

Introduction

Today I begin a four part series of one of the most complex and challenging books of the Bible. Read and interpreted with care this book has a great deal to say about some of the false thinking and bankrupt values of our time. This book is not for the superficial or careless reader. It is written in the wisdom genre of literature which means that it demands careful study and disciplined thinking. Put simply the reader has to apply him/herself with energy and concentration if the treasures of this book are to be unlocked. Without this kind of diligence you could easily come to the conclusion that the message of this book is that life is meaningless and futile – without hope and useless. Indeed, if you ask the average Christian what they know about the book of Ecclesiastes they are likely to quote “Vanity, vanity all is vanity” (Qoheleth 1:2b). This superficial response could be compared to a similar misconception expressed by those who say that the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) can be summarised by “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” (Lev 24:20) Both these statements simply do not stand up to scrutiny. What this book does address is the meaning of life. It asks the question, “*What is life about?*” Possibly as you look at your life you are tempted to ask the same question.

Ecclesiastes or Qoheleth derives its name from the Hebrew word Kahal קהל – congregation or an assembly of people from which we get the word *kehilat*. The Greek form is Ekklesia (Ecclesiastes) The name Qoheleth probably refers to an “assembler” - the act of collecting sayings or gathering people together.

Opinions about this book are divided and have been so since it was first considered for the Old Testament Canon. Early Rabbinic opinion about the book was varied. Some of the sages said that Qoheleth “did not defile the hands” which was the Hebrew idiom meaning that it was not inspired – not holy. The Jewish concerns were that the Name of Yahweh is not mentioned. They were also concerned about the fact that there is no mention of the Torah or of Israel either. Some sages pointed out that some of the content seems to contradict other Bible texts.

Qoheleth 11:9 *Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see...*

Num 15:39 *...do not prostitute yourselves by going after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes.*

Rabbi Akiva (+- 100 years after Jesus) disagreed. He defended Qoheleth as well as the Song of Solomon and said that *they did defile the hands*. Akiva's influence was such that both books were accepted as inspired and included in the Old Testament canon.

Christian concerns about the book were that it seems at first impression to evoke religious scepticism and a pessimistic fatalism neither of which are characteristic of a faith response.

Qoheleth is one of three books that are associated with King Solomon. They are Proverbs, Song of Songs and Qoheleth. The first book, Proverbs, is a collection of wise sayings many of which formed Solomon's own collection. The Proverbs teach that it is the fear of the Lord that initiates the proper course for all of the mundane decisions of life (**Proverbs 1:7**).

One of the mundane areas that the writers stress is integrity in the area of human sexuality. Few contrasts in the book are as vivid, or as frequent, as that of the "strange/foreign woman" and "the woman of wisdom." The "*strange woman*" is depicted as constantly laying a trap for the young man to come into her bed and make love to her. But her steps lead down to the grave and she is to be shunned and rejected in her enticements. As we shall see this speaks directly to Solomon's life experience.

The second book Song of Songs is as emphatic as the first on the beauty and value of marriage. It is the story of a Shulammitte woman from the village of Shunem in the Jezreel Valley in Northern Israel who is brought to Jerusalem to be part of Solomon's extensive harem, known as the daughters of Jerusalem. Solomon in all his splendour is unable to win her away from her love and commitment to simple a shepherd. Finally the woman is released and she returns home to her lover and is united to him in marriage (**Song 8:4-14**).

The oft-repeated theme is "My beloved is mine and I am his" (**Song 2:16; 6:3; 7:10**) is an expression of the tenderness that the Shulammitte woman and the shepherd boyfriend have for each other. Solomon, the third party, is clearly the loser in this story.

In the book of Qoheleth this expose' of the tragedy of Solomon's life continues. The image of the wasted Solomon is used most effectively in this book. Qoheleth is associated with Solomon. He is one who has wisdom, wealth, power and women but cannot find meaning "under the sun."¹

According to Walter Kaiser, "*If Proverbs and the Song of Songs appear to be difficult for many to derive any contemporary values from, most simply throw up their hands when it comes to the book of Ecclesiastes.*"²

Questions concerning the authorship of the book are numerous, and scholars are deeply divided concerning the lack of a clear unifying structure. Indeed, "Ecclesiastes seems at first glance to be a collection of apparently random themes."³

Correctly interpreted, however, Qoheleth provides a stringent critique of the consumer society of which we are a part. It challenges prevailing simplistic religious systems, naïve human ambitions and our addiction to materialism.

