

ECCLESIASTES



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In the Jewish cycle of feasts, certain Scripture readings are assigned to be read during specific festivals. Ecclesiastes is read during the fall festival of Sukkot, also known as the Feast of Booths. This festival recalls the time when Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years eating manna from heaven. It is also a harvest festival, a time to give thanks for the regular cycles of nature and God's provision of food. Non-Jews are always welcome in a sukkah, the hut that is set up outside the house in which the family gathers during the festival to read Scripture and say prayers. During graduate school, I was invited by one of my fellow students to join his family for a meal in their sukkah. I shall long remember what it felt like to sit in the festooned camping tent that served as a sukkah reading the book of Ecclesiastes. The book emphasizes the fleeting and sometimes absurd nature of human existence as well as the opportunity we have to enjoy life while we can. I was

reminded as we read that we are all on a journey through this world and there are no guarantees about tomorrow. Our lives are fleeting, like grass that springs up in the morning and withers in the afternoon sun. We have only the here-and-now for certain, and we have each other. In light of the brevity and uncertainty of human life, the author has one central recommendation: “So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun” (8:15). The message of Ecclesiastes is embodied in the sukkah that provides a vivid reminder of both our transience and of the joy available to us when we gather to eat and drink, sustained by God’s gifts.

The opening verse of Ecclesiastes introduces us to the author: “These are the words of Qoheleth, son of David, king in Jerusalem.” The heir to David’s

throne was, of course, Solomon, so the name Qoheleth is confusing. The confusion may be intentional since it is unlikely that the actual author was Solomon; the vocabulary and content suggest that the book was written a century or two after the exile during time of Persian domination. Rather, the author presents himself in *the persona* of Solomon. Writing from the imagined perspective of the king of Israel most noted for his riches and wisdom gives the author a privileged vista from which to consider life's mysteries. This is especially true in the first two chapters of the book. As the book progresses, the Solomonic persona fades, and the author's own social perspective emerges more clearly (e.g., 4:13–16; 5:8–17). Careful reading and consideration of the social realities pertaining among Jews in the Persian period has led scholars to surmise that the author lived in a period of commercial expansion marked by both opportunity and social inequity, a time when

fortunes amassed with care and hard work could be lost suddenly through shifts in the market or the displeasure of a ruler or patron (see 8:1–9). The author’s question, “What do people gain from all the toil with which they toil under the sun?” is especially resonant in this social setting.

The title “Qoheleth” derives from the Hebrew verb “to assemble.” This may refer to Solomon’s reputation as a wise teacher around whom students assembled (see 1 Kings 4:34; 10:23) or to his fame as an assembler of observations on life and proverbial sayings (Prov 25:1). Or it may refer to the role of the real author who was a gatherer of wisdom and a teacher (Eccl 12:9–10). Older versions of the Bible translated the narrator’s title as “the Preacher.” The NIV and NRSV use the title “the Teacher,” a term more appropriate to the evident vocation of the narrator. I prefer simply to use “Qoheleth,” an anglicized rendition of the Hebrew term. Readers of the book

are invited to imagine themselves as a students assembled around Qoheleth, gathering in his wisdom and becoming wise themselves.

At the heart of the book is the perennial question, what is the meaning of life? Or, on a personal level, what is the meaning of *my* life? Why am I here? Most of us spend our days with our nose to the grindstone, ignoring these “big questions.” We submerge ourselves in the ten thousand things that whirl around us and lose sight of the question of meaning. Qoheleth urges us to step back from the whirl long enough to ponder the big picture. He asks us to observe closely the world around us, both natural and human, and to try to make sense out of what we see, even if it conflicts with what we think we know. *Seeing* is exceedingly important in the book. Qoheleth uses the Hebrew word meaning “to see” over forty times to describe how he obtained the evidence for his conclusions. (This repetition is obscured by translations that

render the Hebrew word *rā'â* with a range of English verbs: “see,” “realize,” “consider,” “observe.”) Like Socrates, he pushes his readers to examine their most basic assumptions about the world—including those assumptions they learned from their faith tradition—and to question the validity of these assumptions in light of experience. He believes that experience trumps tradition.

