



## Wisdom Literature

### Ecclesiastes/Qoheleth

The name of this book has never been satisfactorily explained. The Hebrew, Qoheleth, is evidently derived from *qahal*, "assembly, and the Greek "Ecclesiastes," "member of an assembly," reflects this. A modern suggestion takes it to mean "gatherer" or "assembler." Ironically, Ecclesiastes is probably the least community-oriented book in the Bible. It is very much a reflection on existence from an individual point of view.

The superscription of the book identifies Qoheleth as "the son of David, king in Jerusalem." Qoheleth 1:12 repeats that he was king over Israel. He was traditionally identified as Solomon. (Jewish tradition held that Solomon composed the book in his old age. The attribution may help explain why the book became canonical.) But even if that identification was implied in the opening chapter, it was not maintained consistently. In most of the book, the speaker appears as a teacher who is acutely aware of the injustice of high officials but is unable to do anything about it. At the end of the book we are told that Qoheleth was a wise man, who taught the people knowledge. Qoheleth is exceptionally critical of traditional wisdom, but this need not be incompatible with his role as a teacher.

The language of the book shows that it cannot have been written in the age of Solomon. This is Late Biblical Hebrew, heavily influenced by Aramaic, and with many points of affinity with the later Hebrew of the Mishnah. There are two clear Persian loanwords: *pardes* ("garden," 2:5, the word from which English "paradise" derives) and *pitgam* ("response, sentence," 8:11). Dates proposed for the book range from the Persian (fifth-fourth century b.c.e.) to the Hellenistic period (third or early second century b.c.e.). There are no Greek loanwords, but then Greek words are very rare in admittedly later writings such as Ben Sira, Daniel, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Some scholars have held that Qoheleth is influenced by Greek philosophy, especially Epicureanism, but the similarities are superficial. One possible indication of date may be that the author takes issue with belief in life after death: "Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?" (3:21). The view that the human spirit goes upward after death is not attested in Judaism before the Hellenistic period, when it appears in the apocalypses of the books of Enoch and Daniel. That this view merits refutation in Qoheleth shows that it must have been current, and this is unlikely before the late third century b.c.e. As in the case of other wisdom books, however, exact dating is not crucial here. Qoheleth is concerned with aspects of life, and death, that are pertinent to all times and places.

Attempts to find a literary structure in the book have not been very successful. There is a clear editorial frame, consisting of a superscription in 1:1 and two epilogues, in 12:9-11 and 12-14. Moreover, the book begins and ends with two poems (1:2-11 and 11:7-12:7). The refrain “vanity of vanities” in 12:8 picks up the refrain of the opening poem. One can distinguish roughly between the two halves of the book. The first half is punctuated by the refrain: “all this is vanity and chasing after wind,” which marks off sections: 2:1-11; 2:12-17; 2:18-26; 3:1-4:6; and 4:7-6:19. Qoheleth 6:10-12 wraps up the first half by picking up the theme of the opening poem, that there is nothing new under the sun. The second half of the book is marked by the phrases “not find out” and “who can find out,” and “cannot know.” Other refrains are repeated throughout the book: the advice that one should eat, drink, and be merry occurs seven times in all. Concern over the finality of death also runs throughout the book.

### Vanity of Vanities

The first two verses of Qoheleth (1:2-3) introduce two of the basic themes of the book. The first is summed up in the famous phrase “vanity of vanities.” The Hebrew word that is traditionally translated as “vanity” here (*hebel*) literally means “vapor.” The Midrash, Qoheleth Rabbah, takes it to mean “like the steam from an oven.” Some commentators offer “absurd” as a modern equivalent, but while this term captures some of Qoheleth’s frustration, it does not convey the key aspect of *hebel*, which is transitoriness. What makes life “vanity” is the finality of death.

The second basic theme has the form of a question: “What profit do people have from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?” (1:2). The idea of “profit” comes from business and perhaps reflects the growing commercialization of Jerusalem in the Hellenistic period. The Hebrew term is *yitron*, “that which is left over.” The quest for a “profit” from life defines the problem that concerns Qoheleth, to a great degree. Again, this problem is impermanence or transitoriness. However much people may seem to gain for a while, in the end it all dissolves like vapor.

