ECCLESIASTES:

THE QUESTIONS AND THE QUEST

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by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRO: INTERPRETATION, MEANING, AND PURPOSE

The moment you open the book of Ecclesiastes, you read what seems to be the most cynical statements in all Scripture: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." This pronouncement comes from a man who has everything: money and mansions; wisdom and wealth; power and possessions; wine and women. In the end, the wisest man to live found his wisdom to be wanting and his life to be lacking. In his pursuit to find meaning, each of these things in turn, turned out to be meaningless. So, it seems that the man who had everything actually had nothing.

Ecclesiastes tends to cause problems in the minds of Christians with its apparent gloomy outlook. It has been called "the strangest book in the Bible,"[1] the "black sheep of the Bible,"[2] the "problem child of Scripture,"[3] and the Bible's "resident alien."[4] Even in Jewish circles, there was a debate as to whether Ecclesiastes "defiles the hands."[5] People can wonder what this book is even doing here or ask the question why it is even in the Bible to begin with. Doesn't the message of the gospel mean good news? Where the expectation of Scripture is to provide joy, hope, contentment, and a promising future; the author seems cynical, pessimistic, suspicious, or even depressed.

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[1] James Lee Crenshaw, *Qoheleth: The Ironic Wink*, Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament (University of South Carolina Press, 2013), 24.

[2] Roy B. Zuck, ed., *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Baker Books, 1994), 17.

[3] Ronald B. Allen, "Seize The Moment, Meaning in Qohelet," April 1998, 1.

[4] Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, The New American Commentary (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 254.

[5] Iain W. Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 2001), 17.

How then are we to understand the message of this book? If Ecclesiastes tells me that life is vanity, then what good can it do for me? How is a book with such a gloomy perspective supposed to provide help and hope to me? Yet, if we are honest – have we not felt the same way about life from time to time? Have you never felt the same way, even if it were just for a moment? Have you ever found yourself sympathizing with any of the frustrations, futilities, and failures of life that Solomon expressed in Ecclesiastes? Have you ever desired sufficient answers for them? An honest introspection would have to say yes. And that is a primary strength of this book.

It knows you.

More specifically, God knows you. God knows your questions, frustrations, desires, and longings for answers in life. God invites you to get answers through the book of Ecclesiastes. But there is going to be some work to build a bridge. Understanding and applying the Bible has been described as building a bridge between two worlds.[6] You have the ancient world in which the Bible was written, and you have the modern world in which we live today. Some books of the Bible require more elaborate, carefully made, reinforced bridges. Some only need a 2x4 that is laid across a creek.[7] This is the opportunity presented to us with Ecclesiastes. There are so many things you can resonate with in Ecclesiastes because you live in a world that is fallen, sinful, and suffering. Yet, through the experience, trials, and failures of the wisest man to ever lived– you can also find hope, meaning, purpose, and enjoyment in this life through a proper perspective where your heart and eyes are fixated on Christ.

However, even laying down a 2x4 across a creek takes some work. As a patterns, the Bible tells us that it is not going to yield its riches and treasures to those

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[6] John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017).

[7] Matt McCullough, "Three Reasons You Should Preach Through Ecclesiastes," 9Marks, October 11, 2018, https://www.9marks.org/article/ecclesiastes/.

who are unwilling to work for it (Deut 6:6-9; Prov 2:3-6; Acts 17:11-12; 2 Tim 2:6).

Ecclesiastes has baffled people for centuries. It is commonly placed the short list of canonical books which are the most difficult to interpret and preach in the Bible and has been described as "one of the most enigmatic [pieces of literature] ever produced."[8] However, that does not mean that understanding Ecclesiastes is "vanity" and a "chasing after the wind." The reason for difficulty stem from a divergence of opinions on key issues such as authorship, when it was written, where it was written, the interpretation of key words and phrases, which portions are poetry and which are prose, the apparent lack of structure, and whether the book intends to communicate a more pessimistic or optimistic message. Furthermore, the most distressing concern about the book is some believe it lacks any gospel message. Is it no wonder why some pastors "consider it the better part of wisdom to omit Ecclesiastes from their preaching schedule."[9]

This is a great loss for the church when books of the Bible are avoided, and thus the whole counsel of God is not preached. Furthermore, the tendency to exclude this book from preaching, God's people lack the necessary "knowledge … words of delight … words of the wise … that are all given by one Shepherd" (Ecc 12:9-12). In most English translations, the word shepherd is capitalized. Truly, we cannot afford to miss the words of our faithful Shepherd. While the interpretive issues are manifold, I will give a summary of the most important issues in interpretation regarding key words, key phrases, authorship, and the perspective of the book to help glean wisdom from this book.

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[8] Knut Martin Heim, *Ecclesiastes: A Discourse Analysis of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Daniel L. Block (Zondervan Academic, 2025), 29.

[9] Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2007), 1.

