

## LECTURE 23: ECCLESIASTES

### “The God who shepherds through life’s enigmas”

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### I. Orienting Data

- A. **Wisdom in Revolt?** James L. Crenshaw (*Ecclesiastes*, 23): “Life is profitless, totally absurd. This oppressive message lies at the heart of the Bible’s strangest book. Enjoy

life if you can, advises the author, for old age will soon overtake you. And even as you enjoy, know that the world is meaningless. Virtue does not bring reward. The deity stands distant, abandoning humanity to chance and death. These views contrast radically with earlier teachings expressed in the book of Proverbs....” Should we agree with this pessimistic view of Ecclesiastes? Are the words of the main speaker more like those of Job’s friends rather than of a godly sage?

- B. Focus:** How to respond when life doesn’t make sense—“under the sun” theology, i.e., life understood by those who aren’t God and who have been affected by the fall, including believers.
- C. Title:** Hebrew = Qoheleth, likely a vocational title meaning “assembler”—i.e., one who assembles others to teach wisdom (ESV = “Preacher”)
- D. Content:** The pondering of a wisdom teacher who wrestles with life’s realities; what is to be gained by achieving wealth or wisdom when in the end death claims both rich and poor, wise and foolish; the need for the fear of God in all of life.
- E. Date of Composition:** unknown; 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C. if Solomon is the author, as is suggested when Eccl. 1:1 is read with 2:1–12. I propose that Qoheleth is most likely Solomon, who later in life offers godly counsel regarding how best to relate to Yahweh and his broken but beautiful world.
- F. Emphases:**
  - 1. The difficulty in grasping many of life’s harsh realities.
  - 2. The proper response of God’s people in the wake of such realities.
  - 3. How to live wisely in a world that doesn’t always make sense.

\*For a further overview of the book’s message as understood by your professor, see [Jason S. DeRouchie, “Shepherding Wind and One Wise Shepherd: Grasping for Breath in Ecclesiastes,” \*SBJT\* 15.3 \(2011\): 4–25.](#)

- II. Summary:** Amid the enigmatic pleasures and pains of life in this crooked world under the sun, the wise, who recognize that life is like shepherding wind (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9) and who have eyes to see the light and recall the light even in the darkness (2:13–14; 7:11–12; 11:7–8), must fear and follow (3:14; 12:13) the One Shepherd (12:11; cf. Ezek 34:23; 37:24; John 10:16) by living in view of the judgment (11:9; 12:14) and by trusting that he will preserve his own to the end (8:12–13; John 10:27–30).

- III. Excursus: Ecclesiastes and the Epic of Gilgamesh** (adapted from Jason S. DeRouchie’s article by the same name in *The Archaeological Study Bible*, 1026)

The longest literary composition known from ancient Mesopotamia is the Gilgamesh Epic, the autobiographical narrative tale of an ancient king’s failed quest for lasting fame and immortality (*ANET*<sup>3</sup> 72–99, 503–7). A tavern-keeper’s advice to the hero Gilgamesh summarizes the story’s message: in view of the impending death of all mankind, the task of mortals is to make the most of life—to eat, drink, be merry, be clean, dress radiantly, delight in one’s children, and let your wife enjoy you (Old Babylonian Version 10.3, *ANET*<sup>3</sup> 90).

Scholars have long noted the similarity of this admonition with that of the “Preacher” in Ecclesiastes, whose personal wrestling with life’s meaning, transience, and/or enigmas led him to conclude that people should simply seize the day, finding satisfaction in all that God gives (esp. 9:3, 7–10; cf. 2:24; 3:12–13, 22; 5:15–20[14–19]; 8:15; 11:7–12:1). The Preacher also concluded that “all the works which have been done [by mankind] under the

sun ... [are] vanity and striving after wind” (Eccl 2:11; cf. 1:2–3, 14, 17; 2:17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 5:2[1], 16[15]; 6:9), which corresponds closely with one of Gilgamesh’s statements: “Only the gods [live] forever under the sun [*or* with Shamash]. As for mankind, numbered are their days; whatever they achieve is but wind!” (OBV 3.4, *ANET*<sup>3</sup> 79). Other parallels include the mention of a three-stranded cord when commenting on friendship (cf. Eccl 4:9–12 with *GE* 4.4; 5.2 [Standard Assyrian Version]) and the stress that no aspect of life is permanent (cf. Eccl 1:4, 11; 2:16; 3:18–19; 9:5–6 with *GE* 10.6 [SAV], *ANET*<sup>3</sup> 92–93).

In view of these similarities, some have suggested that the author of Ecclesiastes, writing from Israel during the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium B.C., must have borrowed snippets of wisdom directly from the Gilgamesh Epic, a Mesopotamian work completed early in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC. Because a copied fragment of the Epic dated to the 14<sup>th</sup> century BC was found in northern Israel, we know that the story of Gilgamesh was at least known in the region at an early time. Nevertheless, the following observations suggest that direct literary dependence is unlikely.

1. Life’s purpose and brevity, human mortality, and the value of friendship are normal concerns of ancient Near Eastern wisdom writings and are not confined to these two books.
2. There is little similarity in the genre’s of the Epic and Ecclesiastes; although they teach a similar moral, the former does so through a story, whereas the latter offers it through mere reflections on life.
3. The phrase “under the sun” is used differently in Ecclesiastes and the Epic and is found throughout the ancient world in both the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC.
4. Though both Gilgamesh (10.3) and the Preacher (e.g., Eccl 1:14; 2:11, 17) can say that all of life’s accomplishments are but “wind,” the Akkadian and Hebrew words used are not cognates (*sa-ru* vs. *ruah*), and “wind” is a common metaphor easily used by any.
5. Although the call to joy in Eccl 9:7–10 finds its closest ancient parallel in the Gilgamesh Epic 10.3, the wording is not exact, both texts are highly integrated into their own contexts, Ecclesiastes makes no mention of delighting in one’s children, and similar summons to find pleasure today in view of life’s brevity are found elsewhere in the ancient world (e.g., the Egyptian “Harper’s Song,” *ANET* 467).
6. In contrast to the Epic that leaves man at enmity with the gods and with no lasting hope, Ecclesiastes grounds the call to enjoy life in the approval of God (Eccl 9:7) and stresses that those who fear God will be blessed and know true hope (8:12–13; cf. 5:7[6]; 12:13–14).

Ecclesiastes may be directly dependent on the Gilgamesh Epic, the two may simply be indebted to a common tradition, or the similar reflections may be due only to the wrestling of two individuals with the same human question—i.e., How is one to live when life makes no sense? Significantly, regardless of the literary relationship between Ecclesiastes and the Epic, the two are worlds apart theologically. The Epic challenges mankind to enjoy life but gives no lasting hope. Within Ecclesiastes, however, life’s enigmas are tempered by true hope when one remembers and fears God (see 5:7[6]; 8:12; 12:1, 13–14).

