INTRODUCTION AND ECCLESIASTES

By Ashby L. Camp

Copyright © 2026 by Ashby L. Camp. All rights reserved.

Contents

INTRODUCTION 2
I. Preface 2
II. Structure of the Book 3
III. Qohelet's Speech 6
IV. Qohelet's Identity 10
V. Date 12
THE TEXT 13
I. Frame Narrative: Prologue (1:1-11) 13
A. Superscription (1:1) 13
B. Introduction to Qohelet's Thought (1:2-11) 13
II. Qohelet's Autobiographical Speech (1:12–12:7) 14
A. Autobiographical Introduction (1:12) 14
B. "Solomon's" Quest for the Meaning of Life (1:13–2:26) 15
C. The Quest Continues (3:1–6:9) 21
D. Qohelet's Wise Advice (6:10–12:7) 36
III. Frame Narrative Epilogue (12:8-14) 61
A. The Evaluation of the Frame Narrator (12:8-12) 61
B. The Conclusion: Fear God (12:13-14) 67

INTRODUCTION

I. Preface

A. I think few would quarrel with J. Stafford Wright's description of Ecclesiastes as "one of the most puzzling books of the Bible."[1] Richard Belcher says, "Ecclesiastes is one of the most difficult books of the Bible. It has been called 'a baffling book', 'alien among the other books of the Old Testament', 'the most problematic of the whole Hebrew Bible', and 'an embarrassment to the Old Testament'."[2] The late OT scholar David Hubbard quipped, "Anyone to whom the book of Ecclesiastes is not a puzzle has not yet read it."[3]

B. As a teacher, the book is daunting, especially in light of Jas. 3:1, but since God has given it to us, I think we are obligated to wrestle with it. Paul tells us in 2 Tim. 3:16-17 that all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be proficient, having been equipped for every good work. And he says in Rom. 15:4 that what was written beforehand was written for our instruction, in order that through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures we might hold hope securely.

C. Part of the difficulty is that the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes is unusual. It is loaded with difficult words, grammar, and syntax,[4] so there is more room than normal for disagreement about the translation, which is reflected in the differences in English versions. But the difficulty runs deeper than the language. It includes identifying the genre, structure, and ultimately the meaning of the book. Studying it as a 21st-century, English-speaking Westerner, I sympathize with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 when Philip asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

D. I pondered Ecclesiastes for years, but it was not until 1998 when I read Tremper Longman's commentary that I felt I was finally understanding it or at least making significant progress. Longman is an internationally respected OT scholar who focused a significant part of his academic career on ancient Jewish wisdom literature. In fact, he has written major commentaries on all the wisdom books of the Bible: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. And he has published a slew of other works. The second edition of his 1998 commentary on Ecclesiastes was published just this year, and in between those two editions, he wrote another commentary on Ecclesiastes. Of course, none of that means that he is right about everything – that he is an infallible guru – but it does mean that he is worth taking seriously. I do not always agree with Longman, but I will be sharing with you what I judge to be his insights.

---

[1] J. Stafford Wright, "Ecclesiastes" in Frank E. Gabelein, ed., *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 5:1137.
[2] Richard P. Belcher, Jr., *A Study Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Faverdale North Darlington, England: EP Books, 2014), 9.
[3] David Alan Hubbard, *Beyond Futility: Messages of Hope from the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 7.
[4] Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2026), 18.

The outline and translation I will be using are his. If you want the Hebrew nitty gritty that is behind his translation choices, it is available in his commentary.

E. As you might imagine, Longman's proposed understanding has not ended the debate about Ecclesiastes. Disagreement remains over how to understand the book overall and how to understand the various sections and verses within it. My plan is to explain how I understand it and why, and then you must judge if I have correctly apprehended the Spirit's meaning. I think I have, or I would not be teaching it, but given the difficulty of the book, it would be delusional for me to insist that my understanding is without question the correct one. Acknowledging that is not abdicating my responsibility as a teacher, as I was once told; it is seeking to maintain a humility that is commensurate with the difficulty.

II. Structure of the Book

A. It is crucial to recognize at the outset that there are two separate voices in Ecclesiastes. The bulk of the book, the lengthy section from 1:12–12:7, is a first-person autobiographical speech by a man called or nicknamed קֹהֶלֶת [*Qōhelet*] in Hebrew. That section begins at 1:12 with the statement "I, Qohelet," and then, apart from one interjection by the narrator at 7:27, that first-person perspective continues through 12:7. Those are the words of Qohelet; he is the one speaking in that section.

1. If the name Qohelet is unfamiliar to you, that is because it is a *transliteration* of the Hebrew term rather than a *translation*. Because the term functions as a nickname, many scholars and at least a few English versions (NJB, NAB, NCB) transliterate it rather than translate it. That is, they approximate the sound of the Hebrew using the English alphabet instead of giving a meaning for the word. Depending on the convention being used for how to represent Hebrew letters in English, it begins with either a "Q" or a "K" and ends with either a "t" or "th." So the common variations are Qohelet, Kohelet, Qoheleth, and Koheleth.

2. Most English Bibles seek to *translate* קֹהֶלֶת [*qōhelet*] into English. That is, they seek to give an English meaning to the word not simply to duplicate its sound.

a. For example, our sister Crystal's Chinese name is 美平, which is *transliterated* in English, meaning the sound is reproduced in English, as Mei Ping. But *mei* means beautiful and *ping* means peace, so if one translated the name instead of transliterating it, it would be rendered Beautiful Peace.

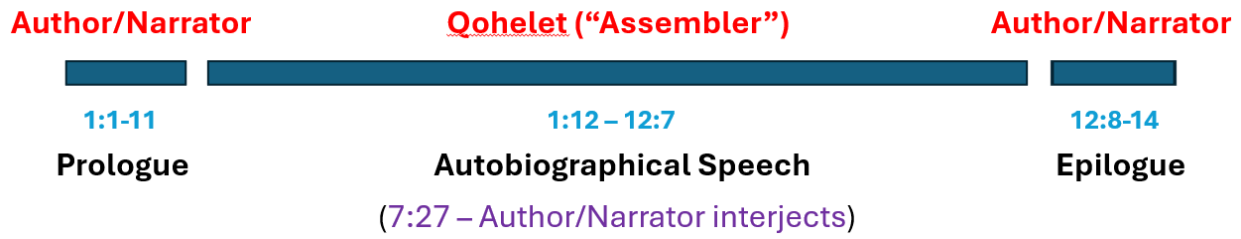
b. The Hebrew term קֹהֶלֶת [*qōhelet*] literally means "one who assembles" or "assembler." Based on the assumption that the person is called "assembler" because he gathers people to teach or preach to them, most English versions loosely translate the word as "the Teacher" or "the Preacher." With many commentators and a few English versions (NJB, NAB, NCB), I prefer the transliteration approach, so I refer to the speaker as Qohelet. This person is indeed a wisdom teacher, but as I will explain later, I think he assumes the name Qohelet to further the literary persona that he adopts in the first part of his speech.

3. The book is titled "Ecclesiastes" after the speaker in the lengthy central portion of the book, the man called Qohelet. The Hebrew term Qohelet was loosely translated into Greek as ἐκκλησιαστής (*Ekklēsiastēs)*, which means a member of the assembly. You may recall that the Greek word *ekklēsia* means an assembly or congregation. The Greek was transliterated in Latin as *Ecclesiastes* (*eh-kleh-zee-AHS-tes*), which came into English as *Ecclesiastes* (*ih-KLEE-zee-AS-teez*).

B. Qohelet's first-person speech in 1:12–12:7 is framed or bookended by a prologue and epilogue that are written by another person (or at least in another voice). That person, who takes the role of a narrator or presenter, is the author or composer of the complete work, the book of Ecclesiastes.

1. This person speaks *about* Qohelet, referring to him in the third person. So, 1:1 begins, "The words of *Qohelet*," referring to the words of Qohelet that the author/narrator will be presenting in the central section of Ecclesiastes. Verse 2 reinforces the third-person perspective with "'Completely meaningless,' *Qohelet said*." He is identifying *Qohelet's* message, not speaking on his own. That third-person perspective is resumed at the end, beginning in 12:8 with the virtually identical phrase, "'Completely meaningless,' [the] *Qohelet said*."

Structure of Ecclesiastes



2. Additional evidence for this framing structure is provided by Longman's finding that Qohelet's speech, the first-person section (1:12–12:7), follows the pattern or form of a kind of ancient autobiography.

a. Like Qohelet's speech, those works begin with a first-person introduction by a famous person who was long deceased (e.g., "I am Kurigalzu, the great king"). In other words, they employ a literary device of speaking as a great person of the past, which is why Longman labels them "fictional autobiographies." The second section of those particular ancient autobiographies "is a personal narration, where the first-person speaker recounts his or her exceptional acts,"[5] the length of which varies. The third section often ends with wisdom admonitions and instructions. Longman concludes, "Qohelet's speech in the body of the book of Ecclesiastes thus employs the same pattern of autobiography as that which appears in Mesopotamian literary tradition."[6] OT scholar Jerry Shepherd concurs: "In this commentary, I have adopted the position advocated by Tremper Longman that the work is best characterized as

[5] Longman (2026), 25.
[6] Longman (2026), 27.

'framed wisdom autobiography,' with the material inside the constructed frame of the prologue and epilogue finding its closest parallels in the genre of royal Akkadian 'fictional autobiography.'"[7]

b. That suggests that Qohelet's speech is a distinctive, self-contained literary unit, which in turn suggests that the author/narrator composed Ecclesiastes by adding the prologue and epilogue to that preexisting work to guide the reader's evaluation of it. All of this, of course, was superintended by the Spirit of God, so that the entirety of Ecclesiastes is precisely what God wanted written. Some think that the author/narrator created the character Qohelet as the autobiographical speaker to serve as a representative of a misguided strain of wisdom teaching that he wished to critique, but I think it is more likely this was a preexisting work of another wisdom teacher.

3. Many scholars recognize this framing structure in Ecclesiastes; Longman is not the Lone Ranger. For example, it is recognized by Jerry Shepherd in his 2008 commentary on Ecclesiastes in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*.[8]

a. Peter Enns states:

> Understanding the macrostructure of Ecclesiastes is vital for discerning the message of the book as a whole. What strikes the reader is the book begins (Eccles 1:1-11) with the voice of a narrator. Beginning at Ecclesiastes 1:12 and extending to Ecclesiastes 12:7, the narrator gives way to Qohelet's own voice (with the interesting exception of Eccles 7:27). The narrator's voice resumes in the conclusion, Ecclesiastes 12:8-14 (or epilogue, although some commentators refer to Eccles 12:13-14 as the epilogue).[9]

b. Richard Belcher states:

> The book of Ecclesiastes is composed of a first-person autobiography (1:12–12:7) that is framed by third person narrative (1:1–11; 12:8–14). The purpose of 1:1–11 is to identify the author of the work and to present his words to give the reader an idea of the nature of the first-person account. The purpose of 12:8–14 is to evaluate the words and arguments of Qohelet for the benefit of his son (12:12). The fact that there is a third person intrusion (7:27) supports the view that someone is presenting the words of Qohelet as a warning to avoid speculative wisdom.[10]

c. Christopher Wright states:

---

[7] Jerry E. Shepherd, "Ecclesiastes" in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 6:263.
[8] Shepherd (2008), 253-365.
[9] Peter Enns, "Ecclesiastes 1: Book of" in Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns, eds., *Dictionary of Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 124.
[10] Richard Belcher, Commentary on Ecclesiastes (accessed on 8/23/2026).

The book comes to us as a kind of double act. There are two voices.
1. The Frame-Narrator. The book opens and closes by its author telling us that he is reporting the words of Qoheleth. He introduces Qoheleth in 1:1-11. Then he reports what Qoheleth said, from 1:12 through the whole central part of the book (with a brief reminder that this is what he is doing at 7:27). The narrator then finishes the book off in 12:8-14. So those opening (1:1-11) and closing (12:8-14) sections make the "frame" for the book. Consequently, the overall author, or editor, of the book as a whole is sometimes called the "Frame-Narrator."
2. Qoheleth. "I, the Teacher . . ." (1:12). This is the autobiographical substance of the book. Qoheleth speaks in the first person throughout (except for 7:27) until 12:8.[11]

d. And Ryan Ball states:

[T]his project works with the position that Qoheleth's address begins in 1:12 and concludes in 12:7. . . .

Considering this basic structure, the result can properly be described as a frame narrative. . . . A few observations may be drawn: 1) the narrator introduces and presents Qoheleth; 2) after Qoheleth's address, the narrator provides an epilogue, in which he evaluates Qoheleth and offers his own conclusion; 3) the frame narrative is an integral part of the book; 4) the narrator is the implied author of the book; 5) the narrator is the one who gives Qoheleth room to speak and does so for his own reasons; 6) the narrator, through the frame with its introduction and conclusion, guides the reader's approach to Qoheleth; and 7) The narrator has the final word, both sequentially and authoritatively. To say this another way, Qoheleth's address is set within the context of the narrator's frame.[12]

III. Qohelet's Speech

A. Qohelet's speech is largely skeptical and pessimistic, a complaint about the apparent meaninglessness of life and the inability to perceive "rhyme or reason" in the world.

1. Life seems incoherent. It is chaotic, difficult, and unfair, and then it ends at a time that is beyond man's knowing. As Longman sums up the theological outlook of the central portion of the book (1:12–12:7), "Life is full of trouble and then you die."[13]

2. That perspective resonates with our atheistic culture, but God's existence is not doubted by Qohelet. Rather, it is his acceptance of God's existence that creates the tension with his observations and experience, what makes many things seem inexplicable and therefore frustrating.

[11] Christopher J. H. Wright, *Hearing the Message of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023), xviii.
[12] Ryan Ball, *Hebel, Joy, and the Fear of God* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2025), 28.
[13] Longman (2026), 42.

B. The most pressing issue is how Qohelet's negative theological perspective fits with the rest of Scripture. At places, it seems clearly contrary to the message of other texts. Just consider:

1. Qohelet's essential sentiment, his basic conclusion, is expressed by the author/narrator at the beginning of the prologue (1:2): "'Completely meaningless,' Qohelet said, 'completely meaningless! Everything is meaningless!'" Then, at the beginning of the epilogue (12:8), after Qohelet's speech, the author/narrator repeats: "'Completely meaningless,' [the] Qohelet said. 'Everything is meaningless.'" Longman remarks, "[T]he second wise person [author/narrator] introduces and concludes Qohelet's teaching with the refrain (1:2 and 12:8) as if to say this is Qohelet's basic conclusion."[14]

a. The word translated "meaningless" is the Hebrew noun הֶבֶל [*hebel*], which occurs 38 times in the book. There is debate about how best to render it. It literally means "breath, breeze, vapor," but it is often used metaphorically, as here, to mean "devoid of meaning." It was rendered "vanity" in the KJV and many subsequent English translations in the sense of being futile and without purpose or meaning, but the primary sense of "vanity" today is thinking too highly of oneself, so it is not the best choice. It is rendered "meaningless" in the NIV and NLT. The word also can carry the metaphorical sense of fleeting, absurd, and enigmatic, which may be better choices for some occurrences in the book.

b. Qohelet's frustration was so great that he says in 2:17 that he "hated life." Longman comments, "*I hated life* is a personal statement, but, since he does not particularize it to himself by saying 'my life,' it has the force of suggestion to his readers as well. That is, everybody's life is worth hating."[15] A world without meaning does indeed drive one to despair.

2. According to Qohelet, even wisdom is ultimately meaningless because both the fool and the wise man end up dead (2:14b-16). In his view, death levels everything, makes everything the same in the end, so that nothing *ultimately* matters. He counsels in 7:15-16 that people *not be* "too righteous" or "overly wise" because he has seen the good die young and the wicked live long. Since righteousness and wisdom do not even guarantee that one will live long and prosper, he says that people should not labor too hard in pursuit of them. That is quite a contrast to the value placed on wisdom in Proverbs, for example, and to how the pursuit of righteousness is portrayed throughout Scripture.

3. As far as Qohelet could determine, death was the end of the story.

a. He says in 9:5 that the dead know nothing, have no reward, and are forgotten. That sounds like once we die it is as if we never were.

b. He writes (3:19-21):

> [19] For the fate of human beings and the fate of animals are the same fate. One dies like the other. There is one breath for all. Human beings have no advantage over

[14] Longman (2026), 39.
[15] Longman (2026), 99.

> the animals, for everything is meaningless. [20] All go to the same place. All come from the dust, and all return to the dust. [21] Who knows whether the breath of humans goes up above and the breath of animals goes down to the depths of the earth?

c. To Qohelet, death is like a snapped silver thread, a crushed golden bowl, a broken jar by the well, and a crushed wheel at the cistern (12:6). The point is that life is valuable and useful, but it is rendered completely worthless and useless at death. He has no hope (confidence) that things will be "put right" after death.

C. Qohelet's road is one of despair because he restricts his inquiry to an "under the sun" perspective. The phrase "under the sun" is used 29 times in the book but nowhere else in the Bible. Qohelet uses the equivalent phrases "under heaven" and "on earth" multiple times (three and five times, respectively). He is trying to make sense of reality from "down here," by reasoning about the world he encounters with his senses, apart from "outside sources," apart from, or at least minimizing, the word of God that enters this world from above. Longman states:

> While Qohelet sounds nonorthodox in the light of the rest of the canon, he presents a true assessment of the world apart from the light of God's redeeming love. His perspective on the world and life is restricted; he describes it as life "under the sun," that is apart from heavenly realities, apart from God. In other words, his hopelessness is the result of the curse of the fall without recourse to God's redemption.[16]

D. This is so much the way of modern Western society. It insists on viewing this world without regard to the perspective of heaven, on interpreting reality from scratch so to speak, by reasoning from what we can see and experience.

E. Longman suggests, and it answers a lot of questions for me, that Qohelet's speech was used in Ecclesiastes, essentially quoted, by the author/narrator, no doubt himself a wisdom teacher, as a foil, a teaching device, for his point that efforts to comprehend reality that are restricted to an "under the sun" perspective – to one's observation, experience, and intellect – are at best inadequate and at worst futile and dangerous. In other words, the point of Ecclesiastes, its normative or authoritative value, is derived from the author/narrator's negative judgment on the teaching of the skeptic which comprises most of the book. God's message is in the author's presentation of Qohelet's work as a cautionary tale.

F. The key to whether the author/narrator offers a negative judgment on Qohelet's teaching is how one understands the epilogue. Opinions differ on that score, but as I will explain when we get there, it makes more sense to me, following Longman, to understand those verses as a respectful distancing from and critique of Qohelet's teaching. That does not mean that everything Qohelet says is wrong. Rather, it means his "under the sun" perspective is inadequate and pulls him to an improper and even dangerous skepticism and pessimism.

