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At the end of the book of Ecclesiastes, a wise father warns his son concerning the multiplication of books: “Furthermore, of these, my son, be warned. There is no end to the making of many books!” (12:12). The Targum to this biblical book characteristically expands the thought and takes it in a different, even contradictory, direction: “My son, take care to make many books of wisdom without end.”

When applied to commentaries, both statements are true. The past twenty years have seen a significant increase in the number of commentaries available on each book of the Bible. However, for those interested in grappling seriously with the meaning of the text, such proliferation should be seen as a blessing rather than a curse. No single commentary can do it all. In the first place, commentaries reflect different theological and methodological perspectives. We can learn from others who have a different understanding of the origin and nature of the Bible, but we also want commentaries that share our fundamental beliefs about the biblical text. Second, commentaries are written with different audiences in mind. Some are addressed primarily to laypeople, others to clergy, and still others to fellow scholars. A third consideration, related to the previous two, is the subdisciplines the commentator chooses to draw from to shed light on the biblical text. The possibilities are numerous, including philology, textual criticism, genre/form criticism, redaction criticism, ancient Near Eastern background, literary conventions, and more. Finally, commentaries differ in how extensively they interact with secondary literature, that is, with what others have said about a given passage.

The Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms has a definite audience in mind. We believe the primary users of commentaries are scholars, ministers, seminary students, and Bible study leaders. Of these groups, we have most in mind clergy and future clergy, namely, seminary students. We have tried to make the commentary accessible to nonscholars.
by putting most of the technical discussion and interaction with secondary literature in the footnotes. We do not mean to suggest that such information is unimportant. We simply concede that, given the present state of the church, it is the rare layperson who will read such technical material with interest and profit. We hope we are wrong in this assessment, and if we are not, that the future will see a reverse in this trend. A healthy church is a church that nourishes itself with constant attention to God’s words in Scripture, in all their glorious detail.

Since not all commentaries are alike, what are the features that characterize this series? The message of the biblical book is the primary focus of each commentary, and the commentators have labored to expose God’s message for his people in the book they discuss. This series also distinguishes itself by restricting its coverage to one major portion of the Hebrew Scriptures, namely, the Psalms and Wisdom books (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs). These biblical books provide a distinctive contribution to the canon. Although we can no longer claim that they are neglected, their unique content makes them harder to fit into the development of redemptive history and requires more effort to hear their distinctive message.

The book of Psalms is the literary sanctuary. Like the physical sanctuary structures of the Old Testament, it offers a textual holy place where humans share their joys and struggles with brutal honesty in God’s presence. The book of Proverbs describes wisdom, which on one level is skill for living, the ability to navigate life’s actual and potential pitfalls; but on another level, this wisdom presents a pervasive and deeply theological message: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7). Proverbs also raises a disturbing issue: the sages often motivate wise behavior by linking it to reward, but in reality, bad things happen to good people, the wise are not always rewarded as they expect. This raises the question of the justice of God. Both Job and Ecclesiastes struggle with the apparent disconnect between God’s justice and our actual life experience. Finally, the Song of Songs is a passionate, sensuous love poem that reminds us that God is interested in more than just our brains and our spirits; he wants us to enjoy our bodies. It reminds us that we are not merely a soul encased in a body but whole persons made in God’s image.

Limiting the series to the Psalms and Wisdom books has allowed us to tailor our work to the distinctive nature of this portion of the canon. With some few exceptions in Job and Ecclesiastes, for instance, the material in these biblical books is poetic and highly literary, and so the commentators have highlighted the significant poetic conventions employed in each book. After an introduction discussing important issues that affect the interpretation of the book (title, authorship, date, language, style, text, ancient Near Eastern background, genre, canonicity, theological message, connection to the New Testament, and structure), each commentary proceeds section by section through the biblical text. The authors provide their own translation, with
explanatory notes when necessary, followed by a substantial interpretive section (titled “Interpretation”) and concluding with a section titled “Theological Implications.” In the interpretation section, the emphasis is on the meaning of the text in its original historical setting. In the theological implications section, connections with other parts of the canon, both Old and New Testament, are sketched out along with the continuing relevance of each passage for us today. The latter section is motivated by the recognition that, while it is important to understand the individual contribution and emphasis of each book, these books now find their place in a larger collection of writings, the canon as a whole, and it is within this broader context that the books must ultimately be interpreted.

No two commentators in this series see things in exactly the same way, though we all share similar convictions about the Bible as God’s Word and the belief that it must be appreciated not only as ancient literature but also as God’s Word for today. It is our hope and prayer that these volumes will inform readers and, more important, stimulate reflection on and passion for these valuable books.

The book of Ecclesiastes is one of the most intriguing and difficult books in the canon. Qohelet concludes time and again that life is enigmatic, and at times so is the interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes. Craig Bartholomew is marvelously prepared to guide us in an exploration of this small, yet important book. He combines his expertise as a scholar of the Hebrew Bible with an understanding of the canon as a whole, the history of interpretation of the book, and philosophy. He calls on all these skills in his exposition of the book, and we, his readers, are the beneficiaries.

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Author’s Preface

Writing a lengthy commentary on Ecclesiastes is a privilege and a challenge. Undoubtedly myriads of my predecessors in this respect have felt as I have about this enigmatic book: as befits its content, it is like an octopus—just when you think you have all the tentacles pinned down, you notice one still waving around!

Many friends have helped in the writing of this book. My research assistant David Beldman has been of inestimable help in tracking down sources, assembling the bibliography, and in interacting with my work and getting it into final shape. After David left for the UK, Sean Purcell took on this role. I am most grateful to John Hultink and Redeemer University College for making it possible for me to have such resourceful assistants. Al Wolters, Ryan O’Dowd, and Tremper Longman III have helped improve the manuscript through their close reading of it. Brenda Stephenson, my colleague in psychology at Redeemer, was particularly helpful in developing the psychological reading of Ecclesiastes in the postscript to the commentary. Jim Kinney and Wells Turner of Baker Academic have been a joy to work with, and I am grateful both for their patience in waiting for the commentary to appear and for the work of Baker’s editorial team.