## IV. Interpreting Ecclesiastes

### A. Structure:

**Fig. 23.1. The Structure of Ecclesiastes at a Glance<sup>1</sup>**

Prologue (Eccl. 1:1)		
Qoheleth's Queries (1:2–12:8)	Indicative Motto: All is <i>Hebel</i> (1:2)	Part 1
	Introductory Poem (1:3–11)	
	Qoheleth's Investigation of Life (1:12–6:9)	
	Qoheleth's Conclusions of Life (6:10–11:6)	Part 2
	Concluding Poem (11:7–12:7)	
	Indicative Motto: All is <i>Hebel</i> (12:8)	
Epilogue (12:9–14)		

### B. The Curse as a Backdrop to Ecclesiastes

1. Ecclesiastes is a realistic commentary on life in the created, cursed world—life “under the sun” (Eccl. 1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17–20; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1, 12; 8:9, 15, 17; 9:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10:5).
  - a. All life as we know it happens “under the sun” (4:15; 9:9) as a gift of God (5:18; 8:15): toils, labors, and deeds (1:18–20; 5:18; 8:9; 9:6, 9); joy (8:15); time and chance (9:11); and wisdom (9:13).
  - b. There is no lasting gain “under the sun” (Eccl. 1:3; 2:11), for death comes to all (6:12; 9:6).
  - c. Nothing new happens “under the sun” (1:9).
  - d. All that is done “under the sun” is *hebel* (1:14; 4:7), and because of this it is grievous (1:17).
  - e. “Under the sun” there are corruption (3:16), many oppressions (4:1), evil deeds (4:3), and grievous evil (5:13; 6:1; 9:3; 10:5).
  - f. Mankind cannot discern all God’s work “under the sun” (8:17; cf. 7:13–14).
  - g. Only the wise have eyes to see the “light” of the sun; the fool walks ever in darkness (2:13–14). In such a context, the sweetness of light and the pleasantness of seeing the sun (11:7) is something only the redeemed enjoy. The “sun,” therefore, appears to point in this book both to life under the curse and life under divine goodness that only few see and celebrate.
2. God has made the world crooked, subjecting it to frustration (1:15; 7:13; cf. Rom. 8:20).

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Addison G. Wright, “The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 30 (1968): 322–25; cf. idem, “The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth,” *CBQ*, 42 (1980): 38–51; idem, “Additional Numerical Patterns in Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 45 (1983): 32–43. Wright observes that Ecclesiastes contains exactly 222 poetic verses, with the argument shifting directly in the middle: 111 occurring from 1:1–6:9 and 111 from 6:10–12:14. See also Ardel B. Caneday, “Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?” *Grace Theological Journal* 7.1 (1986): 31–34; James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 313–314, 319. For a helpful though unfavorable critique of Wright’s numerology, see Choon-Leong Seow (*Ecclesiastes*, AB [New York: Doubleday, 1997], 44–46).

3. The only chance of grasping what is going on in the world is in relation to its Creator (Eccl. 12:1).
4. Numerous parallels exist between Genesis' creation theology and the view of the Qoheleth (Roy B. Zuck, "God and Man in Ecclesiastes," *BSac* 148/589 [1991]: 54; cf. Charles C. Forman, "Kohleth's Use of Genesis," *JSS* 5 (1960): 256–263; D. M. Clemens, "The Law of Sin and Death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1–3," *Them* 19 (1994): 5–8):
  - a. Man was initially created good but then fell into sin (Gen. 1:31; 3:1–19; Eccl. 3:16; 4:1; 7:29).
  - b. The consequence of sin was toil (Gen. 3:14–19; Eccl. 1:3, 8, 18; 2:11, 17, 22) and death (Gen. 3:19, 24; 4:5, 8; Eccl. 2:14–16; 3:20; 4:2; 9:5; 12:6–7).
  - c. Mankind was made from dust and breath (Gen. 2:7; 3:19; Eccl. 3:20; 12:7), has limited knowledge (Gen. 2:17; Eccl. 8:7; 10:14; 11:5), and was created to live in companionship with others (Gen. 1:27; 2:21–25; Eccl. 4:9–12; 9:9).
  - d. My research assistant Brian Verrett identified these parallels:
    - i. *Ecclesiastes*: Though God made humanity (הָאָדָם) upright (Eccl 7:29) and has put "forever" (עֲלָם) in his heart (3:11), humans have sought out "schemes" (חֲשָׁבוֹן, 7:29) so that the hearts (לֵב) of the sons of Adam are full of evil (רָע) and then they die (מוֹת, 9:3) by returning to the dust (עָפָר + שׁוֹב, 3:20), proving that life under the sun (שֶׁמֶשׁ) is הֶבֶל (3:10).
    - ii. *Genesis*: Though God made the first man (הָאָדָם) spiritually alive (Gen 2:17) and intended for him to live forever (עוֹלָם, 2:9; 3:22), he sinned so that the thoughts (מַחְשַׁבָּת) of the heart (לֵב) of humanity (הָאָדָם) are evil (רָע, 6:5) and humans die (מוֹת, 5:5; 7:22) by returning to the dust (עָפָר + שׁוֹב, 3:19), proving that life under the great light (i.e., the sun, 1:14–18) is cursed (3:14, 17).

### C. Key Interpretive Questions:

1. The meaning of *hebel* ("wisp of air, breath, vapor"; 38x in Ecclesiastes), which serves as a foundational and recurring theme in the body of the book—Qoheleth's queries (NOTE: *hebel* is spelled the same as *Abel* in Genesis 4, with his life serving as a picture of seemingly random brokenness of our world).
  - a. LXX = *mataiotes* ("vanity, emptiness, futility, purposelessness, or transitoriness") (see Rom 8:20)
  - b. Vulgate = *vanitas* ("emptiness, worthlessness, unreality, untruth, vanity, or boasting") but not "transitoriness, fleeting"
2. The role and perspective of the epilogue in relation to the rest of the book. Does the epilogue correct or affirm Qoheleth's theology?
  - a. The conservative Tremper Longman III affirms that Qoheleth's message is wholly pessimistic and stands in contrast to orthodox wisdom teaching (*The Book of Ecclesiastes*). But this message serves only as a literary foil for the true message of the book, which is found in the last two verses, 12:13–14: "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."

- b. The voice of Qoheleth is here compared to the voices of Job's three friends. In Longman's words, Job is "composed of nonorthodox speeches of the human participants of the book, speeches that are torn down and demolished at the end" (38). Longman pits the frame narrator against Qoheleth, but is this the best way to read the book's conclusion? Crenshaw recognizes that the epilogue affirms Qoheleth, but he sees this as an unexpected twist that supplies the main reason why Ecclesiastes could be included in the canon ("Ecclesiastes, the Book of," *ABD*, 2:278).

