**THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES**

“Reflecting on the Meaning of Life”

Most scholars agree there is no other writing like it in the entire Bible. It is written by someone who is older or at least past mid-life who asks serious existential questions for which he has found no adequate answers:

What is the true meaning of life?

Where does one find real happiness and joy?

How much is enough for success and security?

Is there something we are supposed to do with our lives?

As Michael Fox notes, “Every interpretation of *Ecclesiastes* must answer three questions:

What is Koheleth negating and complaining about?

What is he affirming and recommending?

What are his underlying reasons for each?”

These existential and interpretative questions are the ones to keep before us as we read and reflect on the text. We may not find easy or comforting answers, but they are the questions that haunt each of us as we encounter the challenges and the perplexities of life.

There is a sense of “loss” or resignation about life. When you look at the “big picture” does any of it make sense? The problem is introduced in verses 2 & 3 of the first chapter:

“Utter futility! Said Koheleth—

Utter futility! All is futile!

What real value is there for a man

In all the gains he makes beneath the sun?”

Rabbi Harold Kushner calls it “the most dangerous book of the Bible” because it asks the hard questions without giving the anticipated answers. It challenges the orthodox Jewish approach to God and life. So how does it get into the canon?

Oscar Wilde: “In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.”

Question: Why should that sense of happiness be so elusive, eluding both those

people who get what they want in life and those who don’t?

Money and power do not satisfy that unnameable hunger in the soul.

PROBLEM: What we miss in our lives, no matter how much we have, is a sense of meaning. Most settle for the therapeutic approach which tends to help us adjust to what is rather than to envision a world that does not yet exist.

Kushner: Our souls are hungry for meaning, for the sense that we have figured out how to live so that our lives matter, so that the world will be at least a little bit different for our having passed through it.

Kushner: “The question of whether life has meaning, or whether our individual lives make any real difference, is a religious question . . . . because it is about ultimate values and ultimate concerns.” (*This will be an interesting dilemma when looking at the Book of Ecclesiastes because the author reflects on life from a philosophical perspective rather than a religious one. Ask yourself, what difference does this make?*)

“It is religious because it is about what is left to deal with when you have learned everything there is to learn and solved all the problems that can be solved. Religion focuses on the difference between human beings and all other species, and on the search for a goal so significant that we make our lives significant by attaching ourselves to it.”

Think about Koheleth, the writer of *Ecclesiastes*, as an older, experienced man in life, who writes reflecting on what he has encountered and his observations about life’s realities—this is a book that really does not make sense to one who has not gone through the “grind” and hit the “snags” along the way. The fascinating thing about this book is the take on life that emerges from it.

BASIC FACTS

**Author:** Is identified as “*Koheleth*” (Preacher, Teacher) who is a person who had

access to royal influence, affluence, and power with a wide range of life experience.

In the opening verse, Koheleth is called “son of David,” but that might mean only that he comes from the Davidic line. Jewish and Christian tradition has famously identified him as Solomon because of this epithet. It is best to think of Koheleth as the literary persona of a radical *philosopher* articulating in an evocative rhythmic prose that occasionally scans as poetry, a powerful dissent from the mainline Wisdom outlook that is the background of this thought. It has long been recognized that this is one of the later books of the Hebrew Bible. Some scholars have been tempted to see in it an influence of Greek philosophy, but C.L. Seow argues convincingly on linguistic grounds that the text was probably written a few decades before the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great in 333 BCE. His unblinking, provocative reflections on the ephemerality of life, the flimsiness of human value, and the ineluctable fate of death read like the work of a stubborn and prickly original—one who in all likelihood wrote in the early or middle decades of the fourth century BCE. His frequent invocation of terms drawn from bookkeeping reflect the mercantile economy of the period. His class identity is uncertain, though his politics are conservative.

Koheleth offers pragmatic counsel that one might expect to find in Proverbs. However, his observations are properly philosophic, inviting the reader to contemplate the cyclical nature of reality and of human experience, the fleeting duration of all that one cherishes, the brevity of life, and the inexorability of death, which levels all things. He is a writer who works out philosophic thought through poetic prose. He has a finely developed sense of expressive rhythm; he makes central use of refrains and other devices of repetition, the stylistic repetition serving as a correlative for the cycle of repetition that in his view characterizes the underlying structure of reality.

Kushner: “It is the work of an angry, cynical, skeptical man who doubts God and questions the values of doing good.”

“What point is there in working hard? A generation passes and another comes along, but the world remains the same forever.” (1:4)

**Setting**: It is written at midlife, reflecting on what has been personal experience, trying to make sense of the traditional biblical perspective:

Follow God’s ways and you will be blessed,

and life will have meaning;

defy God, and you will experience struggle

and chaos in life.

