

The Message of Ecclesiastes

by J.K. McKee posted 19 October, 2008 www.tnnonline.net

The Book of Ecclesiastes is one of those texts of Scripture that people either find very uplifting, or very depressing. Some find it to be an encouraging word about their lives, and others find it to do nothing more than confirm all the negative things about human existence. If you have stayed away from Ecclesiastes in your Bible reading, not quite knowing what to do with it, **then you are not alone.** For over two millennia both Jews and Christians have been somewhat perplexed about this text of Scripture. It is often viewed that the orator in the Book of Ecclesiastes is one who thinks all life on Earth to be meaningless, and that he might as well just die now and get it over with. Certainly while “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven” (3:1), such a time will inevitably come to a close. The way some have viewed Ecclesiastes, it seems that nothing more—including a resurrection—awaits.

The fact that Ecclesiastes does have some ancient controversy associated with it, needs to be noted by anyone of us who reads this text and considers what it has to say in our overall reading of the Bible. *It should never be read by itself, isolated from the rest of the canon.* Recently (Fall 2008) I was given a copy of a new study Bible for my library, and it had this to say in its introductory remarks for Ecclesiastes: “Ecclesiastes has always raised questions concerning its appropriateness in the Old Testament canon...Its philosophical attitude of questioning beliefs central to Judaism and Christianity has led many to dismiss it...The book is unsparingly forthright in recording the author’s desperate search for meaning.”¹ While Ecclesiastes is a book of the Bible, it does not stand alone, and it surely does not have the same weight as do the Torah, the Prophets, the Gospels, and the Apostolic Epistles.

Ecclesiastes was one of the last books to be included in the Jewish canon of the Tanach, and the Mishnah records the debates that occurred between the Pharisaical Schools of Hillel and Shammai over its usefulness: “[The Book of] Qohelet does not render the hands unclean,’ according to the House of Shammai. And the House of Hillel say, ‘It renders the hands unclean’” (m.*Eduyyot* 5:3).² Shammai considered the text to not render one’s hands unclean because Ecclesiastes was not intrinsically that holy, whereas Hillel viewed the text as being holy. Debate over the holiness, or unholiness, of the Book of Ecclesiastes was still going on until the late First Century C.E. (m.*Yadayaim* 3:5), well after Yeshua the Messiah had come on the scene. The Apostle Paul’s reference to Ecclesiastes 1:2 in Romans 8:20 assured Ecclesiastes a place within the Christian canon, but much of the Church has viewed Ecclesiastes with some of the same skepticism as the Rabbis.

Whether you are aware of this or not, there is considerable debate about Ecclesiastes’ authorship and its date of composition. Many look to the opening remark, “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1) and assume that King Solomon is the author. This is the traditional view, but as Dillard and Longman note in their resource *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, “It is not the conservative view, since...a number of conservative scholars have not agreed with it.”³ Other than the fact that the text of Ecclesiastes itself does not mention King Solomon by name, there are some sound reasons for us **to not consider Solomon the author**, and I would be one of the few Messianic Bible teachers who would not hold to Solomonic authorship of the text.

No one denies that the intended speaker or subject in Ecclesiastes was “king over Israel in Jerusalem” (1:12). But what is to be made of his remark, “I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me” (1:16), or more specifically “all who were over Jerusalem before me” (NASU)?⁴ If this is King Solomon, then the only other king who could really be considered would be his father King David. Some have suggested that “all” of the monarchs might also include figures such as Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18) or Adoni-zedek (Joshua

¹ *God’s Game Plan: The Athlete’s Bible* 2007, HCSB (Nashville: Serendipity House Publishers, 2007), 605.

² Neusner, *Mishnah*, 653.

³ Dillard and Longman, 248.

⁴ Heb. *kol-asher-hayah l’fanai al-Yerushalayim*.

10:1), but as Peter Enns notes, “this argument seems to have an air of desperation about it.”⁵ It would not seem inappropriate to assert, then, that the speaker in Ecclesiastes is someone from a later time in the Southern Kingdom.

