

61. Qoheleth or, Ecclesiastes

The Preacher takes Job a step further. Not only is God inscrutable, but the mere life of man is also without meaning.

Job had conceded that there was a Divine Design; it was merely too deep to relate to finite human lives. So unacceptable was this to those in charge of the canon of approved texts, that there was later added the speech of Elihu, brilliantly expounding the idea that human suffering is caused by human sin. That satisfied the orthodox, and Job was eventually accepted into the canon. The same was the fate of Qoheleth. He also found God incomprehensible:

Qoh 3:11 . . . he hast set eternity in their heart, yet so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end . . .

Qoh 8:17. Then I beheld all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun, because however much a man labor to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea, moreover, though a wise man think to know it, yet he shall not be able to find it.

But Qoheleth also found that the doings of man *in his lifetime* are meaningless, even to himself, since they do not endure. Nothing we may achieve will abide. This is the first, and also the last, statement in the book:

Qoh 1:2. Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

Qoh 12:8. Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity.

Good luck getting *that* into the canon. But as with Job, additions were later made to facilitate that acceptance. Those later additions were of several kinds. The two commonest were statements of conventional wisdom (W) or piety (P). Both appear in the last verses in the text, now recognized¹ as extraneous:

Qoh 12:9 (W). And further, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he pondered, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs. [10] The Preacher sought to find out acceptable words, and that which was written uprightly; words of truth. [11] The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails well fastened are the masters of assemblies, given from one shepherd. [12] And furthermore, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

Qoh 12:13 (Q). This is the end of the matter; all has been heard: Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. [14] For God will bring every work into judgement, with every hidden thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.

Siegfried (1898), followed with variations by McNeile (1904) and Barton (1908), found W and P material at other places also.²

¹For example, Delitzsch (1891) 428 and Lohfink (1980) 142.

²For a convenient comparison of the “wisdom” and “pious” passages recognized by Siegfried, McNeile, and Barton, see Rankin (1956) 8.

Here is a sample of the alternation of **W** and **P** passages with original **Q**:

Qoh 8:1 (Q). Who is the wise man? And who knoweth the meaning of a thing?

[2, **W**] *Keep the king's command . . . [3] Be not hasty to go out of his presence. Persist not in an evil thing, for he doeth whatever pleaseth him. [4] For the king's word hath power, and who may say unto him, What doest thou? [5] whoso keepeth the commandment shall know no evil thing, and a wise man's heart discerneth time and judgement, [6a] for to every purpose there is a time and judgement.*

[6b, **Q**] The misery of man is great upon him, [7] for he knoweth not that which shall be; for who can tell him how it shall be? [8] There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power over the day of death. And there is no discharge in war, neither shall wickedness deliver him that is given to it. [9] All this have I seen, and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun . . . there is a time when one man hath power over another to his hurt. [10] So I saw the wicked buried [in honor]. . . and they that had done right . . . were forgotten in the city; this also is vanity.

[11, **P**] *Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. [12] Though a sinner do evil a hundred times, and prolong his days, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, that fear before him. [13] But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God.*

[14, **Q**] There is a vanity which is done upon the earth, that there are righteous men unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there are wicked men to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. [15] Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat and drink and be joyful, for that shall abide with him . . . all the days of his life which God hath given him under the sun. [16] When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth . . . [17] then I beheld all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun; because however much a man labor to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea, moreover, though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it.

The **W** insert warns the hearer against offending the powers that be; the **P** insert affirms that the wicked will ultimately be punished. By contrast, the other material, with its recurring signature term **vanity**, is concerned with the lack of earthly justice, whether given by god or enforced by man in the secular realm, where crime is supposed to be punished by the civil authorities.

We must further recognize two other types of addition. One is the Solomon persona. His authorship is claimed by the opening statement:

Qoh 1:1. The words of the Preacher, *the son of David, king in Jerusalem*.

and developed by two explicitly Solomonic passages, Qoh 1:12-18 ("I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem . . .") and 2:1-12 ("So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem"). The Solomon pose is then abandoned; the speaker thereafter is merely a seeker after wisdom.

Qoheleth also attacked the civil administration, as being responsible for oppression. One passage steps in to defend the virtuous king and his ministers; this is the K group of interpolations:

Qoh 10:16 (K). Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child, and thy princes eat in the morning! [17] Happy art thou, O land, when thy king is the son of nobles, and thy princes eat in due season, for strength and not for drunkenness.

These four types of additions (S, W, P, and K) amount to about half the text. It is arranged in twelve chapters, as though to suggest the labors of man around the year, or a lifetime. For the original, we suggest a seven-chapter structure, six days for the futile labors of man; the last portraying death: the day of rest.