## V. The Meaning of *Hebel*:

### A. General Comments:

1. Translational renderings: (1) "Vain, meaningless; futile"; (2) "Irrational, senseless, absurd"; (3) "Transient, temporary, fleeting, ephemeral"; (4) "Mysterious, incomprehensible, ungraspable, enigmatic."<sup>2</sup>

Fig. 23.2. Categories of Meaning Assigned to *Hebel* in Ecclesiastes

	Less Abstract	More Abstract
Negative view of <i>hebel</i>	(1) Vanity, meaninglessness (of things); futility (of actions) "All things in this world are worthless, valueless, or profitless"	(2) Irrationality, senselessness, absurdity "All things in this world are counter-rational or a violation of reason"
Positive or Negative view of <i>hebel</i>	(3) Transience, temporariness, fleetingness, ephemerality "All things in this world are brief"	(4) Mystery, incomprehensibility, ungraspability, enigma "All things in this world are not fully in humanity's power to comprehend"

2. Overview of *hebel* ("wisp of air, breath, vapor"):
- The initial aspirated "h" followed by the spirant "v" sound suggests that the word is probably onomatopoeic, which means it is spoken by the exhalation of "breath" that the word itself denotes.
  - Only three instances of literal, physical "breath" are found in the OT, and even with these the point is to stress the breath-like futility of wickedness (Ps 62:10 [ET9]; Prov 21:6; Isa 57:13). In all the rest of the occurrences, including all thirty-eight in Ecclesiastes, the nominal and verbal instances are metaphorical.
  - Many of the occurrences outside of Ecclesiastes retain the sense of the "ephemeral" or "fleeting" (e.g., Job 7:16; Ps 39:6 [ET7], 12 [ET11]; 144:4).
  - In other instances, the noun denotes "valueless" or "inefficacy" (and so "vain"), in that something does not or cannot fulfill what it implicitly promises (e.g., Jer 10:2; Isa 30:7; 49:4; Job 9:29). Accordingly, *hebel* appears to denote "worthlessness" in a number of contexts where it parallels nouns like *tōhū*, "nothingness"; *rîq* "emptiness"; and *lō' hō' il*, "it is not profitable" (Isa. 30:6, 7; 44:25; 49:4; 57:12; Jer. 16:19). Furthermore, in

<sup>2</sup> For a bibliography of those who hold the various views, see Jason S. DeRouchie, "Shepherding Wind and One Wise Shepherd: Grasping for Breath in Ecclesiastes," *SBJT* 15.3 (2011): 19 nn. 21–24.

contexts where *hebel* parallels nouns like *’āwen*, “misdeed”; *kāzāb*, “delusion”; *ma’al*, “unfaithfulness”; *šīwē’* “worthless, without result”; and *šeqer*, “falsehood,” it carries the sense of “deceit” (e.g., Zech. 10:2; Ps. 62:10; Job 21:34; Prov 31:30). So it is that *hebel* serves regularly as a designation for false gods (e.g., Deut. 32:21; 2 Kgs. 17:15; Jer. 8:19; 14:22; 16:19; Jonah 2:9 [ET8]).

- e. Finally, in some texts *hebel* appears to express that which is senseless, foolish, or without thought, as when Elihu states that “Job opens his mouth in *empty talk* (*hebel*); he multiplies words without knowledge” (Job 35:16; cf. Jer. 10:3, 8; Ps. 39:7[6]).
  3. In Ecclesiastes, the equating of *hebel* with “everything” in the refrain (Eccl. 1:2; 12:8) along with the formulaic character of the *hebel*-judgments throughout the rest of the book suggests that there is a common definition to the various occurrences in the book and that 1:2 and 12:8 summarize Qoheleth’s thought on reality.
    - a. While certain contexts may support “vanity, emptiness” (2:1, 11, 19, 21) or “transience” (2:15; 3:19; 6:12), neither of these options fits all instances.
    - b. In light of the Preacher’s calls to joy and affirmation of the need to fear and remember God, it is difficult to believe he views life as “worse than pointless” and “absurd” (*contra* Fox).
    - c. I suggest “enigma” (i.e., not fully comprehensible but still meaningful) best captures the overall thrust of *hebel* in every instance throughout the book.
  4. What types of things are judged *hebel*?
    - a. Human behavior
      - i. Toil and its products (2:11; 2:18–26; 4:4, 7–8, 15–16; 5:10; 6:1–2)
      - ii. Pleasure (2:1; 6:9)
      - iii. Wisdom and growing wise (2:15; 7:15–16)
      - iv. Words (5:6–7; 6:10–11)
    - b. Living beings and times in their lives (3:18–19; 6:12; 7:15–16; 9:9; 11:10)
    - c. Divine behavior—events
      - i. Divine justice (2:15, 26; 6:1–2; 8:10, 14)
      - ii. “Everything” (1:2, 14; 2:17; 6:3–4; 11:8–9; 12:8)
- B. Against “Meaninglessness,” “Pointless,” or “Absurd”**
1. Common synonyms to *hebel* as “meaninglessness” or “valuelessness” are completely absent in Ecclesiastes—e.g., *’ayin*, “nothing, naught”; *rêq*, “empty, idle, worthless”; *rîq* “emptiness”; *šīwē’* “worthless, without result”; *tōhû*, “nothingness.”
  2. Qoheleth’s “better than” statements (3:22; 4:9; 5:1; 7:1–3, 5, 8, 10; 9:4, 16–18) all suggest that there is meaning, for how can something be more meaningless than something else?
  3. If all is “meaningless” or “absurd,” then why should we listen to Qoheleth’s own conclusions, which themselves would be pointless?
  4. Qoheleth affirmed deep meaning in life, for he tagged much in this life “evil, trouble” (9:3), “grievous evil” (5:13, 16; 6:2), “great evil” (2:21), and “unhappy business” (1:13; 4:8)—all declarations that affirm a standard of truth and rightness and a conviction that the universe needs “straightening” (1:14–15;

7:13). Pain or offense testifies to one's innate sense of meaning and purposefulness, whether accurate or misguided.

### C. Against "Transience" or "Temporary"

1. While Qoheleth addresses the unchanging cycles of "every matter under heaven" (3:1; cf. 1:4–11; 3:1–8; 12:2–7), the point of affirming life's repetitions and with that brevity is not to highlight life's temporary nature but to identify the enigma of history's recursive nature and of each generation's relative insignificance in the scope of God's story.
  - a. After observing God's call on mankind to live wisely in all seasons of life (3:1–10), Qoheleth clarified the point of his temporal observations: while God makes everything beautiful in its time and has granted each individual a sense of infinity within, no one is able to gain an ultimate grasp of creation's history from start to finish (3:11).
  - b. "I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out" (8:17).
2. As Qoheleth describes life's unhappy business, it portrays an existence that is anything but temporary, at least from the perspective of the human experiencing it.
  - a. The workaholic has "no end to all his toil," his greed is "never satisfied," and he "never asks, 'For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?'" (Ecc. 4:8).
  - b. The leaving of one's wealth to another who never worked for it is not simply *hebel* (2:19, 21, 23) but a "great evil" (2:21) that leads to a lifetime of "sorrow" and "vexation," "despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun" (2:20, 23).

