

UNDERSTANDING
OLD TESTAMENT
WISDOM LITERATURE:

Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes
(and a few Psalms)

The Book of
Ecclesiastes
(and a few Psalms)

ECCLESIASTES

“Qoheleth” - (Hebrew) the Teacher

“Qahal” - (Hebrew) the assembly, the congregation

“Ecclesia” (Greek) the assembly (translates “qahal”)

“Ecclesiastes” - (Greek) the Teacher

DATE:

The Hebrew is “near pre-exilic” or “near post-exilic”, just before or after the Jews returned from exile in Babylon (early 500’ s - 400’ s B.C.).

The book was put into its final form around that time.

If written by Solomon, then it’ s form of Hebrew was brought up-to-date by later final editors. *(Some of the archaic Hebrew in the oldest parts of the Hebrew scriptures were updated by scribes during and after the Jews returned from Babylonian exile.)*

NOTE: THE DOCTRINE OF INSPIRATION

The Christian doctrine of "Inspiration" (the scriptures are inspired by God) has always included the Holy Spirit's guidance in all of these aspects of inspiration ...

- 1.The original author's choice of genre,
- 2.The original author's choice of language, structure, flow of the narrative or argument, etc.,
- 3.If originally dictated to a scribe to be written down, both the dictation and the writing,
- 4.The choice of people to interview about past events (Luke, etc.), or choice of previously existing oral or written tradition,
- 5.All subsequent edits done to correct initial errors, and
- 6.All edits later done to update archaic language (Hebrew words so old that no one used them anymore).

AUTHOR:

The book never names Solomon, but some think he wrote it. This is probably unlikely, for several reasons.

1. The language style is 350 to 450 years later than Solomon.
2. The phrase “anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me” (1:12) would be a very strange way for Solomon himself to refer to merely David (and perhaps Saul).
3. The author speaks of himself as a king in past time, not present tense (1:12). We have no record of Solomon ever ceasing to be king.
4. Why would Solomon (or someone intending to be understood as Solomon) use a name other than Solomon if he wanted his work to be accepted beyond question?

5. After chapters 1 - 2, Qoheleth writes from the perspective of a subject rather than a ruler.

The most likely author / narrator was a wise man, a sage, who wrote in the period just before, during, or after Judah's exile in Babylon.

The narrator differentiates between himself and Qoheleth, by implication in 1:1, and rather explicitly in 12:9 and following.

In that part of Proverbs which Solomon wrote, he created the woman Wisdom as an alter-ego, a character through whom he could say what he wanted to say.

Solomon was not claiming to “be” the woman Wisdom, but was claiming to be as wise as the woman Wisdom, without actually saying so.

In a similar way, the narrator / author of Ecclesiastes created the Teacher, Qoheleth, as an alter-ego, a character through whom he could say what he wanted to say.

In this way, the narrator does not actually claim to literally “be” Solomon, but he does claim to be an equal to Solomon, at least in wisdom and in much of his living.

This was an accepted and honorable way of writing in the ancient world, including among the Hebrews.

The readers knew exactly what was happening, and the Jews and later the Christians accepted that God had led the narrator to write in this way in order to say some things that God wanted said, in ways chosen by God.

To deny this and to insist on reading Ecclesiastes in a simplistic, literalistic way is to deny God’s inspiration of this book.

STRUCTURE

The author structured this book very carefully.

It roughly divides in half, framed by the narrator's opening and his closing. Everything between is said by Qoheleth.

> > The foundational word or concept is "Hevel (Hebel)." < <
Hevel means "vapor," and stands for that which is empty or hollow, temporary or passing, meaningless.

Hevel stands for the two fundamental divisions of the book:

1. Everything Is Ephemeral and Unreliable - Hevel as unsubstantial, fleeting, lacking in permanence.

What is good? *(The first division's question)*

2. Everything is Elusive - Hevel as situations for which we can find no answer, they are enigmatic, illusory, intellectually futile.

How can we know (anything)? *(The second division's question)*

STRUCTURE

Hevel stands for the two fundamental divisions of the book:

1. Everything Is Ephemeral and Unreliable - Hevel as unsubstantial, fleeting, lacking in permanence.

What is good?

Hevel is a “chasing after the wind,” or a “vexation of spirit.” This phrase occurs 7 times in chapters 1-6, then stops.

The phrase “what does anyone gain” is also repeated w/ *Hevel*.
(1:3, 2:11, 3:9, 5:15-16, 10:11)

There are 111 verses from 1:1 - 6:9, and the same after that. 6:9 is the hinge, 6:10 is the midpoint.

111 is three times the numerical value of *Hevel* (37).

There are 222 verses in the entire book, or 6 times the numerical value of *Hevel*. (The number of imperfection.)

There are 1,491 words in 1:1 - 6:9a, and in 6:10 - 12:14.

STRUCTURE

Hevel stands for the two fundamental divisions of the book:

2. Everything is Elusive - *Hevel* as situations for which we can find no answer, they are enigmatic, illusory, intellectually futile.

How can we know (anything)?

“*Chasing after the wind*” is replaced with new phrases questioning our ability to know anything for certain, such as ... “under the sun” (another repetitive phrase; empirical experience without God or the heart of faith):

“find / not find” - 7:14,24,28, 8:17

“know / not know” - 6:10 - 11:6 (9:1,5, 10:14-15, 11:2,5-6)

THREE MAJOR THEMES

The most fundamental teaching of Ecclesiastes is that all of life is meaningless (Hevel - a vapor, empty, futile, vain) unless it is rightly related to God. Life is worthwhile only when based on God and His Word. Seek true wisdom, fear God, enjoy life now!