One of the biggest issues regarding Ecclesiastes is the style of Hebrew that it employs. Even those who adhere to the traditional Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes note that the language is from a later date, outside that of the Tenth or Ninth Centuries B.C.E. in which he would have reigned. Enns describes “that the language of Ecclesiastes is, by all standards of our knowledge of the historical development of Hebrew, unambiguously of later origin.”⁶ There is debate over whether the usage of specific terms seen in the text permit or disallow for Ecclesiastes being composed after the Babylonian exile. Conservatives are divided, but even those who would hold to some kind of pre-exilic composition of Ecclesiastes, as I do, still place it in a period far away enough from Solomon’s reign. I would personally lean toward Ecclesiastes being delivered in the same time period as the Prophets Amos or Micah, a time when the Northern and Southern Kingdoms were immensely prosperous, yet with Assyria and sharp decline looming on the horizon.⁷ This prosperity had been accomplished by corrupt kings and an aristocracy which had exploited the poor and the helpless. Ecclesiastes may have echoes of Solomon’s ungodly opulence in view, in an effort to criticize the current generation.

So who really is the author of Ecclesiastes? If we simply go to the text, it is someone who is called “the Teacher,” “the Preacher” (NASU), “the Speaker” (REB), or simply *Qohelet*. Commentators who adhere to the traditional authorship of Ecclesiastes are still often forced to refer to the main person in the text as Qohelet, if not just to avoid controversy. It is not impossible that this Qohelet is speaking *as though he is King Solomon*, or at least that some of his sayings are Solomonic in origin. His name derives from the Hebrew *qahal*, meaning “assembly,” and we get the title Ecclesiastes from its Greek equivalent, *ekklēsia*, as employed by the Septuagint. Qohelet is an orator to a crowd, perhaps not that unlike a court jester or (un)motivational speaker. His words are intended to provoke some thought on the part of his audience. As G.S. Hendry explains it, “Qoheleth is addressing the general public whose view is bounded by the horizons of this world; he meets them on their own ground, and proceeds to convict them of its inherent vanity.”⁸

In some way, is it possible that Qohelet may use some reverse psychology on his audience? If this is the case, it intensifies our need to read Ecclesiastes within the larger canon of Scripture, limiting its weight when set against other texts. The presuppositions that one brings to Ecclesiastes (like whether or not King Solomon is the author) can (significantly) affect how we interpret it by itself—and in light of other Biblical books and key doctrines such as the resurrection. Ecclesiastes’ somewhat erratic communication style does not help one reading it, either.

At the offset of the book, the main person in Ecclesiastes identifies himself: “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). This Qohelet is to be identified with a son of David, who was also a king in Jerusalem. As previously stated, there is no requirement that this son of David be King Solomon, but he could be a descendant of King David.⁹ Such personification as a monarch of Jerusalem could easily have been used to indirectly chastise one of the rulers of the Southern Kingdom who had become wicked and corrupt. But ultimately, whoever this son of

⁵ P. Enns, “Ecclesiastes 1: Book of,” in Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns, *Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 122.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

Cf. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1077; he traces the linguistic evidence of Ecclesiastes as pointing to a date no later than the completion of the Book of Malachi, perhaps when the text reached its final form.

⁷ Consult the author’s entries for the Books of Amos and Micah in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

⁸ G.S. Hendry, “Ecclesiastes,” in D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, eds., *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 570.

⁹ Indeed, Yeshua the Messiah is the son of David (Matthew 1:1; Luke 1:32; et. al.), and yet a millennium separated the reign of King David from the ministry of our Lord.

David is intended to be, it is what Qohelet says that really matters. He is a speaker to the assembly who asks them pertinent things.

So what is important to Qohelet? Well, as the NIV puts it: “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless” (1:2). Other versions render this with “Vanity of vanities” (NASU) or “Utter futility” (NJPS).¹⁰ They are actually behind the curve with what many commentators have noted regarding *hevel*, which can mean “(transitory) **breath**” (*CHALOT*),¹¹ likened unto a “**vapour**” (*BDB*)¹² or perhaps even a “mist.” This is surely how *hevel* is used in other places in the Tanach, such as in Isaiah 57:13, “The wind will carry all of them off, a mere breath [*hevel*] will blow them away.” Or perhaps also Proverbs 21:6, “A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor [*hevel*] and a deadly snare.” This is not that much different than James the Just’s word, “What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (James 4:14). Qohelet’s emphasis is not that life on Earth is meaningless, but that it is instead transitory, and that a person must be brought back to its Source—who is God (3:11).¹³ Walter C. Kaiser is right to emphasize,

“The ‘vanity of vanities’...of Ecclesiastes...was not that life was a bore, filled with futility, emptiness, or the frustrating conclusion that nothing was worth living. No! Instead ‘vanity’ (*hebel*) was simply that life *in and of itself* could not supply the key to its own meaning, nor could it truly liberate the person. No one part of God’s otherwise good universe could in and of itself provide any all-embracing solution that would integrate truth, learning, and living.”¹⁴

