

ECCLESIASTES
Ecclesiastes 1:1-2
“Quest for Meaning”
January 7, 2024

Ecclesiastes 1:1-2

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

**² Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity. ¹**

It has been called one of the most difficult books in the Bible to read, understand, and apply. Over the centuries the book has led to debates, questions, more debates, and even confusion among some of the great thinkers and theologians. It is a tough read.² Martin Luther stated “This book is one of the more difficult books in all of Scripture, one which no one has ever completely mastered.”³

The book has evoked deep thought and kindled not a small amount of controversy since first introduced to Hebrew readers thousands of years ago. There remains a polarization among contemporary commentators, pastors, theologians, and those committed to read through their Bibles annually regarding whether this book should be viewed as affirming life or deeply pessimistic.⁴

Thus, after almost an entire year in the challenging and encouraging New Testament letter to the Hebrews, with its mystery author, we delve into the one Old Testament wisdom book, with its mystery author, realizing that this journey may just provoke more questions than anticipated, even for those who have been steeped in church culture for decades.

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ec 1:1–2). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

² O'Donnell, Douglas Sean. *Ecclesiastes: Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2014), 3.

³ Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*, translated and edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 15-17.

⁴ Bartholomew, Craig G. *Ecclesiastes: Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 17.

So, thank you for jumping into the deep end of the pool with us today and let me encourage you to stay with us as we journey through each verse of these twelve chapters of wisdom writing that initially declares that everything is vanity. Get your Bibles open, your journals ready, and let's go.

As with any beginning, we need to know some basics. Think of Ecclesiastes as a jigsaw puzzle of thousands of pieces. Each piece is needed to complete the whole, and if one is left out or lost, the final image just will not be complete.

The seeming disjointedness of the book is challenging. One theologian described it as trying to control an octopus. Just when you think you have all the tentacles under control—that is, you have understood the book—there is one tentacle waving about in the air.⁵

How should we read this Old Testament book. I like what theologian Douglas Sean O'Donnell says, we should read it as *“God’s wisdom literature with a unified message that makes better sense in light of the crucified, risen, and returning Christ.”*⁶

To begin to grasp what God is revealing to us through this book, we open today with just two verses. This is so we can get our bearings.

Thus, three things to consider today as we start.

1. **WORDS** – Who is the author? Who is the one inspired by the Holy Spirit to give us these words?
2. **WISDOM** – The book is categorized as a wisdom book. What does that mean?
3. **WORTHLESSNESS** – So much for sliding slowly into the main point, as in verse 2 we already read of the cry of the author regarding life as vanity.

⁵ Bartholomew, 13.

⁶ O'Donnell, 4.

WORDS

Ecclesiastes 1:1

The **words** of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.⁷

So, who is this Preacher? Some translations have the word Teacher rather than Preacher. Others use philosopher or spokesman.

While philosopher and spokesman are not incorrect translations of the original word, they are weak in this context and strip away what the original language says. The original Hebrew word is **Qoheleth**. (ko-HEL-et)

The root of this word Qoheleth means “to gather, collect, or assemble.”⁸ In this instance, it means to gather or assemble the people, primarily for the purpose of worship. Thus, Qoheleth is preaching wisdom to the gathering of the people of God.⁹

The English title “Ecclesiastes” comes from a Greek word for church—*ekklesia*. An *ekklesia* is not a building, but the church as the local gathering of people—a congregation worshipping God. *Ecclesiastes* is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word *qoheleth*. Thus, the literal meaning of this title is “one who speaks in the *ekklesia*”—the assembly of God’s people.¹⁰

But, the question is “Who is the Preacher—the Qoheleth?”

Traditionally, it has been understood to be Solomon. Why? Because he is a son of David the king who ruled in Jerusalem. I will most often refer to the author as Solomon throughout this series.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ec 1:1). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

⁸ Ryken, Philip Graham. *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 16.

⁹ Ryken, 16.

¹⁰ Whybray, R.N. *Ecclesiastes: The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 2.

However, there have been historians and theologians who believe it was someone else, with good arguments. Some say Zerubbabel. Some say an anonymous biographer. Perhaps so, but ultimately focusing on who the human writer was, may lead readers to miss who the author ultimately is. For the **words** of the Preacher as given in this book is not simply a narrative or opinion from a human being, but the Word given through inspiration of the Holy Spirit. These words were given, sealed, and secured for God’s church by God’s hand, so that today as we gather and turn on our tablets, open an app on our phones, or fold back the leather covers of our printed Bibles, we can rest assured that the words saved for centuries, translated and transliterated into our language, have been preserved and given to us not as simply good literature or artistic prose, but as the living, holy Word of God, worthy of reading, studying, and using as Paul reminded Timothy in the New Testament letter...

2 Timothy 3:16-17

¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. ¹¹

So, trust the words of the Preacher, as you read with understanding.