---

[16] Longman (2026), 48.

G. In this understanding, the structure of Ecclesiastes is somewhat like the Book of Job. The arguments of Job's friends and even Job regarding his suffering reflect an inadequate and erroneous understanding of God's relationship to Job's situation. Not that everything that they say is wrong, but much is out of keeping with the divine perspective revealed in the Yahweh speeches at the end of the book. Longman remarks, "We need to read [Qohelet's] comments in the light of the evaluation of the second wise man [the author or frame narrator] in much the same way we read the speeches of Job's three friends in the light of the Yahweh speeches at the end of the book of Job."[17] In that case, Qohelet's teaching cannot automatically be taken as true but must be assessed by the rest of Scripture. They are pessimistic reflections of someone who is looking through only one eye, viewing the world from an "under the sun" perspective. Some things we can "Amen," despite his skepticism and pessimism, but other things miss the mark.

H. There are a number of passages (2:24-26, 3:12-14, 22, 5:18-20, 8:15, and 9:7-10) in which Qohelet urges one to find contentment in eating, drinking, and labor, but in doing so he expresses resignation rather than affirmation. In the darkness of a life that has no ultimate meaning, the best one can do is to enjoy the temporal pleasures that lighten the burden. But since the ability to enjoy these things also is dispensed by God in accordance with his will, which to Qohelet seems like whim, Qohelet considers even this a chasing after the wind. He apparently did not consider himself a person so blessed by God (see, 5:18–6:12).

I. Isolated from the context of the book, some of Qohelet's statements about God are quite positive. For example, he indicates that God is a giver of gifts (2:26), is sovereign over everything (7:13-14), and is our Creator (12:1). But in the context of the whole speech, many commentators characterize Qohelet's view of God as one who is distant, occasionally indifferent, and sometimes cruel.

1. James Crenshaw, who like Longman is an expert in ancient Jewish wisdom literature, identified Qohelet as a prime representative of skepticism in Israel. He argued that "Israel's skeptics severed the vital nerve at two distinct junctures. They denied God's goodness if not his very existence, and they portrayed men and women as powerless to acquire essential truth."[18]

2. It is noteworthy that Qohelet refers to God solely by the generic *Elohim*. He never uses God's personal, covenantal name Yahweh.

3. God's sovereignty is affirmed by Qohelet, but this sovereignty actually calls into question God's concern for his people. From Qohelet's perspective, we are largely in the dark and things seem unpredictable and chaotic. He sees evil, injustice, and oppression, and nothing gives him any confidence that God will set it all right.

4. Even 5:1-7 can be read as a note of caution in dealing with the God who is so distant, perhaps even indifferent. He is to be "feared" as one who is unpredictably and

[17] Tremper Longman III, "Ecclesiastes" in Philip W. Comfort, ed., *Cornerstone Bible Commentary* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2006), 257.
[18] Longman (2026), 44.

inscrutably dangerous, not feared in the proper sense of fearing the consequences of defying a mighty and loving deity.

IV. Qohelet's Identity

A. Qohelet was traditionally thought to be Solomon, who was king in Jerusalem after David in the 10th century B.C., but a large majority of scholars today, including many Evangelicals, reject that understanding. They do so because there is good reason to believe that Qohelet simply was adopting the *literary persona* of Solomon as a vehicle for presenting his skeptical theology.

1. He did so because Solomon was the ideal historical person to make his point that the best efforts to find satisfaction and meaning in life through an "under the sun" quest fail. If Solomon could not find satisfaction and meaning through wisdom, wealth, women, and building projects, no one can. Christopher Wright states:

> Many scholars and commentators are of the view that Qoheleth is speaking (at least at the start of the book) *in the guise of Solomon* – in an accepted and understood way. That is, he is imaginatively portraying what Solomon could have done and thought. Solomon was legendary as the great patron of the wisdom, arts, and science of his era; a skillful political administrator; an energetic initiator of many infrastructure projects; one who amassed great wealth through international trade and multiplied marriages of diplomatic advantage; and so on. Solomon had all the time, resources, money, and opportunity to find the meaning of life. If anybody should have found the key to understanding the world and leading a successful, fulfilling, and *meaningful* life, it should have been Solomon. "But," says Qoheleth (speaking as Solomon), "I didn't."[19]

2. The readers of Qohelet's day would have understood what he was doing and would not have taken the allusions to Solomon as a claim to actually be Solomon. Longman has shown that Qohelet's speech, 1:12–12:7, is in the form of those ancient Near Eastern literary works known as fictional or pseudonymous autobiographies. In those works, the author cast his words as those of a famous deceased person, so by presenting his autobiography in that particular literary form, Qohelet was signaling the use of a literary persona.

3. If someone in 2026 wrote a critique of today's civil rights movement implying in various ways that he was Martin Luther King, Jr. – calling himself "Marcher" and noting that he had a dream of equality – everyone would understand that the modern author was linking himself to Dr. King as a way of reinforcing the insightfulness of his critique. If anyone would be in a position to recognize failings in today's civil-rights movement it would be the man historically identified with civil-rights politics. We as readers would understand that the writer was not trying to pass himself off as MLK – who has, after all, been dead for almost 60 years – but was associating himself with King for rhetorical or literary purposes.

[19] C. Wright (2023), xix-xx.

4. There also are clues in the book itself that Solomon was a literary persona.

a. Rather than explicitly identify himself as Solomon, the skeptic only does so indirectly. The nickname Qohelet ("one who assembles") may well be an allusion to Solomon's assembling of the people for the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8. The verbal root *qhl* (*qof*, *he*, *lamed*) occurs quite often in that section. If Solomon himself was the author, there does not seem to be any reason for him to use such a name. It is more likely that the nickname was adopted to associate the actual writer with Solomon while retaining his distance from the actual person. It was a way of indicating that the Solomonic persona was being adopted for literary and communicative purposes.

b. Ecclesiastes 1:12 says, "I, Qohelet, *have been* king over Israel in Jerusalem." He does not say, "I *am* king." The verb form, a perfect, "normally . . . describes a completed action in the past,"[20] which is why it is often rendered "was" king. But there was never a time that the real Solomon could have written such a thing because he died while ruling Israel (1 Kings 11). He never "was" or "had been" king over Israel. It is a signal that the author is harking back to a historical figure and writing *as if* that figure were alive in his day. He *was* king back in the 10th century B.C.

c. Ecclesiastes 1:16a says, "I said to myself, 'I have surpassed in wisdom everyone who ruled Jerusalem before me.'" David was the only Israelite king in Jerusalem before Solomon, and it is most unlikely that he would include in the comparison prior pagan kings. This again is a signal that the section was written by someone adopting the persona of Solomon rather than by Solomon himself. The association with Solomon is presented in an obviously loose way, magnifying Solomon's wisdom in words that could not have been uttered by the real Solomon.

d. The association between Qohelet and Solomon is adopted only during the search for meaning (1:13–6:9), and even after the first three chapters the distance between Qohelet and Solomon widens. In 4:1-3 Qohelet bemoans the oppression he sees and the fact the oppressed were powerless against their oppressors, but certainly the king would be in a position to do something about that situation. Moreover, Solomon is said in 1 Kings 12:4 to have placed a heavy yoke of hard service on the northern tribes which is at odds with the sentiment expressed by Qohelet. In 5:8-9 Qohelet says it is the king who profits from oppression of the poor field workers thus putting quite a gap between himself and the king.

5. In 1:1 the author/narrator takes Qohelet's identification with Solomon at face value. He is not affirming that Qohelet is David's son and king in Jerusalem (if that clause applies to Qohelet rather than David) but is simply acknowledging that he presents himself that way in his autobiographical speech. For purposes of the author's critique, it is the substance of Qohelet's message not its literary form that is important. Now if you think that is unreasonable, if you are convinced that the author/narrator is independently affirming that Qohelet is indeed Solomon, then you are faced with what I consider to be greater difficulties.

[20] Longman (2026), 74.

6. But note that even if one believes Qohelet was Solomon, that does not make Solomon the author of Ecclesiastes. Remember, the author or composer is the narrator who incorporates the work of Qohelet into his own composition. The traditional view that sees the third-person references to Qohelet as changes between the young and old Solomon seems quite strained. Why would the older Solomon refer to himself as a young man using the third person? Further, the third-person reference in 7:27 seems clearly to mark the presence of a narrator who is distinct from Qohelet.

B. The belief that Qohelet was Solomon can influence one's interpretation of Qohelet's words. Even though Solomon apostatized later in life, there often is a reluctance to attribute to him the kind of pessimism and skepticism that Qohelet quite clearly expresses. The tendency is to defend or rescue Solomon by putting an orthodox spin on all that Qohelet says, which in my opinion, sometimes strains the interpretation beyond the breaking point.

C. If, as I believe, Qohelet was not Solomon, then all we know about him, apart from what he reveals in his autobiographical speech, comes from the comments about him by the author/narrator in the epilogue, which can be taken in different ways.

1. There are some translation issues that I will note when we get there, but the author/narrator says in 12:9 that Qohelet was a "wise man," meaning he was a member of that profession, and in that role or capacity he taught people knowledge. That is neutral statement of fact not an endorsement of Qohelet as a teacher generally and certainly not an endorsement of all that he says in his speech. Being a "wise man" by profession or position was no guarantee that one had true insight into life and the ways of God. Ahithophel, for example, was a famous wise man, a counselor to King David, but he allied himself with Absalom against David, God's anointed (2 Sam. 15:12–17:3). Indeed, Qohelet himself acknowledges in 7:7 that a wise man can be made a fool, there referring to the effect of extortion and bribery.

2. I think, with Longman, that Qohelet can be described as a confused wise man. Longman writes:

> He is someone who knows the wisdom teaching of Israel well but has set out to understand life on his own and is frustrated and confused by life's incongruities and mysteries. This being the case, it is not surprising that in some cases we see [Qohelet] contradicting himself, as he turns sometimes to his knowledge of traditional wisdom for answers and at other times to his own anecdotal observations of life (e.g., 3:16-22; 7:3-9; 11:9).[21]

V. Date

If Qohelet is not Solomon, then that identification cannot be used to date the central portion of the book to Solomon's lifetime in the 10th century B.C. Based largely on assessments of the language, most scholars date the work to somewhere in the Persian or Hellenistic periods,

[21] Longman (2006), 254.

from the fifth to the third centuries B.C. But as Longman notes, "none of the arguments lead to certainty or the ability to be overly precise."[22]

THE TEXT

I. Frame Narrative: Prologue (1:1-11)

A. Superscription (1:1)

1 *The words of Qohelet, son of David, king in Jerusalem.*

1. The author/narrator introduces his work by announcing his intention to present the speech, the words, of Qohelet, which he does in 1:12–12:7. Qohelet is not yet speaking, as indicated by the reference to him in the third person.

2. As I said in the introduction, Qohelet in his first-person speech identifies with Solomon for rhetorical or communicative purposes, and the author/narrator takes that identification at face value. He is not declaring that Qohelet is in fact David's son and king in Jerusalem (if that clause applies to Qohelet rather than David) but simply acknowledging that he presents himself that way in his speech. He takes Qohelet's work as written, on its own literary terms.

B. Introduction to Qohelet's Thought (1:2-11)

2 *"Completely meaningless," Qohelet said, "completely meaningless! Everything is meaningless!"*
3 *What profit is there for people in all the toil that they do under the sun?*
4 *A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains the same forever.*
5 *The sun rises, and the sun sets, only to hurry around to rise again.*
6 *It blows to the south, going around to the north. The wind goes around and around. The wind keeps blowing in circles.*
7 *All rivers flow to the sea, but the sea is never full. The rivers return to the place from which they flow.*
8 *All things are wearisome beyond words. The eye is never satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing.*
9 *Whatever is will be again. What was done in the past will be done again. There is nothing new under the sun.*
10 *Here is a common expression, "Look, this is new!" But it was already here long ago. It existed before our time.*

[22] Longman (2026), 11.

[11] *There is no remembrance of the past, nor will there be any remembrance of what will be in the future. There is no remembrance of them among those who will exist in the future.*

1. The function of the prologue is to preview the mood and thrust of Qohelet's following reflections. As I said, the fact that the author/narrator brackets Qohelet's first-person autobiographical speech (1:2 and 12:8) with Qohelet's declaration that everything is completely meaningless suggests that this is Qohelet's basic conclusion; it captures the tenor or overall perspective of his speech. Nothing makes any ultimate difference, and therefore nothing has any real meaning. Longman comments: "The frame narrator has placed the refrain in this introductory position to prepare us for what is to come. Qohelet will prove his point in his monologue, especially in the first part, where he is searching for meaning in things and people 'under the sun' (see 1:3). Then the frame narrator will drive the point home by repeating 1:2 in 12:8."[23]

2. The Hebrew phrase that is translated "Completely meaningless" (*hăbēl hăbālîm*) is literally "meaninglessness of meaninglessnesses." That is an idiomatic way in ancient Hebrew of expressing the greatest degree of meaninglessness. It is like the expressions "Song of Songs" or "King of kings" or "Holy of Holies."

3. Verses 3-11 preview Qohelet's somber mood and conclusions. As Longman notes, "One of the main themes of these verses is the monotonous sameness of the world in spite of the illusion of change."[24] Belcher says, "The point of the opening [verses] is that life is an endless wearisome cycle that does not go anywhere and does not accomplish anything."[25]

4. There is no profit in any human endeavor (v. 3), all things are wearisome beyond words (v. 8), and there is nothing new under the sun (v. 9). To say that nothing truly changes is to say that nothing makes a difference. It is all the "same old same old," no matter what one does, so we are all just marking time, living temporary lives that have no ultimate meaning. And our lives will soon be forgotten (v. 11).

II. Qohelet's Autobiographical Speech (1:12–12:7)

A. Autobiographical Introduction (1:12)

[12] *I, Qohelet, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.*

1. As I noted in the introduction, Qohelet does not say, "I *am* king." The verb form, a perfect, "normally . . . describes a completed action in the past,"[26] which is why it is often rendered "was" king. But there was never a time that the real Solomon could have written

[23] Longman (2026), 60.
[24] Longman (2026), 84.
[25] Belcher, Commentary on Ecclesiastes (accessed on 8/23/2026).
[26] Longman (2026), 74.

such a thing because he died while ruling Israel (1 Kings 11). He never "was" or "had been" king over Israel. It is a signal that the author is harking back to a historical figure and writing *as if* that figure were alive in his day. He *was* king back in the 10th century B.C.

2. And he quite clearly is pointing to Solomon because David and Solomon were the only two kings to rule over Israel, the united kingdom, in Jerusalem. After Solomon's death, the kingdom divided into Israel to the north, which was ruled from Samaria, and Judah to the south, which was ruled from Jerusalem.

3. Longman states, "This verse follows the pattern of autobiographical introductions in Egypt, Syria, and especially in Mesopotamia."[27] Longman dubs those autobiographies fictional or pseudonymous autobiographies because the author casts his words as those of a famous deceased person. By presenting his autobiography in that particular literary form, Qohelet was signaling the use of a literary persona.

B. "Solomon's" Quest for the Meaning of Life (1:13–2:26)

1. Introductory Reflections (1:13-18)

13 *I devoted myself to search and to explore wisely all that is done under heaven. It is an*
evil task that God has given to the human race to keep them occupied.
14 *I observed all that is done under the sun. And really, it is all meaningless and a*
chasing of the wind.
15 *What is bent cannot be straightened; what is missing cannot be counted.*
16 *I said to myself, "I have surpassed in wisdom everyone who ruled Jerusalem before me.*
I have observed all forms of wisdom and knowledge."
17 *I devoted myself to understand wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly. I*
understood that this is also a chasing of the wind.
18 *For with much wisdom comes much frustration; he who adds to knowledge adds to*
pain.

a. Qohelet, in the role of Solomon, says he gave himself over to exploring by wisdom, by his legendary insight into life, all activity on earth. Longman comments, "We must remember, however, that he believes there is nothing new on earth. The present and the future bring nothing new, so if the present is meaningless, the future will bring nothing to change that unhappy prospect."[28]

b. Qohelet's distance from the wisdom tradition of Israel as exemplified in a book like Proverbs is evident "when he calls his task *evil* in this verse and later when he questions the traditional claim that wisdom brings life (cf. Prov 8:35). He apparently rejects that view, believing rather that in light of death wisdom is meaningless (2:13-16)."[29]

---

[27] Longman (2026), 73.
[28] Longman (2026), 77.
[29] Longman (2026), 77.

c. He labels the task of investigating life as evil because after he investigated (past tense) everything under the sun, he found it all to be meaningless, a frustrating exercise in futility, expressed in the phrase "a chasing of the wind." In his mind, God assigned people a futile task, to search for the meaning of life when, according to Qohelet, there is none. It is a divine snipe hunt.

d. The thrust of v. 15 is that life is "bent," messed up in some way, and it cannot be corrected because, as he states in 7:13, no one can straighten what *God* has bent. He is the creator of this world, and one cannot overturn the meaninglessness that Qohelet believes he has designed into life. The futility of trying to do so is as obvious as the fact that one cannot count what is missing. (There is, of course, a sense in which this world is "bent," not the way it is supposed to be, because of the curse in response to sin's invasion, but that does not make life meaningless.)

e. Qohelet highlights his (Solomon's) unparalleled suitability, as the legendary wise king, the one who has seen all manner of wisdom and knowledge, to discover the meaning of life through observation and experience. Longman remarks, "The point is, if *he* cannot find meaning in or through wisdom, then who can?"[30]

f. His first search for meaning focused on wisdom and knowledge and on madness and folly as subjects (or "to understand wisdom and to know madness and folly"). He does not say why he included madness and folly in the study, but he concluded that even this investigation was a chasing of the wind, a frustrating exercise in futility. It was just another activity that ultimately did not matter, a spinning of wheels during one's short life.

g. Indeed, that investigation could not have been ultimately meaningful because, as he sees it, wisdom and knowledge, the subjects of the study, are overrated if not illusory paths to meaning. Gaining more wisdom and knowledge only leads to greater frustration and emotional pain in that it intensifies one's awareness of their inadequacy to reveal ultimate meaning.

2. The Pursuit of Meaning in Pleasure (2:1-11)

> [1] *I said to myself, "Come on, I will now test you with pleasure and experience the good life." But this too proved meaningless.*
> [2] *I thought, "Laughter is madness and pleasure – what can it do?"*
> [3] *Still guided by wisdom, I mentally explored by cheering myself with wine and embracing folly until I could see what was good for people to do under heaven during the few days of their life.*
> [4] *I did great works. I built for myself houses and planted for myself vineyards.*
> [5] *I made for myself gardens and parks. I planted every kind of fruit tree in them.*
> [6] *I made for myself pools to water the flourishing forest of trees.*

[30] Longman (2026), 80.

