

Specific Advice for Reading Ecclesiastes

Traditionally, no other book in the Bible has been such a difficult read. This is because of (1) the somewhat rambling nature of many of Qohelet's observations—at least to the Western mind—(2) some strikingly antithetical statements existing together in the same book, and (3) the negative side of some of these statements, which seem so contradictory to the rest of the Bible. But if you try to read the book from the editor-compiler's perspective—that of a teacher of wisdom who, living before the full revelation of resurrection, recognized the value of Qohelet's assertion that life in the present world doesn't always add up—then you will be able to see that the final message of the book is not at all the hedonist or fatalist tract that some have made it out to be. Crucial to understanding this is to appreciate Qohelet's own context(s).

First, whatever else, Qohelet was written within Israel's Wisdom tradition (see the introduction to the Writings, p. 120), a tradition that was not trying to speak for God in the same way the prophets did, but one that was musing carefully on life in order to teach the young how to live well before God. And somewhat like the author of Job, but in contrast to the way some might mechanistically apply the book of Proverbs, Qohelet is convinced that the ways of the Creator are past finding out. Although he maintains a sturdy trust in God throughout (2:24; 3:11–14; 5:7b, 19; 9:7) and believes God to be just (3:17; 8:12–13), he nonetheless finds the real world not nearly as predictable as, for example, Job's "comforters" do, who see a sure cause and effect to everything and thus represent a kind of "wisdom" that Qohelet is likewise reacting strongly against.

Four realities dominate Qohelet's overall perspective: (1) God is the single indisputable reality, the Creator of all and the one from whom all life comes as gift (e.g., 3:12–14), including its—for Qohelet—usually burdensome nature. (2) God's ways are not always, if ever, understandable (3:11; 8:17). (3) On the human side, what is "done under the sun" (2:17) simply is not tidy; indeed, much of it doesn't add up right at all.

The way things should be (the righteous get the good, the wicked get the bad) is not in fact the way things are—at least not consistently in this present life. (4) The great equalizer is death, which happens to rich and poor, wise and foolish alike. Given Qohelet's lack of hope in a resurrection, then once you're dead that's it—without memory, forgotten, no matter what your life may once have meant (9:5–6). And it is this reality that makes life seem *hebel* (a word that occurs thirty-seven times, just over half of its seventy-three OT occurrences).

At issue is what this word means for Qohelet, since it literally means "wisp of air" or "vapor." Most of the time he uses it as a metaphor for the nature of human existence. But what metaphorical freight does it carry? A tradition that goes back to the Septuagint translates it "emptiness" (cf. the KJV, "vanity," that is, "in vain"), pointing to the "vaporous" nature of our human lives (along with its companion, "chasing after the wind"). Another tradition, followed by the NIV, goes for "meaningless." While either of these work fine in some instances, they do not help in others. In most cases the sense seems to be the passing/transitory or unsubstantial nature of things, like vapor itself. This seems especially to be its sense in the prologue, where human life, in contrast to the constancy and "oldness" of the world, evaporates very quickly. Moreover, the "vapor" that is our life is also

elusive, lying outside our own control; it is like “chasing after the wind” (an ironic play on hebel = “wisp of air”).

So what should one make of such a “vapor,” these “few and hebel days” we pass through like a shadow (6:12; cf. 2:3; 5:18), especially in light of life’s inequalities and, for the one who lives apart from God (“the fool”), its utter meaninglessness? Qohelet’s answer is not, as some have accused him, “milk it for all you can, because you only go around once” (a misunderstanding of his repetition of the “eat and drink” theme, 2:24; 3:13; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7). Rather, his point seems to be that, even if one knows so little except the certainty of the grave, one should live life, hebel as it usually is, as a gift from God. This is because, in the end joy and pleasure come not in “getting” (securing “profit” from what one does)—because that will evaporate—but in the journey itself, the life God has given. Death comes to all alike, but not all live alike; in such a world, joy and satisfaction are to be found in living the rhythms of life without trying to be in control or to “make gain” of what is itself merely transitory.

Even read from this perspective, Qohelet’s wisdom is not altogether comforting. But overall it is an orthodox book. If one misses any mention of the great events of Jewish history, that is quite in keeping with the Wisdom tradition, and if one feels squeamish about great but contradictory realities being set side by side, that is probably because we too, like Job’s “comforters,” prefer things to be tidier than they are. But in the end even Qohelet does not leave the young dangling. One way is clearly to be preferred to the other, and the so-called contradictions serve to highlight that fact. The Christian believer, who now reads from the perspective of joyous hope in the resurrection and the certainty of divine judgment, should all the more be prepared to appreciate Qohelet’s embracing of life in the present, despite its hebel nature.

How to Read the Bible Book by Book (pp. 155-157). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.