Most of Scripture says that God cares about who we are and what we do! Koheleth comes and tells us that God does not in fact care about any of that. Rich and poor, wise and foolish, righteous and wicked are all the same in God’s eyes. Regardless of how they live, they all grow old and die and are soon forgotten. How we live makes no difference.

**KEY REFRAIN**: *“Vanity,” “vanity of vanities”* (KJV) 1:2

Throughout the text, there is a repeated phrase (*the refrain*) “*hevel havelim*”—"Vanity, vanity all is vanity!” Robert Alter translates it, “merest breath, all is mere breath,” Michael Fox renders it, “Utter futility! All is futile!” It literally means “mist,” “vapor,” “senseless(ness),” “absurd(ity),” hence futile, fleeting, illusory. It is key to the author’s conclusion about the meaning of life. The Hebrew *hevel* probably indicates the flimsy vapor that is exhaled in breathing, invisible except on a cold winter day and in any case immediately dissipating in the air. It is the opposite of *ruah*, “life-breath,” which is the animating force in a living creature because it is the waste product of breathing. If then, one wanted to line up the abstractions implied by *hevel*, it would include not only futility, absurdity, and vanity but at least insubstantiality, ephemerality, and elusiveness as well. *Hevel*, “breath” or “vapor,” is something utterly insubstantial and transient, and in this book suggests futility, ephemerality, and also, as Fox argues, the absurdity of existence.

*All is mere breath* (Alter). The constant repetition, from this initial verse onward, gives the rhythmic prose of Koheleth an incantatory power and at the same time registers one of its principal themes: that it is the very nature of reality for all things constantly to repeat themselves.

The next key ingredient to note is what I call the “*chorus*” which appears repeatedly throughout *Ecclesiastes* and provides a clue to the Koheleth’s answer to his dilemma. It appears for the first time in 2:24

*“There is nothing worthwhile for a man but to eat*

*and drink and afford himself enjoyment with his means.”*

It is repeated in various forms in 3:12-13, 22; 5:17; 8:15; 9:7ff; 11:9. The question is: what does this mean? Is it ultimately a satisfactory answer to his existential quandary? That will be one of the issues to ponder in your reflections. Koheleth uses reason, experience, and wisdom to discern whether or not life makes sense, whether or not there is any meaning to what we do or who we are. If there is not, as Koheleth seems inclined to conclude, he enjoins us to make the most of what we have while we have it—to enjoy in measured fashion good food and wine and a woman one loves, if only the unpredictable course of circumstances makes a person lucky enough to possess these things.

In 6:10, Koheleth expresses a sense of resignation that things have already been predetermined in life.

“Everything has already been decided. It was known long ago what each person would be. So, there’s no use arguing with God about your destiny.” (NLT)

“Whatever happens, it was designated long ago and it was known that it would happen; as for man, he cannot contend with what is stronger than he.” (Hebrew Study Bible)

So, it is futile to debate with God about something that is an accomplished fact. No matter what energy you put into your efforts your ultimate destiny is already set. Therefore, why not be resigned to this reality, and live fully in the moment!

**PROBLEM**: Possibility of the meaninglessness of life! For events to be meaningful they would have to cohere in a comprehensible picture. Deed and consequence must correspond securely and predictably. Koheleth is weighed down by the collapse of meaning as revealed by the contradictions that pervade life. He is frustrated that life does not make sense that the mass of disjointed deeds and events cannot be drawn together into a coherent and significant picture. The irrationality of the world is his fundamental grievance, and his other complaints—such as the brevity of life, the futility of effort, the triviality of worldly goods, the vulnerability of wisdom, and the anomalies in divine justice—are secondary to this one and serve to confirm it. Frustrated by such incoherence and irrationality, Koheleth calls the world *hevel*—“senseless” or “absurd” or “futile.”

**IN LITURGY**: By the 11th century, Ecclesiastes was read during Sukkot. Today, the book is read on Sukkot among most Ashkenazim on the intermediate Sabbath of Sukkot—or the 8th day of the holiday. Koheleth declares the transience of human life, which is well symbolized by a temporary booth; and that autumn is the season evocative of mortality.

**ECCLESIASTES 3:1-15—TIME AND ITS CONTRAINTS**

This passage teaches that everything that happens or is done has its right time, meaning a set of circumstances in which it should happen or be performed, and God determines when this is. In everything we do, we should wait until the time is ripe rather than straining against the natural flow of events. Yet, unfairly, we cannot be certain of discovering when the right time has arrived.