### D. Support for "Enigma" or "Frustratingly Mysterious"

Ecc. 11:7–8. Light is sweet [not meaningless or absurd], and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. For if a person lives many years [far from brief], he should rejoice in them all [far from meaningless or absurd]; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many [not few and fleeting]. All that comes is enigma (*hebel*).

1. When Qoheleth asserted that "all" in creation was *hebel*, I believe he meant that nothing in the universe this side of eternity was fully understandable, whether bad or good. The point is *not* that truth is "unknowable" or "unintelligible" but that reality is ultimately "unfathomable." While able to know and understand some truths, realities like the repetitive character of life and nature (1:4–7, 9–10), the soul's inability to be satisfied (1:8), and the failure of every new generation to learn from the past (1:11) make existence in this present age "wearisome" at best (1:8; cf. 8:17; Ps. 73:16). All things bear a level of mystery and frustration. This is *hebel*.
  - Ecc. 1:17–18. I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.
  - Ecc. 3:11. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's hearts, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.
  - Ecc. 6:11–12. The more words, the more *enigma*, and what is the advantage to man? <sup>12</sup> For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his *enigmatic* life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?



- Ecccl. 7:13–14. Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?<sup>14</sup> In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.
  - Ecccl. 8:5–7. Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way.<sup>6</sup> For there is a time and a way for everything, although man’s trouble lies heavy on him.<sup>7</sup> For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be?
  - Ecccl. 8:16–17. When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one’s eyes see sleep,<sup>17</sup> then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.
  - Ecccl. 11:5. As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.
2. The identification of many “evils” in this world—*ḥōlî rā* ‘ (“a sickness of evil”) (6:2); *‘inyan rā* ‘ (“a bad business, an evil occupation”) (1:13; 4:8; 5:13); *rā ‘ā rabā* (“a great evil”) (2:21)—all point to something painful and traumatic, as in what goes on in a person when we can’t understand life.
  3. Support for “enigma” also comes in two recurring phrases that are regularly appended to Qoheleth’s *hebel* judgments, bearing the same contexts and referents: *r<sup>‘</sup>ūt rūah* (“a shepherding of wind”) (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9) or *ra’yôn rūah* (“a thought of wind”) (1:17; 4:16). The point of these phrases is that grasping why the world works the way it does is often like attempting to get wind under control—an impossibility.
  4. Besides the nine combined instances of *r<sup>‘</sup>ūt* and *ra’yôn* in the book, the only other occurrence of the root *r<sup>‘</sup>h* is in 12:11 where the words of the wise are said to be “given by one Shepherd [*rō‘eh ʾehād*].” While many scholars have thought a reference to God as “one Shepherd” is intrusive and does not fit the context of Ecclesiastes, I would argue that there is no better title that could have been chosen, for when people find themselves in a world that makes little sense—a world where trying to understand reality is like shepherding the wind, what is needed is confidence in One Shepherd who has been upholding all things well for all time. This Shepherd is the great provider and protector of his own, and fearing him in the midst of life’s enigmas enables one to find joy in this painful existence as we await the day when all wrongs will be triumphed over.

## VI. The Unity of Qoheleth’s Theology with that of the Frame-Narrator

### A. General Observations:

1. The Frame-narrator’s call to fear God and to keep his commandments (12:13–14) stands in alignment with Qoheleth’s theology (cf. 5:1–7).
  - a. Indeed, the call to fear God pervades the Preacher’s teaching:
    - Ecccl. 3:14. I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that *people fear before him*.
    - Ecccl. 5:7. For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is enigma; but *God is the one you must fear*.
    - Ecccl. 7:16–18. Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?<sup>17</sup> Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?<sup>18</sup> It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for *the one who fears God shall come out from both of them*.

- Eccl. 8:12–13. Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolong his life, yet I know that it will be well with *those who fear God*, because *they fear before him*. But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because *he does not fear before God*.
  - Eccl. 12:13–14. 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.
- b. The closing poem also includes implicit calls to fear, which help resolve the tension between finding joy and living in an enigmatic world.
- i. As stressed in 12:13–14, the Preacher believed that all joy in this world must be tempered in light of the ultimate judgment.
    - Eccl. 3:16–17. Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. <sup>17</sup> I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work.
    - Eccl. 11:9. “Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things *God will bring you into judgment*.”
    - Eccl. 12:13–14. 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.
  - ii. The very context for joy in this world is a conscious remembrance of the Creator. 12:1 – “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.”
    - (1) This call pushes one beyond “life under the sun” to the very One who upholds life and gives it purpose.
    - (2) “Remembrance ... involves consciously allowing the great acts of God, remembered in the tradition, to shape one’s perspective in the present. The days of darkness will be many (11:8), but the way to joy in the midst of this darkness (12:2–7) is to remember God as creator” (C. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 251).
    - (3) Remembrance, which nurtures a proper fear of God, presents the possibility for resolution to the enigmas of life and opens the door for joy: “Let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” (1 Pet. 4:19).
2. The Preacher’s calls to joy—to seize the day—are often juxtaposed with the *hebel* judgments:

Calls to Joy	Related <i>Hebel</i> Judgments
2:24–25	2:19, 21, 23, 26
3:12–13, 22	3:19
5:18–20	(5:15–17)
7:14	(7:13, 15)
8:15	8:14
9:7–10	9:(3), 9
11:7–12:1	11:8, 10; 12:(1), 8

- a. Far from being a hopeless attempt to satisfy one's soul in a meaningless world, I believe the hedonism of the Preacher is a true attempt to find delight in God's gifts even when we don't fully understand his world.
- b. Trust in God as the One Shepherd is the only right way by which our souls can be free to delight in this world, even as we hope for the next.
- c. The Preacher's calls to joy, fear, and remembrance are likely all expressions of life and blessing in the covenant.
  - i. Ecclesiastes 9:4–6 stresses that life is God's most precious gift, and v. 7 states that one can enjoy bread, wine, and the details of life "for God has already approved what you do." Such a statement may suggest that the bread and wine are provisions that have come in response to covenant faithfulness (i.e., blessings of the covenant).
  - ii. Richard L. Schultz ("Ecclesiastes," *NDBT*, 214) has suggested that Qoheleth's encouragement to "eat, drink, and enjoy your work" refers directly to the fulfillment of the covenant promises of national blessing, as described in 1 Kings 4:20: "Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea. They ate and drank and were happy."
3. The Frame Narrator's own words are most naturally read to affirm this conclusion.
  - Eccl. 12:9–12 (ESV). Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. <sup>10</sup>The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. <sup>11</sup>The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. <sup>12</sup>My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