Readers should note that because the Hebrew in this commentary is all transliterated, I have gone against common practice by putting Hebrew verse numbers in brackets after the English number where the numbers differ.

I am glad to dedicate this volume to my mother, who remains sorely missed, and to Carolyn Gird, a true friend. They are both women who fear the Lord and are worthy of praise.

A good commentary leads the reader to the text, and my hope and prayer is that this volume will encourage readers to wrestle themselves with the fecund text of Ecclesiastes.

Craig Bartholomew
Ancaster, Ontario, Canada
October 2007
I.
Frame Narrative:
Prologue
(1:1–11)

Translation

1. The words of Qohelet, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
2. "Utterly enigmatic," says Qohelet, "utterly enigmatic, everything is enigmatic."
3. "What is the benefit for humankind in all one's labor at which one labors under the sun?"
4. A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth stands forever.
5. And the sun rises and the sun sets, and it hurries to its place where it rises again.

1. The vocalization of the construct hābēl hābālîm, which occurs twice in this verse, is unusual. Many take it as an indication of Aramaic influence and thus as supporting a late date for Ecclesiastes. Fredericks (Qoheleth’s Language, 222) disputes this. Cf. Schoors, Preacher, 1:75.

2. Literally “for the man.” Qohelet has humankind in mind. See interpretation.

3. This is the first occurrence of the relative še in Ecclesiastes. Qohelet’s extensive use of še (68 times) is used by scholars to argue for a late date for Ecclesiastes because še becomes dominant in late Hebrew. Fredericks (Qoheleth’s Language, 102–4) disputes this. Schoors (Preacher, 1:56), however, asserts that “the distribution is such that Qohelet’s use of še betrays either a northern origin or a late date. Which of the two explanations must be preferred cannot be decided on the sole basis of the relative pronoun.”

4. Because of the participles that follow in vv. 5–6, some commentators transpose the waw and zayin in wēzārah so as to read it also as a participle. However, the Hebrew MSS as a whole strongly attest to wēzārah, and I retain this form here. See Seow, Ecclesiastes, 106.
6 Blowing northward and turning southward,
    round and round goes the wind,
    and the wind returns to its circuits.
7 All the streams flow into the sea,
    but the sea is not full;
    to the place to which the streams flow,
    there they continue to flow.
8 Everything is wearisome; mankind is unable to articulate it.
The eye is not satiated by seeing,
    nor is the ear filled by hearing.
9 Whatever was is what will be,
    and whatever has been done is what will be done,
    so there is nothing new under the sun.
10 If there exists a thing about which one can say,
    “See, this is new,”
    it already existed in the ages that were before us.
11 There is no remembrance of those who came before;
    nor will those who are still to come
    be remembered by those who come after them.

Interpretation

3 The words of Qohelet, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

1:1. Title. This verse is the title for the book. The expression “the words of” occurs frequently in the OT to introduce collections of sayings (cf. Jer. 1:1; Amos 1:1; Prov. 30:1; 31:1). Thus in the title the narrator introduces what follows as a collection assembled by one “Qohelet.” “Words of” thus gives an

5. There is some debate about how to translate šābîm, as “return” or in the sense of “again,” as here. Either way, the point of the text is the continuous, circular motion of the waters.
6. Whybray (“Qoheleth as a Theologian,” 248–49) argues that yĕgê ʿîm (wearisome) is more likely related to the noun yĕgîa (effort or the result of effort) so that “wearisome” should rather be translated as “in constant activity.” However, Whybray does acknowledge that in the two other places in the OT in which yĕgê ʿîm occurs (Deut. 25:18; 2 Sam. 17:2), it does seem to mean “weary.”
7. The use of lē here indicates the agent. See RJW §280.
8. Min is here used to indicate means (RJW §320).
9. Indefinite use of mah. See RJW §125.
10. There is some discussion of this verb’s tense. See Isaksson, Studies, 75–76. There is nothing important at stake in the decision taken.
11. The Hebrew syntax here is difficult. I follow Gordis (Koheleth, 207) and Seow (Ecclesiastes, 110) in taking yēs dābār as having the force of a conditional sentence. Cf. RJW §479.
indication of the genre of the book. In 12:9–10 the narrator elaborates on the activity involved in bringing together this collection: Qohelet taught knowledge to the people, and he pondered and sought out and arranged many proverbs; he sought to find delightful words, and he wrote truth plainly. As we will see there, “words of” should therefore not just be thought of as sayings randomly assembled but as a careful, reflective gathering and crafting of written material into a literary whole.

The nature of Ecclesiastes as collected and arranged sayings is probably further implied by the name qōhelet. Numerous suggestions have been made about the meaning of this name, which occurs seven times in the book (1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8, 9, 10), once with the definite article (12:8). The most likely derivation of the word is from the verb qbl, “gather” or “assemble.” The feminine participial form here is not unusual in the OT in reference to particular offices in Israel. Thus Qohelet could be thought of as the one who gathers Israel or who addresses the gathering—hence the translation by some as “the preacher”—or, in my view, as one who gathers material for education of the public. Indeed, there is no reason why qōhelet may not refer to both the one who teaches the public and the one who carefully gathers material for public education. The idea of qōhelet as the one who gathers the assembly seems less likely—the emphasis in 12:9–14 is on qōhelet as one who gathers material and teaches. Fox suggests that qōhelet means “teacher to the public,” and he rightly discerns parallels with the personification of wisdom as a woman in Prov. 1–9 in which she preaches in the public areas of the city. The title associates Qohelet with Solomon, as we will see below, and in 1 Kings the verb qbl is used of Solomon gathering the elders of Israel (1 Kings 8:1: yaqhēl), and in 1 Kings 8:22 he addresses the public.

12. Galling (Prediger, 276–99) approximates this view. See Bartholomew, Reading Ecclesiastes, 73–74.

13. See Ezra 2:55, 57, and Neh. 7:59. On the feminine ending having a masculine referent, see IBHS §6.6a. Kamenetzky (“Rätselname Kohleth,” 227) finds the comparison with Ezra 2:55, 57, and Neh. 7:59 unconvincing because the feminine forms there are family names. He argues that qōhelet is in the feminine form because it best expresses the individuality of the designated object. With regard to the feminine form, Hengstenberg (“Ecclesiastes,” 594) notes, “The only correct explanation of this is, that Solomon was called Koheleth because he was personified Wisdom, hḥkmḥ, and that Wisdom spoke through him.”