Of course, seeing the transitory nature of human life—in view of the supremacy of God—is something that one must encounter in Ecclesiastes by following its words very carefully and closely. Qohelet opens his litany about human life with the question, “What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?” (1:3). The setting of almost all of his words concern what takes place *tachat ha’shamesh* or “beneath the sun” (NJPS), meaning on Planet Earth. Work is something that remains constant for everyone. “Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever” (1:4), meaning that a human’s life is but a short time compared to how long the Earth has been here. And so, “The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises” (1:5), winds continue to blow (1:6), streams continue to flow (1:7), and sometimes there is just too much for a person to take in (1:8). The cycle of life repeats itself over and over, as “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun” (1:9). Everyone lives on Earth, works on Earth, and will inevitably die on Earth. It is all transitory.

Qohelet asks another opening question: “Is there anything of which one can say, ‘Look! This is something new?’” (1:10a). He says that “It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time” (1:10b) or “before us” (NASU). In spite of how generations and future generations of people will be forgotten (1:11), whatever was here in the past will be here in the future. There are constants to human life that will never change.

Qohelet is one who “was king over Israel in Jerusalem” (1:12), and he “devoted [himself] to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven” (1:13a). Here, one would think that echoes of King Solomon’s previous reign are in view, and there are commentators who feel that the anonymous Qohelet speaks in court as *though he is Solomon*. Successive kings of Judah likely also committed themselves to some kind of study and exploration of wisdom just as Solomon did. All of Israel’s monarchs, whether of the Southern or Northern Kingdoms, were to some degree well educated per the demands of their office, and like Qohelet, “have seen all the things that are done under the sun” (1:14a). His conclusion is that “all of them are meaningless [*hevel*], a chasing

¹⁰ Heb. *havel havelim*.

¹¹ William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, the Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1988), 76.

¹² *BDB*, 210.

¹³ *Hevel* was rendered in the Septuagint Ecclesiastes as *mataiotēs*, “state of being without use or value, emptiness, futility, purposelessness, transitoriness” (*BDAG*, 621).

¹⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 139.

after the wind" (1:14b), meaning that the things of Earth have a fleeting or transitory nature. They are not necessarily valueless—but they may not possess the substance that one may think they have. It is for this reason why, "What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted" (1:15).

Probing the assembly, Qohelet attests that he is one who has "grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge" (1:16). This is a king who more than anything else has partaken of the world, and has "learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind" (1:17b). It will not bring what he ultimately seeks or desires, "For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief" (1:18). This conclusion in v. 18 should not come as a surprise for any of us. The more we know about the world, the more grief we experience to one degree or another. Death and war are two of the most terrible things that the history of the world offers us—things true to every generation no matter the cause or the materials and instruments used to fight.

Qohelet describes the pleasures of life that he considers to be *hevel*, saying, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good" (2:1). These transitory things include laughter (2:2), drinking wine, and "embracing folly" (2:3). Public works projects like building houses, planting vineyards and gardens, and tending to trees are *hevel* (2:4-5). Having massive amounts of slaves, herds, and flocks, in addition to great riches and a harem—what "delights the heart of man" (2:7-8)—do not bring one happiness, in spite of Qohelet having some kind of wisdom (2:9). He says, "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired... Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless [*hevel*], a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun" (2:10, 11). Having tried to build a diverse portfolio of goods and possessions, and not being fulfilled, Qohelet turns to considering wisdom (2:12) so he could be better than the fool (2:13). Yet he concluded, "the same fate overtakes them both" (2:14). Nothing was to really be gained by becoming wise, because both the wise man and foolish man die (2:15-16).

Having pursued these things, Qohelet is not a happy man. He says, "I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless [*hevel*], a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?" (2:17-19a). Whatever he does during his life on Earth will just be passed on to the next generation to be repeated (2:19b), and so Qohelet finds himself in despair (2:20). What he has done could be squandered by those who come after him. He asserts, "For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune" (2:21). Life on Earth is something that only includes "toil and anxious striving... All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest" (2:22, 23). All Qohelet can say to this reality is, "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work" (2:24a).

Certainly, life on Earth has more meaning and value than just working, and then eating and drinking. At this point, the Creator of all this actually enters into the scene as Qohelet indicates that life "is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God" (2:24b-26a). Such would have been an appropriate rebuke of corrupt kings and officials who had amassed wealth at the expense of the godly poor (cf. Amos 4:1; 5:11-12; Micah 6:12). For such people, "This too is meaningless [*hevel*], a chasing after the wind" (2:26b). No matter how many pursuits they may embrace, the satisfaction they desire in transitory things will not be found. Without God as one's focus, life is just a mist—something that offers some kind of pleasure, but ultimately is blown or fades away.