**B. Critique of Longman's Attempt to Make the Epilogue NOT Affirm Qoheleth (*The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 274–84).**

1. *The translation of v. 10*. A literal, word-for-word rendering of 12:10 is: "Qoheleth sought words of delight, and uprightness was written—words of truth" (see NKJV). In contrast, Longman unnecessarily alters the Masoretic pointing of the Hebrew text, blending the clause with the preceding (275 n. 65): "Qoheleth sought to find words of delight and to write honestly words of truth" (see NASB). And in Longman's perspective, the Frame Narrator would want us to believe Qoheleth's quest was never successful. However, reading the Hebrew naturally shows the text to be a simple affirmation of Qoheleth's theology.
2. *The meaning of v. 11*. Following Michael V. Fox (*Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 325), Longman reads the "goads" and "nails" of v. 11 to be a negative image, stressing their ability to "sting" when applied (Longman, 280). He also translated "one Shepherd" as "a shepherd," suggesting the number *one* is merely a late form of an indefinite article (279). In contrast, the Narrator's words can be just as easily understood to stress how the wisdom sayings of Qoheleth should be like a goad in prodding us in the right path and like a nail in firmly establishing us in good teaching. This view is reinforced if the "one Shepherd" is an allusion to Yahweh, from whom all wisdom comes. Longman asserts that such an allusion to God at "would be a unique reference in the wisdom literature and a startling affirmation of the divine origin of wisdom" (279). Three related responses are here offered.

- a. The rarity with which *ʾehād* (“one”) functions as an indefinite article along with the fact that alleged instances are almost solely limited to the Former Prophets (GKC §125b; J-M §137u–v) gives initial caution to such a use in the compact epilogue of Ecclesiastes. With this, the definite presence of *ʾehād* most naturally points to a “singular identification” and not a general, indefinite “shepherd.”
  - b. To mention God as the author of wisdom would be far from unique or startling, for Ecclesiastes has already related God’s work with wisdom (8:16–17) and identified God as the “Creator” of all (12:1) and the giver of wisdom (2:26). Not only this, Job states explicitly that, while wisdom is “hidden from the eyes of all living,” “God understands the way to it, and he knows its place.... He saw it and declared it; he established it, and searched it out” (Job 28:20, 23, 27). Similarly, Solomon declared, “Yahweh gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Prov. 2:6). Moreover, personified wisdom declared itself to be possessed by God at the beginning of his creative work (8:22; cf. vv. 22–31).
  - c. To call Yahweh the “Shepherd (*rōʿeh*)” of wisdom appears to be an intentional contrast to mankind’s inability to do so. As fallen creatures in a fallen world, our attempt to fully grasp what God is doing is like “shepherding wind” (*rʿût rūah*) (Eccl. 1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9). What we cannot grasp, God the great Shepherd oversees with care, and in this we should find hope.
3. *The implications of v. 11.* Significantly, while wisdom in Qoheleth is seen as coming from God, it is now being relayed through his earthly Davidic king, who himself anticipates the Messiah, the one who “fears God and keeps his commandments” perfectly (Eccl. 12:13 with Deut. 17:18–20). The messianic reading of Qoheleth is enhanced by its canonical placement.
- a. First, the kingdom-messianic trajectory of the Writings calls for seeing the messiah as the ultimate wise man, righteous in all his ways because he meditates on the law day and night (Ps. 1:2), fears God and hopes in his Redeemer simply because of who God is (Job 19:25; 28:28; cf. 1:9), and fears Yahweh and treasures instruction (Prov. 1:7).
  - b. Second, Eccl. 12:11 declares that “the words of the wise” are given by “one shepherd.” Canonically, the only other occurrence of “one shepherd” in the OT happens in Ezekiel 34 where Yahweh declares that he will be “the shepherd” of his sheep (v. 15) and then asserts in vv. 23–24: “I will set up over them *one shepherd*, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, Yahweh, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them.” Thus, when read within the TaNaK structure, the use of “one shepherd” in Eccl. 12:11 *recalls* the messianic hope for the “one shepherd” established in Ezek. 34:23.
  - c. Third, in a book generated with messianic fulfillment, the writer of Hebrews calls Christ “the great shepherd” (Heb. 13:20). This language likely is drawn from Christ’s self-description in John 10, where he calls himself “the good shepherd” who both “lays his life down for the sheep” and knows his own” (John 10:11, 14). Most significant for our passage, however, is that

Christ declares: “I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, *one shepherd*” (10:16). Because the phrase only occurs in Ezekiel 34 and Ecclesiastes 12, and because both OT texts are stressing the providing, protecting role of God in a broken world, ultimately through his king, the reference in John 10 is likely an explicit echo. What comfort there is for those who find refuge in the king: John 10:27–30. “My sheep here my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup> I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. <sup>29</sup> My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. <sup>30</sup> I and the Father are one.”

4. *The meaning of v. 12.* Longman reads 12:12 as cautioning the son from listening to Qoheleth (= “Furthermore, of these, my son, be warned!”) rather than as cautioning the son from listening to anything contrary to Qoheleth (so ESV) or in confusing wisdom with study (so Garrett). Literally, the Hebrew reads, “And more than [*or* in addition to] these things, my son, be warned: There is no end to making many books, and much study is a weariness of flesh.” For a note on why Longman’s rendering of the Hebrew as “Furthermore, of these” is strained, see Whybray’s discussion of v. 9 (which starts with the same word) in *Ecclesiastes*, 170.

- C. **The Final Note.** In light of the affirming words of the Narrator for Qoheleth’s message, he concludes with a synthesis of the book in 12:13–14: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. <sup>14</sup>For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”

## VII. The Book’s Message Summarized

### A. God Has Made Our Life “under the Sun” Enigmatic.

1. The refrain:
  - a. “Ultimate enigma, says Qoheleth, ultimate enigma! All is enigma” (DeRouchie’s translation; cf. 12:8).
  - b. That life is unsatisfying, repetitive, and troublesome creates high levels of puzzlement, mystery, and even vexation for the believer and non-believer alike.
2. God has cursed the world and intentionally made it frustratingly enigmatic.
  - Ecc 1:14–15. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is *an enigma* and a shepherding of wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.
  - Ecc 1:18. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.
  - Ecc 3:11. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s hearts, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.
  - Ecc 6:12. For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his *enigmatic* life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun? (Cf. 8:7.)
  - Ecc 7:13–14. Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? <sup>14</sup> In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.