WISDOM

What is wisdom literature? Wisdom literature deals with the way the world “works.” These may be huge philosophical issues or smaller, day-to-day struggles. The wisdom literature of ancient Israel was recognized as the fountainhead, the pinnacle of all wisdom.¹²

There are at a minimum at least ten genres represented in Ecclesiastes:

1. Proverb
2. Autobiography
3. Personal reflection

¹¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (2 Ti 3:16–17). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹² GotQuestions.org. “What Is Wisdom Literature?” *GotQuestions.org*, 16 Apr. 2018, www.gotquestions.org/wisdom-literature.html.

4. Poetry
5. Rhetorical questions
6. Quotations
7. Example illustrations
8. An oracle of woe
9. Blessing
10. Commands and prohibitions¹³

But when we think of wisdom literature, the meaning transcends genre. Solomon declared this truth in the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs 9:10

**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.** ¹⁴

We will only be within the book of Ecclesiastes during this journey, but it is to our advantage to read Job and Proverbs as well, as these wisdom books provide the immediate intertextual (within the scripture) context for understanding it.¹⁵

Frank Crüsemann, an Old Testament scholar, suggests that Ecclesiastes brings Job to its logical conclusion.¹⁶

These wisdom books are so challenging. As many in church read the stories of Old Testament heroes, the gospel accounts, and the letters, those are somewhat highly traveled roads. Yet, these wisdom books are the roads less traveled. They are like backroads.¹⁷ It has been said that the primary function of these books is to provoke the reader to wrestle actively with life issues.¹⁸

¹³ Bartholomew, 61-62.

¹⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Pr 9:10.

¹⁵ Bartholomew, 84.

¹⁶ Crüsemann, Frank. *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 61.

¹⁷ Eswine, Zack. *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2014), 5.

¹⁸ Thiselton, A.C. *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 65-66.

No single book of the Bible is written or preserved in a vacuum, but inter-connected, one with another, so that through the fulness of time, as God reveals himself in the written word, through the preached word, to the *ekklesia*, by the Qoheleth (Preacher) we will better understand his truth...as the old song states “by and by.”

You know the song, perhaps. The verse that states:

Oft our cherished plans have failed,
Disappointments have prevailed,
And we’ve wandered in the darkness,
Heavyhearted and alone;
But we’re trusting in the Lord,
And according to his Word
We will understand it better by and by.¹⁹

And that leads us to verse 2.

WORTHLESSNESS

Ecclesiastes 1:2

**Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.**²⁰

What a word! No wonder Jewish scholars who gathered at the Council of Jamnia in AD 90 debated whether this book “makes the hands unclean”—meaning it should be stored away due to its challenges.²¹

Vanity: meaning so many things...and none immediately seem positive. It’s translated in various places as temporary, transitory, meaningless, senseless, futile, contingent, incomprehensible, absurd, empty, a

¹⁹ Tindley, Charles Albert, and B.B. McKinney. “When the Morning Comes.” *Hymnary.Org*, hymnary.org/text/trials_dark_on_every_hand. Accessed 3 Jan. 2024.

²⁰ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 1:2.

²¹ Bartholomew, 18.

“striving after the wind,” a bubble, smoke that curls up into the air, a mist, a breath, and...worthless.

The Hebrew word is *hebel* and it is used throughout the Old Testament and in Hebrew literature.

Ultimately, there is a sense that life is short, temporary, not lasting.

It is like warm breath on a cold day that dissipates.

Psalm 39:5

**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*²²**

The writer, the Preacher, is declaring a superlative. “Vanity of vanities” means it’s the ultimate vanity. Not unlike Solomon’s Song of Songs which was the song of all songs, God being described as Lord of lords, King of kings. Or even the Holy of holies being the most holy place. This is a wordplay on purpose and the Preacher is lamenting that life seems worthless—it is but a vapor and is vanity of all vanities.

And left to that, we all know some who would agree and go sit in their sorrow. But this book is not a collection of depressing diatribes bent on leaving us empty.

For we do not read this Old Testament book (or any Old Testament book) without Christ in mind. Jesus taught us this. While the New Testament rarely quotes from this book, the Bible is to be taken as a whole. Life without Christ *is* vanity of vanities. It is limited. It is short. It is temporal and like a vapor.

²² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 39:5.

In this Holy Spirit inspired, inerrant and immutable book from God's Word, we will discover together how great our God is. How he brings meaning to EVERYTHING under the sun by means of his Son. Our work. Our possessions. Our desires. Our family. Our relationships. Our pleasures. Our hobbies. Our interests. All matter!

And God brings meaning and reveals to his children that even in a life of trouble. Even through the depravity of this world, the evil exposed daily, the accidents that cause great pain, the injustices, oppressions, absurdities, and all that can be categorized as terrible beyond description, there is meaning. There is a hope. There is God.²³

The temporal is viewed rightly. The eternal is revealed.

This is what faith gives us. Faith is a gift, but it is not cheap.²⁴

Grace to you.

²³ O'Donnell, 13.

²⁴ Bartholomew, 20.