Authorship

The belief that Solomon was the sole author of Ecclesiastes was the dominant view from antiquity and held prominence until the 18th and 19th century with the advent of historical criticism.[10] This method of interpretation gained popularity during the Enlightenment of western Europe (ca. 1650-1800). In essence, this is a perspective that entirely dismisses the supernatural, miraculous, or any divine intervention that is described in the Bible, or that occurred in the writing of Scripture. Therefore, the text itself is not divinely inspired and the miraculous events in the Bible can all be explained through naturally occurring events. Historical criticism, as a mindset, can be seen as an extreme form of interpretation that which presumes meaning first. Once the meaning is presumed, then the text is interpreted from that assumption.[11] Consequently, the Bible is seen simply as a compilation the writings from man which are not supernaturally inspired by God.[12]

However, prior to the advent of historical criticism, the ancient tradition of believers understood that Solomon was the author, indeed, "from antiquity until the eighteenth century, virtually all readers, interpreters, preachers, and commentators were unanimous that the author was Solomon, the son of David, who was king over all Israel in Jerusalem from 971–931 BC.[13] However, since the 18th century, this view has waned and the dominant view is that of historic criticism that there is more than one author and their identities cannot be conclusively known.[14]

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[10] Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 14:254.

[11] For an analysis of this perspective of interpretation, see Elijah Hixson et al., eds., *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism* (IVP Academic, 2019).

[12] Robert W. Yarbrough, "Should Evangelicals Embrace Historical Criticism? The Hays-Ansberry Proposal," *Themelios* 39, no. 1 (2014): 37–52.

[13] Heim, *Ecclesiastes*, 21.

[14] Craig Bartholomew, "Qoheleth in the Canon?! Current Trends in the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," *Themelios* 24, no. 3 (1999): 4–17.

From the historical criticism perspective, perceived problems in Ecclesiastes such as an assessment of life as vanity, apparent lack of a self-identified author, the futility of work, and a despair of life itself can all be reconciled through a reconstruction of how the text came into being. With this novel approach, new and speculative conjecture began to invent merely new ways in which the text came into existence, including new ideas about the authorship of the text itself.

Non-Solomonic

Those who utilized the historic criticism approach sought to resolve the question of authorship of Ecclesiastes. Rather than Solomon identify himself by name, he uses the term *qoheleth*, which is translated as "preacher," or "teacher." Rather than take the plain reading of introduction to be Solomon, advocates of historical criticism then formulated a new genre called "fictive royal autobiography." In this genre, am author would leverage a king's respect, honor, or wisdom by utilizing their identity. Simply put, the newly discovered writer of Ecclesiastes:

> "… explores reality "as if" he were Solomon, for example, imaginatively re-enacting Solomon's reign in order to … explore "life under the sun" that require great wealth and power and wisdom. He "becomes" a king within the world of the text in order to persuade his hearers of truths about the world as it is confronted by the wealthy, the powerful, and the wise – among whose tanks certainly number kings like Solomon."[15]

Frame-narrator. This "imaginative re-enacting" in Ecclesiastes is called the *frame-narrator theory*. It proposes that one man is reporting the wisdom material of another man, and therefore, are two authors of Ecclesiastes.[16] The first author – the *qoheleth* – is a cynic and a pessimist. The second author – the framer, or editor – then took these sayings of the *qoheleth* and bookended them by adding Eccl 1:2; 7:27; 12:8.

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[15] Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 27–28.

[16] Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 14:256.

Thus, the "framer" of the narrations sought to balance or correct the difficult sayings by utilizing the clout of Solomon by adding 1:1 and 12:9-14. When the book is approached in this way, it is no wonder that Ecclesiastes is simply the pessimistic, narcissistic, hedonistic, and nihilistic thoughts of a skeptic which need to be balanced and corrected. Some took this logic to an extreme and concluded that Ecclesiastes was compiled from nine different sources with an editor responsible for the final form of the book.[17]

Cynic, Narcissist, Pessimist, and Skeptic

From the historic criticism view, the message of Ecclesiastes is that of a cynic who manifests a dramatic displeasure with life under the sun, and the editor, or *framer* of the book, seeks to correct the perspective. Following in this line of reasoning, it has been common among critics to simply see Ecclesiastes as a book that is narcissistic, hedonistic, and pessimistic. In fact, the tone of Ecclesiastes is so troubling that one author believes "the Preacher's God is not out God, neither is He the God of Israel, as indicated by the complete absence of the name of Yahweh from the book." He goes on to say, "the Preacher has no personal relationship with his God, and this explains his gloomy, sub-Christian attitude, which is so far removed from the Old Testament."[18] In fact, this perspective sees the Old Testament's low point as Ecclesiastes and that the book "digs for itself its own grave."[19]

Furthermore, the cynical perspective is one that is problematic because cynicism seems to be in contrast with the author's intent, which was to provide "words of delight" (Ecc 12:10). The disposition of cynicism comes not from providing help, encouragement, or wisdom to others. Darryl Dash captures the attitude of cynicism well

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[17] Bartholomew, "Qoheleth in the Canon?! Current Trends in the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes."

