (Gen 3:17-19). Death is a shroud of darkness (6:4) and no one has any power over the day of death (8:8). These terrible uncertainties prompt ambivalence in Qohelet’s own reflections. At one point, he declares that the dead and unborn are better off than the living because they do not need to live with evil (4:2-3) but he counters his own claim later on. Life is better because, cruel as it might be, the living still have memory, deep emotions, companionship, and the prospect of personal engagement (9:4-6). An added benefit: wisdom is found in the presence of death (7:1-4).

### **Justice and Hope in Judgment**

While Qohelet knows that the present is fraught with injustice (8:14), he also affirms that both the righteous and the wicked will be called to account (3:15-17). His probe into motives reveals raw evil behind injustice and oppression (4:1-4). Injustice is systemic and based on insatiable greed (5:8-11). Qohelet also treads into difficult theological territory, noting occasions when humans are “robbed” by God who gives them everything that seems valuable but takes away their lives before they can enjoy them (6:1-2).

Even so, in spite of egregious injustices in this temporal sphere, God's justice will, in the end, set those things right (8:10-14). Qohelet issues a call to execute justice where possible (8:11) and enjoy God's gifts responsibly (11:9). The sufficient conclusion to the matter is to fear God and keep His commandments (12:13-14). In that will be unassailable hope.

### **Questions**

1. Re-read Ecclesiastes intentionally substituting "transient" for "meaningless" each time you see the latter. Does it change how you think about the messages in the book?
2. Why is Solomon associated with these reflections?
3. What constitutes "the human crisis"? What answers can we give to these wrenching questions?