- Ecccl. 8:17. Then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out. (Cf. 7:23–24; 9:11–12; 11:5.)
  - Ecccl. 11:8. So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is *an enigma*.
3. The bright purposes and kindnesses of God get dimmed from our vision due to:
    - a. The monotony of life's repetitions (1:4–11)
    - b. How quickly one is forgotten after death (2:14–16)
    - c. The brevity of wisdom, skill, wealth (2:21; 5:16)
    - d. Rebel *and* remnant experiencing birth *and* death, love *and* hate, peace *and* war (3:2, 8).
    - e. Ignorance (3:11; 11:5)
    - f. Injustice and oppression (4:1)
    - g. Discontentment (4:8; 6:2)
    - h. Financial loss (5:13)
    - i. Persistent battle with sin (9:3)
    - j. Unexpected trial (9:12; 11:2)
  4. Ecclesiastes is “under the sun” theology.
    - a. There is no lasting gain “under the sun” (Eccl 1:3; 2:11), for death comes to all (6:12; 9:6).
    - b. Nothing new happens “under the sun” (1:9).
    - c. All that is done “under the sun” is *an enigma* (1:14; 4:7), and because of this it is grievous (1:17–18).
    - d. “Under the sun” there are corruptions (3:16), oppressions (4:1), evil deeds (4:3), and grievous evil (5:13; 6:1; 9:3; 10:5).
    - e. All life as we know it happens “under the sun” (4:15; 9:9) and comes as a gift of God (5:18; 8:15):
      - i. Toils, labors, and deeds (1:18–20; 5:18; 8:9; 9:6, 9)
      - ii. Joy (8:15)
      - iii. Time and “chance” (9:11)
      - iv. Wisdom (9:13)
    - f. Mankind cannot discern all God's work “under the sun” (8:17; cf. 7:13–14).
  5. Everyone, believer and non-believer alike, is part of life “under the sun,” and in this world all is enigmatic (1:2; 12:8; cf. 1:14; 4:7).
    - Ecccl 1:2 (DeRouchie): Ultimate enigma, says the Preacher, ultimate enigma! All is an enigma. Cf. 12:8.
    - Rom 8:20–21. For the creation was subjected to *futility* [frustration, enigma?], not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.
  6. Attempting to grasp life's enigmas to trying to shepherd the wind—both are impossible: 6x as a phrase qualifying or clarifying *hebel* (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4; 6:9); 1x as a substantive in place of *hebel* (4:6) (cf. “thought of wind,” 1:17; 4:16).
    - Ecccl. 1:14. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is *an enigma* and a shepherding of wind.

**B. The Proper Response—** Why then has God cursed the world and rendered it enigmatic?

1. To create dependent people who *fear* him.

- Ecccl 3:11, 14. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. . . .<sup>14</sup> I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.
  - Ecccl 5:1, 4–7. Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. . . .<sup>4</sup> When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow.<sup>5</sup> It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.<sup>6</sup> Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?<sup>7</sup> When dreams increase and words grow many, there is *enigma*; but God is the one you must fear.
  - Ecccl 7:13–14. Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?<sup>14</sup> In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.
2. To create a people who *desire* real gain both here and beyond judgment.
- a. Qoheleth questions what “gain” (*yitrôn* – only in Ecccl.) there is from life's toils (1:3; cf. 2:11, 13[2x], 3:9; 5:9, 16; 7:12; 10:10, 11) and concludes that there is no real “gain” under the sun (2:11).
- i. While joy in toil was his “reward” (2:10), there was no “gain” in life under the sun (2:11; cf. 5:15–16).
- Ecccl 2:10–11. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.<sup>11</sup> Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was an enigma and a shepherding of wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.
- ii. One key reason present gain is non-existent is because life under the sun (i.e., under the curse) leads to death for all.
- Ecccl. 2:20–21. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is *an enigma* and a great evil. Cf. 5:13–16; 6:1–6.
  - Ecccl. 3:19–20. For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is *an enigma*. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.
  - Ecccl. 8:8. No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. . . .
  - Ecccl. 9:2–3. It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. . . .
- b. Nevertheless, while Qoheleth believed there was no *gain* under the sun, he held that even in this cursed world the life of wisdom has gain (2:13) in the way that it opens the door to the age to come (7:12). That is, the gain of wisdom is a gain of hope for lasting life that begins today.
- Ecccl 2:13. Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness.
  - Ecccl 7:12. For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.

- c. The gain of wisdom in the present works in two ways:
  - i. *Inaugurated gain*: Fearing God today (i.e., living wisely in light of the future) leads to the approval of God, which frees you and me to delight in today as a gift of the Creator as we hope for tomorrow (Eccl 2:24; 6:1–2; 9:7; 11:9; 12:1).
    - Eccl 2:24–25. There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God,<sup>25</sup> for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment.
    - Eccl 6:1–2. There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind:<sup>2</sup> a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is *an enigma*; it is a grievous evil.
    - Eccl 9:7. Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.
    - Eccl 11:9; 12:1. Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment....<sup>12:1</sup> Remember your Creator.
  - ii. *Consummate gain*: Future judgment awaits all (3:16–17; 11:9), and fearing God (8:12–13; 12:13–14) and “remembering your Creator” (12:1) in the present—i.e., living out the life of wisdom—are the only means for ensuring vindication in the last day.
    - Eccl 3:16–17. Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work.
    - Eccl 7:12, 16–19. The advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it....<sup>16</sup> Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? <sup>17</sup> Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? <sup>18</sup> It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them. <sup>19</sup> Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.
    - Eccl 8:12–13. Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.
    - Eccl 11:9; 12:1, 7. Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.... Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”; ... before ... the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.
    - Eccl 12:13–14. The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.
3. To create a people who *delight*, truly and worshipfully rejoicing today in the midst of this beautiful yet broken world.
  - a. Qoheleth’s *hebel* statements find greatest prominence in the very contexts he calls people to delight in life’s pleasures right now (2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20; 7:14; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:8–10).



- Ecc 2:10–11. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. <sup>11</sup> Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was *an enigma* and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.
  - Ecc 2:24–26. There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, <sup>25</sup> for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? <sup>26</sup> For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is *an enigma* and a striving after wind.
  - Ecc 3:12–13. I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; <sup>13</sup> also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man.
  - Ecc 3:22. So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?
  - Ecc 4:7–8. Again, I saw *an enigma* under the sun: <sup>8</sup> one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, “For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?” This also is *an enigma* and an unhappy business.
  - Ecc 5:18–20. Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. <sup>19</sup> Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God. <sup>20</sup> For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.
  - Ecc 7:14. In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.
  - Ecc 8:15. And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.
  - Ecc 9:7–10. Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. <sup>8</sup> Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. <sup>9</sup> Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. <sup>10</sup> Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.
  - Ecc 11:8–10. So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity. <sup>9</sup> Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. <sup>10</sup> Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.
- b. Qoheleth has a balanced worldview that affirms the real evil of this cursed world and the reality of God and joy (2:18–26).
- i. Toil is real and painful (2:18–23): Living under the curse, Qoheleth states his hatred of toil (2:18), succumbs to despair (2:20), finds no enjoyment (2:21), sees a great evil (2:21), perceives no gain (2:22), yields to sorrow (2:23), considers work a vexation (2:23), and possesses a restless heart (2:23).

