

Ecclesiastes 1–6

The Hebrew word **Qoheleth** is approximately translated as “Ecclesiastes” or “the Preacher.” It is a word that can carry the meaning “**one who convenes or calls an assembly.**” The book is richly adorned with literary beauty and powerful imagery. Its philosophical depth and poetic character are particularly evident.

The presence of **Persian words** in the book points to a **post-exilic period**. When the author describes himself as “the son of David and king in Jerusalem,” authorship is traditionally attributed to **Solomon**. However, the prevailing scholarly opinion is that the book was written by a Jewish thinker sometime between **300 and 200 BC**. It may have been composed during the period when the **Ptolemies incorporated Palestine into the Egyptian Empire**.

This was a period when the people had to bear a **heavy burden of taxation**. Since taxes had to be paid in fixed amounts of money rather than in agricultural produce, people were sometimes driven to the desperate situation of **selling themselves into slavery**. The gap between the wealthy, the middle classes, and the poor peasant farmers was enormous. Traditional family relationships and established social values had also begun to deteriorate. Individuals became increasingly divided into different social and economic strata. It was against such a **difficult and oppressive social situation** that Qoheleth’s work was written.

Qoheleth responds to the **economic, political, and religious problems** of his time in two significant ways: First, Qoheleth presents a spirituality characterized by **profound detachment**. The author repeats the principal Hebrew word **hebel** (“vanity,” “meaninglessness,” or “transience”) **thirty-seven times**, corresponding to the numerical value of the Hebrew letters of the word: **He = 5, Beth = 2, Lamed = 30**, giving a total of **37**. Both at the beginning and at the end of the book, he uses the expression: “**Vanity of vanities**” — **Hebel hebalim** (Ecclesiastes 1:2; 12:8). This expression functions as a key theological and literary theme of the entire work, emphasizing the fleeting, elusive, and ultimately transient character of human existence and its achievements.

Second, Qoheleth attempts to **undermine the foundations of the prevailing Greek wisdom tradition**. This becomes evident in his treatment of wisdom. The author acknowledges that **wisdom is superior to folly** (Ecclesiastes 2:13–14a). Yet, immediately afterward, he observes that, in the face of death, **the wise person has no lasting advantage over the fool** (2:14b–15). Thus, Qoheleth questions whether wisdom possesses any **absolute or ultimate value**. Human wisdom may have practical advantages over folly during earthly life, but it cannot ultimately overcome the fundamental reality of death. His position, therefore, is that **wisdom does not possess absolute value in itself**.

It is not easy to propose a clear structure for the book, apart from describing it as a collection of scattered reflections on the **meaning and purpose of human life**. Nevertheless, in the light of certain fundamental ideas that recur throughout the book, the author’s view of life is not entirely unclear.

The author acknowledges the **sovereignty of God and the divine plans**. However, his understanding of God develops through a **dialectical style of thought**. According to him, God, who remains silent in the darkness, must be reverently acknowledged and accepted; **God must be allowed to be God** (cf. 5:2b).

The author is particularly attentive to calculations of **profit and loss and to numbers**. It is noteworthy that the Hebrew word for “**profit**” — *yitrôn* — is used **18 times** in the book.

The author’s reflections ultimately arrive at the conclusion that **everything that takes place under the sun**—this world and all its activities, business, achievements, pleasures, and pursuits—is **hebel**, that is, fleeting and ultimately elusive.

It cannot be said that the author’s way of thinking is entirely free from limitations or contradictions. It is sufficient to regard **Qoheleth as a link in the transitional period of post-exilic Jewish thought**, before Jewish faith and hope eventually reached the firm path of conviction and expectation that became particularly evident through the **Maccabean Revolt**.

Structure

1:1–11 — Introduction

1:12–6:9 — Reflections on human life in **eight sections**

6:10–12:14 — Conclusions drawn from these reflections in **eight sections**

Text Analysis

The word **Qoheleth**, which is in the **feminine form**, occurs in Ecclesiastes 1:1; 1:12; 7:27; and 12:9–10. It is derived from the Hebrew verb *qāhal*, meaning “**to assemble,**” “**to gather together,**” or “**to call an assembly.**” The use of such a feminine form to denote an **office, function, or role** is characteristic of Hebrew linguistic style.

Ecclesiastes 1:3 **Amal = toil / hard work / arduous labor / burdensome work**

Important references: Ecclesiastes 1:3; 2:10–11, 18–20, 22; 3:9; 4:4, 8; 5:14; 6:7. This concept has a strong connection with the **toil and hardship that entered human life after the Fall**, particularly as described in **Genesis 3:17**.

Tahat hashsemes = “under the sun” / **within the limits of human life on this earth**: This is one of the most characteristic and frequently repeated expressions in Ecclesiastes. (1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17, 20; 3:16; 4:1, 7, 15; 5:12; 6:1). (Tahat = under) (Hashsemes = the sun) **Therefore, literally, it means** “under the sun.” In Ecclesiastes, however, the expression carries more than a merely geographical meaning. It refers broadly to the **sphere of earthly human existence**, with all its limitations, activities, achievements, pleasures, and struggles.

Eth = Time : The concept of Eth is very important in Ecclesiastes 3:1–8. Qoheleth states that every contrasting experience in human life—birth and death, weeping and laughter, mourning and dancing, love and hatred—has its own appointed time and season. Here, the idea that human beings do not have complete control over time becomes evident. Within the order of God’s creation, human life is limited by time and subject to its boundaries.