[18] Kurt Kuhl, *The Old Testament, Its Origins, and Its Composition*, trans. C.T.M. Herriott (John Knox Press, 1961), 264–65. Kulh also followed the Historical Criticism approach to the Bible.

[19] Franz Delitzsch and C.F. Keil, *Ecclesiastes* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 182.

when he writes:

> "Cynicism comes from a good place: high standards. But cynicism is a dangerous way to express those standards. It gives us the luxury of being right without the responsibility of working for change. It gives us the pleasure of effortless superiority … cynicism is the worst response to high standards. It uses pessimism to condemn others and to opt out of personal responsibility."[20]

If the author is a cynic, then what should we make of Ecc 12:9-14 where the intent is to give knowledge by arranging proverbs with great care, to give words of delight, and to give words from the wise in Ecc 12:9-10? What then are we to make of the eight different exhortations to rejoice?[21] How then should we understand the intent of Ecclesiastes, when the goal is to bring the reader to the fear of God and keep his commandments? The label of cynic and pessimist seems unwarranted.

Solomonic Authorship

So, why doesn't Solomon identify himself by name? Instead, Solomon uses the Hebrew word *qoheleth*. I believe that examining how this word was used in the Old Testament sheds light on the motive to utilize this moniker. The word *qoheleth* is a participle – a verbal noun that is used as an adjective. Solomon is using the participle *qoheleth* to describe himself (adjective) as a gatherer (verb) of the assembly (noun) of God's people. The purpose of doing this is to instruct God's people, hence the English translation of *qoheleth* as teacher, preacher, or assembler.

Solomon is Qoheleth

I believe Solomon is intentional in identifying himself by not by name and royal title, but in employing the moniker *qoheleth*. The Hebrew word *qahal* means

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[20] Darryl Dash, "Fighting Church Cynicism," The Gospel Coalition, September 11, 2019, https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/columns/straight-paths/fighting-church-cynicism/.

[21] See Table B

"assembly," and it is the word that God used to describe the promises to the patriarchs that would become a numerous people, his *qahal.*

> God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a qahal of peoples (Gen 28:3)
>
> And God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a qahal of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body (Gen 35:11).
>
> When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people qahal themselves together to Aaron and said to him … (Exod 32:1).

At times, the word for assembly can be utilized in a negative way, yet it still describes the gathering of God's people:

> They *qahal* themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them… (Num 16:3)
>
> Then the whole congregation of the people of Israel *qahal* at Shiloh and set up the tent of meeting there (Josh 18:1).

So, with *qahal* being the name for the "assembly" of God's people, the person who then gathers the *qahal* is then called the *qoheleth*.

> So, David *qahal* all Israel from the Nile of Egypt to Lebo-hamath, to bring the ark of God from Kiriath-jearim (1 Chron 13:5).
>
> And David *qahal* all Israel at Jerusalem to bring up the ark of the LORD to its place, which he had prepared for it (1 Chron 15:3).
>
> Then Solomon *qahal* the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the fathers' houses of the people of Israel, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion (1 Kings 8:1).

I believe that Solomon sees himself in the line of *qoheleths* who *qahal* the people of God to reveal to them what the will of God is. The *qoheleth* places himself stands in the line of descent, in which Abraham stood, in which Moses stood, in which

Aaron stood, in which king David stood, and in which he now stands, in which the Messiah will come.[22] It is more likely the reason Solomon does not name himself as the author but rather uses the moniker of *qoheleth* because he sees himself following in a tradition of *qoheleths* who assemble, or *qahal*, God's people. The king aligns himself, like a pattern or type, of the *qoheleths* who were (mostly) not kings. This pattern would include the Patriarchs (Abraham, Issac, and Jacob), Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and king David. As Garrett says:

> "The use of the name "the Teacher" indicates that the author is distancing himself from his role as absolute monarch and taking on the mantle of the sage … what emerges from Ecclesiastes is not a royal pronouncement but the reflection of a wise man who "has been" king. As we read the book, we are more and more absorbed in the words not of "King Solomon" but of "Solomon-become-'the-Teacher.' "[23]

This interpretation explains why Solomon chose the name *qoheleth* while cohering with the claims that the writer is the son of David and ruled when Israel was a united kingdom (Ecc 1:1).

Textual correlation

Additional evidence for Solomonic authorship is the well-documented and strong correlation between Ecclesiastes and the Solomonic reign of 1 Kings regarding description of monarchial reign, wisdom, wealth, servants/slaves, sin, women, and numerous authoring proverbs.[24] Are we to take these correlations as simply that? It seems the similarities would point the reader to identity the author with the reign of Solomon.

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[22] Jim Hamilton, "The Words of the King," Kenwood Baptist Church, January 7, 2024, https://kenwoodbaptistchurch.com/sermons/the-words-of-the-king/.

[23] Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 14:264. This table is slightly modified by the addition of

[24] John D. Currid, *Ecclesiastes: A Quest for Meaning: Ecclesiastes Simply Explained* (EP Books, 2016), 8.