> [7] *I acquired male and female servants, and I had house-born servants as well. I also acquired herds and flocks. I had more than anyone before me in Jerusalem.*
> [8] *I also amassed for myself silver and gold, the treasure of kings and provinces. I gathered for myself male and female singers and many concubines – the pleasure of humankind.*
> [9] *I surpassed all who lived before me in Jerusalem, and all the while, my wisdom stayed with me.*
> [10] *I did not refuse myself anything that my eyes desired. I did not hold myself back from any pleasure that made me feel happy in all my toil. This was my reward from all my toil.*
> [11] *But then I turned my attention to all the acts that my hands performed and to the toil that I toiled hard to do. Indeed, they were all meaningless and like trying to catch the wind. There was no profit under the sun.*

a. Qohelet reports that he (Solomon) sought to find meaning in life in sensual pleasures and living the high life, but that too proved to be ultimately meaningless. He was skeptical that true meaning might lie in things like laughter and pleasure but nevertheless undertook an assessment of hedonism and self-gratification as part of his effort to determine what was truly meaningful, to see how people should spend their short lives.

b. He engaged in grand construction projects and amassed great wealth. He had a multitude of servants to wait on him, singers to entertain him at his whim, and all the sexual activity he desired. He pursued pleasure without restraint; as we might say, he went crazy. This, of course, would be contrary to God's will as expressed, for example, in Num. 15:37-42 (esp. v. 39, NIV):

> [37] The LORD said to Moses, [38] "Speak to the Israelites and say to them:
> 'Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. [39] You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and **not prostitute yourselves by chasing after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes**. [40] Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God. [41] I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the LORD your God.'"

c. He claims that the pleasure he experienced in his investigation was a bonus, a happy byproduct of all his effort. But as he said in v. 1, the bottom line, when he assessed everything he had done and all the work in which he engaged, is that it all was meaningless. It had no lasting or ultimate value. In terms of finding what is ultimately meaningful, all his effort was as futile and frustrating as trying to catch the wind. There was no profit under the sun, no real gain from what he observed and experienced in his life on earth.

d. Shepherd comments:

> After surveying all of his works, however, he then passes judgment on all of them as meaningless and a chasing after the wind. What is especially critical to note with regard to this judgment is that it hangs like a dark cloud over every so-called

> *carpe diem* passage that follows. . . . In other words, even though several times later in the book Qohelet will recommend that the best thing a person can do is to derive pleasure from his labor (or the fruits of his labor) because that is his lot in life, he declares up front that he himself received pleasure from his labor as his lot in life but considered it all to be meaningless and a chasing after the wind. This shows us that the *carpe diem* passages are really falsely named. The advice to be given in these passages is not so much "seize the day" as it is "here is a palliative for you to take in the light of the painful absurdity of life."[31]

e. We tend to view Qohelet here as presenting the orthodox and important message that true meaning and value are not found in pleasure and personal achievements. We say, "Amen," right? They are not found in those things but only in God. That is true, but it is not Qohelet's point. He is more pessimistic and skeptical. He is not celebrating the truth that meaning and value are found only in God but bemoaning that the world is apparently *without* meaning. As far as he can tell from observation and experience, from his "under the sun" perspective, life is a depressing crapshoot that has no rhyme or reason.

3. Death Renders Both Wisdom and Folly Meaningless (2:12-17)

> [12] *I turned my attention to observe wisdom and mad folly. For what can anyone who comes after the king do but that which has already been done?*
> [13] *I observed that there was more profit to wisdom than folly, like the profit of light over darkness.*
> [14] *The wise have eyes in their head, while fools walk around in darkness. But I also understand that the same fate awaits both of them.*
> [15] *I said to myself, "Even I will meet the same fate as the fool, why then have I become so wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is meaningless."*
> [16] *For the memory of neither the wise nor the fool endures forever. The days arrive only too soon when both will be forgotten. How will the wise person die? Like the fool!*
> [17] *So I hated life, for the work that is done under the sun is evil to me. Indeed, all is meaningless and a chasing of the wind.*

a. Qohelet indicated in 1:17-18 that he sees no ultimate value in wisdom and knowledge, but he recognizes that wisdom is relatively valuable compared to folly. It is better than folly in that it helps one to navigate the world, just like light is more useful than darkness in that regard.

b. But the fact death awaits both the wise and the foolish washes away that brief advantage making the pursuit of wisdom ultimately meaningless. The wise man turns out to be no different than the fool because they both will die and neither will be remembered. George Athas comments: "For Qohelet, however, death is the ultimate leveler that robs everyone of any meaning in life (2:15-16). The cheer that pleasure brings and the light that wisdom sheds, then,

[31] Shepherd (2008), 282.

ultimately come to nothing. They have no lasting value and merely reinforce the transience and meaninglessness of all things."[32]

c. This prompts the declaration, "So I hated life." Seeing death as a great leveler, as something that erases all that went before and puts all in the same situation, does make life meaningless, which yields the despair he voices. To quote Longman's remark again, "*I hated life* is a personal statement, but, since he does not particularize it to himself by saying 'my life,' it has the force of suggestion to his readers as well. That is, everybody's life is worth hating."[33]

d. All the activity done and effort expended on earth strikes him as evil or negative because it ultimately amounts to nothing. He repeats the refrain, "Indeed, all is meaningless and a chasing of the wind."

4. Death Renders Toil Meaningless (2:18-23)

> [18] *Then I hated all my toil that I do under the sun, because I have to leave it to whomever comes after me.*
> [19] *Who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? But he will control all the toil for which I so wisely toiled under the sun. This too is meaningless.*
> [20] *So I began to despair of all the toil that I did under the sun.*
> [21] *For there was a person who toiled with wisdom and with knowledge and with success, but he had to leave his reward to an individual who did not work for it. This too is meaningless and a great evil.*
> [22] *For what do people get for all their toil and anxiety that they experience under the sun?*
> [23] *For all their days their task is filled with pain and frustration. Even at night their minds do not rest. This also is meaningless.*

a. Toil or labor can refer to the work itself or the results of that work. Qohelet's point here is that laboring is ultimately meaningless because death deprives one of the assets that one's labor accumulated. It all ends up in the hands of someone else who, to add insult to injury, may be a fool. Thus, one's labor winds up not mattering at all, which strikes Qohelet as a bad or evil thing.

b. People endure a lifetime of labor that is anxiety producing, painful, frustrating, and sleep depriving, and they ultimately get no benefit from it. They appear briefly on earth, endure the hardships of work, and then die. From an "under the sun" perspective, it is a bleak picture indeed.

5. Carpe Diem! – God Allows Some to Enjoy Life (2:24-26)

---

[32] George Athas, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 78.
[33] Longman (2026), 99.

> [24] *There is nothing better for people than to eat and drink and enjoy their toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God.*
> [25] *For who will eat and who will worry apart from him?*
> [26] *For he gives wisdom, knowledge, and pleasure to the one who pleases him, but he gives to the one who is offensive the task of gathering wealth to be given to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless and chasing the wind.*

a. The best one can hope for in this life is to eat and drink and enjoy one's ultimately meaningless labor. This is a statement of resignation, not enthusiasm; that is as good as it gets. Qohelet has *seen* that the ability to do so, to eat and to enjoy one's toil, is doled out by God, presumably by observing the distribution of those things in the population and having no other explanation for it. His observation that it is from God is confirmed by the theological conviction that no one will eat or worry apart from him, meaning he is the dispenser of those things.

b. To further the point, he says that God dispenses wisdom, knowledge, and pleasure to the "one who pleases him," but he gives to the "one who is offensive" the task of gathering wealth to pass to the one who "pleases him."

(1) Despite the fact the verb חָטָא (*ḥāṭāʾ*) normally means "to sin" and most English versions render the participial form in this verse (*ḥôṭeʾ*) as "sinner,"[34] I agree with Longman and others that the "one who pleases" and the "one who is offensive" should not be understood here in a moral sense, as one who is righteous versus one who is a sinner. Shepherd wrote in 2008:

> The majority of recent major commentaries on Ecclesiastes (e.g., those by Crenshaw, Murphy, Seow, Longman, Fox, and perhaps Krüger) take the position that in Ecclesiastes the term has indeed been emptied of any moral significance: the *ḥôṭeʾ* is simply someone who has become displeasing to God. Some of the suggested translations, then, are "one who is offensive," "bungler," "unlucky one," "unfortunate one," or simply "one who is displeasing to God."[35]

(2) Qohelet is not saying that God gives good things to good people and bad things to bad people. Rather, it is simply a way of referring to those who are favored and disfavored, chosen and not chosen, by God for his own often inscrutable purposes regarding a particular benefit at a particular time. Fox, "who offers an impressive list of nonmoral uses of *ḥāṭāʾ*,"[36] states: "In Qoh 2:26 and 7:26 the *ḥoteʾ* is someone who is offensive to God. While most sages take it for granted that God is offended only by sin or moral folly, Qohelet believes that God (like a human ruler) may treat a person as offensive for inexplicable reasons and not necessarily because of actual sin or folly."[37]

---

[34] The CEB has "those who are offensive"; the REB has "who fails to please him."
[35] Shepherd (2008), 286.
[36] Longman (2026), 109.
[37] Fox (1989), 189.

(3) That Qohelet is not saying that God's choosing is based on one's righteousness is indicated by the fact Qohelet says in v. 26 that God has the one who is *offensive* gather wealth to be given to one who *pleases* him, when he just said in 2:21 that the person who toiled with wisdom and knowledge and was successful has to leave his wealth to someone who did not work for it. The gatherer and receiver in 2:21 are not bad and good, morally undeserving and morally deserving. So being "offensive" and "pleasing" in 2:26 is not about moral deservedness but about God's choice. The "one who pleases" is the one to whom God chooses to give a benefit, and the "one who is offensive" is the one who does not receive it.

(4) That explains why Qohelet says immediately afterward, "This too is meaningless and chasing the wind." As Longman notes: "One is thus left to ask: Why would Qohelet think it meaningless if good things happened to good people and bad things to bad? After all, throughout the book it is precisely the lack of connection between ethical behavior and reward that causes Qohelet so much frustration."[38]

(5) Shepherd comments:

> [H]e has already mentioned this situation a few verses earlier (vv. 18-21). Qohelet himself is one who by "wisdom, knowledge, and skill" has amassed things, only to have to hand them over to the one who "pleases God," though he is not sure whether this person is actually wise or a fool.
>
> In this particular context, then, it is probably best to understand the two clauses – the "one who pleases God" and the "one who is offensive" – to be in Qohelet's thinking somewhat like a revolving door. The person who has collected things, who was for a short while the one whom God favored, will soon be the one who falls out of favor. He will die and leave all the things for which he labored to the one to whom God has now transferred his favor. That person may be wise or a fool, but he is also the lucky one whom, for some reason, God has made to be his new favorite. But his unfortunate time will come as well.[39]

c. But, as Qohelet made clear in 2:1-11, it does not really matter who gets wisdom, knowledge, and pleasure and who does not because having wisdom and experiencing pleasure are meaningless. They have no lasting or ultimate value because the same fate awaits everyone. So seeking ultimate meaning and value in those things is an exercise in futility and frustration like chasing of the wind.

C. The Quest Continues (3:1–6:9)

1. The Burden of the "Proper Time" (3:1-15)

[1] *For everything there is a season, and a time for every activity under heaven.*

[38] Longman (2026), 109.
[39] Shepherd (2008), 287.

[2] *A time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot what has been planted.*
[3] *A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to tear down and a time to build.*
[4] *A time to cry and a time to laugh; a time of mourning and a time of dancing.*
[5] *A time to cast stones and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing.*
[6] *A time to seek and a time to give up as lost; a time to keep and a time to throw away.*
[7] *A time to tear and a time to sew; a time to be silent and a time to speak.*
[8] *A time to love and a time to hate; a time of war and a time of peace.*
[9] *What profit do workers have from their toils?*
[10] *I observed the task that God has given to the human race to keep them occupied.*
[11] *He makes everything appropriate in its time. He also places eternity in their hearts. But still, no one can discover what God is doing from beginning to end.*
[12] *I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves during their lives.*
[13] *Also everyone who eats, drinks, and enjoys their toil – that is a gift of God.*
[14] *I know that everything God does lasts forever. Nothing can be added to it or taken from it. God has acted, so that they might fear him.*
[15] *Whatever is, already has been. What will be has already been. God makes the same things happen over and over again.*

a. This is probably the most widely known passage in Ecclesiastes. According to Qohelet, for everything and every activity on earth, there is an appropriate time for it to occur or to be done. He emphasizes the point with the beautiful poem in vv. 2-8, where he says there is a time for fourteen sets of merisms, pairs of opposites that encompass the specified items and everything in between (see NET note). Longman says, "Ecclesiastes 3:2-8 contain fourteen pairs of contrasting opposites. The citing of opposites in this way is a common figure of speech (merism) in Hebrew poetry, and it denotes completeness."[40]

b. He is not suggesting that everything one does is okay because there is a time for doing everything. On the contrary, he is asserting that things need to be done *at the proper time*. And because the appropriateness of one's activity is determined by external circumstances, is situation sensitive, one must correctly perceive those circumstances if one is to act appropriately. Otherwise, one will be "zigging" when one should have "zagged." For example, Prov. 26:4 instructs one *not* to answer a fool according to his folly, and 26:5 says that one *is* to answer a fool according to his folly. There are times and circumstances when one should ignore a fool and times and circumstances when one should engage him.

c. Part of Qohelet's frustration is that the knowledge necessary to make all those reads, to comprehend reality and life at that depth, is beyond human grasp. No matter how diligently one explores life and the world from "under the sun," it remains to some extent a "black box," an impenetrable mystery, which leaves one ill equipped to identify the seasons and times for various actions. Elizabeth Huwiler states, "There is a time for everything, but we

[40] Longman (2026), 114.

humans are unable to comprehend this. In the final analysis, we simply cannot understand God's work."[41]

d. He immediately follows the poem of vv. 2-8 with the rhetorical question he asked at the beginning (1:3), "What profit do workers have from their toils?" His understood answer is, "None." That everything has its proper season or opportune moment does not change that fact. It does not remedy the ultimate meaninglessness of what we do in our few days on earth. It simply provides another basis for frustration because of our limitations. Christopher Wright states, "Just knowing there's a right time for everything doesn't really answer the fundamental question. Even if you get your timing right, what's the point of it all? That's a question that Qoheleth is finding so hard to answer. In fact, it's a hard burden that God has put on us all."[42]

e. Qohelet says in v. 10 that he observed the task that God has given to the human race to keep them occupied, which in 1:13 he identified as the task of investigating all that is done under heaven, understanding this world. There he labeled it an "evil task." As I said regarding that verse, he labels the task of investigating life as evil because after he investigated (past tense) everything under the sun, he found it all to be meaningless, a frustrating exercise in futility. In his mind, God assigned people a futile task, to search for the meaning of life when, according to Qohelet, there is none. It is a divine snipe hunt.

f. He acknowledges in v. 11, as was stressed in the poem, that God made and ordered the world so that everything has an appropriate time, but God also places *eternity* in the human heart. Walter Kaiser, Jr. says "that 3:11 talks of 'a deep-seated desire, a compulsive drive . . . to know the character, composition, and meaning of the world . . . and to discern its purpose and destiny.'"[43] But according to Qohelet, "[t]his placement of eternity in the heart of humans leads to frustration"[44] because, as he says in v. 11b, no one can discover what God is doing from beginning to end. We are unable to comprehend what we long to comprehend.

(1) Longman quotes the following from John Jarick:

> In 7:27, 28 Koheleth recorded that he had wanted to discover the sum of things, but could not; and in 8:17 he noted that people seek to find out "all the work of God . . . that is done under the sun," but cannot. 3:11 makes excellent sense as a kind of parallel to these two verses. The human being has *aiōn*, "eternity," in his heart – his Creator has made him a thinking being, and he wants to pass beyond his fragmentary knowledge and discern the fuller meaning of the whole pattern – but the Creator will not let the creature be his equal. As surely as God has put *aiōn* in the human heart (a consciousness that there is more than the immediate *kairos* of this or that [3:2-8] in which the creature finds itself), he has also put a veil upon the human heart, so that the finite human mind is unable to reach

[41] Roland E. Murphy and Elizabeth Huwiler, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 188.
[42] C. Wright (2023), 32-33.
[43] Longman (2026), 121.
[44] Longman (2026), 121.

beyond the *kairos* into the *aiōn* to see as God does.[45]

(2) Joshua Bremerman states:

> What exactly did God place into man's heart? In context, it seems as though God has placed the desire to understand how he makes all things beautiful in his timing. As we see in the latter half of verse 11, God has made man to yearn for understanding of the past, present, and future – God's work from beginning to end – and how all of these times and seasons work together.
>
> The next piece of Ecclesiastes 3:11, however, sobers the listener. God has given man a desire to comprehend how he works all things together, "yet so that [man] cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." Following the logic here, we see God designing times and seasons together in a wise, fitting manner. He has given humanity a desire to understand this work. However, though he has placed this innate desire within mankind, humans cannot fathom God's perfect timing.[46]

g. In light of our frustrating inability to figure out the world, to discern ultimate meaning, he again offers a word of resignation. He says that the best one can hope for is to be happy and enjoy oneself during one's life. That is as good as it gets. He adds that being able to do so, which he now, as in 2:24, specifies as being able to eat, drink, and enjoy one's toil, also is dispensed by God. Longman comments:

> Qohelet points out that no one can take even these small, temporal enjoyments for granted. God must permit the opportunity and the attitude that is predisposed toward it. As Crenshaw rightly states it, "even the power to follow his advice is a divine gift."
>
> It is true, as Jarick pointed out, that Qohelet consistently links God with the possibility of enjoyment in the present (2:24-26; 3:13, 22; 8:15). It is fair to deduce, however, that from his frequent expressions of pain and frustration Qohelet did not himself feel that God granted him this *gift*, which serves as anesthesia toward the problems of the present fallen world (see 5:18[19], 19[20], where again we encounter the *gift of God*). This insight points to Qohelet's underlying problem: he feels unfairly treated.[47]

h. Qohelet asserts that everything God does, including the frustrating state of affairs that is human existence, is unchangeable. Longman remarks, "The point of the present verse is: try as they might, whether they like it or not, humans cannot change their situation."[48] They are trapped in a reality they are driven to sort out but without an ability to do so, a reality in which they can discern no ultimate meaning.