What are some of the things life possesses? Qohelet urges those hearing him to consider how, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven" (3:1), and he goes through describing many of the different kinds of seasons that human beings often encounter

during their lives (3:2-8). In spite of workers having some kind of toil, Qohelet is clear to say, God “has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end” (3:9-11). *Gam et-ha'olam natan b'libam* is a unique statement to consider, “Also, he has put eternity into man's heart” (ESV).¹⁵ While limited creatures that they are, a human being is to understand that there is something beyond Earth. Life on Earth, while possessing good things (3:12-13a), pales in comparison how “everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing can be taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him” (3:13b-14). A life lived without Him as the emphasis misses the point!

Qohelet returns to his pessimistic line of reasoning with the crowd. The cycles of human life repeat themselves (3:15), but he adds something: “In the place of judgment—wickedness was there, in the place of justice—wickedness was there” (3:16). *Resha* is present in places where it should not be (cf. Micah 6:10-11), and so what happens is “God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed” (3:17). This could be read as a hint of a future resurrection and judgment. But what follows are some very difficult words that have stirred unbelievable controversy among many examiners of Ecclesiastes. Qohelet asserts,

“As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like animals. Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless [*hevel*]. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?” (3:18-21).

These are the kinds of sentiments that one would expect the Sadducees of the First Century C.E. to say—people who the Apostolic Scriptures attest did not believe in the resurrection (Matthew 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8). Does Qohelet deny the resurrection? Some interpreters say yes.

I would suggest something different, though. Qohelet's purpose is to get his listeners to see that there is more to life than just fulfilling one's sensual desires—things that are transitory and not permanent. Qohelet says that God will bring people to justice (3:17) who commit wickedness. Wicked people who think they can get away with sinful deeds are really no better than the animals, thinking that once they die they will face no consequences for their actions.¹⁶ After all, as Qohelet cynically says, “For who can prove that the human spirit goes up and the spirit of animals goes down into the earth?” (3:21, NLT). Qohelet is really trying to get his audience *to think* about their wickedness, and if they really do face the same fate as the animals. Because after all, who can really prove that there is something more than this life? His line of reasoning is for them to simply enjoy life on Earth now, because after all, how can we really know what happens next (3:22)? No consequences after death, right?

Qohelet then describes “all the oppression that was taking place under the sun” (4:1), possibly reflecting a then-present evil in the Northern and Southern Kingdoms (i.e., Amos 4:1; Micah 2:2). The oppressed have no comforter (4:1b), the dead are happier than those living (4:2), and those yet to be born are better than those who have lived (4:3). Qohelet says “that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless [*hevel*], a chasing after the wind” (4:4). This was not something just endemic to the royal court, but to other people out in the marketplace, even though it is better to be doing something that brings tranquility than to be doing nothing at all and be filled with toil (4:5-6). At the same time, simply striving for work and not taking a break to enjoy life “is meaninglessness [*hevel*]—a miserable business!” (4:7-8). God has made us for much more than that!

A solitary life is not a fulfilled one, either, according to Qohelet. “Two are better than one,” he says, “because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can

¹⁵ “[H]e has given human beings an awareness of eternity” (CJB).

¹⁶ Keep in mind that God did not make human beings a little higher than the animals; God made human beings in His image (Genesis 1:26-27), slightly lower than Himself (Psalm 8:3-9).

help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves” (4:9-12a). These are important words to keep in mind for any proper marriage. Husbands and wives are to work together as friends, as those who can help one another and offer the other valuable companionship. And there is an important clue offered by Qohelet as to how this can be a successful endeavor: “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” 4:12b). A marriage of two people is not enough *without God* present to bind them together!

Qohelet does not follow any ordered approach in his words. He interjects, “Better [to be] a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning” (4:13). Such a person may come from humble origins (4:14), but what happens when he attains power? People do follow after him (4:15), but they are often not pleased with the successor king (4:16). Attaining power, to Qohelet, “is meaningless [*hevel*], a chasing after the wind” (4:16b). Kings come and kings go, after all. Ruling for the sake of ruling is not enough. These are very cleverly crafted words used by Qohelet to perhaps criticize the current regime of his era, certainly with some Solomonic undertones.