The poem in 1:2-11 expresses another aspect of Qoheleth’s view of the world: “there is nothing new under the sun.” The Hebrew Bible is often said to have a linear view of time, in contrast to the cyclic view of ancient Near Eastern myth; that is, the Bible supposedly allows for a sense of progress and direction in history. This is true of some parts of the biblical corpus, but the wisdom books of Proverbs, Job, and Qoheleth have no sense of a goal in history. The same or similar things happen over and over again. Novelty is an illusion that results from our ignorance of history. The fact that people of long ago are not remembered undermines a common hope in the ancient world that one might live on through one’s reputation and good name. Qoheleth insists that there is no transcendence of death, and no way out of the cyclical existence in which humanity is trapped.

## A Time for Everything

The limits of human wisdom are set out clearly in a famous passage in 3:1-9: “for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” The passage goes on to list fourteen pairs of opposites: to be born and to die, to kill and to heal, to love and to hate, and so on. The assertion that there is a time for each of these may seem shocking at first: should there be a time to kill and a time to hate? But in this respect Qoheleth is quite faithful to biblical ethics. In the book of Exodus, the absolute prohibitions of the Ten Commandments are relativized in practice in the “book of the covenant” (Exodus 21–24), the casuistic laws that take specific circumstances into account. There are lots of situations where killing is not only permitted but commanded. The psalmist has no qualms about “hating” God’s enemies. Where Qoheleth differs from the rest of the biblical tradition is in his lack of confidence that human beings can know the right time. In Proverbs timing is what distinguishes the wise person from the fool. For Qoheleth, however, this wisdom is beyond the human grasp.

Since humanity cannot figure it all out, what are people to do? Qoheleth reiterates the message that one should eat and drink and enjoy the life that is available. He also repeats the key observation that leads to his conclusion: “the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same . . . who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?” (3:19-21). The traditional Hebrew belief was that the shade of human beings lived on in Sheol. Only in the apocalyptic literature (Daniel, and the noncanonical books attributed to Enoch) do we find a belief that the human spirit goes upward after death. Qoheleth is probably taking issue here with beliefs that were just beginning to emerge in his time. His appeal, however, is not to traditional belief but to personal experience. No one knows what happens after death, but the common human experience is that people do not come back. There is no leap of faith here, no wager based on hope without evidence. Qoheleth’s philosophy of life is that we should base our lives on the evidence that we have.

## The Concluding Poem

Perhaps the most moving part of Qoheleth is the poem on old age at the end of the book. This poem balances the opening poem in 1:1-11 and shares the same theme: all is vanity or vapor. Qoheleth 12:1-8 is widely recognized as an allegory of old age, although there is no agreement on how the details should be interpreted. Some commentators take the passage as an account of a storm, nightfall, or the ruin of an estate, any of which could serve as a metaphor for old age. The passage is not a sustained allegory, but an allusive poem that conveys a cumulative impression of collapse, culminating in the conclusion that all things pass, all is vapor.

## The Epilogues

The book of Qoheleth concludes with three epilogues that clearly do not come from the author of the main part of the book. The first, in 12:9-10, describes the author, in the third person, as a

teacher of traditional wisdom. The second, in vv. 11-12, comes from an editor who was troubled by the skeptical sayings of the sage. He justifies them by comparing them

to goads, but adds quickly: "Of anything beyond these, my child, beware. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh" (as any student can testify). Here we see the canonical impulse at work in the attempt to limit the number of books that can be accepted as authoritative.

The final epilogue, in 12:13-14, does most violence to the spirit of the book. It picks up a verse from 8:17, where the sage says in his heart that God will judge the righteous, but that verse is followed by a passage that explains that human beings and animals have the same fate. There is no irony in the epilogue: all one has to do is fear God and keep his commandments. This is the only time that the commandments are mentioned in Qoheleth. The epilogue practically tells the reader not to pay too much attention to the book. One does not need wisdom; it is sufficient to keep the commandments. Qoheleth never suggested that "the whole duty of everyone" could be identified so simply.

It is not surprising that some scribes found Qoheleth troubling and tried to limit its influence. The greater surprise is surely that it was included in the canon of Scripture at all. Its inclusion may have been due to its supposed Solomonic authorship, but it also testifies to the critical spirit that pervades so much of the Hebrew Scriptures.