14. Joüon (“Sur le nom de Qoheleth”) argues that Qohelet is an orator of the people, not just of an elite. See my discussion of 12:9.

15. Ullendorff (“Meaning of qḥlt”) follows Ginsberg’s suggestion that qōhelet can only be a translation of an Aramaic form, and he goes on to note that in Aramaic-Syriac qbl means not only “to summon an assembly” but also “litigious, pertinax.” Thus he suggests that qōhelet may mean “the arguer.” However, as discussed in the introduction, it is unlikely that Ecclesiastes is a translation from Aramaic.

16. Fox, Ecclesiastes, 3.

assembly (qĕhal). Of particular relevance to Qohelet as the one who gathers the material set before us in this book is all the wisdom that Solomon gathered (cf. 1 Kings 4:29–34).

That we are to think of Qohelet as Solomon is made clear by the phrase “the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” “King in Jerusalem” could refer to David or Qohelet, but in the light of 1:12 it is best to take it to refer to Qohelet. Only David and Solomon were kings over Israel in Jerusalem. “The son of David” must refer to Solomon. As established in the introduction, Qohelet is not really Solomon; what we have here is a royal fiction. In the interests of the journey in quest of wisdom that is to unfold in this book around the figure of Qohelet, we are to think of him as a Solomonic figure: wealthy, particularly wise, and with great authority.

As king in Jerusalem we should also note that this is the leader of God’s people and someone familiar with the Israelite traditions as they have been embodied in the Sinai covenant and the Davidic covenant. We would not therefore expect Qohelet to be an unbeliever but someone who knows the ways of the LORD and whose responsibility it is to promote those ways among God’s people.

“Qohelet” is thus a kind of nickname for the central character of the book whose journey of gathering wisdom for the people the narrator presents to us. It is hard to know whether we are to think of Qohelet as a historical person. The literary nature of Ecclesiastes means that Qohelet may be a fictional construct by means of which the narrator presents his teaching. However, the narrator’s comments about Qohelet in 12:9–14 incline me toward the view that Qohelet is most probably a historical person.

1:2. Statement of the theme of the book. Verse 2 and its virtual repetition in 12:8 are an inclusion that states the theme of Ecclesiastes. It is common in biblical literature to find a theme stated at the beginning and end of a section as a way of indicating what the section is all about. The word for “enigmatic” is hebel, which occurs here twice in a superlative construction and once in

18. Kamenetzky (“Rätselname Koheleth”) argues that the background to the name Qohelet is found particularly in Chronicles, in which forms of the root qhl are regularly associated first with David (1 Chron. 28:1, 8; 29:1, 10, 20), then with Solomon (2 Chron. 1:3, 5; 5:2–3; 6:3). Kamenetzky argues, therefore, that the author of Ecclesiastes had access to the books of Chronicles and that Ecclesiastes must be dated later than Chronicles (ibid., 228). Chronicles was most likely written in the Persian period (539–333 BC), though some argue for a dating as late as the mid- to early third century. See discussion on dating in R. K. Duke, “Chronicles, Book of,” in Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books, ed. W. T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 164–71.

19. So Longman, Ecclesiastes, 1; and N. Lohfink, Qoheleth, 10.
relation to ‘everything.’ In Hebrew, the way to express a superlative is to say “enigma of enigmas,” which means “utterly enigmatic.” Similar expressions in the OT are “holy of holies” (that is, most holy) and “song of songs” (that is, the best song). This thematic statement by Qohelet is thus strong and emphatic. This is further enhanced (as if it needed it) by the repetition of the superlative, the further statement that everything is enigmatic, and the repetitive alliteration in the Hebrew of the letter hebrew. Qohelet here is represented as making as strongly as possible his point that he sees everything as utterly enigmatic. This shocking statement of the theme by the ruler of God’s people in Jerusalem anticipates the journey he will embark on and the conclusions he will come to.

Hebel is a key word in Ecclesiastes, occurring thirty-eight times. Traditionally translated as “vanity,” in recent decades an astonishing variety of translations of hebel have been proposed, such as “meaningless,” “useless” (GNB), “absurd,” “futility,” “bubble,” “transience,” and “breath.” The literal meaning of hebel would appear to be breath or vapor. Isaiah 57:13 is an example of this usage, in which hebel parallels ruah (wind): “When you cry out, let your assemblage of idols deliver you! But the wind will carry them off; a breath [hebel] will take them away. But the one who takes refuge in me shall inherit the land and possess my holy mountain.” However, in the majority of places in the OT where hebel is used—and in Ecclesiastes in particular—it is used metaphorically, and the challenge is to work out in this context the connotations of hebel.

Seow, with others, maintains that Ecclesiastes uses hebel in a variety of ways, so that no one translation covers all uses. He retains “vanity” as the translation “for want of an adequate alternative.” He notes the clear negative connotation of hebel in Ecclesiastes and points out that hebel is used of human life and experience, not of God or the universe in general. “The view that ‘everything’ is hebel, then, reflects not so much Qohelet’s cosmology as

20. IBHS §14.5b.
21. See Jarick, “Hebrew Book of Changes,” for insightful comments about the poetic implications of the orthographic similarities between “everything” (hakkōl) and “enigmatic” (hebel).
22. Longman, Ecclesiastes, e.g., 59.
23. Barucq, Eclesiaste, 27–28; and Fox, Ecclesiastes, xix, although he translates hebel as “futility” in his translation.
24. See Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 57, but note that he changes his translation of hebel as he finds appropriate throughout the book. Krüger (Qoheleth, 42) translates v. 2 as “Futile and fleeting, said Qoheleth, futile and fleeting! All (that) is futile.”
26. Levy, Qoheleth, 12; and Braun, Kohelet, 45.
27. Fredericks, Coping with Transience, 11–32.
28. N. Lohfink, Qoheleth, 19.
30. Seow, Ecclesiastes, 102.
it does his anthropology. What is *hebel* cannot be grasped—neither physically nor intellectually. It cannot be controlled.”