- ii. Nevertheless, joy is possible even amidst the greatest toil (2:24–25), just as Qoheleth has found “wisdom and knowledge and joy” (2:26). How?
- c. Resting in God’s present and future favor enables one to enjoy life’s pleasures as gifts of God (9:7–10; 11:8–10).
  - i. *God gives:*
    - (1) An unhappy business with which mankind is to be busy (1:13; 3:10)
    - (2) Wisdom, knowledge, and joy to the one who pleases him and the business of gathering and collecting to the sinner, who in turn gives to the one who pleases God (2:26).
    - (3) Life in which to toil under the sun (5:18; 8:15; 9:9)
    - (4) Wealth, possessions, honor and (not the) power to enjoy them (5:19; 6:2)
  - ii. *A gift of God:*
    - (1) For one to eat, drink, and take pleasure in all his toil (3:13)
    - (2) For one to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil (5:19)
- d. In light of the crooked nature of the world under the sun (i.e., under the curse), there is “nothing better” than to delight in the life God gives (2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:18; 8:15).
- e. To enjoy God’s pleasures is to enjoy God, for there is no real satisfaction except which comes from him.
  - Ecccl 2:24–25. There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?
  - Ecccl 6:1–2. There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. That is *an enigma*; it is a grievous evil.

### C. Synthesis:

1. God has cursed the world to create enigma.
  - Ecccl 7:13–14. Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? <sup>14</sup> In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.
2. Ultimately, life under the sun is out of our control; grasping it is like the “shepherding of wind” (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 15–16; 6:9).
  - Ecccl 1:14–15. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is an enigma and a shepherding of wind. <sup>15</sup> What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.
3. God has made the world both crooked and enigmatic so that people will fear him, the Shepherd who has been controlling all from the beginning.
  - Ecccl 3:14. I perceived that whatever God does endures forever. . . . God has done it, so that people fear before him.
  - Ecccl 12:11. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.
4. The fear of our Shepherd helps one live wisely today and empowers one to enjoy life in the present whenever possible.
  - Ecccl 11:9. Rejoice, O young man, in your youth. . . . But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

5. The fear of our Shepherd today helps us rest in our Shepherd's purposes today and secures our future tomorrow, after judgment.
  - Ecccl 8:12–13. Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.
  - John 10:16, 27–30. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, *one shepherd*. . . .<sup>27</sup> My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.<sup>28</sup> I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.<sup>29</sup> My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.<sup>30</sup> I and the Father are *one*.
  - Rev. 7:16–17. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.<sup>17</sup> For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.
6. The end of the matter:
  - Ecccl 12:13–14. The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

### VIII. A Sample Meditation on a Tough Text: Ecccl 7:13–18

#### A. The Text: Ecccl 7:13–18

<sup>13</sup> Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? <sup>14</sup> In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.

<sup>15</sup> In my *hebel* life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. <sup>16</sup> Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? <sup>17</sup> Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? <sup>18</sup> It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.

#### B. Commentary:

1. Verses 13–14 provide a grand vision of God's sovereignty over both good and evil. He is the one who has cursed the world, making it crooked, and none but him can make it straight. Both days of joy and days adversity come from God, and he works in a way that does not allow us to know which will come tomorrow.
2. Verse 15 expresses the challenges of retribution theology when limited to the present day.
  - a. Retribution theology asserts that if you do well, you will enjoy blessing, whereas curse comes to all who rebel. But life in the here and now does not always follow this pattern, and this is part of Qoheleth's enigma: "In my *enigmatic* life I have seen everything." The cursed world twists (or at least delays) retribution theology, so that there are wicked people who prosper and righteous people who die young.
  - b. The prepositional phrases "in his righteousness" and "in his evil doing" could be construed to mean dying "in the state of his righteousness" or living "in the state of his evildoing," but it could also be adversative, meaning "in spite of" (cf. Num 14:11, "in spite of all the signs," BDB 88–

- 91). If this is the case, it would mean that the righteous man died *in spite of* his righteousness and that the wicked man lived *in spite of* his evil-doing.
- c. Elsewhere, Qoheleth similarly bemoans, “I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness” (3:16). And again, “There is *hebel* that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous” (8:14).
3. These tensions can result in two inappropriate responses, both of which Qoheleth highlights in vv. 16–17, with the corrective coming in v. 18.
    - a. The corrective in v. 18 states that a true fear of God will lead to not following either of the paths pursued in vv. 16–17. That is, vv. 16–17 provide two ditches that could cause danger to anyone who gets distracted from his true pursuit of the Lord.
      - i. Vv. 16–17, *NRSV*: Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself? <sup>17</sup> Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you die before your time?
      - ii. Vv. 16–17, *ESV*: Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? <sup>17</sup> Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?
      - iii. Vv. 16–17, *NIV*: Do not be over righteous, neither be overwise—why destroy yourself? <sup>17</sup> Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool— why die before your time?
      - iv. Vv. 16–17, *CSB*: Don’t be excessively righteous, and don’t be overly wise. Why should you destroy yourself? <sup>17</sup> Don’t be excessively wicked, and don’t be foolish. Why should you die before your time? (Cf. NASB, NET Bible)
    - b. Vv. 16–17 have three basic interpretations, only the second and third of which actually align with biblical thought:
      - i. The first view holds that Qoheleth was cautioning anyone from being too righteous or too wise on the one hand or too wicked on the other—just be good, not great and not horrible. Bear a moderate level of vice and virtue (so Gordis, *Koheleth*, 275–76; cf. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 257). The challenge, of course, with this view is that even a little sin is wrong (Jas 2:10) and that perfection is always our standard (Matt 5:48).
      - ii. The second view holds that Qoheleth is actually condemning self-righteousness, presumed wisdom, and all wickedness and foolishness. To be “too righteous,” therefore, is not to have too much righteousness but to elevate your own righteousness, forgetting that “pride goes before destruction” (Prov 16:18). Whether through presumption of excellence or excessive shame apart from God-reliance, the self-exalting man will be destroyed. While this is a possible reading of vv. 16–17, it requires that these verses be separated from their immediate context and that “righteousness” in v. 15 mean something completely different. Furthermore, whereas v. 15 counters the act-consequence

nexus, vv. 16–17 would be read as affirming it: “Why should you destroy yourself? ... Why should you die before your time” (cf. Prov 10:27; Job 22:16).