What is the answer to some of these problems? Qohelet says to “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.” (5:1). His key instruction is: “Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few” (5:2). He actually does urge his listeners to listen to what goes on in the House of God, not just offer vain sacrifices (cf. Amos 5:18-27). Any vows made to God must be promptly fulfilled (5:4-5), as one’s mouth is to not cause a person to sin (5:6). As he says, “stand in the awe of God” (5:7).

Enforcing what is honest and right does not come easy. Qohelet observes, “If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields” (5:8-9). Corruption and the enforcement of *injustice* go all the way to the top, and “whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless [*hevel*]” (5:10). It is not that difficult to see some parallels between Qohelet and the Prophets here, although Qohelet’s words are more carefully crafted. The desire for riches and wealth seems to just feed itself, although in many cases the rich are in a more decrepit condition than the poor: “The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep” (5:12).

Qohelet goes on a rampage against “a grievous evil under the sun” (5:13) brought about by riches. Wealth can cause harm to people (5:13b), wealth can be lost (5:14), and some people are born poor and die poor (5:15-16). A man who is poor is simply to find the satisfaction that he can “during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot” (5:18). Those who do have wealth are to recognize God as the Source for such wealth, looking to Him for true gladness (5:19). Yet at the same time, there are others who possess such wealth, and are never able to enjoy it (6:1-2). Some live their lives in prosperity but do not receive proper honor after they are gone, perhaps being worse off than the stillborn child (6:3-4). Death equalizes all whether rich or poor, as all will inevitably be buried (6:6). Qohelet describes more transitory pursuits, such as the appetite (6:7), wise persons compared to fools (6:8), and what one sees with his eyes (6:9). Things one pursues after in life, after all, have already been pursued by those who have lived before (6:10), and as Qohelet says, “The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?” (6:11). The time a person spends on Earth in such preoccupation is labeled as *mispar y'mei-chayei hevlo*, “the few days of his fleeting life” (NJPS), likened unto a “shadow” (6:12). Qohelet is not being fatalistic, but is trying to emphasize that without something more *or beyond*, life on its own does not reach its full potential.

Half way through his discourse, Qohelet lists a variety of traits that a wise person must keep in mind (7:1-12), that both the rich and poor people of his day should have quickly identified

with. He summarizes, “Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor” (7:12). God Himself is the originator of human life, and is responsible for what transpires (7:13-14). Qohelet tells his audience, “a man cannot discover anything about his future” (7:14b), and therefore must turn to something greater than himself for true meaning.

Qohelet, describing his “meaningless life” (7:15)—perhaps better described as his transitory days searching for meaning—speaks of the things that he has encountered. He has seen righteous men dying in righteousness, and wicked men living long in wickedness (7:15b). People that live proper lives demonstrate them in a balanced way (7:16-18). They do not die young for making mistakes in “righteousness” (7:16), and they guard themselves against wickedness (7:17). No one is exempt from the effect of evil (7:20), and one must be careful of what other people say as negative words will always be spoken (7:21-22). Qohelet is one who has been tested by wisdom (7:23-24), wanting “to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly” (7:25b). He knows that “the woman who is a snare” (7:26) can engulf a man in sin—something that certainly took place within Israel’s monarchy with Solomon’s many wives and the subsequent wives of the leaders of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. Qohelet may be speaking to an audience who would take this as applying to themselves—staying away from evil women⁷—but it was most definitely a criticism of the leaders of his period.

Qohelet has had difficulty finding people that are upright. He says “I found one *upright* man among a thousand, but not one *upright* woman among them all” (7:28). Is this King Solomon criticizing himself (cf. 1 Kings 11:3)? Or is this Qohelet making an observation of how scarce righteous people are in his generation? Or perhaps Solomon is used as a point of reference for the evil of Qohelet’s generation? The point is: “This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes...Wisdom brightens a man’s face and changes its hard appearance” (7:29-8:1).

Qohelet’s unique style of communication continues, as he asks some questions of his audience that pertain to their relationship with the ruling king:

“Obey the king’s command, I say, because you took an oath before God. Do not be in a hurry to leave the king’s presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. Since a king’s word is supreme, who can say to him, ‘What are you doing?’” (8:2-4).

Many interpreters have viewed these words as relating to Qohelet’s audience’s relationship to God, and that God-ordained rulers are to be obeyed, but I would offer another view. One can see some possible words of rebuke here. Yes, those who serve the king are to serve him because of a commitment made before God. But is the king really allowed to do whatever he wants? Are those who serve the king in close quarters really not allowed to rebuke him when he does something wrong? *Only if God supports absolute monarchy.* It is true, “Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm” (8:5a), but “the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man’s misery weighs heavily down upon him” (8:5b-6). While insurrection against injustice may not be the ideal, is there a way for those who witness it to properly admonish their rulers?