Table A

Topic	Ecclesiastes	1 Kings
King in Jerusalem	1:1	8:1; 11:42
Wisdom	1:16	3:12
Wealth	2:4-10	7:1-8
Slaves	2:4-10	9:20-21
View of Sin	7:20	8:46
Women	7:26-28	11:1-8
Speaker of Proverbs	12:9	4:32

Formulaic Consistency

Another consideration for Solomonic authorship is the formula which accompanies the opening of Ecclesiastes, "The words of the *Qoheleth*, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." In the opening of a book in the Old Testament, the formula "the words of" followed by an author is used in the Bible to convey who wrote that book of the Bible.

> **The words of Amos**, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake (Amos 1:1)
>
> **The words of Jeremiah**, the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin (Jeremiah 1:1)
>
> **The words of Nehemiah** the son of Hacaliah (Neh 1:1).

The book of Ecclesiastes would, at the very least, testify to the author being a king, who was the son of David, and who ruled in Jerusalem. Given those three descriptions are truthful about the author – only one man in the Bible fits that description: Solomon. Furthermore, the author claims he wrote the book "uprightly" or in a manner that honors God (Ecc 12:10). It seems short of "upright" to use a pseudonym and claim to be the king himself.

Theology and Purpose

Scholars have been divided on what contributions Ecclesiastes makes to the understanding of theology as a whole.

Theology

When the text of Ecclesiastes is carefully considered, there is a great theological contribution to the understanding of God, his character, his sovereignty, and his providence.[25]

Table B

Theological Topic	Text in Ecclesiastes
God's sovereign control over man	1:13 (cf. 3:10); 2:26; 3:1, 11, 14, 18; 5:18–20; 6:1–2; 7:14, 26; 8:15; 9:1, 7
God's providential grace	2:24–26; 3:13; 5:18–20; 8:15
God's eternality	3:11, 14; 12:5, 7
God's creatorship	3:11, 14; 7:29; 8:16–17; 11:5; 12:1, 7
God's perfection	3:14; 7:29; 8:16–17; 11:5
God's justice and holiness	2:24–26; 3:17; 5:4, 6; 7:26, 29; 8:2, 12–13; 11:9; 12:14
God's abode	5:2
God's omnipresence and omniscience	5:2, 6; 8:2, 16–17; 11:5; 12:14
God's omnipotence	7:13; 11:5
God's preservation of his saints	7:26; 8:12–13
God requires reverential fear	3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12–13; 12:1, 13
God requires obedience before sacrifice	5:1, 4, 7; 8:2; 12:1, 13
God's word	12:13

Considering the contributions to the doctrine of God's sovereignty, providence, eternality, perfection, omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience, the

[25] William Barrick D., *Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament*, Focus on the Bible Commentary Series (Christian Focus, 2012), 10.

readers should come to realize that "God, and God alone, is the sole reason why life on planet Earth has any real significance."[26] Those who would see Ecclesiastes as mere pessimism and lacking any theological or spiritual contribution have not considered the text – specially to draw near to the text of Ecclesiastes, and not be captivated by the writing of fools (Ecc 5:1).

Solomon Provides Hope in God

The most significant problem critics have with Ecclesiastes is its tone, which has been described as pessimistic, gloomy, and cynical. However, when the history of the Jewish people is considered, this criticism doesn't stand. Ecclesiastes is read on the third day of the Feast of Tabernacles which recalls Israel's wilderness wanderings (Lev 23:33-43). It was a feast that reminded them of God faithful provision in the wilderness for 40 years while also celebrating God's provision in their current harvest. Reading such a book during such a joyful festival indicates that Judaism does not take the tone of the book to be pessimistic.[27]

Table C

Text	Problem Described	Exhortation to Rejoice
1:12-2:26	Pleasure does not satisfy	2:24-26
3:1-15	Ignorance of the future	3:12
3:16-22	Injustice	3:22
5:9-19	Wealth does not satisfy	5:17
8:10-15	Injustice	8:15
9:1-10	God is inscrutable; death is certain	9:7-9
11:7-12:7	Old age and death	11:9-10; 21:1

[26] Barrick, *Ecclesiastes*, 10.

[27] Barrick, *Ecclesiastes*, 9.

Continuing in this hopeful view is the tradition of historic, conservative, evangelical Christians have read Ecclesiastes from a more optimistic perspective in that the book is *evangelistic*. In other words, the book was written with the purpose to point people to God, which was the consensus approach of the Reformers and the Puritans.[28] Therefore, the premise of Ecclesiastes is that Solomon seeks to direct our hearts to the source of contentment, satisfaction, and purpose in a world that is fallen and fleeting. Far from intending a pessimistic or cynical attitude, Solomon consistently calls his audience to rejoice in the blessings and the life they are given.[29]

Some take the numerous references to vanity as reason for a pessimistic view of the book as a whole. However, the number of occurrences of the words "good," "wisdom," and "God" exceed the number of occurrences of "vanity," "trouble," or "evil."[30] The numbers alone don't bear out the claims of the pessimistic perspective. Using this metric alone would seem to be relying on one angle of interpretation, which would likely be misleading and misunderstandings.