All of Qoheleth's teaching / observations are done from the viewpoint of "if this is all there is" - life without God or eternal reward or punishment. *The despair of rationalistic empiricism.*

1. Everything is Hevel - vapor, empty, fleeting, futile, vain, *so seek true wisdom.*
2. Fear God - discussions of ethics (wisdom) begin with this phrase, over against the naturalistic "under the sun."
3. Enjoy life now - enjoy life despite it's Hevel, draws both sections to a close.

OUTLINE

1:1 Superscription (*Narrator's narrative*)

PART I

IA. Reflection: Everything is Ephemeral and Unreliable

1. 1:2-11 Preface

2. 1:12 - 2:26 Nothing Is Ultimately Reliable

3. 3:1-22 Everything Is in the Hand of God

4. 4:1-16 Relative Good Is Not Good Enough

(Part I - continued)

IB. Ethics: Coping With Uncertainty

1. 5:1-7 (Hebrews 4:17-5:6) Humble Attitude Before God
2. 5:8 - 6:9 (Heb 5:7-6:9) Enjoyment But Not Greed

PART II

IIA. Reflection: Everything Is Elusive

1. 6:10 - 7:14 No One Knows What Is Good
2. 7:15-29 Righteousness and Wisdom Are Elusive
3. 8:1-17 It's an Arbitrary World,
Anything Can Happen to Anybody

IIB. Ethics: Coping With Risks and Death

1. 9:1-10 Carpe Diem (Seize the Day)
2. 9:11 - 10:15 The World Is Full of Risks
3. 10:16 - 11:6 Living With Risks
4. 11:7 - 12:8 Conclusion

12:9-14 Epilogue (*Narrator's narrative*)

1. 12:9-12 Qoheleth and the Wise
2. 12:13-14 Summary

Note particular emphases.

Frequently mentioned words / phrases / concepts:

1. Vapor - *Hevel* (meaningless, vanity). Used 35 times.
2. Gain - *yitron* (what does man gain?) Used 10 times.
Advantage, profit, gain, reward.
There is no permanent, abiding gain, no adequate compensation, for one's labor. Neither does wisdom, pleasure, achievement, or anything else produce permanent gain *in this life*.
3. Under the sun - under heaven. **Used 29 times** and 3 times.
In this life, on this earth. Natural life before death.
Life without taking eternity into account. *The frequent use of this phrase is also designed to make the reader think of life NOT under the sun - life beyond this life.*

4. Work / labor / toil - about 40 times.
The viewpoint of the working person. Life is hard.
5. Good / better - about 40 times. What is good? What is better?
6. God - Elohim. About 40 times. *ONLY in God is there hope.*
7. Fear / Revere God - The intent of God. *12:13 - SUMMATION!*
8. Chasing after the wind - Used 9-10 times in first half alone.
Can also be translated “vexation of the spirit.”
9. Enjoy life - words expressing this concept are used about 20 times, *usually with explicit commendation or command.*
10. Gift / gives / lot - God’s sovereign choice to give or allot a certain situation, blessing, trial, or destiny to a person. *Under God’s reign, some things are allotted and some are open.*

11. Judgment - repeatedly. God will judge.

Under the sun, if this natural, empirical life is all there is, then nothing matters - all is vapor (Hevel).

BUT, since there is God, known from the heart of faith, *EVERYTHING matters*, and all will be brought under judgment, whether in this life or the next. 3:17, 12:14.

12. I saw / I thought - empirical observation, experience, and reflection.

Only the heart of faith sees God.

THE THREE MAJOR THEMES

1. Everything is Hevel (vapor) - fleeting, empty, meaningless.
“Under the sun” - if this natural life is all there is.
SO, seek wisdom from God, because wisdom offers the best way of living, if it recognizes that ...
 - a. we will NEVER understand everything,
 - b. there is much pain and evil in this life,
 - c. we must fear and obey God,
 - d. even wisdom is only rewarded in the next life, and
 - e. we should enjoy our life NOW in the context of all these truths.

2. Fear God - there is ONLY hope in God.

Because there is God, EVERYTHING matters.

The meaninglessness of life without God is the polar opposite of the meaningfulness of life with God.

God will bring everything to light.

God will judge everything.

NOW, in the New Covenant, we know that, for all who will accept Christ's sacrifice, God HAS judged all things in Christ.

Upon Jesus the Son, God's Lamb, all of God's wrath on sin was poured out.

If we will but accept this by fully surrendering our lives to God through Jesus the Christ, our GAIN - ETERNAL LIFE - is assured. There WILL BE permanent benefit.

3. Enjoy Life Now! - This is Qoheleth's command and commendation.

This command concludes BOTH sections (5:18-20, 11:7-10)!!

Do not deny that natural life is "Hevel." (*Fleeting*)

Do not create "Hevel" happiness outside of God. (*Empty*)

Do not play mind games or heart games.

RECOGNIZE THE DARKNESS FOR WHAT IT IS.

LOOK BEYOND THE NATURAL AND LOOK TO GOD.

Even God's gifts are NOT our source of joy, ultimately.

Even the gifts will pass, for they too are "Hevel." (Fleeting)

Qoheleth says, "Fear and obey God. Look beyond TO GOD."

We now say, "Look to Christ."

Only in CHRIST is there something NEW UNDER THE SUN.

ONLY in the RISEN JESUS is has NEW CREATION begun, *the New Creation where we will have a permanent gain!!*