Seow’s approach alerts us that how we translate *hebel* will depend to a significant extent on how we read the book as a whole; thus the hermeneutical spiral of interpretation is unavoidable. Rather than his anthropology, what is at stake in Qohelet’s quest is his *epistemology*, how we come to know such that we can trust the results of our explorations. Qohelet embarks on a quest for knowledge, and it is this exploration of the meaning of life that continually runs down into the conclusion: utterly *hebel*. In this respect Qohelet’s quest does indeed include his view of God—Qohelet is after all king in Jerusalem—and of the cosmos.

Douglas Miller rightly notes that in order to understand *hebel* in Ecclesiastes we need to take seriously its metaphoric and symbolic nature. He argues that *hebel*, whose basic meaning is vapor, is a tensive symbol: it holds together a set of meanings but cannot be exhausted by any one of them. Miller discerns three referents of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes: insubstantiality, transience, and foulness. He notes the significance of *hebel* being both motto (1:2 and 12:8) and refrain in the book. In the motto, according to Miller, *hebel* functions multivalently to refer to the totality of human experience, whereas in the refrains the referents are focused by the contexts.

Ecclesiastes does use *hebel* with a variety of nuances, and as here in 1:2, it always carries a negative connotation, but an important question is whether the symbol has a core meaning or referent. The common element in relation to Qohelet’s epistemological quest is that if there is meaning and value, it cannot be grasped and is thus *enigmatic* or *incomprehensible*. As Miller notes, a live metaphor like *hebel* guards its meaning by the descriptive phrases associated with it. The proximity of *hebel* to “wind” is instructive in this respect, for Qohelet will repeatedly associate his *hebel* refrain with the phrase “striving after wind.” The wind is real enough, but it cannot be grasped. This does not mean that there is no meaning, but that if there is it cannot be grasped. I thus suggest that the core meaning of *hebel* is “enigmatic.” Seow notes, “Something that is *hebel* cannot be grasped or controlled. It may refer to something that one experiences or encounters for only a moment, but it cannot be grasped—neither physically nor intellectually.” Such an approach finds support in

31. Ibid.
32. D. Miller, “Qohelet’s Symbolic Use of *bbel*”; idem, Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes.
33. Seow, Ecclesiastes, 47. Murphy (“On Translating Ecclesiastes,” 573) similarly argues with respect to *hebel* that “the nuance is incomprehensible rather than irrational.” See also Gammie, “Stoicism,” 178–80. Gammie (ibid., 179) notes, “It is apparent that the author of Qoheleth intends to stress in the passages where *hebel* is linked with *rĕʿūt/raʾyôn ṛuḥāʾ* the ‘incomprehensible, ungraspable’ nature of his quest for meaning.” Ogden (Qoheleth, 22) similarly asserts that “the term *hebel* in Qoheleth has a distinctive function and meaning: it conveys the notion that life is enigmatic, and mysterious.” For an older but similar argument see Staples, “‘Vanity’
light of the repetition of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes (and this almost always in the manner of a conclusion) and the central role of *hebel* in the motto embracing Qohelet’s teaching, and it also alerts one to the value in translating *hebel* with one word, although we must be attentive to nuances as we proceed with Qohelet’s journey. Even where *hebel* does not appear in a conclusion, its occurrence invariably connects with the *hebel* refrain throughout the book, and it is a vital clue for picking up on Qohelet’s thought and irony. A good example of this is 5:7 [6], where Qohelet offers a clue as to the source of *hebel*. See the commentary on 5:1–7.

“Says Qohelet” reminds us that we are here busy with the narrator’s introduction of Qohelet, who will not come onto the stage until v. 12. Verse 2 is thus the narrator’s provocative summary of Qohelet’s quest for meaning.

3“What is the benefit for humankind in all one’s labor at which one labors under the sun?”

1:3. *The programmatic question.* This verse expresses the programmatic rhetorical question that informs the whole of Ecclesiastes, not just the immediate context. Qohelet’s quest described in vv. 12–18 and continued throughout the book is an attempt to answer this question. This also means that although the question is laden with a sense of the agony of life “under the sun,” it is a real question, and thus it is unhelpful to transform it into “a thesis statement of the preface: human beings have no advantage in all their toil ‘under the sun.’” Qohelet’s autonomous epistemology will lead him to this conclusion, but to close the question down before his journey even gets going ignores the literary character of Ecclesiastes. The rhetorical question is common in Ecclesiastes; the thirty-two questions account for about 12 percent of the book. The function of the rhetorical questions is to engage the reader by creating a gap in the reading: “These gaps ‘beg to be filled, and as a result hook the audience, the pure psychology of interrogation guarantees the capturing of the reader’s attention.’ The intellectual ‘vacuum’ created by the rhetorical question pulls its victim into its circle of influence and drives the reader to solve its intellectual challenge.” Thus, although Qohelet will regularly conclude that he cannot find any benefit in labor, the openness to the rhetorical question of v. 3 is important to maintain—this openness invites the reader to participate in Qohelet’s struggle about the meaning of life.

of Ecclesiastes.” Ravasi (*Qohelet*) makes much of Ecclesiastes as enigmatic but translates *hebel* with the Italian *vuoto* (space, gap, void).