> "… the real reason that no book in the OT is as disparaged as Ecclesiastes is simply because no book is so misunderstood … consequently, that which is criticized for having no joy is really the book that brings joy.[31]

I would agree, and I think allowing the text to speak for itself bears this out. While joy may be too strong of a word for an overall theme of the book, contentment in God and enjoyment of his blessings could better communicate all that Solomon is pondering without glossing over the serious and sobering nature of his writings.

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[28] Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 14:271.

[29] Duane A. Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 275.

[30] Barrick, *Ecclesiastes*, 12.

[31] Currid, *Ecclesiastes*, 5.

Table D

Occurrences	Word or Phrase
52	good
52	*wisdom/wise*
40	God
40	*heart*
38	*vanity/emptiness*
37	*time*
33	*trouble*
30	*evil*
29	*under the sun*
26	*live/life*
17	*rejoice/joy*
12	*give/gift*
6	*eat and drink*

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Purpose

Knowing the perspective of Solomon also helps to understand his purpose. At this point, the text speaks for itself:

> Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth … the end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Ecc 12:9-10, 13-14).

I believe of the stated purpose for the book speaks for itself.

Words and Phrases

Translation is always that. It's not deciphering a code. There is often not a one-to-one translation of many words from one language to another. This is why translation is a science and an art. This is true of many words from Hebrew to English, and Ecclesiastes is no exception. A key word to understanding the message of Ecclesiastes the word that is translates variously as "vanity," "futility," or "meaningless."

What is *hebel*?

In our English Bibles, the first words of Ecclesiastes bear the proclamation of Solomon saying that that everything is "vanity." The Hebrew word is *hebel* (pronounced hev-el), and it has been translated, or interpreted rather, in manifold ways including "meaningless," "completely meaningless," "useless," "delusion," or "absolute futility." The word *hebel* occurs 38 times in Ecclesiastes and bookends the whole of the message, which tells us that this phrase encompasses its meaning and message. Based on the number of different translations of the word, it's meaning has long been debated. Even so, the word *hebel* is Ecclesiastes is "superlative, repetitive, and comprehensive."[32] Therefore, it is important that we understand this word so that we understand what Solomon is saying seeking to teach.

The Hebrew word *hebel* literally means "breath," although, for plain reasons, it is also employed metaphorically in the Old Testament to refer to idols.[33] One of the difficulties of translation is when a word in one language does not have a direct correlation in another language. A word in Hebrew can have a range of meaning in English. In such cases, context should allow for the best translation of what a Hebrew

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[32] Brian Borgman, *Don't Waste Your Breath* (Free Grace Press, 2023), 17.

[33] Deut 32:31; 1 Ki 16:13, 16:26; Ps 31:6; Jer 8:19, 10:8, Jonah 2:8.

word would mean in English. Of all the times this word is used in the Old Testament, roughly half occur in Ecclesiastes. Therefore, we are given an abundance of use outside Ecclesiastes to bring clarity to it meaning and use. However, the way and the context in which the word *hebel* is used helps us to more clearly understand its meaning.

> I loathe my life; I would not live forever. Leave me alone, for my days are a **breath** (Job 7:16).
>
> Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere **breath**! Selah (Ps 39:5).
>
> Those of low estate are but a **breath**; those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a **breath** (Ps 62:9).
>
> So he made their days vanish like a **breath**, and their years in terror (Ps 78:33).
>
> Man is like a **breath**; his days are like a passing shadow (Ps 144:4).
>
> The getting of treasures by lying is a fleeting **vapor** and a snare of death (Prov 21:6).
>
> When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you! The wind will carry them off; a **breath** will take them away (Isa 57:13).

It is important to take note that in each of the uses above, there is a consistent theme of brevity, a shortness of life, or imminent death. When you read Genesis 4, we learn of the first recorded fratricide in history, Cain's murder of Abel. The Hebrew word for Abel's name is *hebel*, which depicts the shortness and brevity of his life; it even connotes his death.[34] I believe this is the primary meaning of the word in Ecclesiastes, and there are some other passages where *hebel* would best be interpreted as vanity, or futility. Therefore, it is important to allow the context to dictate the translation of *hebel.*

Furthermore, the precise Hebrew word for vanity or emptiness is *rîq*

[34] Allen C. Myers, ed., *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, Revised Edition (Eerdmans, 1987), 4.

(pronounced *reek*). So, while Solomon has a word at his disposal which would specifically mean "vanity" or "meaninglessness," he instead used a word that primarily communicates "brevity" as the primary meaning and a "vanity" as a secondary meaning. The English word "meaningless," however, is a translation whose connotations in the English are simply too strong and even have nihilistic undertones of hopelessness.