---

[45] Longman (2026), 121
[46] Joshua Bremerman, "Wisdom Is Vindicated by Her Deeds: Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 in Matthew 11:16-19," *Themelios* 49.2 (2024), 318.
[47] Longman (2026), 123.
[48] Longman (2026), 123.

i. According to Qohelet, the reason God acts as he does is that mankind might "fear him," but it is not clear what he means by that. It seems unlikely, given the negative perspective of the surrounding context, that he is saying God acts as he does that mankind might have a proper and pious attitude toward him, that they might rightfully fear the consequences of rebelling against the mighty and compassionate One. Rather, it seems Qohelet sees God as wanting to generate something more negative and threatening, a more general fear of him as one who is unpredictably dangerous. Longman states, "In brief, Qohelet believes that God acts the way that he does to frighten people into submission, not to arouse a sense of respectful awe of his power and might."[49]

j. Verse 15 reinforces the point of the prior verse that humans cannot alter the frustrating situation in which they find themselves. Longman comments, "Qohelet's point in this verse is that – past, present, future – there is nothing new under the sun." He says, "In brief, the verse states that nothing new ever happens or will happen. God just repeats himself through time, and humans cannot make things better."[50]

2. Is There Any Justice (3:16-22)

> [16] *Furthermore I observed under the sun: The place of judgment – injustice was there! The place of righteousness – injustice was there!*
> [17] *I said to myself, "God will judge the righteous and the unjust, for there is a time for every activity and for every deed too."*
> [18] *I said to myself concerning the human race, "God tests them so that they may see they are like animals."*
> [19] *For the fate of human beings and the fate of animals are the same fate. One dies like the other. There is one breath for all. Human beings have no advantage over the animals, for everything is meaningless.*
> [20] *All go to the same place. All come from the dust, and all return to the dust.*
> [21] *Who knows whether the breath of humans goes up above and the breath of animals goes down to the depths of the earth?*
> [22] *So I observed that there is nothing better than for people to rejoice in their work, for that is their reward. For who can bring them to see what will happen after them?*

a. Qohelet now shifts his attention to the issue of justice. He sees that the law courts are corrupt so that people do not get what they deserve. The place where justice is to be delivered is instead a venue of injustice. Longman comments: "The reader can see that Qohelet abandons the Solomonic persona in this verse. Political and legal justice were the ultimate responsibility of the king in ancient Israel. That Qohelet observes it and expresses distaste for it, and in no way owns responsibility for it, is one of the many signs that Qohelet is not actually Solomon or any of the kings of Israel or Judah."[51]

---

[49] Longman (2026), 124.
[50] Longman (2026), 124.
[51] Longman (2026), 127.

b. This failure of the legal justice system brings to his mind teaching that he no doubt grew up with in Israel, that God will set things right, that humans will eventually get what they deserve. There is a time for that as well as for everything else.

c. But Qohelet is no longer convinced of that. He immediately has the countering thought that God tests humans to have them recognize that they are just like animals when it comes to death. He says that humans share the same fate as animals and have no advantage over them, a skeptical and pessimistic perspective that is in line with his repeated conclusion that everything is meaningless. They all go to the same place, that is, they all simply decay into dust.

d. Having flatly denied that there is any difference in the fate of humans and animals, Qohelet hedges slightly by suggesting in v. 21 that no one *knows* whether they have different fates. In other words, there is nothing from an "under the sun" perspective, nothing from observation and experience, that demonstrates a difference. But since Qohelet prioritizes "under the sun" evidence over God's special revelation about the distinctiveness of human beings (e.g., Gen. 1:26-28; Ps. 8:4-6), the absence of the evidence he values readily leads to his declaration that there is *in fact* no difference in their fates.

e. Longman comments: "Qohelet briefly entertains the possibility that everything will be put right in the future, but then he pulls the carpet out from this own argument by saying that death may very well be the end of it all for human beings as for animals."[52] He adds: "In short, this section is one of a number that indicate to us that Qohelet did not have a conception of the afterlife. Without such, he realizes that there is no place for divine retribution outside the present evil world. In other words, his observation extends beyond 'under the sun' to what takes place in the afterlife, but he concludes that there is nothing there."[53] Daniel Ott states:

> For Qohelet, death is final. Death is the fate that awaits us all. And in this regard human beings are no different from any other living thing: [quote of 3:19-21 omitted]. Qohelet's words are stark. We are dust in the wind. We amount to nothing. . . . Qohelet eschews any notion of life after death. We come into the world naked and leave the same way. All that we may achieve or obtain cannot go with us (5:14). We are stripped clean in the end. Qohelet insists that anything we gain in this life – whether material, experiential, spiritual or intellectual gain – cannot endure beyond our death.[54]

f. When Qohelet refers to death in 12:7 as "the dust returns to the earth as it was, *and the spirit returns to God*," he is not contradicting his assertion in 3:21 that the evidence he requires for that conclusion is lacking. He is not affirming the truth of the statement but is simply invoking a conventional way of describing death in that culture, a way that was rooted in Scripture (see, Gen. 2:17, 3:16; see also, Tobit 3:6). He expects the reader to understand from his prior comments that he does not endorse that description. As we will see when we get there, the thrust of that section is that life is valuable and useful but is rendered

---

[52] Longman (2026), 133.
[53] Longman (2026), 129.
[54] Daniel J. Ott, "No wisdom in Sheol: A theology of death," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 205:3 (March 2023).

completely worthless and useless by death. Qohelet is not attempting to reverse his entire point by tacking an optimistic comment on the end.

g. Given the depressing fact that human existence is ultimately meaningless, he again offers a word of resignation. The best one can do is to rejoice in one's work before the lights go out. The final clause (v. 22b) expresses Qohelet's doubt that people will be made aware of anything (can be brought to see what will happen) after their deaths (after them). As Longman notes, "The phrase *after them* is a circuitous manner of saying 'after their death.'"[55]

3. Better Off Dead (4:1-3)

> [1] *Then I turned and observed all the oppression that is done under the sun, and oh, the tears of the oppressed! There is no one to comfort them. Power is in the grasp of the oppressors. There is no one to comfort them.*
> [2] *So I praised the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still alive.*
> [3] *But better than both of these is the one who does not yet exist. That one has not seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.*

a. Qohelet says that he observed all the oppression that is done on earth (under the sun). It produced many tears, and there was no one to comfort those under the boot. The oppressors held the power. Again, the Solomonic persona is clearly abandoned because as king Solomon had great power and would be in a position to do something about the oppression. If the real Solomon said such things, it would be like that old Sprint commercial where a pompous business executive says that joining the Sprint plan is his way of "Sticking it to the Man." And then his assistant says, "But, sir, you *are* the Man."

b. Because of the heavy and hopeless oppression he witnessed, Qohelet says that those who have already died are better off than those who are still alive because they no longer have to witness such abuse. That is a remarkable indictment of this world given that he just made clear that he thinks there is nothing beyond death. And then he adds that those who do not yet exist in the world, those who have not yet been born, are better off than both those who have died and those still living because they have not yet witnessed the evil activity that is rampant on earth (under the sun). It is a depressing picture indeed.

4. Once Again – The Meaninglessness of Work (4:4-6)

> [4] *Then I observed that all toil and all success in work results from jealousy of one's neighbors. This too is meaningless and chasing the wind.*
> [5] *Fools fold their hands and consume their own flesh.*
> [6] *Better one handful with rest than two fistfuls with toil – and chasing the wind.*

a. Qohelet says he observed that all toil and success in work is motivated by jealousy or envy of one's neighbors, a desire to keep up with and surpass them in possessions

[55] Longman (2026), 132.

and status. It is true, as Longman notes, that "[t]his motive can never be satisfied, so it leads to ceaseless work and despair,"[56] but more importantly, this selfish motive does not change the fact that one's labor, wealth, and status are all ultimately meaningless in the face of the great leveler of death. Living to keep up with or surpass the "Joneses" intensifies one's focus on work and success, but that motivation is itself meaningless and chasing the wind because the work and success it promotes are meaningless in the end.

b. This is not an endorsement of total inactivity, folding one's hands in rest. That is the path of fools who then are left with nothing to eat, which is expressed hyperbolically as them being left to "consume their own flesh."

c. He says it is better to be content with what one needs – one handful – than to grasp for wealth – two fistfuls – which requires one to toil without rest. Since wealth and status are ultimately meaningless, why sacrifice rest for them during one's few days of life?

5. Another Reflection on Meaninglessness: The Lonely Miser (4:7-8)

> [7] *Then I turned and observed an example of meaninglessness under the sun.*
> [8] *There was a person, who was all alone. He also had no son or brother. He toiled endlessly and was never satisfied with his wealth. "And for whom do I toil, depriving myself of good?" Also, this is meaningless and an evil task.*

a. Qohelet reports an example of meaninglessness that he has observed on earth (under the sun). It involved a person who was all alone. He had no friend, no business partner, and no wife and did not even have a brother or a son.[57]

b. This man worked himself to the bone, as we might say, and was never satisfied with his wealth. He was never content with what he had, presumably for the reason just mentioned: there is no keeping up with the Joneses.

c. He recognized that there was no reason for him to work so excessively, to deprive himself of relatively good things in this life, like rest. Qohelet remarks that this warped pursuit of wealth is meaningless because wealth has no ultimate value, and he labels it evil or bad that someone would make the acquisition of personal wealth the priority of their life.[58]

6. The Advantages of Companionship (4:9-12)

> [9] *Two are better than one, for they can get a good return for their toil.*
> [10] *For if one of them falls down, the other can help his friend up. But pity the person who falls when there is not another to help.*

---

[56] Longman (2026), 139.
[57] Longman (2026), 141-142.
[58] Longman (2006), 280.

[11] *Also, if two people lie down together, they keep warm, but how can one person keep warm?*
[12] *And though someone can overpower one person, two can resist the attacker. "A three-stranded cord does not quickly snap."*

a. Qohelet's reflection on the lonely miser leads him to comment on the advantages of companionship. Though "relationships at best bring comfort in a world without ultimate meaning, a life that is difficult and ends in death,"[59] they do provide certain benefits in this life.

b. He notes that two are better than one regarding the return they can get from their toil. They can accomplish more together and presumably reap larger profits.

c. When a person on a journey has a serious fall, into a pit or off a cliff, for example, he is in dire straits if he has no companion to help him. Falling, of course, can serve as a metaphor for other crises in life.

d. Two people traveling together can share body heat to keep each other warm, whereas the solo traveler lacks that advantage. When John and I were boys, maybe ten and twelve years old, the gas or electric company shut off all the heat to our house because we did not pay the bill. This was in the middle of winter in New Jersey, so we piled all the covers onto one bed and slept together for heat.

e. Two people on a journey in the ancient world were better able to protect themselves from robbers than a person traveling alone. Outside the control of towns and cities, danger was lurking. It was what we might call the "wild west."

f. The section concludes with a proverb that "a three-stranded cord does not quickly snap." People have wondered why the number three appears, but there is reason to believe that Qohelet is "alluding to a well-known ancient Near Eastern proverb concerning the benefits of friendship."[60] The point is "that strength can be gained through human relationships."[61] The attempts throughout history to read Christ or the Trinity into the proverb or to identify the three cords as faith, hope, and love are unfounded.

7. Political Power Is Meaningless: An Anecdote (4:13-16)

[13] *A poor but wise youth is better than an old and foolish king who no longer pays attention to advice,*
[14] *though he came from a prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom.*
[15] *I observed all who lived, those who walked under the sun, with the next youth, who replaced him.*

[59] Longman (2026), 142 (referring to Gordis).
[60] Longman (2026), 145.
[61] Longman (2026), 145.

16 *There was no end to all the people, to all those whom he led. Yet people who lived later did not like him. This too is meaningless and chasing wind.*

a. Qohelet gives an anecdote in which a poor but wise young man, a former prisoner, replaced an old, foolish king whose foolishness was evident in his refusal to pay attention to advice. This young king was himself soon replaced by another young man, "thus illustrating the temporal glory and ultimate meaninglessness of this world (see 4:16)." Longman states, "In short, wisdom may bring a king temporary success, but it cannot guarantee him his greatest wish – a long reign and a hereditary successor."[62]

b. The second young king was popular, but even that was short lived. Longman states: "Countless people followed the 'next youth' of 4:15, who replaced the wise young man of 4:13 and 14, who came to the throne from humble origins to replace the old, foolish king of 4:13. Yet not even the final king mentioned, the popular one, continued to enjoy the people's favor. In the end, people did not like even him."[63]

c. Longman remarks, "It is primarily wisdom and folly that again are contrasted, and this anecdote . . . illustrates the point that we already came across in 2:12-17: while wisdom is superior to folly in the short run, in the long run the advantages of wisdom are nonexistent."[64] Power and popularity are likewise shown to be insecure and thus to have no ultimate meaning, which is why he declares at the end, "This too is meaningless and chasing wind." Death awaits the wise and foolish, the rich and poor, the powerful and lowly, and the popular and hated, and as Qohelet sees it, its finality deprives this life of any lasting meaning.

8. God Is in Heaven (4:17–5:6 [5:1-7])

4:17 (5:1) *Watch your step when you go to the house of God. Draw near to listen rather than offer the sacrifice of fools. For they do not know that they are doing evil.*
5:1(2) *Do not be quick with your mouth, and do not let your heart rush to utter a word before God. For God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore, let your words be few.*
2(3) *For dreams come with much work, and the voice of the fool with many words.*
3(4) *When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it, for there is no pleasure in fools. You, however, fulfill what you have vowed.*
4(5) *It is better that you do not make a vow than that you make a vow and not fulfill it.*
5(6) *Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to commit sin. And do not say to the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry with your words and destroy the work of your hands?*
6(7) *For when dreams multiply, so do meaningless words. Instead, fear God.*

a. Qohelet urges great caution when in God's special presence at his holy sanctuary. One should listen rather than offer the "sacrifice of fools." It is unclear "whether the expression refers to a certain type of sacrifice or a sacrifice offered with a particular mind-set, or

[62] Longman (2026), 149.
[63] Longman (2026), 149.
[64] Longman (2026), 145-146.

lack thereof, or if it is referring to all sacrifices as foolish, since 'God is in heaven' and therefore unaffected by human sacrifices."[65] Whatever it means, the instruction to avoid it is explained by the fact the fools who offer such a sacrifice do not know that they are doing evil. In other words, being in the house of God is a dangerous situation, a trap for the unwary, in that there is an increased likelihood of unknowingly stumbling into wrongdoing.

b. He says one should be reluctant and careful in speaking before God because God is in heaven and one is on earth. How one reads this is obviously tied to one's view of Qohelet's overall theology, but I think he is stressing the distance between God and man to emphasize the ease and danger of saying the wrong thing. Like exhausting work produces restless dreams, so fools produce many words. He is advising that they "walk on eggshells" around God. It sounds like, "Keep your mouth shut and your head down." Longman comments:

> The topic of this verse [5:2] and the next [5:3] is clearly prayer, but the tone of the verse is once again ambiguous, and the verse could conceivably be read two ways. On the one hand, a pious Qohelet could be warning his readers not to badger God with superfluous talk. After all, God is *in heaven*, that is, he is in control. This approach considers Qohelet's warning as an anticipation of Matt 6:7-8: "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." Qohelet, however, has been anything but pious up to this point. His damper on prayer stands over against the torrent of the psalmist's heartfelt words in that Qohelet advises people to approach God in prayer only rarely, and then only briefly, as if the danger is taking too much of God's precious time. Qohelet warns his readers to be cautious in approaching God with words because *God is in heaven and you are on earth*. We take this statement not as an assertion of divine power, but of divine distance, perhaps even of indifference.[66]

c. Qohelet instructs that vows should be fulfilled promptly and completely, noting that it is better not to make a vow than to make one and fail to fulfill it. This echoes Deut. 23:21-23. One should not let one's mouth drag one's flesh to commit sin, meaning that one should not make a vow that one fails to fulfill. When the religious leaders send a messenger to collect the vow, a practice that presumably existed at that time, the person should not try to dodge his responsibility by claiming it was a mistake of some kind. God will be angry and destroy the person's work. I suspect Qohelet emphasizes the seriousness of vows because it fits his suggestion that interacting with God is dangerous business.

d. He says that when dreams multiply one is moved to pour out words before God. The connection is unclear, but perhaps dreams were taken as omens that prompted prayer. He labels those words meaningless because he thinks they will do little good given God's distance. Instead of uttering them, they should keep quiet out of fear. Shepherd comments:

> Qohelet is not talking about worship, nor does he mean what the frame-narrator means in 12:13 when he says "fear God," though he uses the same words. Having

[65] Longman (2006), 283 (note on 5:1[4:17]).
[66] Longman (2026), 153-154.

just mentioned in 5:6 that God "may be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands," Qohelet's admonition here is not that one should have a "reverential" fear of God but that one should be truly afraid of God.[67]

Longman states:

> In summary, our understanding is that [Qohelet] is not positively inclined toward God. He does not think that God helps much, and indeed he might be more trouble than help. He is best avoided or at least approached at a minimum. In this context, as in other contexts within the speech of [Qohelet], we thus understand his admonition to "fear God," not in the sense of respect, but rather in the sense of being afraid of a God who could hurt a person.[68]

9. The Network of Oppression (5:7-8[8-9])

> 7(8) *If you see oppression of the poor and deprivation of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be surprised concerning the situation. For one official watches out for another, and there are officials over them.*
> 8(9) *The profit of the land is taken by all; even the king benefits from the field.*

a. Qohelet says they should not be surprised to find the poor being oppressed or justice being denied in the courts because that state of affairs has been institutionalized by the political hierarchy. It is not a bug but a feature in a system where corrupt officials protect one another and there are layers of bureaucracy that make it easy to dodge accountability.

b. Within that system, the poor are oppressed as everybody corruptly takes a piece of what the land produced through their labor. It goes all the way to the top, with even the king deriving an unjust benefit. Government officials are fleecing their subjects. This reinforces the sense that Solomon was a literary persona adopted by Qohelet for rhetorical purposes.

10. The Meaninglessness of Wealth (5:9[10]–6:9)

> 5:9(10) *Those who love money never have enough money; those who love riches never have enough gain. This is also meaningless.*
> 10(11) *When prosperity increases, those who consume it increase. So what success is there for its owner, except to admire it?*
> 11(12) *Sweet is the sleep of laborers, whether they eat much or little. But the abundance of the wealthy does not allow them to sleep.*
> 12(13) *There is a sickening evil I have observed under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner.*
> 13(14) *And that wealth was lost in an evil situation. Though a son was born, there is nothing to leave him.*

---

[67] Shepherd (2008), 304.
[68] Longman (2008), 285-286.