The Catalogue proper (3:1-9) is a memorable poem proceeding in a stately march by a series of pairs, or antinomies, one thing and its opposite. Each pair underscores the point already stated in verse 1; the amassing pairs drives home that *everything* has its time. Verses 10-15 then draw out the implications of this principle, namely that we do not understand or control the course of events, so the only reasonable approach is to enjoy life as it comes.

The teaching of this unit is reformulated later in 11:1-6 as follows: Things will happen when and where they will. Hence it is only prudent to adapt oneself to the constraints of reality and to avoid excessive effort—***‘amal***. Also, since we are ignorant of the future, we should do things at a variety of times and in a variety of ways.

v. 2 “**A time to be born and a time to die**” The seven verses that begin here are the first instance of formal poetry in Koheleth. There are seven paired lines, with the number seven pointedly chosen because of its traditional association with the sacred. *There is a semantic pairing in each pair of lines: here, life and death for humans; planting and uprooting in the vegetable kingdom; then killing and healing, wrecking and building; weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing.*

v. 5 “**A time to fling stones. . .**” Most commentators believe has a sexual connotation.

v. 7 “**to tear . . .to sew**” These may refer to acts of mourning and emergence from mourning, which would then be matched by the silence and speech of the next line.

v. 9 “**What gain is there**” This verse, taken together with what follows, may spell out the philosophic point of the catalogue of times. *The contradictory events of human life, both good and bad, are beyond humanity’s control. At one moment one will be called upon to laugh, at another, to weep, but one can scarcely hope to derive any gain from this alternating pattern not determined by the individual*.

v. 11 “**Eternity, too, He (God) has put in their heart**” The Hebrew **‘*olam*** means “eternity” in the biblical language, though some interpreters argue that here it has the sense of “world” that it carries in rabbinic Hebrew—that is, God has planted in the human heart the love of the world. It seems more likely that the intended meaning is: *man is conscious of the idea of eternity, but that is the source of further frustration, for he is incapable of grasping “what it is God has done from beginning to end*.”

v. 13 “**this is a gift from God**” *Koheleth repeatedly urges us to enjoy the pleasures of life here and now, but he is perfectly aware that it is a matter of luck, or God’s unfathomable determination, whether we are given the time and means to enjoy the good things of life, or whether we are condemned to die, to uproot, to rip down, to mourn*.

v. 14 “**recur**”—means the God has made a world of eternal repetitions, so that humans can influence the course of events only to a trivial extent.

“**whatever God has brought to pass will recur evermore**”—God is in control, having created a system of times that is opaque to human wisdom (3:11). Whoever has the discernment to recognize this will fear God and share the humility epitomized in the confession of the psalmist: “My times are in your hand” (Ps. 31:16, “My fate”)

v. 15 “**What is occurring occurred long since**”—*Divine omnipotence overwhelms our puny efforts, and nothing substantially new can interrupt the awesome course of events that God has ordained.*

**SO, WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN????**

There two scholars that offer interesting interpretations about the meaning of the Book of Ecclesiastes, understanding that it is difficult at best to come to a definitive consensus. Michael Fox comes to three conclusions about Koheleth’s thought: 1) Koheleth is chiefly concerned with the rationality of existence, which he denies by calling everything *hevel*, “breath, vanity”; 2) he does not attack wisdom, the wise, or doctrines of wisdom literature but expresses his esteem for wisdom; 3) not finding meaning in the world, Koheleth affirms the grasping of *inner experience*, emotional and intellectual, as the one domain of human freedom. Yet even this is not wholly satisfactory. Fox attempts to name “contradictions” of Koheleth and examine them rather than explain them away. The main “contradictions” are for him: toil is absurd and without profit, yet it provides the wealth that will provide joy; Koheleth affirms and denies the possibility and the value of wisdom; life is unjust but God is just.

A final interpretation comes from Choon-Leong Seow, who is aware of the danger of systematizing an experiential thinker. He tries to capture both the theological and philosophical aspects of Koheleth in a summary paragraph of his commentary:

In sum, Koheleth always begins his reflection with humanity and the human condition. He concludes at every turn that mortals are not in control of things that happen in the world. They are not in control of their destiny. This is why Koheleth says that everything is *hevel*. He does not mean that everything is meaningless or insignificant, but that everything is beyond human apprehension and comprehension. But in thinking about humanity, Koheleth also speaks about God. People are caught in the situation where everything is *hevel*—in every sense of the word. God is transcendent and wholly other, but humanity is “on earth.” Yet God is related to humanity, and God has given humanity the possibilities of each moment. Hence people must accept what happens, whether good or bad. They must respond spontaneously to life, even in the midst of uncertainties, and accept both the possibilities and limitations of their being human.