**SUMMARY OF ECCLESIASTES**

1. Koheleth approaches his reflection on life from a philosophical perspective rather than from a theological one, using reason, experience and logic to find meaning and purpose in life.
2. Where does God fit in? As Robert Alter notes, God appears with some frequency in Koheleth’s reflections on life. However, it is the term *‘elohim* and never YHWH. The cosmic vista of the prose-poem with which the book begins (1:2-10) makes no mention of God. When the term *‘elohim* is finally introduced in 1:13, the context is odd and unsettling: *“all that is done under the sun—it is an evil business that God gave the sons of man to busy themselves with.”* The God of the earlier books of the Bible can sometimes be irascible or perhaps even capricious, but He means humanity to fulfill a grand destiny, and it is human dereliction that triggers His wrath and brings down His punishment. Koheleth, who does not altogether reject antecedent tradition occasionally thinks that God will bring men to judgment, though it is unclear how or when. Yet here God seems almost perverse in keeping the sons of man busy with an evil business—evil, as the larger context makes clear, not in a moral sense but because it is miserable and pointless, *herding of the wind*. Koheleth has enough of a connection with tradition that he never absolutely denies the idea of a personal god, but his *‘elohim* often seems to be a stand-in for the cosmic powers-that-be, for fate or the overarching dynamic of reality that is beyond human control. Koheleth is not at all impelled to reject theism, but his sense of life is often readily translatable into post-theistic terms: the world is a theater of continuing frustration and illusion; that is the way that God/fate/the intrinsic constitution of reality has determined that it should be.
3. Koheleth’s conclusion about the nature of reality, “the meaning of life,” which I call the “refrain,” occurring repeatedly throughout the book:

“Vanity, vanity, all is vanity”

“Futility, all is utter futility!”

“Nothing is certain! Everything is senseless!”

“Merest breath! All is mere breath.”

1. So, what is one to do in the face of life’s senselessness? Koheleth basically says “carpe diem” which I call the chorus. 2:24; 3:12-13, 22; 5:17; 8:15; 9:17ff; 11:9.

“I know that there is nothing good in it but to be merry and to partake of good things in life. And also every man who eats and drinks and enjoys good things in his toil—this is a gift from God.”

3:12-13

Live in the moment! Celebrate the life you have! Now is certain, the future is not. So, appreciate what you have and don’t waste energy fretting over what you don’t.

1. An autobiographical narrative establishes the context for the philosophic searcher and explorer of experience who makes repeated appearances in the pronouncements on life that he proposes. The book ends with the haunting poem on mortality that is a kind of matching end-piece to the prose-poem at the beginning. The vision of futility begins the book, and the vision of decay and death ends it. All along Koheleth has thought much about the inescapability of death because it is the prime instance of how everything is mere breath: we dream and hope and lust and love, grasp for power and prestige, but the end that awaits everyone is the ineluctable condition of moldering in the grave. Thus, the words that initiated the prose-poem at the beginning aptly conclude the poem at the end: “Merest breath. All is mere breath.” “Vanity, all is vanity.”

What continues to engage the moral and philosophic imagination is the writer, who envisaged the same grim fate for rich and poor, for the righteous and wicked, and who was led to question whether wisdom itself in the end had any advantage over foolishness.