Human beings in and of themselves do not possess the power to change things, as no one has the ability to tell his king what will happen in the future (8:7) nor has power over the elements (8:8a). But Qohelet is clear to emphasize, “As no one is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practice it” (8:8b). If one goes along with the evil decrees of a foolish king, he will be engulfed by it (8:9-10), and “This too is meaningless [*hevel*]” (8:10b). Wicked people will inevitably be overcome by their crimes and sin, over against those who fear God (8:11-13). Unfortunately, one of the transitory things about human life is that the righteous often get “what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve” (8:14). One must simply enjoy the circumstances of life, as “joy will accompany him in his work all the

⁷ Simply because evil women are in view in 7:26, one should not think that Qohelet will not criticize evil men, as it has already occurred in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

days of the life God has given him under the sun” (8:15b). And only God knows the real purpose of why things are the way they are on Earth (8:16-17).

Qohelet is tempered by wisdom, as he says “I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God’s hand...All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not” (9:1-2). The power of death is something that will affect each and every person, as “The same destiny overtakes all” (9:3). Qohelet’s emphasis here is what happens to evil people, and while “there is madness in their hearts while they live...afterward they join the dead” (9:3b). You almost see a chance for possible repentance in his claim, “Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!” (9:4). One might be weaker *and righteous* before God while living, as opposed to having died strong but with *no hope of restitution before Him*. What follows are some more words from Qohelet that have been strongly debated among interpreters:

“For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun” (9:5-6).

Believers in a doctrine known as psychopannychy (otherwise known as “soul sleep”) will take the short clause “the dead know nothing,” and then claim that anyone who believes in an afterlife—in either Heaven or Hell—between the time of death and resurrection is in error for believing so.¹⁸ Yet this is not the context of Qohelet’s words. Qohelet is speaking on how the dead cannot participate “in anything that happens under the sun.” Once a person is dead, his or her fate is sealed before the Almighty, and no chance of restitution remains. A life of worldly experiences is over.

And so what is one to do while living that life “under the sun”? Is it a life of no value according to Qohelet? No. “Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do” (9:7). Now is the time to live a life pleasing to God, where one can enjoy future blessings—and not condemnation—from Him! Qohelet says to “Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless [*hevel*] life that God has given you under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom” (9:9-10). Life on Earth, in spite of its imperfections, indeed has its rewards that God wants people to take advantage of—especially those who are living a life of obedience to Him. These are things that are not available in what lies for one following death.

V. 10 is a place where the NIV translation, “for in the grave where you are going...” is not entirely accurate. The Hebrew word exclusively used in the Tanach for a place of burial is *qever*, whereas *Sheol* is used here, and most versions do render it properly as “Sheol” (RSV, NASU, NJPS, NRSV, CJB, et. al.).¹⁹ *Sheol* is the shadowy world of the dead²⁰ where all dead would have been held (Luke 16:19-31; cf. 1 Peter 3:19) until the ascension of Yeshua into Heaven with the company of righteous dead (Ephesians 4:9-10), where they are being refreshed in the Lord’s presence until the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:51-55; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). Weeping for his son Joseph, the Patriarch Jacob said “I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol” (Genesis 37:35, NJPS).²¹ This

¹⁸ While Ecclesiastes is a part of the Biblical canon, it is an egregious exegetical error for one to take the short clause “the dead know nothing” as stated by the anonymous Qohelet, and then give it more weight than known statements about death, such as those by Yeshua the Messiah (Luke 23:43) or the Apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 5:4-10; Philippians 1:19-24).

For a further discussion of this issue, consult the author’s articles “To Be Absent From the Body” and “Why Hell Must Be Eternal.” Also recommended are Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1984), and John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

¹⁹ The newer TNIV uses the more theologically neutral “realm of the dead.”

²⁰ Cf. Theodore J. Lewis, “Dead, Abode of the,” in *ABD*, 2:101-105.

²¹ Heb. *al-beni avel Sheol*; lit. “to my son mourning (to) Sheol.”

could not have been “the grave” because Joseph would **not have had a grave**, as his father believed he was eaten by wild animals (Genesis 37:33)!²² An existence in *Sheol* was by no means something like existence on Earth, as a disembodied person was only a shade of his or her former self.²³ Robert A. Morey describes the existence that v. 10 details:

“Once in Sheol, all experiences related exclusively to physical life are no longer possible. Those in Sheol do not marry and procreate children because they do not have bodies. Neither do they plan and execute business transactions. Once in Sheol, they cannot attend public worship in the temple and give sacrifices or praise. There are no bodily pleasures such as eating or drinking. Those in Sheol do not have any wisdom or knowledge about what is happening in the land of the living. They are cut off from the living. They have entered a new dimension of reality with its own kind of existence...”²⁴

The point of Qohelet, more than anything else, is to tell his hearers that “no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them” (9:12). Death will seal one’s fate before his or her Maker, and no one need be caught unaware because of evil deeds committed on Earth.