Date. It has been suggested that some passages refer to specific events in the Hellenistic period, or reflect Greek philosophy. Neither case seems firm, but if it has merit, these passages may reflect very late additions. Qoheleth proper most likely both arose and was expanded within Persian times.

Here, then, minus its addenda, is what appears to be the text of Qoheleth as he himself left it: in seven sections, ending with death.

The Original Qoheleth

1. [Qoh 1:2]. Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher: vanity of vanities, all is vanity. [3] What profit hath man of all his labor wherein he laboreth under the sun? [4] One generation goeth, and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth for ever. [5] The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to its place where it ariseth. [6] The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it turneth about continually in its course, and the wind returned again to its circuits. [7] All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; thither they go again. [8] All things are full of weariness; man cannot utter it, the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. [9] That which hath been is that which shall be, and that which hath been done is that which shall be done, and there is no new thing under the sun. [10] Is there a thing of which it may be said, See, this is new? It hath been long ago, in the ages which were before us. [11] There is no remembrance of the former generations; neither shall there be any remembrance of the latter generations that are to come, among those that shall come after. [2:18]. And I hated all my labor wherein I labored under the sun, seeing that I must leave it unto the man that shall be after me. [19] And who knoweth whether he will be a wise man or a fool? yet will he have rule over all my labor wherein I have labored, and wherein I have showed myself wise under the sun This also is vanity. [20] Therefore I turned about to cause my heart to despair concerning all the labor wherein I had labored under the sun. [21] For there is a man whose labor is with wisdom, and with knowledge, and with skilfulness; yet to a man that hath not labored therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil. [22] For what hath a man of all his labor, and of the striving of his heart, wherein he laboreth under the sun? [23] For all his days are sorrow, and his travail is grief; yea, even in the night his heart taketh no rest. **This also is vanity.**

2. [3:9] What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboreth? [10] I have seen the travail which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised with. [11] He hath made everything beautiful in its time; also he hath set eternity in their heart; yet so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end. [14] I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever; nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it . . . [15] That which is to be hath long ago been, and God seeketh again that which is passed away. [16] And moreover I saw under the sun, in the place of justice, that wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, that wickedness was there. [18] I said in my heart, it is because of the sons of men, that God may prove them, and that they may see that they themselves are beasts. [19] For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them; as the one dieth, so dieth the other, and man hath no preeminence above the beasts, for all is vanity. [20] All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. [21] Who knoweth the spirit of man, whether it goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast, whether it goeth downward to the earth? [22] Wherefore I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his works, for that is his portion; for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him? [4:1] Then I returned and saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun; and behold, the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter [2] Wherefore I praised the dead that have been long dead more than the living that are yet alive; [3] yea, better than them both, him that hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun. [4] Then I saw all labor and every skillful work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbor. This also is a striving after wind. [7] Then I returned and saw vanity under the sun. [8] There is one that is alone, and he hath not a second; yea, he hath neither son nor brother, yet is there no end to all his labor, neither are his eyes satisfied with riches. For whom then, saith he, do I labor and deprive my soul of good? **This also is vanity**, yea, it is a sore travail.

3. [5:1]. Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God; for to draw nigh to hear is better than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they know not that they do evil. [2] Be not rash with thy mouth. and let thy heart not be hasty to utter anything before God, for God is in heaven and thou upon earth, therefore let thy words be few. [4] When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it, for he hath no pleasure in fools; pay that which thou vowest. [5] Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. [6] Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error; wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thy hands? [13] There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: riches kept by the owner thereof, to his hurt, [14] and those riches perish by evil adventure, and if he hath begotten a son, there is nothing in his hand. [15] As he came forth from his mother's womb, naked shall he go again as he came, and shall take nothing for his labor, which he may carry away in his hand. [16] And this also is a grievous evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go, and what profit hath he that he laboreth for the wind? All his days shall he eateth in darkness, and he is sore vexed, and hath sickness and wrath.

[18] Behold, that which I have seen to be good and comely is for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy good in all his labor, wherein he laboreth under the sun, all the days of his life which God hath given him; for this is his portion.