14(15) *As he left his mother's womb, so he will return, going as he came – naked. And he will take nothing from his toil that he is able to bring into his possession.*
15(16) *And this indeed is a sickening evil: Just as they come so they go, so what profit is there for those who toil for the wind?*
16(17) *Indeed, they eat in darkness all their days with great resentment, illness, and frustration.*
17(18) *Indeed, this is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate to eat, to drink, and to enjoy all the toil that one does under the sun the few days God has given to that person, for that is his reward.*
18(19) *Furthermore, everyone to whom God gives wealth and possessions and allows them to eat of it and to accept their reward and to take pleasure in their toil – this is God's gift.*
19(20) *Indeed, they do not remember much about the days of their lives for God keeps them so busy with the pleasure of their heart.*
6:1 *There is an evil I have observed under the sun, and it is frequent among humans.*
2 *There are those to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor; they lack nothing that they desire. But God does not allow them to eat of it, but a stranger will eat of it. This is meaningless, and it is a sickening evil.*
3 *A person may have one hundred children and live many years. However many are the days of his life, if he is not satisfied with the good things he has, and does not even get a proper burial, then better, I say, to be a stillborn baby.*
4 *For without meaning it comes, and in darkness it goes, and in darkness its name is shrouded.*
5 *Moreover, it never saw the sun and did not know the sun. There is more rest for this one than for that one.*
6 *Even if someone should live one thousand years two times over but does not experience good times – do not all go to the same place?*
7 *All toil of humans is for their mouths, but the appetite is never filled.*
8 *For what advantage does a wise person have over a fool? What do the poor have by knowing how to act in front of the living?*
9 *Better the sight of the eyes than wandering desire. This is also meaningless and chasing the wind.*

a. Longman says regarding the entire section: "Throughout this unit, Qohelet questions whether meaning or enjoyment is possible through the acquisition and use of wealth. Not surprisingly, given the pattern of his thought thus far, his answer is that it too is meaningless (*hebel*; see 5:9[10] and 6:9). Through a series of reflective statements, proverbs, and stories, Qohelet drives home his conclusion that wealth is meaningless."[69]

b. The section begins with a proverb expressing the truth that those who are fixated on wealth never have enough. Longman states: "The implication is that those who set the acquisition of money as their highest goal in life have a never-ending task. They will never reach their goal, and, therefore, their life is 'meaningless.'"[70] He does not share the more optimistic view of wealth, albeit still cautious, that is expressed in Proverbs.

[69] Longman (2026), 162-163.
[70] Longman (2026), 167.

c. As wealth increases, so do the number of people to whom one's money goes, including friends and relatives, creditors, and hustlers. One is left only to admire it as it passes through one's hands on the way to others.

d. Unlike people who do manual labor, who can sleep even when they are hungry, the wealthy have difficulty sleeping. This is presumably because they are worried about growing or losing their wealth or how they obtained it.

e. Qohelet then "gives two different scenarios, both of which are *evil* and which are united by the futility of wealth."[71] The first is a person who hoards all of his wealth to his own harm, probably meaning that he is consumed by the anxiety attendant to hoarding, the constant worry that something may happen to it. The second scenario is where wealth is lost through misfortune, a situation or circumstance that is "evil" in the sense it works to the detriment of the formerly wealthy person. This leaves him with nothing to pass on to his son.

f. Qohelet expresses in prose the same thought expressed in the poetry of Job 1:21. The father, like all people, takes nothing with him beyond death; he exits this world as he entered it – naked. He sees this as a terrible evil because it renders meaningless one's lifetime of work. Longman comments, "Since holding onto wealth is problematical during life and impossible at death, the laborer really toils for something of little or no substance – *the wind*. In the long run such toil is a waste of time."[72]

g. The ill effects of wealth hoarding that he alluded to in 5:12(13) are now developed with a depressing metaphor of them eating in darkness all their days with great resentment, illness, and frustration. They cannot even enjoy the simple pleasures of life, like eating, and are emotionally and physically impaired by their fixation on wealth.

h. In 5:17(18)-5:19(20), Qohelet repeats the idea that the best one can do in this short life is to take solace in the simple pleasures. Longman says it is a statement "of resignation to the limited best that life can offer. That is, in light of the absence of a meaningful life, Qohelet advocates a life pursuing the small pleasures afforded by food, drink, and work."[73] And even this limited enjoyment and comfort depends on God giving it. Longman states: "Does God grant his gift to many? Qohelet does not directly answer this question here, but from his tone the answer is no (and see 6:2). It is certainly the case that Qohelet does not believe himself to be a recipient of this anesthetizing pleasure (see next verse)."[74]

i. Those to whom God gives the ability to experience small pleasures have that as an anesthetic to life's harsh realities. Longman comments: "A survey of all the passages in which Qohelet speaks of *pleasure* reveals that, while Qohelet commends it during life for those who are able to find it, he knows that it has no ultimate meaning, no profit (*yitrôn*), and so it is

[71] Longman (2026), 168.
[72] Longman (2026), 169.
[73] Longman (2026), 170.
[74] Longman (2026), 171.

ultimately meaningless (*hebel*). Pleasure is all there is during one's earthly existence, advises Qohelet, so enjoy it now, if you can."[75]

j. Qohelet has observed another grave tragedy, an evil, in this world that is common: people have it all, including wealth and honor, but God does not allow them to enjoy it. God has withheld that gift from them. Longman states:

> In 5:18(19) God gives some people "wealth and possessions" and "allows them to eat of it." In this verse Qohelet has in mind those to whom God has given these same gifts, even adding *honor* (thus paralleling the list in 2 Chr 1:11), but here *God does not allow them to eat of it*. The striking thing about Qohelet's comment is that he directly and solely attributes this negative state of affairs to God. It is God who does not permit the enjoyment of these gifts, thus frustrating the recipients and also Qohelet.[76]

k. Not only does God not allow them to enjoy it, but it will go instead to a stranger, as in the similar statement in 3:16-22. Qohelet declares this predicament to be meaningless, an absolute travesty (a sickening evil).

l. Qohelet expands to other traditional sources of joy. He declares that if one has many children and a long life but has no satisfaction in those things, the implication being that God has not allowed him to have it, then, in Qohelet's view, the person will be so miserable that even a stillborn child who had no burial would be better off than him.

(1) That understanding is not the most natural reading of the Hebrew, but it is grammatically possible and strongly favored by the context. Thus, a Hebrew scholar of the caliber of Stuart Weeks renders the end of v. 3 as: "then, even when it has no proper burial, I say that a miscarried child is better off than him."[77] Shepherd similarly translates: "and though he had no burial, I say that the stillborn is better (off) than he."[78]

(2) Weeks comments:

> Qohelet plays off the man's longevity and fatherhood to develop a complicated comparison with a miscarried child, who has no life at all: such a child is better off than a man who finds no satisfaction in his good fortune, however long that man might live. Because he deliberately intertwines his descriptions of the man and the child, the comparison is difficult to follow at points, but the key issue seems to be that the (non-)existence of the child is an easier experience than a long life lived without happiness.[79]

---

[75] Longman (2026), 171.
[76] Longman (2026), 172.
[77] Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 5-12*, ICC (New York: T&T Clark, 2022), 72.
[78] Shepherd (2008), 311.
[79] Weeks (2022), 72.

m. Qohelet explains that the stillborn child never sees the light of birth, never sees the sun, but comes already dead, already in darkness. And yet, his fate is "much preferred to the life of one to whom God has given riches, long life, and many children, but not the ability to enjoy it all."[80]

n. He adds in v. 6 that this would be true even if someone should live two thousand years and not be given the ability to enjoy it. And then he again raises the leveling specter of death – "do not all go to the same place?" It is to say that even if one were among those given the ability to find some meager satisfaction and joy in the simple pleasures of life, it ultimately has no meaning because death awaits all. Christopher Wright comments, "Qoheleth really does have the gift of discouragement with this ruthless, relentless honesty. *Memento mori!* Remember you will die. We all will."[81]

o. Humans toil to acquire food, but that is a never-ending task because the appetite is never finally satisfied. Life is a continual striving. Longman quotes Christian Ginsburg's paraphrase of Qohelet's sentiment: "Qohelet perceived 'his life to be a protracted scene of toil, turmoil, and dissatisfaction, ever laboring to satisfy his soul, which cannot be satisfied.'"[82]

p. The wise person may know how to acquire wealth, which connects the sentence to the topic of wealth, but since wealth provides no ultimate benefit in light of death, the wise person has no ultimate advantage over a fool. The thought is similar to 2:12-17. By that same token, there is no ultimate benefit to the poor in knowing social rules that may allow them to get ahead in the world and thus to acquire wealth. Wealth is, in the end, meaningless.

q. The section ends with a proverb, the general idea of which is: "what is present in hand is much better than what one only desires and does not have."[83] The modern proverb "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" is often cited as analogous. It is encouragement not to miss the divine sop of finding some joy and satisfaction in this difficult and short life by focusing on what one does not have. But, as he has made clear, in light of death, even the small pleasures of life are ultimately meaningless, chasing the wind.

D. Qohelet's Wise Advice (6:10–12:7)

1. The Future – Determined and Unknown (6:10-12)

> [10] *Whatever happens has already been named. Also it is known that they are human, so no one may argue with one stronger than they are.*
> [11] *For there are many words that increase meaninglessness. What advantage is there for people?*

[80] Longman (2026), 174.
[81] C. Wright (2023), 74.
[82] Longman (2026), 176.
[83] Longman (2026), 178.

[12] *For who knows what is good for people during the few days of their meaningless lives? He makes them like a shadow, so who can tell them what will happen after them under the sun*?

a. Longman comments:

> This short section marks the middle of the book according to Masoretic marginal notation. It also marks a transition in Qohelet's focus. There is overlap between the two halves of the book, but Qohelet here leaves his explicit search for meaning and in the second half of the book focuses on advice and commentary about the future. This short section anticipates the type of advice to come by telling us that it is meaningless and ultimately unhelpful.[84]

b. Qohelet asserts that whatever happens has already been named. In the ancient Near East, to name something was to have knowledge and control of it, so he is suggesting that everything that takes place is determined by God. Longman says, "It is a fairly strong statement of divine determinism. Everything is out of human hands. 'Everything has already been decided.' No one has any freedom to create themselves; God has fixed people's destinies."[85] However frustrating and diminishing that view may be, Qohelet says we cannot alter it. It is pointless to contend with God, who is so much stronger than man. Employing many words is of no advantage.

c. Moreover, no one knows what is good for people during the few days of their meaningless lives. That is because in Qohelet's world there is no good course *to be known*. For Qohelet, our lives are meaningless because of death. We are fleeting and insubstantial like a shadow, lasting only a "few days," before death removes all distinctions, deprives everything of meaning. Nothing we do ultimately matters, so things can only be good or bad in a relative, temporal sense. He adds that no one can know what will happen on earth after one's death. Life is a sad joke.

2. Miscellaneous Advice (7:1-14)

[1] *A good reputation is better than fine oil. The day of death is better than the day of one's birth.*
[2] *Better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a drinking house, because it is everyone's end, and the living should take it to heart.*
[3] *Anger is better than laughter, for in a troubled face the heart is made well.*
[4] *The heart of the wise is in a house of mourning, and the heart of fools in a house of pleasure.*
[5] *Better to hear the rebuke of the wise than for a person to hear the song of fools.*
[6] *For like the sound of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of a fool. This also is meaningless.*
[7] *For extortion makes a fool of the wise; a bribe distorts understanding.*

---

[84] Longman (2026), 179.
[85] Longman (2006), 293.

[8] *Better the end of a matter than its beginning. Better patience than pride.*
[9] *Do not be quick to anger in your spirit, for anger resides in the bosom of fools.*
[10] *Do not say, "Why is it that the former days were better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.*
[11] *Wisdom is good with an inheritance, a benefit to those who see the sun.*
[12] *For to be in the shadow of wisdom is to be in the shadow of money. And the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor.*
[13] *Observe the work of God, for who is able to straighten what he has bent?*
[14] *On a good day, enjoy yourself. On a bad day, observe: God has made this as well as that, so that no one should find what comes after him.*

a. Longman comments:

> Qohelet continues by giving advice through a series of proverbs. These proverbs follow at least indirectly from his life experience with its conclusion that life is ultimately meaningless. We learn about Qohelet's values in this section, and it is no accident that he frequently uses the so-called "better than" proverbial form (see Ogden 1977). Since he does not find anything that is absolutely meaningful and good as he looks "under the sun," he is reduced to suggesting that some things are only better than others.[86]

b. Qohelet first gives a traditional better-than proverb indicating the (relative) value of a good reputation. It is the same point made in Prov. 22:1. I think he does so, cites a well-known proverb that would elicit a quick "Amen," to lead into his very untraditional take, his skeptical and pessimistic outlook on life: "The day of death is better than the day of one's birth." Given Qohelet's general teaching about death (3:18-21 and 12:1-7), this proverb is best understood as an indication of Qohelet's world-weariness. Longman states: "[I]t expresses Qohelet's relief that life is finally over. In the context of his speech as a whole, this relief arises not because of work completed and well done but because death means escape from life's oppression and meaninglessness."[87]

c. The point of v. 2 is that the living need to internalize the cold hard fact that everyone is going to die and, for that purpose, going to a funeral is better than going to a party. Qohelet does not spell all of this out here, but I think he is saying that the living need to internalize the reality of death because, in his view, death reveals life's ultimate meaninglessness. That is important to understand because it brings the realization that the best one can hope for is to enjoy life's small pleasures, provided God allows him to do so.

d. He says anger is better than laughter because it is part of coming to the realization that life is ultimately meaningless. Laughter can be a diversion that keeps one distracted from looking deeply at life "under the sun." The heart, the inner person, is made well in a troubled face in that the distress of exploring life leads to the truth that death is the end, which as bleak as it is, is still satisfying to know. But this too, of course, is ultimately meaningless.

---

[86] Longman (2006), 295.
[87] Longman (2026), 185-186.

e. Verse 4 repeats the thought of v. 2. Longman remarks, "In keeping with the previous verses, he states his belief that those who are wise contemplate their ultimate death, while fools are those who blithely live as if there is no end in sight."[88]

f. The proverb of v. 5 is in line with various canonical proverbs (13:1; 15:31; 17:10; 25:12; 26:9; 29:9). It is certainly better to hear the rebuke of a wise man than to be distracted by one's preferred song of fools, but Qohelet probably has himself in mind as the wise man attempting to set straight those holding a traditional perspective. He is a voice calling them to face the sad truth (as he sees it) that everything is absolutely meaningless.

g. One should not listen to such fools because their laughter is like the sounds of thorns crackling under the pot; they are laughing as they are being consumed. He adds, "This also is meaningless" because listening to his wisdom instead of being diverted by fools will allow one to know the truth, but the truth it brings one to know is that even this relative advantage is ultimately meaningless. Indeed, everything is ultimately meaningless.

h. Leaving the connecting particle untranslated (NIV) or taking it in the sense of "Surely," as do many translations, Qohelet may be suggesting in v. 7 that some whom his readers may consider wise – those with a traditional perspective – have been made fools through ulterior motivations represented as extortion or bribery. In other words, they have an ulterior motive for not acknowledging the ultimate meaninglessness of everything. They are part of the gaggle of fools he is warning against.

i. The end or conclusion of an investigation into life is better than its beginning because one will presumably have gained insight, which is how Qohelet perceives his understanding. This takes patience to achieve instead of pride because pride assumes that one already has the answers. One should not be quick to get angry – with Qohelet for bucking the tradition? – for anger resides in the bosom of fools in the sense it shuts down one's willingness to hear.

j. Qohelet says wisdom does not ask why the former days were better than the present. I suspect he is criticizing those who are resistant to his teaching on the grounds that it is contrary to the traditional understanding, the perspective that was handed down from the past. For Qohelet, as indicated in vv. 3-11, there is nothing new under the sun. There is only an illusion of change.

k. Wisdom in conjunction with wealth is good, a benefit to the living, the implication being that wisdom without wealth is of no or reduced value. Longman comments:

> Qoheleth's jaundiced view of life comes to the fore in the eleventh proverb (7:11). In the book of Proverbs, we hear that wisdom far surpasses precious jewels or metals (Prov 3:13-15). Previously, [Qoheleth] has admitted that wisdom is better than folly. This holds true – at least before one takes into account everyone's impending death (2:12-17). Here, he also expresses his appreciation of wisdom in

[88] Longman (2026), 187.

very subdued terms, when he claims that "wisdom" is much better when one has "money." Proverbs might suggest that it is only through wisdom that one can get and keep money (Prov 10:2, 16, 22). But here Qoheleth brings wisdom down to the same level as money, giving them both their due as helping one navigate life.[89]

l. He explains in v. 12 that wisdom provides protection from the hard realities of life in conjunction with money. Longman observes, "From the use of *shadow* or 'shade' imagery elsewhere (Gen 19:8; Num 14:9; Jer 48:45), it is clear that what is meant is protection, presumably from the hard realities of life." To have the protection of the former, wisdom, is to have the protection of the latter, money; they work together. He concedes that wisdom (he uses knowledge here as a synonym) has an advantage in terms of saving one's life. Longman remarks, "Indeed, one's money is no help if one is attacked; it might even make attacks more likely. However, a person could get out of a jam by virtue of his wit."[90]

m. The gist of v. 13, in modern parlance, is "This frustrating, difficult, and meaningless life 'is what it is,' and since God is the one behind it, one has no ability to change it, to straighten what God has bent." All one can do, according to v. 14, is roll with the punches. Take whatever joy he allows and grin and bear the rest knowing that it too is from his hand "so that no one should find what comes after him." In that final clause, Qohelet claims that at least part of God's motivation for the seeming randomness of life, the mix of good times and hard times that reinforces the sense that nothing is certain in this life, is to prevent even the wise from predicting what is going to happen in the future.

3. The Limitations of Human Wisdom and Righteousness (7:15-22)

15 *Both I have observed in my meaningless life: There is a righteous person perishing in*
his righteousness, and there is a wicked person living long in his evil.
16 *Do not be too righteous and do not be overly wise. Why ruin yourself?*
17 *Do not be too wicked and do not be a fool. Why die when it is not your time?*
18 *It is good that you hold on to this and also do not release your hand from that. The one*
who fears God will follow both of them.
19 *Wisdom makes the wise person stronger than ten leading citizens who are in a city.*
20 *Surely no one is righteous on the earth, who does good and does not sin.*
21 *Moreover, do not pay attention to all the words that they speak lest you hear your*
servant cursing you.
22 *For, furthermore, your heart knows that you also have cursed others many times.*

a. Qohelet observed in his despair, in his perception of his life as meaningless, that the good sometimes die young and the wicked sometimes live long. This disturbed him presumably because, like Job's three friends – Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar – he had a mistaken expectation that the wise and righteous would always live long and prosper and the wicked would not.