Possessing proper wisdom is something that greatly impresses Qohelet (9:13), as he recounts the example of a poor man with wisdom who saved a city under siege (9:14-15). Yet, “nobody remembered the poor man” (9:15), as is stereotypical of many who perform good works. Qohelet observes, “‘Wisdom is better than strength.’ But the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded” (9:16). He goes on to describe how important wisdom is to a person, noting how frequently wisdom is not heeded (9:17ff). Is it significant that he begins this vignette by stating, “Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good” (9:18). If Qohelet is rebuking the Southern and/or Northern Kingdoms, he could very well be alluding to the fact that they have lost their way—not heeding words of wisdom—and that the sin of *their king(s)* will bring them ruin (10:4-7). He further states, “Woe to you, O land whose king was a servant and whose princes feast in the morning. Blessed are you, O land whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time—for strength and not for drunkenness” (10:16-18). Will those in power listen to Qohelet’s words of warning before it is too late?

Anyone listening to Qohelet, thinking that action can be taken against their king, is also warned by him. He says “Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say” (10:20). A key part of being wise is knowing when to properly speak. Qohelet has previously said, “If a snake bites before it is charmed, there is no profit for the charmer” (10:11). Similarly, if one wants a king to be *properly influenced*, one is not to provoke a king to anger.

Qohelet offers a somewhat strange word of advice to many modern ears: “Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again” (11:1). In all likelihood, this is a reference to some kind of sea trade. If disaster should come, a person should have many options open (11:2)—possibly of escape. Not putting your eggs all in one basket, in other words. A person does not control the elements, as only God has the power to control rain, growth, wind, and clouds (11:3-5). One should be occupied in something whether in the morning or evening, so that success can be found in some way (11:6).

The last of Qohelet’s admonitions is for people to remember who God was in their lives while they were young, *and unaffected by the temptations of the world* (11:7-12:8). This is perhaps one of the most distinct sections where those holding to Solomonic authorship find support, as an old King Solomon is believed to be emoting on his life of frivolity. Perhaps Qohelet has some of

²² Morey, pp 77-78, notes twenty important contextual reasons throughout the Tanach why *Sheol* cannot mean “the grave,” as advocates of psychopannychy commonly argue.

²³ Describing the state of dead people as *rephaim*, “shades” or “ghosts”: Job 26:5; Psalm 88:10; Proverbs 2:18; 9:18; 21:16; Isaiah 14:9; 26:14, 19.

Also to be considered is the fact that the Torah strictly prohibits necromancy or communication with the dead (Deuteronomy 18:11), something which surely loses its significance if there is no intermediate afterlife of any kind prior to resurrection (cf. 1 Samuel 28:3-25).

²⁴ Morey, 79.

these thoughts in mind when speaking to the assembly, but if so he could just as easily be speaking of many others who had been godly in early life, having fallen prey to wickedness in later life. Even those who will remain godly and loyal to righteousness in later years will be affected by the evil surrounding them in society:

“However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything to come is meaningless [*hevel*]. Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment. So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are meaningless [*hevel*]” (11:8-10).

Life on Earth is something that is transitory or a mist, even though it does have its rewards. It is a blessing for a person to maintain the experience he or she had as a young man or young woman with the Lord—throughout the rest of life. Such a life will be a happy one. God will judge each and every one of us for what we do, and surely we should want that to be a *positive judgment*. Qohelet says to “Remove vexation from your heart” (ESV), as the inevitable aging of one’s body is also transitory.

What is the answer to all those things on Earth that are *hevel*—which are not “vanity” (RSV) or “futility” (NASU)—but instead only a passing mist or vapor? Qohelet’s words are not difficult to fathom: “Remember your Creator²⁵ in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, ‘I find no pleasure in them’” (12:1). If one forms a relationship of trust with God while young, when that time of aging comes, one will be prepared to deal with it properly. Rather than looking back on a life of sin and transgression, a long life of godliness should have prevailed. Qohelet details the process of aging (12:2-5), saying that it is “when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred” (12:5).