34. See Ogden, *Qohelet*, 28–30.
37. Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 258. For a full discussion of the rhetorical questions in Ecclesiastes, see R. E. Johnson, “Rhetorical Question.”
The noun “benefit” (yitrôn) occurs ten times throughout Ecclesiastes and only here in the OT.\textsuperscript{38} It is one of several words that are repeated again and again and contribute to the repetitive literary style of the book. **Yitrôn** comes from the root ytr and means advantage, profit, or benefit. It may have a background in business with the meaning of profit.\textsuperscript{39} Seow finds it important to translate yitrôn as “advantage” rather than “benefit” because he believes that yitrôn here is not just benefit but a surplus, something additional. He argues that for Qohelet it is not that labor has no meaning but that it gives one no additional “edge.”\textsuperscript{40} However, Qohelet’s scrutiny of labor and the meaning of life will bring them into question at the deepest level so that it makes no sense to read yitrôn as an additional edge—the question becomes whether labor and life are of any benefit at all.\textsuperscript{41}

“Humankind” (ʾādām, lit. “man”) occurs forty-nine times in Ecclesiastes and always refers to humankind in general, apart from in 2:8.\textsuperscript{42} This alerts us to the universal nature of Qohelet’s quest—he is asking fundamental questions about human existence. “Under the sun,” another expression that occurs repeatedly (twenty-nine times), confirms this universality—Qohelet is concerned with the whole range of human experience.\textsuperscript{43} “Under the sun” occurs only in Ecclesiastes in the OT.\textsuperscript{44} Occasionally Qohelet uses the alternative expression “under the heavens” (1:13; 2:3; 3:1), but the meaning is the same as “under the sun.”\textsuperscript{45}

The noun “labor” occurs twenty-two times in Ecclesiastes, the verb “to labor” thirteen times.\textsuperscript{46} Seow argues that labor has a distinctly negative

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{38} In addition to 1:3 it is found in 2:11, 13 (twice); 3:9; 5:9, 15 [8, 14]; 7:12; 10:10, 11.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 103.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 103–4. “Edge” is Seow’s word.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Ogden (“Qoheleth’s Use,” 343) notes of yitrôn that “its usage is distinctive in being quite generalized in this context.”
\item \textsuperscript{42} Most scholars regard 7:28 as an exception to this, but see the commentary on 7:23–29.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Longman (*Ecclesiastes*, 66) takes this expression to indicate the restricted scope of Qohelet’s inquiry; it excludes the possibility of a transcendent yet immanent God. While Qohelet’s focus is on human life, as “Solomon” he is clearly portrayed as one in the tradition of Yahwism, and in v. 13 he is clear that the task of work is one given to humankind by God. Thus his viewpoint certainly includes God and how belief in God bears on life “under the sun.” Kline (“Is Qoheleth Unorthodox?”) argues that in the OT “under the heavens” is primarily associated with God’s curse and judgment and that “under the sun” and “on the earth” by association have similar connotations in Ecclesiastes. However, Qohelet’s preference is for “under the sun” rather than “under the heavens,” and his quest is about the meaning of life “under the sun”; to assume a negative meaning is to close down the quest before it has begun. Furthermore, in 5:18 “under the sun” is a positive expression, as is “sun” in 11:7.
\item \textsuperscript{44} See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 104–5, for nonbiblical, ancient Near Eastern uses of the phrase.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Seow (ibid., 105) discerns a different nuance between the two expressions. “Under the heavens” is a spatial distinction referring to the cosmos, whereas “under the sun” is a term for this world in contrast to the netherworld. As Seow notes (ibid., 104), however, both terms refer to the universality of human experience.
\item \textsuperscript{46} The verb ʿāšā (to make) is also used to refer to work. See de Jong, “Book on Labour,” 112.
\end{itemize}
connotation in Ecclesiastes and translates it as “toil” to indicate its implications of struggle and pain.47 There is no doubt that Qohelet wrestles with the struggle and meaninglessness associated with much of human endeavor, but “labor,” with its broad connotations of human endeavor in Ecclesiastes, is not always negative. Examples of a positive use of “labor” are 3:13 and 5:18 [17]. Indeed, Qohelet is out to explore the meaning(lessness) of all that humans engage in, and to interpret labor as negative here prejudges the very question Qohelet will explore. De Jong thus appropriately describes Ecclesiastes as “a Book on Labour” and rightly notes the centrality of the theme of labor in Ecclesiastes: “All sorts of aspects of human labour are investigated: for example, striving after wisdom, seeking pleasure, doing justice and the fruits of labour.”48

4A generation goes and a generation comes, 
   but the earth stands forever. 
5And the sun rises and the sun sets, 
   and it hurries to its place where it rises again. 
6Blowing northward and turning southward, 
   round and round goes the wind, 
   and the wind returns to its circuits. 
7All the streams flow into the sea, 
   but the sea is not full; 
   to the place to which the streams flow, 
   there they continue to flow. 
8Everything is wearisome; 
   humankind is unable to articulate it. 
The eye is not satiated by seeing, 
   nor is the ear filled by hearing. 
9Whatever was is what will be, 
   and whatever has been done is what will be done, 
   so there is nothing new under the sun. 
10If there exists a thing about which one can say, 
   “See, this is new,” 
   it already existed in the ages 
   that were before us. 
11There is no remembrance of those who came before; 
   nor will those who are still to come 
   be remembered by those who come after them.

1:4–11. A poem about the enigma of life. Verses 4–11 are a poem that is deliberately placed between the programmatic question and Qohelet’s first-person introduction of himself in 1:12. The distinction between poetry and

prose is complex in Biblical Hebrew, and commentators debate as to whether vv. 4–11 are poetry. However, the parallelism throughout these verses, their chiastic structure, and the abundance of participles in the early part of the poem argue in favor of this being poetic.

It is unclear whether this poem is from Qohelet himself or the narrator, and if from Qohelet whether he wrote it or is quoting it. Whatever the case, it sets the context for 1:12–18 and what follows by giving us some idea why the programmatic question in 1:3 is such a tough one. Chiasmus in longer passages such as this one is not easy to determine, and one must be clear as to why one thinks it is chiastic. It is mainly a careful examination of the content of these verses accompanied by the repetition of a key word in the center of the chiasm that inclines me toward the view that the poem has a chiastic structure:

A generations come and go, but the earth remains fixed (v. 4)
B the repetitive circularity of nature (vv. 5–6)
C as the sea is never full, so neither the eye nor ear are ever satisfied, so that everything is wearisome (vv. 7–8)
B' there is nothing new under the sun (vv. 9–10)
A' there is no remembrance of people (v. 11)

The repetition of the root mlʾ in vv. 7–8 indicates their interrelatedness. The sea is never filled and neither is seeing or hearing, both of which are governed by the verb mlʾ. The “conclusion” to the poem that anticipates Qohelet’s repetitive conclusions is also found in this center, at the start of v. 8: “Everything is wearisome.” Thus the chiasmus functions to indicate the midpoint of the poem, its climax, and thereby to alert us to the sort of conclusion that Qohelet will come to again and again. The way in which the different parts of the poem parallel one another will become clear as we work through the poem.

