The Bible and Bread

Context, Themes, and Word Study

Ecclesiastes

2026 Week 10

Ecclesiastes ~ Eugene Peterson Introduction

Unlike the animals, who seem quite content to simply be themselves, we humans are always looking for ways to be more than or other than what we find ourselves to be. We explore the countryside for excitement, search our souls for meaning, shop the world for pleasure. We try this. Then we try that. The usual fields of endeavor are money, sex, power, adventure, and knowledge.

Everything we try is so promising at first! But nothing ever seems to amount to very much. We intensify our efforts—but the harder we work at it, the less we get out of it. Some people give up early and settle for a humdrum life. Others never seem to learn, and so they flail away through a lifetime, becoming less and less human by the year, until by the time they die there is hardly enough humanity left to compose a
corpse.

Ecclesiastes is a famous—maybe the world's most famous—witness to this experience of futility. The acerbic wit catches our attention. The stark honesty compels our notice. And people do notice—oh, how they notice! Nonreligious and religious alike notice. Unbelievers and believers notice. More than a few are surprised to find this kind of thing in the Bible.

But it is most emphatically and necessarily in the Bible in order to call a halt to our various and futile attempts to make something of our lives, SO that we can give our full attention to God—who God is and what he does to make something of us. Ecclesiastes actually doesn't say that much about God; the author leaves that to the other sixty-five books of the Bible. His task is to expose our total incapacity to find the meaning and completion of our lives on our own.

It is our propensity to go off on our own, trying to be human by our own devices and desires, that makes Ecclesiastes necessary reading. Ecclesiastes sweeps our souls clean of all "lifestyle" spiritualities so that we can be ready for God's visitation revealed in Jesus Christ. Ecclesiastes is a John-the-Baptist kind of book. It functions not as a meal but as a bath. It is not nourishment; it is cleansing. It is scrubbed repentance. It is purging. We read Ecclesiastes to get clean from illusion and sentiment, from ideas that are idolatrous and feelings that cloy. It is an exposé and rejection of every arrogant and ignorant expectation that we can live our lives by ourselves on our own terms.

Ecclesiastes challenges the naive optimism that sets a goal that appeals to us and then goes after it with gusto, expecting the result to be a good life. The author’s cool skepticism, a refreshing negation to the lush and seductive suggestions swirling around us, promising everything but delivering nothing, clears the air. And once the air is cleared, we are ready for reality—for God.

[Ecclesiastes is transliterated from a Greek word that is usually translated “the Preacher” or “the Teacher.” Because of the experiential stance of the writing in this book, giving voice to what is so basic among men and women throughout history, I have translated this word “the Quester” in the text.]

Ecclesiastes ~ Wesley Study Bible Introduction

The “Teacher” for whom the Book of Ecclesiastes is named addresses prosperous people who think material possessions will bring them lasting satisfaction. He argues that nothing “under the sun” is permanent. The wisdom, wealth, and power people strive to acquire are as unreliable as a puff of wind. He challenges those who believe prosperity comes as a reward for righteousness, insisting that “under the sun” there is no strict relation between what we do and how we prosper (9:11). Since the results of our work are not permanent and since we cannot take them with us when we die (2:18-21), Ecclesiastes concludes that the best we can do is to enjoy each moment as it comes, finding pleasure in work itself (2;24; 3:13; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10).

Written in a meditative, journaling style, the book meanders from one topic to another. The phrases “vanity” and “a chasing after wind” weave in and out of the first 6 chapters while the question “Who knows?” dominates the second half of the book. The Teacher insists that we mortals cannot know for sure “what comes after” our brief lives “under the sun” (3:21; 6:12b; 7:14). However, the frequently used phrases “under the sun,” “on earth,” and “under the sky” occur in every chapter, hinting that we might make a distinction between what happens in human experience and what happens elsewhere.

Ecclesiastes functions in the biblical canon to balance texts that suggest the consequences of human action are relatively predictable (e.g., compare Eccl 8:14; 9:11 with Deut 7:12-14; Prov 2:21-22; 3:9-10). Although Ecclesiastes argues that retributive justice does not reliably happen “under the sun” (3:16; 4:1; 8:10) he is the first of the OT writers to suggest that God’s judgment might take place somewhere outside of human experience on earth (3:17; 8:12; 12:14).