Given this evidence, we can interpret Solomon's opening words to be "Breath of breaths, says the Teacher, breath of breaths! All is breath." This means that Solomon's argument is not that life is meaningless, but that in light of eternity, it means less. In other words, it is brief. Life is short. Pain is real. Death is a certainty. Therefore, the thrust is "that 'all' things on earth are short-lived, transitory, and lacking in lasting substance."[35] Therefore, if Solomon's primary use of the word *hebel* in his introduction is taken to mean "breath," then his primary purpose could be to teach us how to not "waste our breath" and to enjoy it while it lasts.

Under the Sun

Another important phrase unique to Solomon is "under the sun." It occurs 29 times, and it is often used in the same phrase with *hebel.*[36] It's companion phrase, "under the heavens" occurs only three times within Ecclesiastes (Ecc 1:13; 2:3; 3:1) but occurs outside of Ecclesiastes eight times (Gen 1:9; 6:17; Exod 17:14; Deut 7:24; 9:14; 25:19; 29:19; 2 Kgs 14:27). The two phrases them communicate the same thing with "sun" referring to the celestial body, "heavens" then referring to the sky, and "under" taken as an indication of the location of life on the earth.[37] Therefore, the phrase "under the sun" has been understood as "life on earth" or "the collective human experience."

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[35] Currid, *Ecclesiastes*, 16.

[36] For instances where both occur with each other, see Ecc 1:14; 2:11; 17, 19; 4:7; 5:12; 9:9.

[37] Heim, *Ecclesiastes*, 33.

Chasing After the Wind

Another phrase that is unique to Solomon is "chasing after the wind." It is a metaphor that is used to create a sense of futility and despair when meaning and purpose is sought in things "under the sun." One author reviews the entire verse and quantifies Solomon's thoughts as "a graphic picture of effort expended with no results gained since no one can catch wind by running after it" (Glenn).

Date of Authorship

Those who would assert Solomonic authorship would date the book to the lifetime of Solomon, which is the 10th century B.C. However, those who would take the view that Solomon is not the author typically date the book around 500 years after Solomon's reign.

Genre

Ecclesiastes is not a narrative, and thus it does not address a specific historical situation, like the Fall, the Exodus, or the Exile. Rather, it is wisdom literature, and is to be read alongside Proverbs, Job, and Song of Songs. Taken together, these books are referred to as "the heart of the Bible." We can be sure of Ecclesiastes belongs in this category is literature because of the lack of references to covenants, the Mosaic Law, the Temple, and Promised Land which greatly occupy the writers of Genesis to Malachi.[38] The focus of wisdom literature is how humanity can live righteously within God's creation.

Structure of Ecclesiastes

The structure of the book is long debated. For ages scholars have exerted themselves find a coherent structure to Ecclesiastes. This has led for some to conclude that "all attempts to show, in the whole, not only oneness of spirit, but also a genetic

[38] Eric Ortlund, *Ecclesiastes* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2024), 5.

process, an all-embracing plan, and an organic connection, have hitherto failed, and must fail."[39] This conclusion, in which a number of scholars follow, essentially leads to authors formulating their own structure of the text based on little more than personal opinion.[40]

Rationale: Recursive and Repetitive

Today, there is an accepted structure and format for books. There is a table of contents, an introduction, maybe even a foreword by a popular author, then comes chapter divisions, a summary, and even an epilogue. In the New Testament, especially within the epistles, discourse analysis brings significant clarity to the structure of the New Testament letters with introductions, greetings, divisions of thoughts, a flow of thought, and benedictions.

However, ancient writers did not structure their books in the same way we do today. However, they did follow a writing etiquette which provides clues as to how they structured their writings, and a primary etiquette would be repetition. So, an ancient author may start with a though and expand on that thought. But then end of that thought was denoted by a reptation of the opening statement. This clear pattern emerges upon simple examination of the text in Ecclesiastes.

Today, if an author desired to write some form of poetry, it would be written to where there was a pattern of rhyme. However, in ancient writings authors signaled poetry not by rhyme but repetition. It is the repetition, or recursive writing, in Solomon's writing that signals the poetry and the chapter divisions that inform us of the structure of Ecclesiastes.[41]

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[39] Delitzsch and Keil, *Ecclesiastes*, 188.

[40] Addison G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *The Catholic Bible Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1968): 313–34.

[41] For a more extensive analysis on how recursive and repetitive phrases are utilized by the Old Testament writers, see Peter J. Gentry, *How to Read and Understand the Biblical Prophets* (Crossway,

Structuring of Ecclesiastes

The proposed structure is based on two primary divisions of the text, along with a prologue and poem to open the book, and then a poem and epilogue to close the book.[42]

Prologue (1:1-2)

The prologue consists of Solomon identifying himself (1:1) along with writing a proverb (1:2). As we have seen, he purposely identifies himself as the *qoheleth*, who teaches the *qahal* of God's people.

Poem: On Toil (1:3-11)

Next, Solomon writes a poem, which is his conclusion on the matter of all his inquiries into life. Starting with the conclusion, he then allows the reader to know how he arrived at this conclusion with each successive section of thought.