Death comes to someone who has lived a long and beneficial life, as “man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets” (12:5b). Having died, a person will go to a *beit olam*,²⁶ whereas survivors are left behind to mourn the passing. Qohelet admonishes his audience, “Remember him [God]—before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well” (12:6), affirming that at the time of death “the dust” or the body “returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (12:7). One part of a human being is of the Earth (Genesis 3:19), and one part uniquely originated from God (Genesis 2:7).²⁷ And all Qohelet can say to his audience, again trying to get them to think, is *havel havelim...ha’kol havel*. Life on Earth is not “Meaningless! Meaningless!” (12:8, NIV)—but it is a **great transitory mist** compared to one’s Creator. A human is quite small compared to a God who is Master of the cosmos, and who among that great vastness is concerned with us as puny mortals.

The Book of Ecclesiastes concludes by summarizing who Qohelet was. “Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true” (12:9-10). Many believe that this is a reference to King Solomon, per the reference to *mishalim ha’rabe* or “many proverbs”—but not all of the Book of Proverbs claims Solomonic authorship,²⁸ and the text does not require that Qohelet be Solomon if he was a court

²⁵ Heb. *u’zeker et-bor’ekha*; “Remember also thy Creators” (YLT).

²⁶ Whether righteous or unrighteous, human beings made in God’s image will all go somewhere after their deaths to a location akin to an “eternal home” (meaning, not of this present dimension), until the period of resurrection and final judgment.

²⁷ Note that in the Genesis Creation narrative (chs. 1-3) that it is only human beings who have the *nish’mat chayim* or “breath of life” deposited into them, whereas the animals do not. Biblical Hebrew lacks the specific vocabulary for “mind” or “consciousness.”

For a further discussion, consult the author’s article “Addressing the Frequently Avoided Issues Messianics Encounter in the Torah,” under the section “Image of God.”

²⁸ Consult the author’s entry for the Book of Proverbs in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

speaker in Judah. If anything, the closing words of Ecclesiastes could have been written by a follower of Qohelet, perhaps not that much different than those who recorded the oracles of the Prophets in written form.

Ecclesiastes claims to have words of wisdom in it (12:11), and indeed it does have them. But it also issues a warning: “Of making many books there is no end, and much study wears the body” (12:12). So as important as study is, especially for being effective in life and having wisdom, Qohelet’s words have indicated that life on Earth has value that is to be enjoyed! Working all the time, in whatever pursuit, will wear one down when there is much good to be experienced! And that time on Earth is to be contemplated well, because when “all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil” (12:13-14). Obedience to God while being “under the *proverbial* sun” will ensure that what comes after is well worth it!

In the Jewish tradition, the Book of Ecclesiastes is customarily read during the week of *Sukkot* or the Feast of Tabernacles. During a season where people are encouraged to rejoice and dwell with God, there can be some frivolities in excess. So, it is recommended that one consider the sayings of Ecclesiastes to pause for a moment, and consider the transitory nature of human life when compared to God. Ecclesiastes should certainly make us consider the cycles of human existence, and the need for us to appreciate the life God has given us so that we can be given the proper judgment by Him—as opposed to the improper judgment.

Current Messianic engagement with Ecclesiastes and its message is another issue. While many read the Book of Ecclesiastes and consider its words, our presuppositions in approaching the text are often not that engaged with the many opinions that are present. These include the subjects of authorship, date, style of composition, and genre. Likewise, how much weight are we to give Ecclesiastes within the scope of the larger Biblical canon? Is Ecclesiastes a fatalistic, negative text about life? Or does Ecclesiastes’ orator use a form of communication that needs to be considered more closely? These are things that will undoubtedly come to the forefront as our approach to the Book of Ecclesiastes improves along with the rest of our Biblical Studies.²⁹

In the meantime, there is one important word that I will take to heart from Ecclesiastes: “the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion *to books* is wearying to the body” (12:12, NASU). As a Bible teacher, I do need a break from writing and research at least once in a while! If you are a teacher or Messianic pastor, enjoy life away from your ministerial duties and be sure to get some rest. Do not let life pass you by because you were so focused on your work, that you failed to consider the simple pleasures. *Take a vacation if you need to*. But that also comes with a caveat: if you have not been in the books, and have not been pursuing wisdom (8:1)—get to it so that you will know the right manner in which to speak!

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version* (NIV), © 1984, published by International Bible Society.

²⁹ For a further discussion on some of the complexities of Ecclesiastes that we need to consider, consult T. Longman, “Ecclesiastes 3: History of Interpretation,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, pp 140-149.