49. The majority of commentators read these verses as a poem, but Longman (Ecclesiastes, 59) argues that they are prose since they lack the heightened presence of traits that define Hebrew poetry, namely, parallelism, terseness, and wordplay.
50. As indicated in the translation.
51. W. Watson (Traditional Techniques, 386–87) notes that “chiasmus does seem to indicate (in combination with other factors) that a particular passage is poetic in character.”
52. For two very different poetic analyses of this text, see Backhaus, Zeit und Zufall, 8–11; and Good, “Unfilled Sea.” Backhaus’s analysis is part of a comprehensive “scientific” analysis of the text whereas Good’s has the flavor of a literary reading. Backhaus (Zeit und Zufall, 8–9) concludes that 1:4–6 and 8–9 are poetry and that 1:7 and 10–11 are prose.
54. Contra Krüger, Qoheleth, 49, who sees v. 9 as the summary or conclusion.
55. W. Watson, Traditional Techniques, 370.
The immediate context of the poem is the programmatic question of v. 3, and the following issues are raised in it as indications of why the benefit of labor is such a problem:

| 1:4 | The earth exhibits permanence, but not so humankind. Generations come and go, and as we will see later in Ecclesiastes, this transience raises major questions for Qohelet of the value of labor (see, e.g., 2:18–23). There is some debate as to whether dôr means generation or cycles of nature. Ogden has argued for the latter meaning, but semantically it is hard to be sure which meaning is intended. However, if these verses do have a chiastic structure, then v. 11 supports reading dôr as “generation”—it is the coming and going of human generations that results in there being no remembrance of individuals. The text of 1:3, with its focus on “humankind,” may also support reading dôr as “generation.”

| 1:5–6 | In contrast to the earth, which stands forever, there is a lot of activity in nature, as indicated by the large number of participles in vv. 5–7, evoking continuous action. The sun and the wind are very active, but their activity is circular and repetitive and seems to go nowhere.

| 1:7–8 | Amid this circularity nothing final seems to be achieved. Although the streams flow into the sea, it is never full, and the process is endless. So too it is with human experience; as much as the eye can observe and the ear take in, there seem to be no final answers from these sources of seeing and listening to the programmatic question. Hence Qohelet’s conclusion at the outset of v. 8: “Everything is wearisome.”

| 1:9–10 | There is nothing new in history. These verses connect with the repetitiveness in nature portrayed in vv. 5–6. Human action in history seems to be as circular as nature—it repeats itself without ever reaching closure.

| 1:11 | This connects with v. 4. As generations come and go, people are forgotten, and so it will continue to be. One may labor very hard and achieve many things, but what is their value if all is lost in time?

56. Transience is part of hebel, but in the context of 1:2 it is clear that the permanence of the earth indicates that hebel is about more than transience. As Good (“Unfilled Sea,” 64) muses, “Perhaps the point of the metaphor in hebel is not impermanence.”

57. Ogden, “Interpretation of dør.” Building on this, Fox (“Qohelet 1.4”) argues that “the earth” (hāʾārēq) refers not to the physical earth but to humanity as a whole. For the same view as that of Ogden, see Whybray, “Ecclesiastes 1:5–7.” Whybray argues that nothing is said about the futility of the phenomena described in 1:5–7 but that implicitly the reader is invited to contemplate their activity with wonder.

58. Good (“Unfilled Sea,” 64) notes, “Dôr seems in some way to continue ādām, since the word has to do with human generations.”

59. In v. 5 “sets,” “hurries,” and “rises again” are participles. In v. 6 “blowing,” “turning,” “round and round goes,” and “returns” are participles. In v. 7 “flow” (twice) and “continue to flow” are participles.

60. GKC §116a notes, “The participle active indicates a person or thing conceived as being in the continual uninterrupted exercise of an activity.”

61. Ogden (Qoheleth, 31) suggests that the author may have the Dead Sea in mind, which, although it has no outlet, has many streams feeding into it but is never full.
Clearly, discerning the poetic, chiastic nature of this section is important and helpful for its interpretation. The continual passing of generations (v. 4) results in individuals not being remembered (v. 11). The way in which individuals are forgotten is a problem to which Qohelet will return again and again. If we are forgotten, then what is the value of all our labor? The circularity of nature (vv. 6–7) is paralleled by the repetitiveness of history (vv. 9–10). This too is a topic to which Qohelet will return. If history simply repeats itself and has no telos, then of what value is labor? Identification of the chiastic structure of this section is helpful in focusing our attention particularly on its center, vv. 7–8. Verses 8 expresses a conclusion that will recur in Qohelet’s journey—here observation of the repetitiveness of nature and its parallel in human history leads to the conclusion that everything is wearisome, and neither observation (a major theme of Qohelet) nor instruction (what wisdom offers) resolves the question of what benefit there is to humankind’s labor under the sun. The adjective “wearisome” occurs only here in Ecclesiastes but is akin to hebel, expressing the struggle and depression involved in trying to discern the meaning of work and thus life amid what one sees and hears.

The poem thus powerfully evokes the issues that Qohelet will struggle with as he seeks to explore the meaning of labor and life itself, and serves as an excellent lead into Qohelet’s journey. As part of the frame, the statement in v. 8 that the eye is not satiated by seeing nor the ear filled by hearing is particularly significant. Observation is central to Qohelet’s epistemology. As Crenshaw notes, “If asked, ‘How do you know?’ Qoheleth readily offers the answer, ‘I saw it.’” But already here we learn that observation by itself will not satisfy. Nor, it appears, will instruction, the domain of traditional wisdom teaching. In this way the poem evokes the horns of the dilemma on which Qohelet will find himself painfully perched; he problematizes the instruction of wisdom but cannot find resolution through observation.