Qoheleth assumes his readers have imbibed the traditional wisdom of his day, wisdom such as is reflected in, for example, Proverbs 10 and Psalm 1. This conventional wisdom assumes that there is a divinely established order underlying the world that automatically rewards and punishes people according to what is due them: the wise, the industrious, and the righteous prosper, and the foolish, the lazy, and the wicked go down in flames. Wisdom consists of discerning the pattern God has woven into the world and bringing one's actions and attitudes into alignment with this pattern, thereby ensuring one's

success and happiness. Qoheleth has his doubts about this conventional wisdom, and he points out its flaws from various angles.

For example, conventional wisdom teaches that hard work will bring success and happiness and that even more hard work will, logically, bring even more success and happiness. But look around, Qoheleth says. Are those who work the hardest the most successful? Are successful people always happy people? The answer is not a clear yes or no. Life is complicated and outcomes are not predictable. More effort does not insure success, and the fruit of one day's labor may turn to sand the next: "The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all" (9:11). And sometimes success is a burden, not a boon: "Sweet is the sleep of laborers, whether they eat little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let them

sleep” (5:12). Qoheleth delights in pointing out life’s ironic twists.

Indeed, the irony of the human predicament is the prevailing theme of the book. Qoheleth begins his book by stating this theme: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” The word *vanity* is easily misunderstood today. The word has nothing to do with self-absorption or a preoccupation with one’s appearance. *Hebel*, the Hebrew word translated “vanity,” literally means “wind” or “vapor,” and it refers metaphorically to that which is elusive, ephemeral, without substance, worthless or empty. As it pertains to the meaning of life, the word indicates Qoheleth’s judgment that, from a human perspective “under the sun,” the world makes no sense. Life is contradictory, futile, or even absurd. From God’s perspective, the world may have a pattern of meaning, but humans can grasp this pattern only partially and cannot reliably profit from what little wisdom they do acquire (7:23–24). Qoheleth ends the book as he

began it, declaring the utter vanity of everything (12:8).

With vanity fore and aft, it is perhaps unsurprising that many readers find Qoheleth's voyage of discovery a rather rudderless excursion. The book does not present a linear progression of thought, though it is not without order. Qoheleth's thought frequently circles back on itself, giving the book a repetitive feel. And this structure may well be intentional. It underlines the author's contention that there are no final answers to life's big questions, even if one attacks them repeatedly: "See this is what I found, says the Teacher, adding one thing to another to find the sum, which my mind has sought repeatedly, but I have not found" (7:27-28).

Chp. 1: Repetition without End

The theme of repetition and circularity is evident in the first eleven verses of the book. The author begins

by asking, “What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?” (v. 3). This question does not merely introduce the opening reflection; it is the heartbeat of the book. Qoheleth asks this question again and again. Three important themes are introduced in this simple question: gain/profit, toil, and mortality. The author wants to know if there is any *gain* or lasting *profit* in life. If there is no profit, what is the point of ardent *toil* and striving? And since all human toil is limited to a finite number of days lived “under the sun,” its meaning can only be determined within the limits set by *mortality*. All die. And death, for Qoheleth, is the end. The author explicitly rejects the idea of meaningful life after death (3:18–21; 9:5–6, 10).

Having posed his thematic question, Qoheleth considers the repetitive patterns in nature. Generations come and go; the winds blow round and round in an endless circuit; water runs continually to the sea without filling it.

The regular cycles of nature are not a cause for celebrating God's faithfulness, as they are elsewhere in the Bible (Genesis 1; 8:22; Job 38:4–39; Psalm 19:1–6; 104; Amos 4:13; 5:8). For Qoheleth, nature's endless repetition is wearisome. The world does not move in a direction; it has no goal, no fulfillment. It merely cycles endlessly on. And just as the sea is never filled, so, too, the human appetite for new experiences is never satisfied. There is ultimately "nothing new under the sun," no change, and, therefore, no meaningful past or future hope. What's more, humans' weakness of memory and attention limits their attempt to create the illusion of a meaningful and connected history (1:11; 2:16). The lesson in these observations is that nothing can be reliably carried forward from one generation to the next and counted as progress or gain. Qoheleth's answer to his opening question is simply this: human striving is pointless because ultimately nothing is gained.