Whether Solomon was the author or not he is, without doubt, the inspiration and life behind the text.

Dwight Pryor describes Solomon as simultaneously the paragon of wisdom and the paradigm of vanity and meaninglessness.⁴ Unfortunately, Solomon ultimately becomes an image of wasted potential and position. It is this tragic contradiction in Solomon's life that is the backdrop for the books of Proverbs, Song of Songs and Qoheleth that are attributed to him.

Solomon's Life

Although not the oldest living son of King David, Solomon was crowned king after his mother Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan convinced David to have Solomon succeed him (**1 Kings 1-2**). Solomon's name in Hebrew is *Shlomo* meaning "the peaceful one". His father David named him Shlomo but at the same time the LORD, through the prophet Nathan, gave him a another name – Jedidiah – *Loved by Yahweh*.

Solomon became Israel's first dynastic ruler on the throne of David. Saul and David, like the judges, had been chosen because God had given them a special measure of power: they were charismatic rulers. Solomon took office without the obvious signs of God's gifting, he received it during his vision at Gibeon, when the Lord offered him his choice of gifts (**1 Kings 3:1-15**).

- 1 **Kings 3:1-15** *Solomon made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt and married his daughter. He brought her to the City of David until he finished building his palace and the temple of the LORD, and the wall around Jerusalem.*
- 2 *The people, however, were still sacrificing at the high places, because a temple had not yet been built for the Name of the LORD.*
- 3 *Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the statutes of his father David, **except** that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places.*
- 4 *The king went to Gibeon to offer sacrifices, for that was the most important high place, and Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.*
- 5 *At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, "**Ask for whatever you want me to give you.**"*
- 6 *Solomon answered, "You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.*

- 7 *"Now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties.*
- 8 *Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number.*
- 9 *So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For, who is able to govern this great people of yours?"*
- 10 *The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this.*
- 11 *So God said to him, "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice,*
- 12 *I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be.*
- 13 *Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for--both riches and honour--so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings.*
- 14 *And if you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life."*
- 15 *Then Solomon awoke--and he realized it had been a dream. He returned to Jerusalem, stood before the ark of the Lord's covenant and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings.*

Realizing the enormity of his task, Solomon chose an 'understanding heart' (שָׂמָה *shama*) (vs 9). The story of the prostitutes' dispute over the baby which follows immediately after this (1 Kings 3:16ff) serves as a classic display of Solomon's God-given wisdom. חֵכְמָה

(chokmah) wisdom

During Solomon's day, the wisdom movement took on a whole new significance, Solomon and his court became world renowned for their wisdom (1 Kings 4:29-34; 10).

Solomon was widely recognized for his fabulous wealth. He was so wealthy that he might as well have had Midas's mythic golden touch, everything he used on a daily basis was golden. In his day he made silver "as common ... as stones" (1 Kings 10:27) ⁵

So vast is the biblical image of Solomon's preeminence that today we are most familiar with his name as possessive adjective: Solomon's mines, Solomon's wealth, Solomon's wives, Solomon's temple, Solomon's wisdom. He built palaces for himself and Pharaoh's daughter, one of his wives. Solomon's reign was spoilt by his ill-treatment of his subjects and by his many marriages. He exploited his subjects by demanding free labour and high taxes from them to carry out his grandiose building programmes. In the end, it was Solomon's foreign wives who made him turn away from the true God to worship their own gods.

1 **1 Kings 11:1-13** *King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter--Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites.*

- 2 *They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." (Deuteronomy 17:14-20) Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love.*
- 3 *He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray.*
- 4 *As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and **his heart was not fully devoted** to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.*
- 5 *He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites.*
- 6 *So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done.*
- 7 *On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites.*
- 8 *He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods.*
- 9 *The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice.*
- 10 *Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the Lord's command.*
- 11 *So the LORD said to Solomon, "Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates.*
- 12 *Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son.*
- 13 *Yet I will not tear the whole kingdom from him, but will give him one tribe for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen."*