Ecclesiastes 1:1-10 NRSVUE

1 The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
2 Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
3 What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?
4 A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.
5 The sun rises, and the sun goes down and hurries to the place where it rises.
6 The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.
7 All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow,
there they continue to flow.
8 All things are wearisome, more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing
or the ear filled with hearing.
9 What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.
10 Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”?
It has already been in the ages before us.
11 The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance
of people yet to come by those who come after them.

Ecclesiastes ~ The New Interpreters Bible | Volume V | pp. 267-269

Frequently this book excites talk about its partial grasp of the truth, its need for fulfillment, and its function as the dark background against which the light of the gospel shines forth.

... Time and time again one is driven to admit the truth of what Ecclesiastes has to say, even though one might not want to hear it. Here is the most real of the realists of the sacred writers. Here is the Hebrew writer least comfortable with conventional wisdom, and the most willing to challenge unexamined assumptions. No faith can survive long what is founded on the slippery slope of conceptually muddled piety, and in *Qohelet* "the Teacher", God has given us a tonic for our biblical faith.

- written in Hebrew
- significant influence from the Aramaic language
- late post-exilic culture
- in the style of *instruction* and *reflection*
- by a “sage”
- most likely in Judea/Jerusalem
- between 332 BCE – 200 BCE (perhaps 250 BCE)

Authorship and Origins

- **Traditional View**: Traditionally attributed to **King Solomon** in his old age, as the author identifies himself as the "son of David, king in Jerusalem".

- **Scholarly View**: Many modern scholars believe the book was written later (around the 3rd or 4th century BCE) by an anonymous author who adopted a "Solomon-like persona" to teach these wisdom lessons.

Vanity ~ ***hebel***

Ch.1 verse 2:

"Vanity of vanities" ~ KJV, RSV, NRSV, JB
"utterly vain, utterly vain" ~ (Moffatt)
"emptiness, emptiness" ~ NEB
"futility, utter futility" ~ REB
"it is useless, useless" ~ GNB
"utter futility!" ~ TNK
"nothing is worthwhile" ~ TLB
"utterly absurd" ~ Fox
"a vapor of vapors!" ~ Scott)
"meaningless! meaningless!" NIV

The standard biblical Hebrew Dictionary gives the root meaning of the word as "vapor" or "breath"…

Comparisons with other Hebrew Scriptures make it evident that the term *hebel* describes something that is without merit, an unreliable, probably useless thing. Perhaps, in the manner of creative thinkers everywhere, the Teacher has welded new meaning onto this already extant term so that it can better serve his special purposes. Michael Fox thinks so, arguing that the most appropriate English rendition of *hebel* as Qohelet uses it is "absurd," "absurdity."

… appealing to the contention of Albert Camus that absurdity arises when two ideas that ought to be joined by links of causality and harmony are in fact divorced from each other. Something that is absurd just makes no sense. To call something absurd is to claim a certain understanding of its nature: it is contrary to reason.

AI | Google.com Ecclesiastes | Key Themes

The Concept of "Hevel": The Hebrew word *hevel* (translated as "vanity" or "meaningless") literally means "vapor" or "smoke".
The author uses it to describe how life is temporary, fleeting, and often paradoxical—like trying to grab a wisp of smoke.

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Life "Under the Sun": This phrase refers to a purely humanistic, earthly perspective. The book argues that from this viewpoint, all human achievement—wealth, wisdom, and labor—is eventually undone by death, the "great leveler".

A Time for Everything: One of the most recognizable passages (Ecclesiastes 3:1–8) describes the rhythmic seasons of life—"a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up".

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 NRSVUE

9 Besides being wise, the Teacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and
studying and arranging many proverbs. 10 The Teacher sought to find pleasing words,
and he wrote words of truth plainly.

11 The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected
sayings that are given by one shepherd. 12 Of anything beyond these, my child, beware.
Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

13 The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments,
for that is the whole duty of everyone. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every secret thing, whether good or evil.

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The Hebrew word for "fear" in Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 is yirah (,(יִרְאָהwhich denotes profound reverence, awe, and respect for God rather than cringing terror. It signifies a deep-seated awe of God's holiness and sovereignty, which drives a desire to obey His commands and live in a way that pleases Him.