Chp. 2: The Pleasure Experiment

The rather gloomy conclusion of the first chapter naturally raises questions. Surely there is some gain in our toil. After all, most humans perceive life as meaningful and act accordingly. If they have the means, they find ways to enjoy life. Is not the pleasure a person finds in life a gain? Qoheleth examines this objection by running an experiment. It is a version of the popular thought game, what would you do if you had a million dollars? In the persona of King Solomon, he imagines what it would be like to have enormous wealth, power, and slaves to do your bidding. Would virtually unlimited resources bring meaning to life? He describes Solomon's pursuit of every pleasure his heart could desire—vineyards and fine wine; ambitious building projects that included houses, gardens, pools, and parks; herds of cattle and a bevy of slaves; lavish entertainment with choirs; and many concubines. But we are assured that Solomon did not loose

control in his self-indulgence; he kept his head. His goal was to learn if pursuing pleasure could produce a lasting gain, something of substance. Qoheleth/Solomon concludes that all his efforts brought him only transitory pleasure and that they resulted in no enduring profit. The pleasure of the moment is swept away by time and death. In addition, the whole pleasure project involved a good deal of work, which inevitably includes a certain amount of frustration and occasionally sleepless nights (2:22–23). Even in the pursuit of pleasure the author discovers unavoidable vexation.

But might not one's toil prove meaningful since it will enrich future generations, most importantly one's own offspring? It is true we will die, but if we are industrious, we can leave our children an inheritance. Future generations will remember and bless us for our wisdom and diligence. Qoheleth/Solomon rejects this hope of generational gain. He laments that children

do not appreciate the wealth they inherit since they did not work for it, and he notes that one's heirs may prove to be fools and wastrels (2:18–21). Wise elders and their accumulated wisdom may soon be forgotten and the fruits of their wisdom and hard work squandered. Isaac Watts captures this poignantly: “Time, like an ever-rolling stream/ Bears all its sons away;/ They fly forgotten, as a dream/ Dies at the opening day” (see Psalm 90:3–6).

Chp. 3: A Time for Everything

The view of life expressed in the first two chapters of the book borders on despair. Life, Qoheleth says, is “an unhappy business... So I hated life... and I turned and gave my heart up to despair.” (1:13; 2:17, 20). So it is surprising when the author begins chapter 3 with a poem about auspicious times for different activities. This poem was made famous in the 1960s when Pete Seeger set it to music in his song

Turn!, Turn!, Turn! (To Everything there is a Season), a song most well known as covered by The Byrds. The idea that everything has its appropriate moment seems hopeful. It suggests that life unfolds in an ordered and meaningful way and that those who understand the order can act appropriately and prosper. Life will reward wise and timely action. This is the essence of the traditional wisdom teaching that Qoheleth elsewhere in the book rejects. Its presence at this point in the book seems jarring, that is until one reads past the poem and finds that Qoheleth critiques its implicit message that a stable order underlies the world and that human effort appropriate to the moment will bring success. Is the existence of a pattern in the world of any real benefit to humans? Qoheleth thinks not. He admits that God has “made everything suitable for its time” and gave humans an intuition that such a pattern exists, that is, “a sense of past and future.” But this sense is of little use to them be-

cause humans “cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end,” nor can they affect the pattern by adding to it or taking away from it (3:11, 14). The logic of the world is fixed but inaccessible, and thus the goal of the wisdom enterprise—to understand and gain control over existence—is ultimately unattainable. Occasionally, the author affirms the value of wisdom. Wisdom is of some benefit, and it is certainly better than foolishness (2:12; 7:11-12). But humans’ reach for wisdom far exceeds their grasp, and an obsessive search for it leads to vexation and sorrow (1:18). The limits of human knowing (6:12; 7:14, 23-24; 8:6-7, 16-17) and the impotence of wisdom (1:16-18; 2:15; 7:16; 9:1, 11, 13-18) are especially prominent themes in the book.