This great tragedy in Solomon's life is reflected in his own collection of wise sayings. Solomon made his choice between wisdom חָכְמָה (*chokmah*) for which he had asked at first, and the unbridled hedonism which his power as king made possible. If ever there was a person whose wisdom deserted him when it counted most it was Solomon. He started out with advantages beyond those of his father David. Only to Solomon did God say, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." (1 Kings 3:5). His name Yedideyah "loved of Yahweh" was true of his early life but he became divided within himself and his addiction to sexual pleasure and foreign women finally won his heart from Yahweh

Jesus puts Solomon and his wealth in divine perspective when he points out in the Sermon on the Mount that even Solomon couldn't buy the exquisite clothing of the simple flowers of the field (Mt 6:28-29). Solomon made his earthly mark and at times used his gifts to honour God, but his spiritual choices show that ultimately he valued temporal luxury over an eternal inheritance.

The Value of Wisdom.

So why study the Book of Qoheleth? The answer is “wisdom” חָכְמָה (*chokmah*). The Bible considers wisdom to be the most important lesson for life. Not just for god’s people Israel but for anyone who is trying to fathom what life is about. A skill to be acquired - more important than material wealth or social status. This is an emphasis that has been lost to most Christians. The fundamental link between submission to God and the development of wisdom is repeated over and over through the Scriptures.

Job 28:28

"The fear of the Lord--that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding."

Psalms 111:10

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.

Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; 15:33;

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

Isaiah 11:2

The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.

Proverbs 2:1-6

- 1 *My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you,*
- 2 *turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding,*
- 3 *and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding,*
- 4 *and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure,*
- 5 *then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.*
- 6 *For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.*

Proverbs 3:13-18

- 13 *Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding,*
- 14 *for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.*
- 15 *She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.*
- 16 *Long life is in her **right** hand; in her **left** hand are riches and honor.*
- 17 *Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace.*
- 18 *She is **a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed.***

Etz-chayim hi lama-chazikim bah, vetom-kheyha me 'ushar.

עֵץ-חַיִּים הִיא לַמְחַזְקִים בָּהּ וְתַמְכִּיהָ מֵאֲשֶׁר:

The "Tree of Life," *etz chayim*, is mentioned ten times in the Scriptures. In the Torah it first appears in the centre of the paradise of Eden (**Gen. 2:9; 3:22,4**), but it is soon lost to humanity on account of Adam's transgression. In the book of Revelation, it reappears in the center of the Paradise of God (**Rev. 2:7, 22:2**), resurrected on account of the faithful obedience of Jesus as mankind's "last Adam" (**1 Cor. 15:45**).

In the book of Proverbs, the Tree of Life is a metaphor for the life of *wisdom (chokmah)*, which is the implied subject of (**Prov. 3:18**). Traditional Judaism identifies *talmud Torah* (the study of Torah) as the Tree of Life, promising wisdom to those who "lay hold of her" (a Torah scroll has wooden rods called *atzei chayim* - the "trees of life" - used to roll the parchment).

From these verses its clear that you do not gain wisdom by sitting in church and leaving me to do all the work. Note the words of action! Three basic definitions of wisdom give insight into what the Bible means by the word חָכְמָה (chokmah) wisdom.

First, wisdom is considered be the art of learning how to succeed in life. This should not be confused with the prevailing "prosperity movement among predominantly American Tele-evangelists. It seems that, ancient sages believed that there was an orderliness to the world in which they lived and that success and happiness came from living in accordance with that God-given orderliness (**Prov. 22:17-24:22**). This "successful living" aspect of wisdom in the life of Jesus is described by the Gospel of Luke. (**Luke 2:41 & 52**)

Second, wisdom is considered by some to be a philosophical study of the essence of life. Certainly, much of the Books of Job and Qoheleth seem to deal with just such existential issues of life (**Job 30:29-31**).

Third, though the other definitions might include this, it seems that the real essence of wisdom is spiritual and related to the Torah. Life is more than just living by a set of rules and being rewarded in some physical manner ("under the sun"). Wisdom comes from God (**Prov. 2:6**). Though it will involve observation and instruction, it really begins with God ("who is beyond the sun") and one's faith in Him as Lord and Saviour (**Prov 1:7; Job 28:28**).

Qoheleth

The keys to understanding Qoheleth are four-fold.

1. Its background in the life of Solomon
2. Its Conclusion

If ever there was a book that warranted reading the ending first it is this one. This is not a detective novel that loses it’s mystery if you give in to temptation and read the last page. The conclusion gives the rationale for the entire book.