---

[89] Longman (2006), 298.
[90] Longman (2006), 298.

b. The fact the righteous do not receive the special favors he expected led him to advise against ruining oneself, devastating oneself emotionally or psychologically, in an effort to become extremely righteous or wise. It was not worth it in his eyes. In addition to the fact that righteousness and wisdom do not guarantee that one will live long and prosper, Qohelet's advice may be motivated by his understanding, expressed in v. 20, that sinlessness is beyond human capability. Maybe he is thinking, "If one cannot be consistently good, why put so much effort into it?"[91]

(1) This advice is certainly at odds with such biblical admonitions as Prov. 2:3-4, where the son is told to "call out" for insight and to "raise his voice" for understanding; he is to seek wisdom like it was silver and search for it like it was a hidden treasure. Jesus in Mat. 5:6 promised blessing to those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness."

(2) Some claim that Qohelet is counseling against *pretending* to be more righteous or wise than one actually is, but that is very doubtful, most notably because that understanding will not work in the following parallel sentence. Qohelet certainly is not referring to those who pretend to be wicked or a fool.

c. "According to Qohelet, one should avoid not only excessive righteousness and wisdom, but also excessive wickedness and folly."[92] I doubt he intends to sanctify any level of wickedness but only to acknowledge, as he indicates in v. 20, that there is a universal baseline of human sinfulness. He is saying do not be a rebel, the kind of person labeled a wicked person or fool because of abnormal sinning. That kind of living may lead to one's death before one would otherwise have died, but then again, he has observed wicked people who live long lives.

d. He says in v. 18 that it is good to hold to both sides of the instruction, not to be too righteous or too wise on the one hand and not be too wicked or foolish on the other. He adds that the one who "fears God" will do that. Longman cautions, "We should be careful not to interpret this last phrase ['fears God'] positively."[93] Qohelet probably means that one who "fears God" in the negative sense of being terrified of him as one who is unpredictably and inscrutably dangerous will not only avoid rebelling against him but will also avoid distinguishing oneself in his service so as not to draw his unwanted dangerous attention.

e. Having diminished wisdom in light of its inability to ensure long life, suggesting that it was not worth extreme effort to acquire, Qohelet now asserts (v. 19) its value relative to political power. The wise person can do more to benefit people than political strength in the hands of ten people who lack wisdom. However, this does not alter the point that Qohelet has already made (2:14-16; 4:13-16) that even wisdom is ultimately meaningless.

f. Qohelet may express the truth that no humans are sinless to bolster his unorthodox advice not to exert oneself too much in the pursuit of righteousness and wisdom. As

[91] Longman (2006), 301.
[92] Longman (2026), 199.
[93] Longman (2026), 200.

I noted, the implication may be, "If one cannot be consistently good, why put so much effort into it?" This may be related to the advice in the next two verses. Longman states:

> This understanding of human nature may lead to the advice given in 7:21-22. It is a warning not to eavesdrop on the talk of a servant. A servant might curse his master. The verse may be implying that if the master hears it, he will be tempted to punish the servant; but then again, if the master thinks about it, he will remember that he has cursed others himself. "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone" – after all, no one is "always good and never sins" (7:20).[94]

4. Inaccessible Wisdom (7:23-24)

> [23] *All this I tested with wisdom. I said, "I will be wise!" But it was far from me.*
> [24] *Far away is that which is, and deep, deep, who can find it?*

a. Qohelet employed wisdom in all aspects of his investigation of life under the sun, pursuant to his resolution to do so. But despite that, the comprehension he desired eluded him.

b. "That which is," meaning all of reality, is far away in terms of grasping its true nature and working. He emphasizes the point with "deep, deep, who can find it?" The implied answer is "no one." This is the frustration of having "eternity" in our hearts (3:11), the "deep-seated desire, a compulsive drive . . . to know the character, composition, and meaning of the world . . . and to discern its purpose and destiny,"[95] but being unable to satisfy it.

5. Seeking and Not Finding (7:25-29)

> [25] *I began to devote myself to understand and to explore and to seek wisdom and the sum of things, and to understand the evil of foolishness and the folly of madness.*
> [26] *And I was finding: More bitter than death is the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The one who pleases God will escape her, but the one who is offensive will be captured by her.*
> [27] *"Observe, this I have found:" Qohelet said, "one thing to another to find the sum of things,* [28] *which I am still seeking but not finding, I found one man out of a thousand, but I did not find a woman among all these.*
> [29] *Only observe this: I have found that God made people upright, but they have sought out many devices."*

a. Qohelet reiterates that he began a quest to comprehend all of reality, which he here refers to as the "sum of things." Longman says, "In Ecclesiastes it [*ḥešbôn*, the sum of things] denotes the explanation that stands behind the world. If Qohelet could discover

---

[94] Longman (2006), 301.
[95] Kaiser quoted in Longman (2026), 121.

the *sum of things*, he would be at the end of his quest. But he never achieves this object of his search, and thus we have his harsh conclusion that everything is 'meaningless' (*hebel*)."[96]

b. But in the course of his investigation, he found that the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap, and whose hands are chains is more bitter than death. I am with those who think he is referring to a particular type of woman. Specifically, I think he has in mind an immoral seductress against whom the father in Proverbs repeatedly warns his son (Prov. 2:16-19, 5:1-23, 6:20-35, 7:1-27).

c. He says the one who pleases God will escape such a woman, but the one who is offensive to God will be captured by her. Notice he does not say that the one who escapes such a woman will please God or the one who is captured by her will be offensive to God. As in 2:26, "those who please him" and "those who are offensive to him" are probably not meant by Qohelet as moral classifications but a reference to those who are favored and disfavored by God for his own often inscrutable purposes, which Qohelet may see as whim. Longman comments:

> Here, *the one who pleases God and the one who is offensive* are not moral categories; the concern is rather "the mysterious actions of God" [quoting Roland Murphy]. In the words of Jarick, "the former category is the person whom God chooses to bless, for reasons known only to the Deity himself, while the latter category is the person whom God chooses not to bless, for the same inscrutable reasons."[97]

d. Qohelet says in v. 27 that he investigated one thing after another in his quest to comprehend reality. Notice that the author/narrator makes his presence known by interjecting the phrase "Qohelet said." Longman says, "We are thus reminded that another voice stands behind Qohelet's, the narrative voice of the book also heard in the prologue and epilogue."[98] Christopher Wright states: "Perhaps the author of the book, the Frame-Narrator of the opening and closing sections, realizes just how shocking and confusing are the conclusions being offered in these verses. So he interjects in v. 27 a reminder that he is only reporting the words of Qoheleth ('says the Teacher'), which he will 'adjust' later. We need to remember this is the story of Qoheleth's quest."[99]

e. He notes that his investigation was still unsuccessful, but in that quest, he says, "I found one man out of a thousand, but I did not find a woman among all these." Given the warning about the danger of women in 7:26, I think he means that he found one *virtuous* man among a thousand but no *virtuous* women. A number of English translations supply various terms – upright, virtuous, true, righteous, good – to bring out this sense.

(1) Qohelet has no illusions about the moral failings of men. He says he found only one in a thousand who was virtuous. But he does claim that women were even worse. Perhaps men were relatively more virtuous in the particular society he observed, and

---

[96] Longman (2026), 206-207.
[97] Longman (2026), 208.
[98] Longman (2026), 209.
[99] C. Wright (2023), 93.

he expressed that difference nonliterally as one man in a thousand but no women. (That his depiction of women here is hyperbolic is suggested by 9:9, where he recommends enjoying life with one's wife.) There is no reason to insist that virtue is always and everywhere present equally among the sexes. To illustrate the concept in terms of one specific evil, a greater percentage of American women than men believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases.

(2) It is also possible, however, that women did not disproportionately lack virtue in the society Qohelet observed and his claim that they did reflects a personal bias against women. Regarding that possibility, Longman states, "This is an important place to point out that Qoheleth's words are not normative biblical teaching. He is a confused wise man who is being quoted at length and then commented on by a second wise man as he instructs his son concerning the dangers of living 'under the sun.'"[100] Christopher Wright similarly observes: "But even if Qoheleth has a misogynistic streak, and even if verses 26 and 28 are his personal experience of woman (unpleasantly derogatory), we must remember that we don't take his words as 'gospel truth' any more than the words recorded of Job's friends. This is Qoheleth's own quest. This is *his* journey, *his* experience, *his* conclusion – not a revealed biblical truth!"[101]

f. In light of his negative assessment of the moral state of society, Qohelet points to his finding that "God made people virtuous [straight], but they have corrupted themselves."[102] What he *found* was the sinfulness of people. The statement that God made people upright is an historical statement that he accepted as true on some basis other than observation, presumably from the first few chapters of Genesis. So in this instance at least, Qohelet, perhaps without much reflection, allows for some truth from "above the sun."

6. No One Is Like the Wise! (8:1)

> [1] *Who is like the wise person? And who knows the interpretation of a matter? The wisdom of a person brightens his face and changes its stern expression.*

a. Qohelet asks rhetorically who is like the idealized wise person of tradition who "knows the score" on everything, who comprehends reality at a depth sufficient to read correctly whatever he comes across. Qohelet just said in 7:23-27 that despite his diligent effort he was unable to grasp all of reality, so the expected answer to his rhetorical question is, "No one!" He is convinced from his "under the sun" quest that wisdom is incapable of penetrating that deeply into reality, so the idealized wise person of tradition, the one for whom wisdom unlocks all doors, is a mirage.

b. In the last sentence, I think Qohelet is presenting himself as an obvious counterexample to the proverbial notion that wisdom produces a cheerful disposition.

---

[100] Longman (2006), 304.
[101] C. Wright (2023), 91.
[102] Longman (2026), 211.

(1) He has indicated repeatedly that he possesses wisdom (1:13, 16; 2:3, 9, 15; 7:23), and yet he clearly has a dark mood and presumably a corresponding stern expression. Longman remarks, "No one is more sour than Qohelet. How many times so far has he called out in anguish, 'Everything is meaningless . . . completely meaningless'? This is not a man who goes around with a smiley face!"[103]

(2) I think Qohelet is suggesting that wisdom is not the source of cheer it is alleged to be because it does not live up to the hype in the tradition about its ability to penetrate reality. Because of its limitations, it cannot provide the satisfaction of full comprehension and, when restricted to an "under the sun" perspective, it leads to the conclusion that death is the end, which is a prescription for despair. Of course, this interpretation is speculative because it is based on the larger context rather than anything explicit in the text.

7. The Word of the King Is Supreme (8:2-9)

> [2] *I say: Observe the kings command, and do not rush into a vow to God.*
> [3] *You should leave his presence and not persist in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he wants.*
> [4] *For the word of the king is supreme, so who will tell him, "What are you doing?"*
> [5] *The one who observes his command experiences no evil thing. A wise heart knows a time and custom.*
> [6] *For there is a time and a custom for every matter, but people's troubles lie heavily upon them.*
> [7] *For no one knows what will happen, because who can say when it will happen?*
> [8] *No one has power over the wind to restrain the wind. No one has power over the day of death. There is no discharge during battle. Evil will not rescue those who practice it.*
> [9] *All of this I observed, and I devoted myself to all the acts that are done under the sun at a time when people have power over other people to harm them.*

a. "Like a typical wise man, Qohelet gives advice so that his students may get along in the world."[104] Specifically, he is addressing behavior before the king, and by extension, behavior before any authority figure. Longman observes: "It was common in ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature to instruct young nobles on how to act in the presence of the king. It would be highly unusual for a king to instruct another person how to behave before the king, and thus this passage is one of a number of passages in the book that reveals to us that Qoheleth is not to be equated with Solomon."[105]

b. Qohelet says that one should obey the king. Referring to the supreme human authority, he is moved to comment on interacting with God, the ultimate authority. He repeats his caution from 5:4-6 about the seriousness and potential danger of making a vow to God.

---

[103] Longman (2006), 305.
[104] Longman (2026), 214.
[105] Longman (2006), 306.

c. He says that one should leave the king's presence and not persist in an "evil matter," meaning a bad idea or one disagreeable to the king. The king will do as he chooses and arguing with him, not properly deferring to his station and authority, is a mistake.

d. He notes that the one who observes the king's command, as he advised in v. 2, will avoid the unpleasant consequences of not doing so, expressed as he "experiences no evil thing." He adds that a wise person knows royal etiquette, the proper custom for engaging the king. He knows a time and custom; he knows what is to be done and when.

e. Qohelet says that as there is a time and custom for engaging the king, there is a time and custom for everything. But that is a source of difficulty because humans are incapable of knowing the future and therefore cannot know the proper time for everything. Longman states: "A wise person is someone who is able to make competent decisions that fit a particular situation. An important component of this ability is an intuition concerning the future results of a decision. But here such a possibility is denied."[106] From Qohelet's perspective, we can only grope with impaired vision.

f. Our inability in this regard should not come as a shock. After all, no one is able to control the wind or his own death, to secure a discharge during a battle, or to turn evil into a savior. The impairment to wisdom of being unable to know the future is just another of our disabilities.

g. Qohelet concludes with a declaration that his words are based on what he has observed during his intense investigation of what takes place on earth, life under the sun. He negatively characterizes the world he explored by adding that his investigation was done at a time when people were abusing their power to the harm of other people, probably harking back to the oppression referred to in 4:1-3.

8. Are the Wicked Really Punished (8:10-15)

> 10 *Thus, I observed the wicked buried and departed. They used to go out of the holy place,*
> *and they were praised in the city where they acted in such a way. This too is meaningless.*
> 11 *Because the sentence for an evil deed is not quickly carried out therefore the human*
> *heart is filled with evildoing.*
> 12 *For sinners do evil a hundred times and their days are lengthened – although I know*
> *that it will be well for those who fear God because they fear him,*
> 13 *and it will not be well for the wicked, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow,*
> *because they do not fear God.*
> 14 *There is another example of meaninglessness that is done on the earth: There are*
> *righteous people who are treated as if they did wicked deeds, and there are wicked*
> *people who are treated as if they did righteous deeds. I say that this too is meaningless.*
> 15 *Then I commended pleasure, for there is nothing better for people under the sun except*
> *to eat and to drink and to have pleasure. It will accompany them in their toil during the*
> *days of their life that God gives them under the sun.*

[106] Longman (2026), 219.

a. Qohelet observed wicked people who died and were buried. Though wicked, they used to pose as pious, going out of the holy place, and despite their wickedness, they were esteemed in the very city in which they did their evil. Longman states: "The wicked may indeed die, but even then, they are buried and praised in the city where they did their evil deeds and religious posturing. It is the fact that the wicked continue to receive the praise owed to the righteous that frustrates Qohelet and leads him to utter his conclusion that 'this is meaningless.'"[107]

b. This absence of retribution or comeuppance frustrates Qohelet. It is a problem in his eyes because "when there is no apparent punishment for evil, then it will flourish. If people do not observe negative consequences for bad actions, they will be encouraged to do even more evil."[108] He does not say that evil always prospers or is never punished. Rather, he argues "that the lack of a quick and clear punishment is enough to encourage wicked people to foster new evil plans."[109] Perhaps he has in mind here God as well as man.

c. The lack of punishment is evident in the case of inveterate evildoers who nevertheless live long lives, something that was said to be the result of God's blessing (e.g., Prov. 3:12, 16, 18). Verses 12b-13 should be understood as a declaration that he is well aware of the company line, the traditional teaching to the contrary, that those who fear God will be blessed whereas those who do not fear him will not be blessed. It should be understood that way because not only does the statement in v. 13 contradict what he just said in v. 12a that he observed, but the fact he describes this as something he "knows" rather than something he "observed" suggests it was part of the tradition he had been taught. He says, in essence, "I know that is what is taught, but it is not what I've seen."

d. This is confirmed in v. 14 where he says that the righteous do not get rewarded but punished and the wicked do not get punished but rewarded. Longman comments:

> Though the text does not name God as the one who ignores or frustrates the moral order, it would be no other. The context has to do primarily with death. To treat the righteous and the wicked according to their deserts would mean that the former would die old and the latter young, but this is not the case in Qohelet's experience. Thus, he is thrown into a quandary of doubt, so much doubt, indeed, that he repeats his conclusion that the situation is meaningless.[110]

e. "Once again, Qohelet advocates the simple pleasures of eating and drinking in the light of meaningless existence."[111] Though Qohelet saw through things so that pleasure did not salve his frustration (e.g., 2:2), he recognizes that God gives some people the ability to enjoy pleasure. That is as good as it gets in this short life, so he counsels them to take whatever solace they can find in it.

---

[107] Longman (2026), 223.
[108] Longman (2026), 223.
[109] Longman (2026), 223.
[110] Longman (2026), 225.
[111] Longman (2026), 225.

9. Not Even the Wise Know (8:16-17)

> [16] *As I devoted myself to know wisdom and to observe the task that is done on the earth, for no one sees sleep day or night,*
> [17] *I observed all the work of God. Clearly no one is able to comprehend the work that is done under the sun, on account of which he toils in order to seek, but he does not comprehend. Even if the wise man says he knows, he is not able to comprehend it.*

a. Qohelet declares that, having devoted himself to the task of analyzing wisdom and critically observing everything that happens on earth, he saw all the work of God, meaning he left no stone unturned in his quest. The phrase "for no one sees sleep day or night" seems to refer to other wise men who are on the same quest. I say that because v. 17 refers to one toiling unsuccessfully to comprehend the work that is done under the sun and identifies the one who is unable to comprehend as the wise man.

b. Qohelet is reiterating the frustrating and disappointing results of his intellectual labor. The bottom line, as Longman states, is, "No one, not even the wise, can understand what is going on in the world. As in 7:25-29, Qohelet admits that no one can find (*māṣāʾ*, here translated *comprehend*) the world."[112]

10. One Fate for All (9:1-10)

> [1] *Indeed, I devoted myself to all this and to examine all this: the righteous and the wise and their works are all in the hand of God. However, no one knows whether love or hate awaits them.*
> [2] *Everything is the same for everybody: there is one fate for the righteous and the wicked and for the clean and the unclean, and for the one who sacrifices and for the one who does not sacrifice; as it is for the good, so it is for the sinner; as it is for the one who swears, so it is for the one who is afraid to swear.*
> [3] *This is evil among all that is done under the sun. For there is one fate for all, and furthermore the human heart is full of evil, and madness is in their hearts during their lives, and afterward – to the dead!*
> [4] *Indeed, there is hope for whomever is joined to all the living. For it is better for a live dog than a dead lion.*
> [5] *For the living know they will die, but the dead know nothing. There is no longer any reward for them, for the memory of them is forgotten.*
> [6] *Their love, their hate, and their jealousy have already perished. They have no portion any longer in anything that is done under the sun.*
> [7] *Go, eat your food with pleasure, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved your deeds.*
> [8] *Let your clothes be white at all times, and do not spare oil on your head.*

[112] Longman (2026), 226.