- (1) Prov. 10:27. The fear of the LORD prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short.
  - (2) Job 22:16. They were snatched away before their time; their foundation was washed away.
- iii. The third view holds that “righteousness” in vv. 15 and 16 are equally genuine “righteousness” that stands in true contrast with “wickedness” in v. 17. It also holds that vv. 16–17 directly relate to the wrestling of v. 15, wherein Qoheleth identifies that part of the crookedness of life under the sun is that in this age of curse the retribution principle does not always work.
- (1) The “righteousness” that is excessive (= “greatly righteous”) is one that *expects* God to respond to it with blessing in *today*, and not just in eternity. Indeed, the second half of v. 16 may best be translated, “Do not make yourself wise *for advantage*” (cf. 2:15; 6:8, 11; 7:11).
  - (2) The term the ESV renders “destroy” at the end of v. 16 elsewhere always means to “be appalled, astounded” (Isa 59:16; 63:5; Dan 8:27; Ps 143:4). As such, rather than claiming that the overly righteous person will be destroyed, it more likely means that the truly righteous person who requires God to keep his life free from suffering in the present will truly be appalled or astounded in this life.
  - (3) If the adverb “greatly/many/very” that the translations render “too” or “excessively” or “overly” actually refers to unhealthy expectations in v. 16, it may equally refer to unhealthy lack of expectation in v. 17. That is, to be “too wicked” would be to engage in wickedness without recourse to what follows. Those that do will likely experience an early death, simply due to their carelessness.
- c. Verse 18 highlights that those who fear God will approach the crookedness of this age with a healthy grasp of the retribution principle—not presuming immediate health and wealth today for right living and not presuming a God who cares little about how we live. Reverent fear will approach life’s enigmas with open hands and humble hearts, entrusting all tomorrows to his good wisdom.

**C. Four More Meditations:** For three more extensive meditations on Qoheleth’s message, see the following:

1. “The Problem of Suffering and the Presence of Our Saving Shepherd”:  
<https://jasonderouchie.com/derouchie-the-problem-of-suffering-and-the-presence-of-our-saving-shepherd/>
2. “Finding Joy amidst Life’s Enigmas: A Message on Ecclesiastes 11:7–12:1”:  
<https://jasonderouchie.com/derouchie-ecclesiastes-finding-joy-amidst-lifes-enigmas/>

3. “Fearing and Following God: A Sermon on Ecclesiastes 12:13–14”:  
<https://jasonderouchie.com/fearing-and-following-god/>
4. “Be Satisfied in the Lord Always: A Sermon on Ecclesiastes 11:7–12:1”:  
<https://jasonderouchie.com/be-satisfied-in-the-lord-always/>

## IX. Three Poems that Wrestle with the Real World of Qoheleth

### A. “*Hebel*” by Zach and Betsy Howard (A Villanelle, spring 2013)

#### *HEBEL*

The *Qoheleth*, with wisdom has begun  
To parse a world when wisdom meets its end:  
Enigmas in his days under the sun.

The world, with all its passing pleasure’s fun  
The preacher young attempting to commend.  
The *Qoheleth*, his wisdom has begun?

Calamities come quickly. Who can run?  
The crooked won’t be straightened. God will send  
Enigmas in these days under the sun.

*Then comes the end. The mortal’s days have spun  
To death: the final motion does suspend.  
The Qoheleth, new wisdom has begun:*

He eats and drinks with joy when days are done  
Controlling naught and nothing he’ll pretend.  
Enigmas all his days under the sun.

Ceaseless is the toiling of creation  
But God with joy the human heart will mend  
The *Qoheleth*, his wisdom has begun:  
Enigmas are his days under the sun.

### B. “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” by William Cowper (1731–1800)

#### GOD MOVES IN A MYSTERIOUS WAY

*God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants his footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.*

*Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never-failing skill,  
He treasures up his bright designs*

*And works his sovereign will.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break  
In blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust him for his grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,  
Unfolding every hour;  
The bud may have a bitter taste,  
But sweet will be the flower.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
And scan his work in vain:  
God is his own interpreter,  
And He will make it plain.<sup>3</sup>*

**C. *Basking in the Rise of the Son* by Jason S. DeRouchie**

*“The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining” (1 John 2:8).*

John Newton, author of *Amazing Grace*, once wrote: “The day is now breaking: how beautiful its appearance! How welcome the expectation of the approaching sun! It is this thought makes the dawn agreeable, that it is the presage of a brighter light; otherwise, if we expect no more day than it is this minute, we should rather complain of darkness, than rejoice in the early beauties of the morning. Thus the Life of grace is the dawn of immortality: beautiful beyond expression, if compared with the night and thick darkness which formerly covered us; yet faint, indistinct, and unsatisfying, in comparison of the glory which shall be revealed” (*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, Vol. 1, p. 319). The words that follow are inspired by this quote.

BASKING IN THE RISE OF THE SON

*The sun breaks and beauty appears,  
A daily reminder that all our fears  
Of dread are passed, though pain persists—*

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<sup>3</sup> William Cowper, “Conflict: Light Shining Out of Darkness,” in *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London: William Collins, Sons and Co., n.d.), 292. This hymn now goes by the title, “God Moves in Mysterious Ways” and was one of the last poems Cowper ever wrote. For a brief biographical sketch of this tormented man and his work, see John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God: The Fruit of Affliction in the Lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd* (The Swans Are Not Silent, Book 2; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 81–119; the above poem is on pp. 83–84.

*The toil, the sorrow, a persistent mist  
That will be burned away in course of time,  
A hopeful rest when full glow shines.*

*The light of dawn is only agreeable  
Because the light of noon is foreseeable.  
If no hope existed for a brighter light,  
Sustained shadows would be lingering night.  
Yet darkness is passing; the true light glows—  
A brightening sky overcoming sorrows.*

*The dawn of immortality is the life we tread,  
A life of grace because Christ bled  
Taking wrath we all deserve—  
A gift of love to preserve  
A people for himself into the age to come—  
The curse abolished in the rise of the Son.*

## **X. Guided Reading for Ecclesiastes**

**A. Key Chapters:** 1:1–11; 3:1–15; 9; 12

**B. Questions:**

1. What refrain occurs at the front and back of the queries of “the Preacher” (see Eccl. 1:2; 12:8)?
2. Read Eccl 1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9 and make a list of things that “the Preacher” concluded were *hebel* (“vanity/futility”) and “striving after wind”?
3. Some have argued that “the Preacher” viewed all of life as meaningless. Note the common thread found in all of the following verses: 2:24; 3:12–13, 22; 5:15–20; 8:15; 9:3, 7–10; 11:7–12:1. Is there anything in these verses that suggests the Preacher is not making a hopeless attempt to satisfy himself in a meaningless world?
4. In 12:1 “the Preacher” calls the audience to “remember the Creator.” In light of the challenges of life, what good does such recollection provide?
5. According to the last two verses of Ecclesiastes, what is “the conclusion, when all has been heard”?
6. “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” In what chapter are these words found?