Theological Implications

The primary background to reading Ecclesiastes is Proverbs. Like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes is associated with Solomon. As argued in the introduction, however, the association with Solomon is deliberately employed as a royal fiction, whereas in Proverbs, despite the complexity of authorship, the historical association with Solomon is stronger. The title of Ecclesiastes thus creates an expectation for wisdom along the lines of that in Proverbs so that

63. See Waltke, Proverbs 1–15, 31–36. Of Ecclesiastes, Waltke notes (ibid., 35) that “although many allege that The Sayings of Qoheleth claims Solomonic authorship, in truth the late editor of that work credits Qoheleth’s words to a Solomon-like figure, not to Solomon himself, in what appears to be a studied attempt to avoid the morally questionable practice of pseudonymity.”
nothing prepares us in the opening verse for the shock both of the statement that everything is enigmatic and of the poem centered in the assertion that everything is wearisome.

That the central character in this book is called Qohelet—that is, the gatherer—is significant. To gather is to pull together into a unity, and wisdom involves seeing how things fit together in God’s complex world. Ecclesiastes is full of irony, and it is likely that the name Qohelet is ironic or a parody. The figure introduced here is the great gatherer of wisdom and its literary articulation, but the question that will quickly emerge is whether even someone like Solomon is up to the challenge of holding together the riddles of human existence in this world.

Intriguingly, the notion of gathering plays an important role in Heidegger’s understanding of human “Being” in his Being and Time. Heidegger calls the Being of humankind in the world Dasein, and Krell argues that “Dasein is the kind of Being that has logos—not to be understood derivatively as reason or speech but to be thought as the power to gather and preserve things that are manifest in their Being.” Heidegger asserts that logos has the “structural form of συνθεσις. Here ‘synthesis’ does not mean a binding and linking together of representations. . . . Here the συν has a purely apophantical signification and means letting something be seen in its togetherness.” Thus for Heidegger, gathering has to do with the intricate contexts of meaning in human life. Such contexts become visible particularly when things go wrong. This bears directly on Qohelet and his quest and exposes the irony in Qohelet’s name. For Qohelet things are badly wrong in the world, and he cannot see how things fit together—the intricate contexts of meaning have been shattered for him, and he does not know how to put things back together again. Irony is a central feature in the literary character of Ecclesiastes, and here already we see it in play. Qohelet is a Solomonic figure who gathers wisdom for the people, but ironically the gatherer’s great problem will be how to hold the disparities in life together.

After 1:1 with its Solomonic associations, v. 2 comes as a tremendous shock. Traditional wisdom presupposes the meaning of life as God’s good creation and seeks to trace the intricate contexts of meaning within that order. Qohelet appears to throw a grenade into the heart of that approach, affirming emphatically that everything is enigmatic, utterly incomprehensible! At the outset of Ecclesiastes, v. 2 alerts us not only to the conclusion that Qohelet will come to again and again but also to the content of the journey on which he will embark. His struggle is whether life is meaningful, and v. 2 alerts us to his struggle to

For the more common view that Proverbs has little if any connection historically with Solomon, see Fox, Proverbs 1–9, 56–58.

65. Heidegger, Being and Time, 56.
come to grips with where his research appears to lead him again and again: all is enigmatic. But it is important to note that this summary statement does not close the debate but rather opens it—the shock of the statement engages the reader in Qohelet’s own struggle as we begin to wrestle with how a wise person akin to Solomon could make this sort of statement.

In terms of the interpretation of Ecclesiastes and of the theology of the book, there is much at stake in how we translate hebel. McKenna is exceptional and insightful in his theological reflections on hebel. He argues for a concept of hebel that permeates the whole of Ecclesiastes as well as the particular contexts that Qohelet explores. McKenna asserts the importance of reading hebel against the background of the wisdom and covenantal traditions of the OT, and theologically he discerns as central the distinction between God as Creator and creation as contingent reality, whose meaning derives always from God and in relation to him. He finds Karl Barth’s doctrine of the “nothingness” of creation helpful in explicating hebel. The nothingness of creation is not nothingness in the existentialist or nihilist sense but creation as nothing in itself; its existence and knowability depend entirely on God. Thus hebel positively means something like “contingency”: “What doctrine is this? I would suggest it is the concept of the contingent rationality of the created reality of the world developed out of the belief that God created out of nothing and by his Word all that has been made to be outside of himself.” McKenna notes that such a doctrine of contingency polemically sets itself against the Greco-Roman approach to knowledge, which seeks to find truth starting from a point within the creation.

McKenna discerns that the canonical and theological context within which we read Ecclesiastes will shape how we interpret hebel. Contrary to the aspirations of much historical criticism, objective, neutral interpretation is a myth. As Gadamer has noted, it is our very prejudices—prejudgments—that make interpretation possible. This does not mean that we simply impose them on Ecclesiastes, but we allow them to illuminate the text as we wrestle with it. McKenna’s theological interpretation of hebel indicates just how fruitful such an approach can be.

A close reading of hebel in Ecclesiastes would, however, nuance McKenna’s approach as follows. Hebel has more of a negative connotation in Ecclesiastes.

67. McKenna, “Hebel in Ecclesiastes.”
68. Ibid., 22.
69. According to Gilson, Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy, 64–83, whereas Greek philosophy could understand contingency in the order of intelligence, it could not extend that to the order of existence because the Demiurge or the Unmoved Mover does not grant existence. It is the identification of God with Being and all its post-Parmenian predicates that led Christian philosophers to explore the existential contingency of the creation and its creatures. The notion of contingency is not found in the Greek world at all.
70. See Clouser, Myth of Religious Neutrality.
than McKenna allows for. *Hebel* does indeed relate to the contingency of creation, but in the context of Qohelet’s autonomous epistemology, which he articulates in 1:12–18, contingency means that the order of creation is enigmatic and incomprehensible, and this is decidedly not good for Qohelet.

As philosophers of science have come to recognize, all data are interpreted within a framework, so that actual data are always *underdetermined* by a particular theory and the same data can be read differently in the context of a different paradigm or framework.71 Popper expresses this evocatively in his images of the bucket and the searchlight.72 According to the bucket theory of knowledge our minds are like containers in which knowledge accumulates. Popper rejects this approach to epistemology and argues instead for the searchlight theory, according to which a hypothesis or theory precedes and informs observation. In the framework of Qohelet’s epistemology, *his searchlight*, the paradoxes of creation and life “under the sun” lead him again and again to the *hebel* conclusion. The very real data he discerns will need to be recontextualized in a very different framework for the positive side of creation as contingent to emerge. But this is to anticipate the later stages of Qohelet’s journey. At this stage it is sufficient to note that Qohelet’s intense struggle with the *hebel* of creation holds out hope for a resolution to the problem he wrestles with.