[6:1] There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is heavy upon men: [2] a man to whom God giveth riches, wealth, and honor, so that he lacketh nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but an alien eateth it; this is vanity, and it is an evil disease. [3] If a man beget a hundred children and live many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul be not filled with good, and moreover he have no burial: I say, that an untimely birth is better than he, [4] for it cometh in vanity, and departeth in darkness, and the name thereof is covered with darkness; [5] moreover, it hath not seen the sun nor known it; this hath rest rather than the other. [6] Yea, though he live a thousand years twice told, and yet enjoy no good, do not all go to one place? [7] All the labor of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled. [8] For what advantage hath the wise more than the fool? What hath the poor man, that knoweth how to walk before the living? [9] Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire; **this also is vanity** and a striving after wind.

4. [6:10] Whatsoever hath been, the name thereof was given long ago; and it is known what man is; neither can he contend with him that is mightier than he. [11] Seeing there are many things that increase vanity, what is man the better? [12] For who knoweth what is good for man in life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? For who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun? [7:15] All this have I seen in my days of vanity: there is a righteous man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his evil-doing. [16] Be not righteous overmuch, neither make thyself overwise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself? [17] Be not overmuch wicked, neither be thou foolish: who shouldest thou die before thy time? [23] All this have I proved in wisdom: I said, I will be wise, but it was far from me. [24] That which is, is far off and exceeding deep; who can find it out? [8:1] Who is the wise man, and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? [5] Because the misery of man is great upon him, [7] for he knoweth not that which shall be, for who can tell him how it shall be? [8] There is no man that hath power over the day of death, and there is no discharge in war, neither shall wickedness deliver him that is given to it. [9] All this I have seen, and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun: there is a time wherein one man hath power over another to his hurt. [11] Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is full set in them, to do evil. [14] There is a vanity which is done upon the earth, that there are righteous men unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there are wicked men to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous; I said that **this also is vanity**.³

³These first four chapters present Qoheleth's pessimistic worldview. They are distinct as a group within the text, in that each one ends in his signature term "vanity." It seems that none of the later added matter has ventured to use that term.

5.[8:15]⁴ Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be joyful; for that shall abide with him in his labor all the days of hie life which God hath given him under the sun.

[16] When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth, [17] then I beheld all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun, because however much a man labor to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea, moreover, though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it. [9:2] All things come alike to all; there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good and to the wicked; to the clean and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth and to him that sacrificeth not; as is the good, so is the sinner, and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath. [3] This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one event unto all; yea also, the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead. [5] For the living know that they shall die, but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. [6] As well their love, as their hatred and their envy, is perished long ago; neither have they any more a portion for ever in anything that is done under the sun.

6. [9:7] Go thy way; eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart, for God hath already accepted thy works. [8] Let thy garments be always white, and let not thy head lack oil. [9] Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of thy life of vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all thy days of vanity, for that is thy portion in life, and in thy labor wherein thou laborest under the sun. [10] Whatsoever thy hand findeth do to, do it with thy might, for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in Sheol, whether thou goest. [11] I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill, but time and chance happeneth to them all. [12] For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare, even so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them. [10:5] There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, as it were an error which proceedeth from the ruler: [6] folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in a low place. [7] I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking like servants upon the earth. [11:7] Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun. [8] Yea, if a man live many years, let him rejoice in them all, but let him remember the days of darkness, **for they shall be many.**⁵

⁴In these last three chapters, Qoheleth turns to advising the living. Given that their end is death, how should wise men spend their days? That is the only remaining question, and the answer is: In such small and temporary pleasures as they can find.

⁵These two passages repeat, and thus emphasize, the preceding 9:11-12. The last sentence introduces the last scene, which presents, and indeed narrates, the day of death that inevitably follows the “days of darkness.”

The evil time, the darkness of death, is prepared, and Qoheleth portrays it. This is the most beautiful evocation of death in all of ancient literature. It shows the senses dimming – momentarily lifted by the songs of birds and insects. Then the thread of life snaps, and all is over.

7. [12:1]. Remember also thy Creator in the days of thy youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; [2] before the sun and the light, and the moon, and the stars, are darkened, and the clouds return after the rain;

[3] in the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows shall be darkened,

[4] and doors shall be shut in the street; when the sound of the grinding is low, and one shall rise up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low;

[5] yea, they shall be afraid of that which is high, and terrors shall be in the way, and the almond-tree shall blossom, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail, because man goeth to his everlasting home, and the mourners go about the streets; [6] before the silver cord is loosed, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern,

[7] and the dust returneth to the earth as it was, and the spirit returneth unto God who gave it.

[8] Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; **all is vanity.**

The deep designs of God cannot be fathomed. There is no divine justice. Nor is there *human* justice: the powers that be are open to corruption above and refuted by crime below. God moves like the seasons, forever repeating himself.

But for man there is no recurrence, no future possibility. Death is final.