First Division (1:12-6:9)

The first division is made clear by a consistent closing of each section of thought with the refrain containing "chasing after the wind," or "a striving after the wind." This phrase only occurs in the first half of the book. As such, it is an indicator of the division between to the two primary sections of Ecclesiastes. This pattern is seen at the conclusion of eight sections of thought (Ecc 1:12-15, 16-18; 2:1-11, 12-17, 18-26; 3:1-4:6, 4:7-16; and 4:17-6:9). Given the repetition of the phrase and that it ends at Ecc 6:9, it is a clear signal of the end of the first major division in the text.

Second Division (6:10-11:6)

The second division of the text is structed by the phrase "man cannot know,"

2017).

[42] Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx." This section is a summary of Addison's article.

or “who can find out” in Ecc 7:24, 29; 8:17; 9:6, 10, 12; 10:15; 11:2, 6. As with the previous section, each of these phrases conclude a successive section of thought. Given the repetition of the phrase and is cessation in Ecc 11:6, it is a clear signal of the conclusion of the second major division of the text.

Poem: On Youth and Old Age (11:7-12:8)

The *qoheleth* then beings the end of his message as he calls on the elderly to remember the years of life that God has given them, and then he calls on the youthful not to forget God in their early years.

Epilogue (12:9-14)

The epilogue, consisting of sex verses, is the summary of all his findings, and an exhortation to “fear God and keep his commandments.”

Rationale: Gematria

A further method for understating the structure of Ecclesiastes is gematria. Gematria is the practice of reading a word or a phrase as a number. Along with the principles of gematria, the bare numeric facts about the verses provide strong internal evidence as to how the book was intended to be structured. Many have observed that the book of Ecclesiastes (1:1-12:14) contains 222 verses, and the halfway point of the book is Ecc 6:9. Thus, the first half of the book (1:1-6:9) contains 111 verses, and then second half of the book (6:10-12:14) contain 111 verses.

This, indeed, is interesting. Furthermore, if you count the numeric vale of the Hebrew word *hebel*, you get 37.[43] In Ecc 1:2, the word *hebel* appears 3 times. If you took the numerical value of *hebel*, multiplied that by the number of times it the word appears in Ecc 1:2, you get 111 (37x3=111), which is the number of verses in the first

[43] *Hebel* is in the singular in 1:2, which accounts for its numerical value being 37.

half of the book. The significance of the number 111 is that it is a multiple of *hebel.* Additionally, the phrase "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!" (1:1, 12:8) form an *inclusio* or "bookends" the text. Within the bookends (1:2; 12:8) of Ecclesiastes, there are 216 verses. The first word of Ecclesiastes is *dabar*, which has a numerical value of 216.

Finally, the epilogue (12:9-14), is comprised of six verses and begins with the word *yoter,* which is translated as "besides" and "beyond" in the ESV. This word begins with the Hebrew word *waw*, it also carries a meaning of "six additional." Being that is the repeated in 12:9 and 12:12, the author could be communicating "six additional … six additional" as the author adds six additional verses to the 216, which brings the whole book to a perfectly balanced 222 verses.

You can judge for yourself the likelihood of this being mere chance, or the chance of multiple authors structing the book this way by mere chance. The more likely conclusion is that Solomon, the sole author, is counting his verses and letting his readers know; he has structured his writing with thought, purpose, and balance.

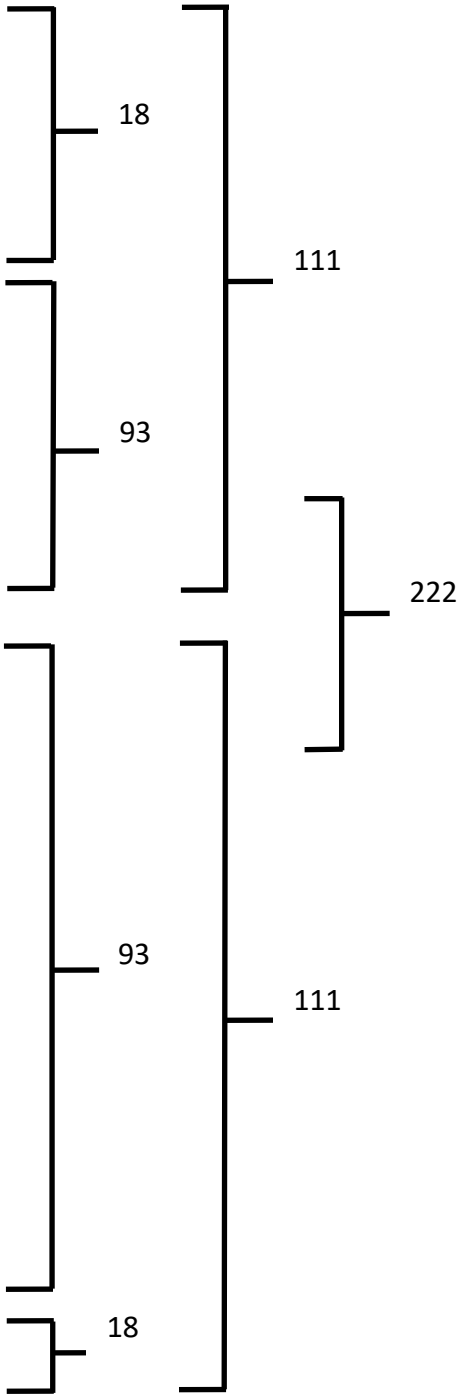
Structure

Therefore, based repetition and numeric inquiry into the text, a uniform and logical structure emerges:

1. **Prologue** (1:1)
2. **Poem**: On Toil (1:2-11)
3. **First Division**: Solomon's Investigation of Life (1:12-6:9)
   - 3.1. Double Introduction
     - 3.1.1. First Introduction (1:12-15) † *ends with vanity/chasing after wind*
     - 3.1.2. Second Introduction (1:16-18) †
   - 3.2. Inquiry into Joy and Pleasure (2:1-11) †
   - 3.3. Inquiry on Wisdom and Folly (2:12-17) †
   - 3.4. Inquiry on Toil
     - 3.4.1. Toil: We will Have to Leave It to Others (2:18-26) †
     - 3.4.2. Toil: Unable to Hit the Right Time (3:1-4:6) †
     - 3.4.3. Toil: Problem of the Second One (4:7-16) †
     - 3.4.4. Toil: You Can Lost It All (4:17-6:9) †
4. **Second Division**: Solomon's Conclusions (6:10-11:16)
   - 4.1. Double Conclusion
     - 4.1.1. Man cannot know what God has done, cannot know what is good (6:10)
     - 4.1.2. Man cannot find out what comes after (6:11-12)
   - 4.2. Conclusion 1: Man Cannot Find Out What is Good for Him to Do (7:1-8:17)
     - 4.2.1. On Prosperity (7:1-14)* *ends with not find out/who can find out*
     - 4.2.2. On Justice and Wickedness (7:15-24) *
     - 4.2.3. On Women and Folly (7:25-29) *
     - 4.2.4. On The Wise Man and the King (8:1-17)*
   - 4.3. Conclusion 2: Man Cannot Find Out What Comes After
     - 4.3.1. He Knows He Will Die; the Dead Know Nothing (9:1-6) *
     - 4.3.2. There is No Knowledge in Sheol (9:7-10) *
     - 4.3.3. Man Does Not Know His Time (9:11-12) *
     - 4.3.4. Man Does Not Know What Will Be (9:13-10:15) *
     - 4.3.5. Man Does Not Know What Evil Will Come (10:16-11:2) *
     - 4.3.6. Man Does Not Know What Good Will Come (11:3-6) ***
5. **Poem**: On Youth and Old Age (11:7-12:8)
6. **Epilogue** (12:9-14)

The visual gematria of Ecclesiastes would be as follows.

1. **Prologue** (1:1)
2. **Poem** (1:2-11)
3. **First Division** (1:12-6:9)
   - 3.1. Double Introduction
     - 3.1.1. (1:12-15)
     - 3.1.2. (1:16-18)
   - 3.2. (2:1-11)
   - 3.3. (2:12-17)
   - 3.4. Inquiry on Toil
     - 3.4.1. (2:18-26)
     - 3.4.2. (3:1-4:6)
     - 3.4.3. (4:7-16)
     - 3.4.4. (4:17-6:9)
4. **Second Division** (6:10-11:16)
   - 4.1. Double Conclusion
     - 4.1.1. (6:10-11)
     - 4.1.2. (6:12)
   - 4.2. Conclusion 1 (7:1-8:17)
     - 4.2.1. (7:1-14)
     - 4.2.2. (7:15-24)
     - 4.2.3. (7:25-29)
     - 4.2.4. (8:1-17)
   - 4.3. Conclusion 2 (9:16-11:6)
     - 4.3.1. (9:1-6)
     - 4.3.2. (9:7-10)
     - 4.3.3. (9:11-12)
     - 4.3.4. (9:13-10:15)
     - 4.3.5. (10:16-11:2)
     - 4.3.6. (11:3-6)
5. **Poem**: On Youth and Old Age (11:7-12:8)
6. **Epilogue** (12:9-14)



Conclusion

Ecclesiastes is written by Solomon with a purpose to give "words of knowledge" to the people of God. He has done so, not from the perspective of a king, but as a *qoheleth* to the *qahal* of God's people. In doing so, he has purposefully and brilliantly structured the book with a divine and mathematical precision. He wrote the book in his twilight years as a reflection on his life in seeking to leave wisdom behind to others – essentially seeking to bless others with his wisdom. Rather than writing from a pessimistic perspective, Solomon is providing a realistic look at life "under the sun," which is in a fallen and fleeting world. If Solomon gives a sense of pessimism, it is purposeful. It is not the goal, but only as meant to accomplish his goal – he is "demolishing to build."[44] Let's take a look at the bridge Solomon is building from his ancient world to our modern day world so that we can propagate the wisdom of God in our lives and the lives of others around us.

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[44] Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn, and A Time to Dance* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1989), 19.

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