In the OT *hebel* is also the name for Adam and Eve’s second son, Abel (Gen. 4:2). “Abel’s name thus alludes unwittingly to the fate that is in store for him, for his life will be cut short.”73 The name of Abel’s brother, Cain, is connected in Gen. 4:1 with Hebrew *qānā*, meaning “to get, acquire,” or, more rarely, “to create.” The precise nuance is unclear, but “there is an ambiguity about her [Eve’s] expression which may suggest that she covertly compares her achievement with Yahweh’s greater works and hoped that he would be her own son.”74 There is good evidence that Ecclesiastes reflects at many points on Genesis, and it is possible that Qohelet’s use of *hebel* has Abel and Cain in mind. Abel’s unjust and meaningless murder is just the kind of datum that Qohelet wrestles with. The ambiguity in Eve’s naming of Cain may also be helpful in our overall interpretation of Ecclesiastes. As in Gen. 2–3, what sets the world adrift is the human desire for autonomy and to play God, rather than embracing one’s creatureliness.

71. In philosophy of science, the underdetermination theory was first articulated by Poincaré, *Science and Hypothesis*, in 1905. It was further developed by Reichenbach, *Philosophy of Space and Time*, in 1953. Glymour ("Epistemology of Geometry," 485) states the theory as follows: “There is a philosophical tradition going back to at least Poincaré, which argues that the geometrical features of the universe are underdetermined by all possible evidence, by all of the actual or possible coincidences and trajectories of material things, whatever they may be. Many different geometrical and physical theories can encompass the phenomena, can account for the motion of things.”


74. Ibid.
The programmatic question about labor in v. 3 frames the whole of Ecclesiastes, which is a response to this question. Labor/work is notoriously difficult to define. As Meilander notes, “In the history of the West work has no single meaning or significance. St. Augustine once said that he knew what we meant by time until asked to explain it; then he found that he did not really know what it is. Something similar is likely to be true of work.”

It includes leisure and pleasure, architecture and landscape design, law courts and justice, work in general—indeed the gamut of human endeavor under the sun. In Ecclesiastes the range of human endeavors explored in Qohelet’s quest to answer this programmatic question indicates the breadth of meaning in mind in the reference to labor in 1:3.

Qohelet is perplexed about the meaningfulness or benefit of labor as he observes the world around him. In Shantung Compound Langdon Gilkey describes in a similar way how he and others experienced work in an internment camp: “Work and life have a strange reciprocal relationship: only if man works can he live, but only if the work he does seems productive and meaningful can he bear the life that his work makes possible.”

Through focusing on work in a comprehensive sense, Qohelet’s quest thus becomes an interrogation of the very meaning of human life, thus exemplifying Gilkey’s comment about the reciprocal relationship between life and work. The goodness of creation is in question: “The Rabbis . . . pointed out that the seven ‘vanities’ of 1:2 (vanity [1] of vanities [2] + vanity [1] of vanities [2] + all is vanity [1] = 7) refers to the seven days of creation and that K[oh]elet]’s complaint is therefore directed against the entire creation and, by extension, the goodness theology that the Genesis narrative supports.”

The contemporary and pastoral significance of Qohelet’s quest should not be underestimated. As with all biblical religion, Qohelet’s concern is with all of human life as God has made it. The refrain “under the sun” evokes this comprehensive range as does the variety of areas of life on which he will focus. We find here no sacred/secular dualism that has contaminated much Christian thought historically. Qohelet is concerned with all of life under the sun, and he will cast his eye across all aspects of human life. One of the most significant missiologists of our time, David Bosch, poses the question, “What is it that we have to communicate to the Western ‘post-Christian’ public? It seems to me that we must demonstrate the role that plausibility structures, or rather, worldviews, play in people’s lives.”

To do this Christians would first need to recover the comprehensive range of biblical faith, that it deals with all of life as God has made it. Qohelet can help us with this in his albeit negative insistence that the question of meaning and thus faith, which of course he

75. Meilander, Working, 1.
76. Gilkey, Shantung Compound, 52.
77. Perry, Dialogues, 24.
78. Bosch, Believing in the Future, 48.
puts into question, relates to all of life and not just to a part of life that some call the sacred dimension.

The poem alerts us to two key issues that Qohelet will struggle with as he explores the benefit of labor and thus the meaning of life: the repetitiveness of history and the fact that people are not remembered. These issues are dealt with in more detail by Qohelet in the following chapters, and we will deal with their theological implications in detail there. Suffice it here to note that this poem expresses, on the basis of observation, a cyclical view of history, in contrast to the OT’s cyclical and linear view. In the poem observation of the repetitiveness of nature leads to finding an analogical repetitiveness in history. As we will see in the next section, observation (v. 8) is central to Qohelet’s epistemology, and if on the basis of observation one concludes that history is endlessly repetitive, then it is indeed hard to see the value of labor and of life.79 One might find meaning in the fact that one’s hard work and achievements will be remembered, but as the poem notes, no matter what one’s achievements, people are quickly forgotten, so that meaning cannot be grounded in remembrance.

Theologically, the poem therefore raises the issue of how we view history and of where we locate our identity or meaning in life. Scripture and the Christian tradition rightly recognize, with this poem, that a cyclical view of history is hopeless, and also alert us to the fact that we cannot root our identity in others and their remembrance of us.

79. Tamez (“When the Horizons Close upon Themselves,” 54) suggests that in the assertion that there is nothing new under the sun, Qohelet is reacting to a context in which all was new. Innovations in all areas of life took place in the period after the death of Alexander the Great and during the Ptolemaic period. She suggests that Qohelet rejected novelty because “he was sharp and daring in his ability to discern the negative consequences that the new Hellenistic economic order would bring to the non-Greek population.” However, this poem and Qohelet make the less contextual and more ontological point that as far as one can see, history repeats itself again and again.