Qohelethh 12:9 -14

- 9 Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs.
- 10 The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.
- 11 The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails--given by one Shepherd.
- 12 Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.
- 13 Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.
- 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

Great wisdom is usually simple. Great philosophical truths are often self evident – but not until they’re explained.

3. Its structure

Four part division of the Book of Qoheleth

1:2 – 2:26

3:1 – 6:9

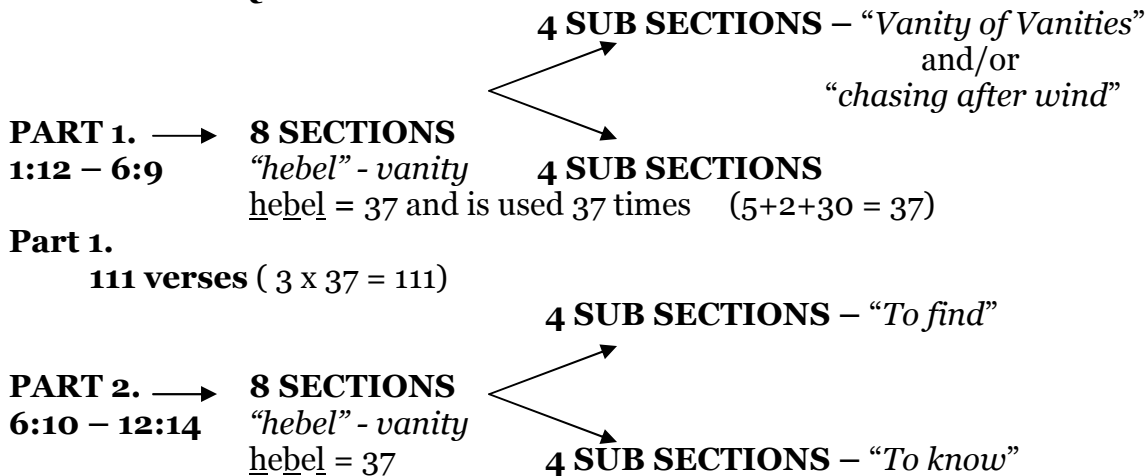
6:10 – 8:15

8:16 – 12:14

The author is building an argument – a wise man does not speak haphazardly. He speaks with a carefully considered and structured argument so that his argument speaks at many levels simultaneously

The author has hidden a clue to the care with which he has structured his argument in the value of the key words and the structure of the text.

The Structure of Qoheleth ⁶



Part 2.

111 verses (3 x 37 = 111)

*The refrains in the introduction (1:2) and at the conclusion (12:8)
each contain three *hebels* indicating the structure to come.

4. Its Language

The final preparation for studying this book is a survey⁶ of the more common terms used by Qoheleth.

1. VANITY – *hebel* הֶבֶל Vapour or breath; Emptiness or futility; Meaningless or worthless.

James 4:14 *Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow.*

You are just a vapour that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.

2. PROFIT יִתְרוֹן Yitron - Advantage or gain; wage or reward;

3. UNDER THE SUN (vs. 2) under תַּתִּיטֵּן sun שֶׁמֶשׁ

Not everything – but everything in the world, from a human point of view.

There is not only the human point of view - there is a the Divine point of view.

To all the striving of life under the sun Qohelet concludes;

הֶבֶל הֶבְלִים הַכֹּל הֶבֶל Hevel Hevalim hakhol Hevel.

Endnotes.

¹ Ryken, Leland; Wilhoit, James C.; Longman III, Tremper, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press) 2000, c1998.
² Kaiser, Walter C. 2001 “The Old Testament Documents : Are they Reliable & Relevant? InterVarsity Press : Illinios.
³ Parsons, Greg W. 2003 “Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Ecclesiastes, Part 1,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160, (638 April-June 2003), 160.
⁴ Pryor, Dwight A. 2005 *Abounding Emptiness, Abundant Living : The Challenge of Qoheleth*. Sermon series available from www.jcstudies.com
⁵ Ryken, Leland; Wilhoit, James C.; Longman III, Tremper, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press) 2000, c1998.
⁶ Ceresko, Anthony R. 1999 *Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom: A Spirituality for Liberation*. Orbis : New York.