At the end of chapter 3, Qoheleth considers why God has hidden from humans the underlying order of things and prevented them from gaining control of life through wisdom. He

concludes that God has done this so that humans will stand in awe of God and recognize their own lowliness. There is an unbridgeable gap between God's eternal being and human impermanence: "God is in heaven, and you are upon earth" (5:2). Far from being like God, humans "are but animals." Humans and animals share the same fate since both die and return to dust again (3:14, 18–21).

It is worth stressing this point because the logic of the book depends on belief in death's finality. Christian (and many Jewish and Muslim) readers of the book may find it hard not to dismiss the author's dour, tragic view of life in light of the hope of the resurrection and eternal life. But the book must be read on its own terms and its questions pondered within the framework of the author's radical thought experiments. His quest to plumb the depths of "all is vanity" can give the reader a greater appreciation for the promise of resurrection. Ecclesiastes

serves to remind the faithful that the hope of eternal life deeply informs their view of the meaning of life and of what is to be gained from human toil.

The book raises, albeit inadvertently, a rather searching question for the faithful reader: Would I love and serve God if there were no benefit for doing so? This is also a central question in the book of Job, the Bible's other book of skeptical wisdom. Righteousness motivated by fear of punishment or hope of reward is of questionable integrity. The Christian hymnist Jane Marshall expresses this powerfully in her hymn "My Eternal King."

My God, I love thee, not because
I hope for heaven thereby,
nor yet because, if I love not,
I must forever die.

.....

Then why, O blessed Jesus Christ,
should I not love thee well?
Not for the sake of winning heaven,
nor of escaping hell.

Not with the hope of gaining aught,
not seeking a reward,
but as thyself hast loved me,
O everlasting Lord...

Qoheleth acknowledges that God will reward the righteous and punish the wicked, but commentators throughout history have differed over whether he believes in *eschatological* justice or justice that is merely sometimes meted out “under the sun,” here and now. Given the inequitable distribution of life’s treasures and pleasures that he observes, he puts little stock in the idea that God’s judgment has made the world balanced and life meaningful (3:16–17; 5:6; 8:12–13; 9:1–2; 11:9). Indeed, Qoheleth has serious doubts about the justice of God (7:15; 9:1).

Chps. 4–12: Life Isn't Fair and Other Observations

After chapter 3, Qoheleth's observations become more fragmented. He moves from theme to theme and sometimes circles back to take up a theme he has covered earlier. It is at this point in the book that the rudder seems to fail and the book begins to wander. For this reason it makes sense to discuss the remainder of the book thematically rather than sequentially.

The frequent reversal of the fates of the righteous and the wicked bothers Qoheleth a great deal. Life is not fair. He strongly disputes the central contention of traditional wisdom that the wise/righteous fare better than the fools/wicked. Look at the evidence, he says. The expected fates of the righteous and the wicked are sometimes reversed. "There are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evil-doing" (7:15; see 8:10, 14).

This he knows by observation. And yet he holds that there is some benefit in righteousness, or at least there should be (8:12-13).

He is similarly ambivalent about the benefit of being wise and industrious (2:13-15; 10:1-20). Work is necessary to meet one's needs, but if carried too far, it can diminish one's life, a point the author makes by quoting two contrasting proverbs (4:5-6). Sometimes the wise stumble through bad luck (9:11-12), or their wisdom benefits no one (9:13-18), and fools may rise to high places (10:5-7). Even a minor slip may undo the wise or thwart their careful plans (9:18; 10:1). Chapter 10 contains several proverbs that weigh against one another the benefits and risks of hard work. "Whoever digs a pit will fall into it... Whoever quarries stones will be hurt by them... If a snake bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage in a charmer" (10: 8-9, 11). But, on the whole, it is better to be wise than foolish (9:17-18; 10:12-15) and

industry is better than laziness, since the former is beneficial more often than not (11:6), and the latter is predictably deleterious (10:18).