[9] *Enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your meaningless life, that is, all the meaningless days he has given you under the sun, for it is your reward in life and for the toil that you do under the sun.*
[10] *All that your hand finds to do, do with your power, for there is no action or thought or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.*

a. Longman comments: "Qoheleth introduces no new ideas in this section, but he dramatically reemphasizes some of the most important themes of his thought. In particular, he describes death as the ultimate end for everyone, an end that renders every accomplishment in life without value."[113]

b. Qohelet begins with an observation from his intense examination of life under the sun. He says that he has discovered nothing to convince him that the righteous and the wise will receive favor (love) rather than disfavor (hate) from the sovereign God. He has no reason to think that, nor does anyone else.

c. In fact, as he already indicated in 2:14-16, the same fate awaits everyone. No matter how a person lives – whether he is righteous or wicked, clean or unclean, good or a sinner – the end is the same: death. According to Qohelet, the fact that everyone, regardless of merit, will die is an evil thing, meaning something tragic and unjust. He adds that evil and madness are rampant among humans, and then those people just die like everyone, with no sorting or apparent justice. Christopher Wright notes the contrasting pairs that Qohelet lists and then states, "But, [Qohelet] contends, none of these opposites makes any difference in the end! Death collapses all such distinctions into meaningless equivalence."[114]

d. Qohelet grants that there is some advantage to being alive rather than dead, but he does so with a proverb that casts that advantage in a minimal light: "For it is better for a live dog than a dead lion." In that culture, dogs were scurvy animals, so yes, the living have an advantage, but it is a miserable one. He identifies the advantage as being conscious, being self-aware, in contrast to the dead who know nothing. But he notes sarcastically that what the living know is that they will die, at which time they will know nothing, have no reward, and be forgotten. Longman remarks, "Thus, while the living may be better off than the dead, they are nonetheless pitiable."[115]

e. Everything about them, who they were – their most intense passions – perished at death. They are just gone from this world. Christopher Wright states:

> Verses 5-6 are shatteringly negative and pessimistic. Death seems to rule out any value in life. Death abruptly terminates all our relationships, whether good or bad, all our emotions and passions, all our participation in the world of the living.
>
> This seems to be the end of the road for Qohelet's quest, or at least one dimension of it. He simply cannot *see* beyond death. And since his whole quest is

[113] Longman (2006), 310.
[114] C. Wright (2023), 105-106.
[115] Longman (2026), 233.

based on what he can *see*, he cannot see any value in a life that has to be lived with the constant prospect of death. He appears to end up in almost total nihilism.[116]

f. Qohelet ends with an expanded version of his appeal to enjoy the small pleasures that God allows in this meaningless life. That is as good as it gets. God's approval of their doing so is implicit in his having provided to them not only the means to eat and drink but also the ability to enjoy it. Shepherd comments, "Qohelet has already said that the ability to eat and drink and be joyful is the gift of God (3:13; 5:19). Automatically then, if you are doing these things, you must be among the gifted ones."[117] Longman states:

> This conclusion [that death is the end of everything] leads [Qohelet] to suggest a life of superficial enjoyment. In other words, we have yet another *carpe diem* passage (see 2:24-26; 3:12-14, 22; 5:18-20). One should eat, drink, and dress for a party. One should also enjoy life with one's wife. We are left to wonder how this harmonizes with the teaching in 7:25-29, which stated that there were no virtuous women to be found; presumably, what can be had is, at best, slim pickings. The wife is your "lot" through all the meaningless days of life that God has given to you. And there is nothing to come after that. In the grave, there will be "no work or planning or knowledge or wisdom."[118]

g. In the face of the skeptical and pessimistic outlook expressed in this section, Longman's reminder is important:

> Again, we must keep in mind that this speech of Qoheleth is in the middle of a quotation of his questionable teaching. We must not confuse the thoughts of Qoheleth with the instruction of the book of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth is a questioning, confused wise man of Israel, whose speech a second wise man is quoting to his son, so he can present a more positive, God-directed viewpoint at the end of the book. In the words of Qoheleth himself, he is talking about life "under the sun," that is, apart from God. The second wise man will use this negative teaching to drive his son to go "above the sun," namely, to God himself.[119]

11. Time and Chance (9:11-12)

> [11] *Then I turned and observed something else under the sun. That is, the race is not to the swift, the battle not to the mighty, nor is food for the wise, nor wealth to the clever, nor favor to the intelligent, but time and chance happen to all of them.*
> [12] *Indeed, no one knows his time. Like fish that are entangled in an evil net and like birds caught in a snare, so people are ensnared in an evil time, when it suddenly falls on them.*

---

[116] C. Wright (2023), 107.
[117] Shepherd (2008), 336.
[118] Longman (2006), 311.
[119] Longman (2006), 310.

a. Qohelet observed that life is not predictable; it does not follow a script and always comport with expectations. The people one would expect to win the race, win the battle, have plenty to eat, accumulate wealth, and generally have a smooth, good life do not always do so. He says, "time and chance happen to all of them," meaning that uncontrollable vagaries of life thwart expected outcomes. As we might say, "Stuff happens."

b. Humans lack the ability to fully comprehend reality, to know when our "number is up" regarding death or some other grave circumstance. In that regard, we are like fish that obliviously get entangled in a net and birds that get caught in a snare. All of a sudden, we are in an unexpected and terrifying situation that ends our life or turns it sideways. Living in that uncertainty is but another of life's frustrations.

12. Limitations of Wisdom (9:13-16)

> [13] *Moreover I observed this example of wisdom under the sun, and it made a big impression on me.*
> [14] *There was a small city and there were a few people in it. A great king invaded and surrounded it. He built huge siege works against it.*
> [15] *A poor but wise man was found in it, and he rescued the city*[120] *by means of his wisdom, but no one remembered that poor wise man.*
> [16] *And I said, "Wisdom is better than power." But the wisdom of the poor man was despised! His words were not heeded.*

a. Qohelet was struck by the case of a small, sparsely populated city that faced a dire military threat from an overwhelming force. A poor but wise man in the city managed to rescue it by means of his wisdom, but we are not told how he did so. Presumably, he somehow persuaded the attacking king to withdraw. He knew how to motivate that king, the right buttons to push. This highlights that wisdom can be quite beneficial in navigating this world. It can even be better than military power.

b. But that wisdom has only limited value to its possessor, and indeed is ultimately meaningless, is illustrated by the fact the man who saved the city by his wisdom was promptly forgotten. Not only did his wisdom fail to generate gratitude or financial benefit – he remained poor – but people thereafter hated his wisdom and refused to listen to him, perhaps being resentful that one of his station had done what his putative betters could not. Longman remarks, "Thus, Qohelet reiterates that, though wisdom is better in the short run, it makes no difference in the long run (see also 4:13-16)."[121]

13. Assessments of Wisdom (9:17-18)

> [17] *The quiet words of the wise are better heeded than the shouts of a leader among fools.*

---

[120] This is from the 1998 edition of Longman's commentary. In the second edition (2026), he renders the clause "he *might have* rescued the city," but his comments in both editions are clear that he believes the poor wise man successfully rescued the city.
[121] Longman (2026), 240.

[18] *Wisdom is better than instruments of war, but one person who messes up destroys a whole lot of good.*

a. Qohelet recognizes that wisdom has an advantage over folly in this world. He expresses that here with the proverb, "It is better to heed the quiet words of the wise than the shouts of the highest-level fool."

b. But again, it is a relative and qualified advantage. Wisdom can trump instruments or weapons of war, as illustrated in 9:13-16, but it is a fragile thing. Longman says, "It takes only one person to cause a whole lot of trouble. In other words, it takes only one person to spoil the work of the wise."[122]

14. Miscellaneous Proverbs on Wisdom and Folly (10:1-4)

[1] *Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink and ferment; a little folly is weightier than wisdom and glory.*
[2] *A wise heart (goes) to the right; a foolish heart to the left.*
[3] *Even when the fool walks on the road he lacks sense and says to everyone he is a fool.*
[4] *If the leader's anger falls on you, do not leave your place! For gentleness appeases great offenses.*

a. Continuing the point from 9:18b, Qohelet indicates that it only takes a little folly to ruin the work of wisdom. Even wisdom's relative benefit is tenuous.

b. He notes that wisdom and folly yield different life paths. The wise heart goes to the right, the favored way, the way of a relatively good life, and the foolish heart goes in the other direction.

c. Qohelet says that a fool's lack of sense is evident even when doing something as mundane as walking on the road. He announces by his words and actions that he is a fool.

d. Qohelet advises that one stay calm and controlled in the face of an irate superior. That is a way to smooth the problem over.

15. An Example Story: The World Upside Down (10:5-7)

[5] *There is an evil that I have observed under the sun, an error indeed that originates from the ruler.*
[6] *The fool is placed in important positions, while the rich sit in low places.*
[7] *I observed slaves on horses and nobles walking on foot like slaves.*

a. Qohelet gives another anecdote of something gone wrong in this world. As a result of some kind of error by the ruler, people were put in positions of significant

[122] Longman (2026), 241.

responsibility for which they were not competent, and people who were competent for those positions were misassigned to positions in which their capabilities were wasted. He labels that situation evil or bad because it has harmful consequences.

b. The fool is contrasted with the rich because the rich, social elites, were trained in that society to assume important positions. Slaves are contrasted with nobles because they commonly lacked the training and experience of nobles. Longman says, "[Qohelet] describes the topsy-turvy world as one where those born to privilege like kings and princes assume the role of servants and vice versa. His point is that the world is simply not functioning correctly. Proverbs 30:21-23 echoes this sentiment."[123]

16. The Disastrous "Accidents" of Life (10:8-11)

> [8] *The one who digs a pit may fall into it; the one who breaches a wall may be bitten by a snake.*
> [9] *The one who quarries stones may be injured by them; the one who splits trees may be endangered by them.*
> [10] *If the axe is blunt and the edge is not sharp, then he must increase his efforts. But the advantage of wisdom is success.*
> [11] *If the snake bites without a charm, there is no advantage to having a charmer.*

a. Longman says, "it seems that these verses are collected here more as different lines of evidence to demonstrate the difficulty and lack of fairness in life."[124] Unavoidable accidents may befall those digging a pit, demolishing a wall, quarrying stones, or splitting logs. That is just how life is. We are prey to accidents in the midst of our normal activities.

b. Verse 10 is an acknowledgement of the relative value of wisdom in this world. It can lead to the better, more successful use of one's tools (abilities) because by wisdom one perceives the value of sharpening or improving them. As Longman notes, "Qoheleth has nowhere in the book abandoned the idea that wisdom has some value; he has only insisted on its limited usefulness. It does not help one with the big problems of life such as death."[125]

c. That said, the value of wisdom is limited. It is restricted to its time or season. The wisdom or esoteric expertise of a snake "charmer" (skilled snake-handler) to occupy a deadly snake's attention and manipulate it to allow it to be captured or killed so that it was no longer a threat to bite someone is useless after the fact, after the snake has already bitten someone.

17. Fools (10:12-15)

> [12] *The words of the mouth of the wise bring favor; and the lips of the fool swallow him.*

---

[123] Longman (2006), 316.
[124] Longman (2026), 248.
[125] Longman (2006), 317.

[13] *The beginning of the words of his mouth is folly, but the end of (the words of) his mouth is wicked madness.*
[14] *And the fool multiplies words: No one knows what will happen. Who can tell anyone what is going to happen after him?*
[15] *The toil of fools wearies them, for they do not know how to get to the city.*

a. This "is a collection of proverbs that denigrate folly." They are "similar to those found in the book of Proverbs (10:8, 21: 15:2; 18:7)." Qohelet again makes clear the relative value of wisdom over folly in this world, but he does not repeat his usual caution that "wisdom itself is not ultimately to be prized."[126]

b. He says that the words of the wise man redound to his favor, whereas the words of a fool engulf him. His words go from stupid at the start to evil insanity in the end. He goes on and on about what will happen in the future, despite the fact he can know nothing about it. Longman says regarding v. 15, "It is likely that the verse says that the reason why fools are so tired after a long day's work is that they are so stupid that they get lost and walk a longer distance than necessary to return to their homes in the evening."[127]

18. The King: Blessing or Curse? (10:16-17)

[16] *Woe to you, O land whose king is immature and whose leaders feast in the morning.*
[17] *Blessed are you, O land whose king is a noble and whose leaders eat at the appropriate time – for strength, and not to get drunk.*

a. Qohelet points out that bad things are in store for a territory that is ruled by a king who is not mature enough to handle the responsibility and whose leaders, no doubt with his approval and support, start the day with a party instead of taking care of their duties. (The text literally says "eat" in the morning, but the context suggests excessive or riotous eating, hence it is commonly rendered "feast.")

b. But good things are in store for a territory that is ruled by a king suited for the job (implied by "noble") and whose leaders are responsible regarding their duties. They eat when it is time for eating, not time for working, and they do so for nourishment, not to get drunk from drink that accompanies eating.

19. Miscellaneous Wisdom (10:18-19)

[18] *Due to laziness the roof sags, and due to inactivity the house leaks.*
[19] *One makes a feast for laughter; wine makes life even merrier, and money answers everything.*

[126] Longman (2026), 251.
[127] Longman (2026), 253.

a. Verse 18 is a standard proverbial rebuke of laziness. One who is too lazy to do what is needed to maintain a house will live with the consequences of it falling apart around him.

b. Qohelet notes that feasts and wine can provide laughter and merriment, the kind small pleasures or numbing agents that he has said throughout the book are the best one can hope for in this meaningless life. Shepherd comments:

> The last line is enigmatic, inasmuch as the verb "answer" (*ʿānâ*) has a wide variety of meanings. Probably, "everything" (*hakkōl*) should be taken as the equivalent of "both," referring to the activities of eating and drinking, and the verb should be taken to mean "provide" (see Gordis, 328; Whybray, 157; Longman, 252). To feast and make merry require money. This is not a critical comment, but it is perhaps a somewhat grudging or resentful one: You have to be one of God's favorites to be gifted with the money that allows an extravagant life.[128]

20. Advice Concerning the King – Once Again (10:20)

> [20] *Moreover, do not curse the king even in your thoughts; do not curse the rich even in your sleeping chamber, for a bird may carry the message or some winged creature may tell the matter.*

a. Qohelet cautions against expressing dissatisfaction with the king or the rich, who stand for those in positions of authority. About the king, he says, in essence, "Don't even think about it," because he is the unrivaled political power and therefore the most dangerous to cross.

b. The danger is that things have a way of getting back to the politically powerful. The statement that a bird may carry the message or some winged creature may tell the matter is analogous to our saying, "the walls have ears."

21. Risk and Uncertainty (11:1-6)

> [1] *Send your bread upon the surface of the waters, for after many days you may find it.*
> [2] *Give a portion to seven, even to eight, for you do not know what evil may occur in the land.*
> [3] *If the clouds are full, they will empty rain on the earth; and whether a tree falls south or north, the place where the tree falls, there it is.*
> [4] *Those who watch the wind do not sow, and those who observe the clouds do not harvest.*
> [5] *In the same way that you do not know what is the way of the wind or how the bones are formed in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who does all things.*

[128] Shepherd (2008), 348. Longman says (2006), 322, "Perhaps we are to understand Qoheleth to say that one can only give a party or buy wine with money. Money is the necessary condition for the other two. No money, no party!"

[6] *In the morning plant your seed and do not let your hand rest at evening. For you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.*

a. The instruction to cast or send one's bread upon the surface of the waters probably refers to engaging in maritime trade. It is encouragement to do so despite the risk of loss involved. Longman comments: "*Bread* (*leḥem*), thus stands for any kind of commodity of trade. The idea of the verse, then, is that, as people engage in trade, profits may flow back to them. Risk is involved, but reward may come. This view is widely held."[129] Indeed, some modern English translations (e.g., NIV, NET, NLT) paraphrase the verse in line with that interpretation. Longman says, "[Emmanuel] Podechard is certainly correct that this verse fits in with the teaching of 3:11; 8:17; and 9:11 that, according to Qohelet, the future is uncertain."[130]

b. The notion of uncertainty continues in the next verse, where the instruction is to diversify one's financial risks as a hedge against the kind of unforeseeable events that destroy plans and cause great harm (hence the label "evil"). Again, some English translations paraphrase the verse in line with this interpretation. The statement "to seven, even to eight" is a common literary device in Hebrew and the ancient Near East, which here functions "to give the impression of a large number of cases."[131]

c. Qohelet cites heavy rain clouds as an illustration of an *inevitable* event in nature and cites a tree falling in any possible direction (north and south serving as a merism) as an illustration of a *random* event. "From both illustrations, Qohelet makes the point that humans do not control what is happening around them."[132]

d. The following verse is a warning not to allow the fact that so much is beyond human control to paralyze one. Longman comments: "Humans can control neither the *wind* nor the *rain*. Thus, farmers who wait for the perfect weather conditions will never get anywhere because they will be afraid to plant for fear that the seed will be blown away, and they will be afraid to *harvest* for fear that rain will come before the crops are in."[133]

e. In v. 5, Qohelet moves from two understood examples of human ignorance – the operation of the wind and the formation of an embryo – to the theological truth that no one likewise knows the working of God in the world. His ways are inscrutable. I am reminded of Paul's words of praise in Rom. 11: 33-34: [33] "O the depth of the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and incomprehensible his ways! [34] For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"

f. Given what Qohelet sees as the crapshoot of life, he advises that one should cover his bases, plant seed in both the morning and the evening to increase the odds of dodging a failure to germinate and to produce the food necessary to live. Longman remarks,

[129] Longman (2026), 261.
[130] Longman (2026), 261.
[131] Longman (2026), 262.
[132] Longman (2026), 262.
[133] Longman (2026), 263.

"Qohelet thus once again expresses a skeptical attitude toward life, though not a skepticism that leads to inactivity."[134]

22. Youth, Old Age, and Death (11:7-10)

> [7] *Truly, sweet is the light, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.*
> [8] *Indeed, if someone lives many years, let him enjoy all of them. But he should remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. All that which is coming is meaningless.*
> [9] *Rejoice, young man, while you are young. Let your heart be merry in days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that God will bring you into judgment concerning all these things.*
> [10] *Put away anger from your heart and turn away pain from your body, for youth and vitality are meaningless.*

a. In 9:1-10, Qohelet made the point that being alive is better than being dead because the living are conscious, self-aware, whereas the dead know nothing. There he made clear that what the living know is that they will die, at which time they will know nothing, have no reward, and be forgotten, which makes life ultimately meaningless. And in light of that, he said to enjoy the small pleasures of life, as that is as good as it gets.

b. Here he sounds those same notes, but he seems more positive about the temporal value of consciousness and self-awareness, the advantage of life over death. He refers to it, expressed as perceiving sunlight, as a sweet and pleasant experience. He again encourages them to enjoy life as they are enabled by God to do so, but as in 9:1-10, he raises the inevitability of death and the pall of meaninglessness that it casts over everything.

c. In that same vein, in the first part of v. 9, he counsels the young man to enjoy his youth. But he then tells him to follow the ways of his heart and the sight of his eyes. Longman says, "In sum, his advice to the young is to pursue whatever you want to do, not to wait or it will be too late. He specifically mentions the *heart* and the *eyes* because these are the 'organs of desire.'"[135] This is radically unorthodox advice – YOLO (you only live once) in modern parlance – that flows from Qohelet's "under the sun" view that death is simply the end.