Fellowship of Israel Related Ministries
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The Hebrew word for "fear" in the context of Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 is yare (.(יָרֵאWhile often translated as "fear," its biblical definition specifically refers to a reverential awe, profound respect, and a sober recognition of God's holiness.

Yare (Verb): The root used in verse 13. It means to revere, honor, or stand in awe. It is a "worshipful posture" rather than cringing terror.

Yirah (Noun): Often used in related passages (like "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"), it describes a holy trembling—realizing you are in the presence of something far greater than yourself.

Distinction from Terror: Biblical Hebrew distinguishes this "good fear" from pachad (,(פַּחַדwhich refers to gut-clenching dread or panic.

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ECCLESIASTES

1:1 THE WORDS OF QOHELET, SON OF DAVID, KING OF JERUSALEM

HEBREW: ONE WHO GATHERS PEOPLE

"TEACHER"

DIFFERENT VIEWS ON AUTHORSHIP

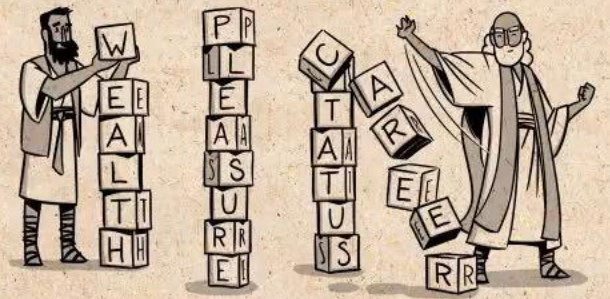
- KING SOLOMON?
- ANOTHER DECENDENT OF DAVID?
- ISRAELITE TEACHER USING A SOLOMON-LIKE PERSONA

KEY POINT: THE TEACHER IS DIFFERENT THAN THE AUTHOR

ANONYMOUS → TEACHER

THE AUTHOR'S BASIC GOAL

TO LET THE TEACHER DECONSTRUCT ALL THE WAYS WE FIND MEANING & PURPOSE APART FROM GOD



BEAUTY GOODNESS JUSTICE

"HEVEL, HEVEL, EVERYTHING IS UTTERLY HEVEL"

HEBREW: VAPOR, SMOKE → USED 38 TIMES

1. TEMPORARY, FLEETING
2. ENIGMA, PARADOX

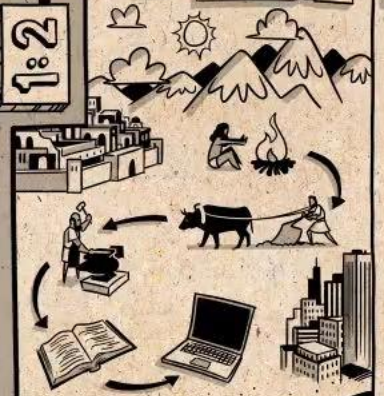
THE TEACHER (1:3-12:7)

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEACHER

1:1

1:2

1:3-11 TIME



TIME WILL EVENTUALLY ERASE YOU, ME, AND ALL WE CARE ABOUT

CAREER

PLEASURE

MONDAY ALWAYS COMES

- WEALTH
- CAREER
- STATUS
- PLEASURE

- WISDOM
- FEAR OF THE LORD (SEE 9:13-18)

HEVEL
NO GUARANTEES
ENIGMA

HOW DO YOU LIVE LIFE IN THE MIDST OF HEVEL?

ACCEPT THAT ALL OF LIFE IS OUT OF YOUR CONTROL

THE GIFT OF GOD

11:7-12:7 DEATH

THE GREAT EQUALIZER

12:8

12:9-14 CONCLUSION & EVALUATION OF THE TEACHER

THE CONCLUSION: FEAR GOD AND KEEP HIS COMMANDS - THIS IS THE WHOLE DUTY OF HUMANS; FOR GOD WILL BRING EVERY DEED INTO JUDGMENT, EVERY HIDDEN THING, WHETHER GOOD OR EVIL (12:13-14)

THE AUTHOR (1:1, 12:9-14)

https://bibleproject.com/videos/ecclesiastes/

The Conclusion: Despite its skeptical tone, the book ends with a clear directive: "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man". It suggests that since we cannot control or fully understand life's mysteries, we should enjoy simple gifts—like food, drink, and work—as blessings from God.