Diligence and wisdom can also be undermined by God's determinations and by social realities. The playing field is not level. God gives some humans power and wealth for no apparent reason (5:19–20), and others, no matter how hard they work or how wise they become, can never get ahead. This fatalism is tempered by the acknowledgment that significant social forces are also at work. The powerful oppress the powerless, and the powerless oppress one another as they compete for advantage (4:1–4; 7:7; 8:9). Oppression is built into the social hierarchy, says Qoheleth, and we should not be surprised when we see it (5:8). While all humans are subject to “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” as Hamlet notes, the socially disadvantaged must bear in addition “the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's con-

tumely... the law's delay" (*Hamlet*, III, i). Life isn't fair, for more reasons than one.

Ironically, sometimes even those who are wealthy and powerful cannot enjoy life. Some people who have every advantage simply lack the capacity or knack for enjoying their time on earth. Despite their wealth and social status, they are unhappy and can only watch with envy as others enjoy themselves, often on the rich person's tab (6:1–6). Qoheleth seems especially disturbed by this "evil" and "grievous ill," and the reader may wonder if the complaint in chapter 6 expresses a dissatisfaction with life more personal than abstract.

The realization that life is unpredictable and therefore unmanageable can be paralyzing. Humans must choose and act as best they can, even if they cannot see what is coming and thereby exercise control over their fate. Life involves risk taking, and thus Qoheleth advises, "Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get

it back” (11:1). There is nothing to be gained by waiting until one is sure of things: “Whoever observes the wind will not sow; and whoever regards the clouds will not reap” (11:4). Given the limits of human wisdom and understanding, the best one can do is to diversify: “Divide your means seven ways, or even eight, for you do not know what disaster may happen on earth” (11:3, 6). We must typically decide and act with very limited knowledge and, consequently, with a certain quality of calculated bravado. No amount of wisdom will enable us to finally control our fate.

The Bottom Line

In view of humans’ helplessness to control their destiny and of the inherent unfairness of life, what should they do? Qoheleth states that there is nothing better for them than to accept life as it comes and try to enjoy it. He repeats this advice eight times in the book, and

it truly is his bottom line (2:24–25; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20; 7:14; 8:15; 9:7–10; 10:8). The simple enjoyment of life is the human “lot” or “portion.” Striving for gain beyond the lot that God has apportioned for humans is vanity and “chasing the wind.” In fact, striving for something beyond what God has allotted, some greater or more permanent gain in life, can destroy the transitory pleasure God has given humans (4:7–8). For this reason, Qoheleth recommends moderation in all human pursuits, even the most high-minded: “Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself? Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you die before your time? It is good that you should take hold of the one, without letting go of the other; for the one who fears God will succeed with both” (7:15–18). Too much aspiration or idealism can destroy a person’s chances of enjoying the brief happiness that is possible “under the sun.” He also

recommends the moderation of desire. Human appetites, “the wandering of desire,” when pursued for their own sake, prove bottomless. Enjoyment of life depends on our capacity to be satisfied with what is right in front of us (6:1:8, 7–9).

Qoheleth ends his meditation on life’s meaning and how one should live with an extended metaphor detailing the ravages of old age—dimming vision, dull hearing, missing teeth, inability to sleep, loss of balance, loss of appetite for food and sex (12:1–7). The time will come for each of us when we will lose our ability to enjoy the lot God has apportioned us. In view of this inevitable deterioration of our capacity to enjoy life, Qoheleth recommends that we enjoy life *now*. Carpe diem!

The conclusion of the book speaks of Qoheleth in the third person, indicating that someone else added it, perhaps his personal scribe, one of his disciples, or a later editor (12:9–14). This passage suggests that Qoheleth’s

conclusions are the last word on the matter, that there is nothing that can or should be added (12:12–13). There is also a parting piece of advice that, at first glance, appears in tension with Qoheleth's skepticism: "Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone" (12:13). Interpreters have differed over the role and value of Qoheleth's ending. Some appraise it positively, as instructive "canonical shaping." Others see it as a vain attempt to harmonize Qoheleth's dissonant voice with other voices in the Hebrew Scriptures. In either case, Qoheleth's eloquent protest against easy answers to the meaning of life is not easily muted. His cry will forever trouble our pious certainties: "Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity."



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Cover image depicting Solomon as the author of Ecclesiastes by Matthias Scheits (c. 1630-1700) from the 1672 Luther Bible, courtesy of the Pitts Theology Library, Candler School of Theology, Emory University.

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