(1) Numbers 15:38-39 state: [38] "Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner. [39] And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after."

(2) As Shepherd notes, "The consistent message of the OT is that one's heart may lead one astray, and one's eyes may yearn after the very thing that will bring about their owner's destruction. The heart and the eyes are unreliable guides."[136]

---

[134] Longman (2026), 264.
[135] Longman (2026), 267.
[136] Shepherd (2008), 353.

(3) Qohelet just said in 9:3 that "the human heart is full of evil." Jesus said in Mk. 7:21-23: [21] For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, [22] coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. [23] All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

(4) One is reminded of 1 Jn. 2:15-16: [15] Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. [16] For all that is in the world – the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride in possessions – is not from the Father but is from the world.

d. Qohelet follows his radical ethical advice with a reminder of the risk involved in accepting it. I see this as a kind of full disclosure by an unorthodox wise man who knows the traditional teaching he is rejecting. He wants the young man to be aware of the potential danger before following him down that road.

(1) In my view, he says, in effect, "But know that God will bring you into judgment concerning all these things, [*so they say*]." In other words, if he is wrong in rejecting the traditional teaching because his "under the sun" investigation has convinced him that death is simply the end and there is indeed a post-death accounting by God, then the young man will sorely regret having taken his advice to give full vent to his passions.

(2) Qohelet does not add "so they say" to his statement, but I think he expects the reader of his work to take it that way. That makes more sense to me than the idea that Qohelet urges a man to indulge his passions and then immediately declares that he will be damned for doing so. If he believes the man will be damned for doing so, then why in the world urge him to act that way? And taking his statement with a contextually understood "so they say" makes more sense to me than to think that Qohelet is suddenly contradicting his repeated declarations and indications that death is the end of existence. As Longman observes, Qohelet "leaves no room for a heavenly, eschatological judgment since he denies the existence of an afterlife."[137] To repeat Ott's statement:

> For Qohelet, death is final. Death is the fate that awaits us all. And in this regard human beings are no different from any other living thing: [quote of 3:19-21 omitted]. Qohelet's words are stark. We are dust in the wind. We amount to nothing. . . . Qohelet eschews any notion of life after death. We come into the world naked and leave the same way. All that we may achieve or obtain cannot go with us (5:14). We are stripped clean in the end. Qohelet insists that anything we gain in this life – whether material, experiential, spiritual or intellectual gain – cannot endure beyond our death.[138]

e. He tells the young man to remove emotional stress (vexation) from his heart and pain from his body, presumably meaning that he is to free himself to the extent possible from those impediments to enjoying life's small pleasures. He is to do so when he is

[137] Longman (2026), 267.
[138] Ott (2023).

young and better able to reduce or eliminate them, because youth and vitality quickly give way to old age, which, as the next section emphasizes, brings a raft of emotional and physical problems. As Longman notes, this is a verse in which the temporal aspect of *hebel* (meaningless) may be emphasized, in which case the sense is: "for youth and vitality are transient."[139]

23. Approaching Old Age and Death (12:1-7)

> [1] *Remember your Creator in the days of your youth before the evil days come and the years approach when you will say, "I have no delight in them,"*
> [2] *before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain,*
> [3] *on the day when the house guards tremble and the landowners bend, and the women grinders cease because they are few, and those women who look through the window grow dim;*
> [4] *the doors in the street are shut when the sound of the mill decreases, and one rises at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low.*
> [5] *Moreover, they are afraid of heights and the terrors in the path. The almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags itself along and the caperberry is useless. For humans go to their eternal home and mourners walk about in the street,*
> [6] *before the silver thread is snapped, and the golden bowl is crushed, and the jar is broken by the well, and the wheel is crushed at the cistern,*
> [7] *and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God, who gave it.*

a. Qohelet advises the young man to remember God, in the sense of being grateful to him,[140] in the days of his youth, when God provides the small, temporal pleasures and the ability to enjoy them. He needs to do so in his youth because the bad (evil) days of old age are coming when there will be no delight, only joyless days that will be followed by death, after which, in Qohelet's view, there will be no awareness of anything.

b. Longman says about v. 2, "The metaphors of the darkening of cosmic lights and the encroaching rain clouds are understood readily enough on a psychological plane as communicating Qohelet's belief that old age is a catastrophe that engenders sorrow. . . . In sum, the passage presents images evoking dread and sorrow in the light of encroaching old age and impending death."[141]

---

[139] Longman (2026), 267.

[140] See, e.g., Deut. 8:18, Ps. 103:2. Leslie C. Allen states in "זכר" in Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1:1102:

> Remembering can connote gratitude. Abigail urged David to remember her in his future time of blessing, after she had brought food and wine to him and his men (1 Sam 25:31). Not remembering someone's former benefits is condemned in the OT (2 Chron 24:22). Nobody remembered the poor wise man who saved his city (Eccl 9:15). At the divine level, Israel in the desert forgot the power of God displayed in the Exodus (Ps 78:42; 106:7; cf. Judg 8:34; Neh 9:17; Isa 57:11). Unfaithful Jerusalem failed to remember the ignominious origins from which God had rescued it (Ezek 16:22, 43). After sinning against God, Israel is urged to remember and appreciate his past grace: "Is this the way you repay the LORD?" (Deut 32:5-7).

[141] Longman (2026), 275.

c. Old age is next presented through the image of inhabitants of a house. House guards tremble and the landowners bend, like the elderly shake and are stooped over. The women grinders cease working because they are few and the women who look through the window grow dim, like the elderly cease to grind food for lack of teeth and gradually lose their vision through cataracts and other issues.

d. Since the deteriorating house of v. 3 is compared with the body and doors control the movement of people from the house to the street and vice versa, Longman remarks, "The closing of the doors cannot help but suggest the blocking or disability of all or some bodily orifices."[142] I think the imagery in the first part of v. 4 is intended to convey the common elderly malady of constipation, which could be related to the decreased grinding, chewing of food, that occurs with old age because of the loss of teeth (v. 3). Rising at the sound of a bird probably refers to how lightly and inadequately the elderly sleep, and the reference to the daughters of song, female singers, being brought low probably refers to the loss of hearing that is common in the elderly.

e. The first part of v. 5 depicts the elderly being afraid to venture out in public. They are afraid of heights and the terrors in the path. Even if this is atypical, "Qohelet is painting an extreme picture of the mental and physical deterioration that comes with advanced years."[143] Longman states regarding the second part of the verse:

> First, the white blossoms of the almond tree may represent the white hair of the aged. Second, the verb used to describe the movement of the grasshopper, which has lost its spring (*yistabbēl*), could conceivably (though this is much more tenuous) describe the painful and labored movement of old age. In the third part, the focus is on the well-known qualities of the caperberry as an aphrodisiac. Later Jewish literature made this connection explicit. If this is true, then the uselessness of the caperberry highlights the loss of sexual potency.[144]

f. The final clause of v. 5 declares that the deterioration of aging that he has been describing ends in death. The "eternal home" of Qohelet's theology is simply the grave. He is not affirming a continuing conscious existence. On the contrary, as Longman observes, "he denies the existence of an afterlife."[145] Qohelet declared in 9:5, "the dead know nothing. There is no longer any reward for them, for the memory of them is forgotten." That is his "under the sun" conclusion.

g. The "before" of v. 6 picks up the thread from vv. 1-2 that he is to be grateful to God in the days of his youth *before* the evil days of old age. He now adds, following the reference to death in v. 5c, that he is to be grateful *before* his death when there is no further opportunity for anything. To Qohelet, death is like a snapped silver thread, a crushed golden bowl, a broken jar by the well, and a crushed wheel at the cistern. The point is that life is

[142] Longman (2026), 277.
[143] Longman (2026), 278.
[144] Longman (2026), 278-279.
[145] Longman (2026), 267.

valuable and useful, but it is rendered completely worthless and useless at death. Qohelet has no hope that things will be "put right" after death.

h. As I said when discussing 3:16-22, when Qohelet refers to death in 12:7 as "the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God," he is not contradicting his assertion in 3:21 that the evidence he requires for that conclusion is lacking. He is not affirming the truth of the statement but is simply invoking a conventional way of describing death in that culture, which was rooted in Scripture (see, Gen. 2:17, 3:16; see also, Tobit 3:6). R. N. Whybray comments, "When he says that 'all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again' (3.20) and that there will come a time when 'the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it' (12.7), he is merely repeating the traditional view of the matter."[146]

i. Qohelet expects the reader to understand from his prior comments that he is not convinced there is an afterlife. Indeed, he has just stressed that life is rendered completely worthless and useless by death, so one should not think he intends to reverse that point with a brief final clause. Shepherd comments: "There is no hint here of any belief in a life beyond the grave. This is not simply the end; it is the absolute end."[147] Jesse Peterson states, "[T]hat Qoheleth (or, in this case, the epilogist) immediately follows 12:7 with the הֲבֶל הֲבָלִים [completely meaningless] refrain should subvert any attempts to read the verse's 'return to God' as a reference to afterlife."[148] Fox states:

> If the return of the spirit did mean something more than the extinguishing of life, some form of salvation for the individual, Qohelet would be reversing the entire pessimistic, worldly thrust of the book in one sentence without context or preparation. Moreover, the very next sentence, the declaration of universal absurdity, would be undermined, for if the essential part of man, the soul (as *ruaḥ* would mean in that case), were to survive with God, man would not be *hebel*, however that word is defined.[149]

III. Frame Narrative Epilogue (12:8-14)

A. The Evaluation of the Frame Narrator (12:8-12)

8 *"Completely meaningless," Qohelet said. "Everything is meaningless."*
9 *Furthermore, Qohelet was a wise man. He also taught the people knowledge. He heard, investigated, and put in good order many proverbs.*
10 *Qohelet sought to find words of delight and to write honestly words of truth.*

---

[146] R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 69.
[147] Shepherd (2006), 359.
[148] Jesse M. Peterson, "Did Qoheleth Believe in an Afterlife?" *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 73:2 (October 2022), 479.
[149] Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement (Sheffield, England, The Almond Press, 1989), 309.

[11] *The words of the wise are like goads, and like firmly implanted nails are the masters of collections. They are given by a shepherd.*
[12] *Furthermore, of these, my son, be warned! There is no end to the making of many books, and much study wearies the body.*

1. The voice of the author/narrator resumes at 12:8, as is evident from the third-party reference, "Qohelet said." As I said in the introduction, these verses are best understood as a distancing from and critique of Qohelet's teaching. That does not mean everything Qohelet said is wrong, any more than everything Job and his friends said is wrong. Rather, it means his "under the sun" perspective is inadequate and pulls him to an improper and even dangerous skepticism and pessimism.

2. In 12:8 the author/narrator gives the same summary of Qohelet's teaching that he gave in 1:2. Before and after he presents Qohelet's autobiographical speech, the author/narrator states, *"Completely meaningless," Qohelet said. "Everything is meaningless."* In doing so, Longman says the author/narrator "indicates that he understands this typically Qoheletine expression to be a proper summary of his message. That message is: there is no ultimate meaning in this world. Once all is said and done, Qohelet's conclusion is that *everything is meaningless*."[150]

a. That is a clear departure from the witness of Scripture. From the very beginning, humans were uniquely created in the image and likeness of God, which makes us God's representative on earth, in the way ancient oriental kings were understood to represent God. Mankind was made God's vice-regent and was given the royal task of ruling creation (Gen. 1:26-28; Ps. 8:3-8). We are to rule as God would rule, to be reflections of God on earth, and thereby bring him glory by exhibiting his nature.

(1) God's call on his special people Israel in Deut. 10:12-13 reveals something of how mankind generally is to bring God glory: *[12] "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, [13] and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?*

(2) In a fallen world in which humanity is alienated from God because of its rebellion, our being who God wants us to be makes us lights in the darkness as we express his greatness in our obedience and praise and demonstrate the goodness and blessedness of life lived under his rule (as Israel was to do as God's special nation: Deut. 4:6-8; Ezek. 5:5; Isa. 42:6, 49:6). In that, we serve in the great purpose of reconciliation, bringing alienated sinners into the mercy of the glorious God.

(3) In the NT we read that we are to let our light shine before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven (Mat. 5:16); that we are to glorify the Father by bearing much fruit (Jn. 15:8); that we are to make disciples (Mat. 28:19-20); and that we are to keep our conduct honorable that others may see our

[150] Longman (2026), 283.

good deeds and glorify God at the Second Coming, meaning that they may be led by our good deeds to become Christians (1 Pet. 2:12).

b. In Qohelet's mind, this purpose of glorifying God, which includes helping to bring others into a relationship with him, a purpose that infuses life with great significance, is rendered worthless by the fact of death. That is the monster on the horizon. He thinks that one's existence is extinguished at death and that nothing therefore ultimately matters. We all have different experiences and circumstances during the blip that is our lives, but the end for everyone is exactly the same; we all go out of existence.

c. As I have said repeatedly, that false conclusion about death is a consequence of Qohelet choosing to restrict his search for meaning to an "under the sun" perspective, to what he could observe and experience. He chose to ignore or minimize God's "above the sun" perspective, which is not found by observing and experiencing the world but in his special revelation, the word of God. Contrary to Prov. 3:5, Qohelet chose to lean on his own understanding rather than to trust in the Lord beyond what he could see and experience. He was wise in his own eyes. As Prov. 14:12 states, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death."

(1) Fox concludes that Qohelet's epistemology is "essentially empirical" because Qohelet "looks to experience as the source of knowledge and the means of validation" and views knowledge as being "created by thought and dependent on perception."[151] David Croteau and Gary Yates state:

> The expression "under the sun" is important to the message of Ecclesiastes in that it designates the sphere and scope of Qoheleth's observation as he sets out to explore how life works. In one sense, "under the sun" conveys universality; his observations are true of all human life and experience on earth. At another level, "under the sun" also conveys limitations. Qoheleth's observations are temporal and earthly, while God's perspectives are eternal and heavenly. Qoheleth's quest was "undertaken from a 'horizontal' perspective." The expression "under the sun" serves to focus "the reader's attention on this world over against the heavenly realm, which is God's domain." Humans live on earth, but God dwells in heaven (5:2), and thus humans cannot know everything that God knows or even everything needed for a complete understanding of life and the world.[152]

(2) This statement by Wilfred McClay expresses the issue well, though he is commenting on current politics:

> In fact, the civilization of the West is better thought of as a long conversation whose most important constituent elements are called by the names "Athens" and "Jerusalem," as first expressed by the Church father Tertullian. Athens stands for the spirit of free rational inquiry undertaken in a fully intelligible world whose

[151] Fox (1989), 85.
[152] David A. Croteau and Gary E. Yates, *Urban Legends of the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2019), 174-175.

> contours and dimensions are fully commensurable with our powers of understanding. Jerusalem stands for the spirit of piety, which stresses the weakness of human understanding and the inadequacy of unaided human nature.
>
> Jerusalem insists we are ultimately reliant for guidance upon the ways in which God has revealed Himself and His will to us. It holds that such reliance constitutes a wisdom superior to reason, since God's ways are not ours. It is by faith that we are saved, in this view, and not by knowledge or deeds. There is "nothing better than the fear of the Lord . . . nothing sweeter than to take heed unto the commandments of the Lord."[153]

(3) As I noted regarding 3:17-18, Qohelet knows the teaching that God will set things right, that humans will eventually get what they deserve in a final judgment, but he is no longer convinced of that. There is no proof of it from observation and experience.

3. On the heels of summing up Qohelet's teaching with the bleak and sorely misguided proclamation that absolutely everything is completely meaningless, the author/narrator informs his readers in 12:9 that, to top it all off, Qohelet was a wise man! As I said before, he is not thereby approving Qohelet's teaching, endorsing everything that he said. Rather, he is identifying him as a "wise man" by profession; Qohelet functioned in that role or capacity. That did not guarantee that he was pious or spiritually attuned to God in all his theology and counsel. Again, the legendary wise man Ahithophel advised Absalom how to wage war against King David, God's anointed ruler. As a wise man, Qohelet should have known better.

4. Qohelet did indeed teach the people knowledge as far as it goes. He made keen observations about life viewed "under the sun," but by restricting his view to that perspective he was driven to warped and incorrect conclusions.

a. Indeed, instead of praising Qohelet for having insight into life, the author simply reports the actions that Qohelet performed: he analyzed and classified many proverbs. He is damning him with faint praise. Longman comments:

> By piling up verbs (*taught, heard, investigated, put in good order*), the frame narrator describes an industrious person. Nonetheless, this description of Qohelet's task lacks any honorifics or terms of respect. It reminds me of student recommendations to a highly competitive academic program in which the recommending professor writes, "Mr. X is industrious; he works hard." When accompanied by mediocre grades, this is the "kiss of death"; the student is usually rejected.[154]

b. Why the author/narrator took such a reserved approach to criticizing Qohelet is not revealed. Perhaps God had other work in mind for the author/narrator that would have been jeopardized if he had rebuked a fellow wise man, perhaps one of stature, undiplomatically. We do not know the original setting sufficiently to make such determinations.

---

[153] Wilfred McClay, "Western Civilization Runs Through Jerusalem, Too" (Oct. 13, 2026) (accessed on 11/18/26).
[154] Longman (2026), 284.

5. The author/narrator says in 12:10 that, as is true of most wise men, Qohelet's *goal or intention* was to bring delight through the presentation of the truth, but he does not say he achieved that goal.

a. In fact, he implies the contrary by saying Qohelet *sought* to do those things. Seeking and finding are two different things. Qohelet admits that he sought to find many things but was constantly frustrated (7:24-29; 8:17). So, in saying that he "sought" to write words of truth, the author/narrator is implying that this was another of his failures.

b. Depending on the vowels one supplies to the consonantal text, the final clause of the verse could mean "and he wrote honest words of truth," not that he merely "sought" to do so. (Standard translations in line with Longman's include NAS, NASU, NAB, HCSB, NET, and CSB.) In that case, the author/narrator would be saying that Qohelet's conclusion that everything is meaningless is true from his limited "under the sun" perspective. Longman states:

> Qoheleth reads the world correctly "under the sun." It is true that life is difficult and then you die – "under the sun." After all, according to Genesis 3, the world, created good by God, has been thrust into meaningless futility by human sin. The rebellion of Adam and Eve brought the whole world under God's curse. They were ejected from Eden to live in the harsh world that we know from our own experience. Death became a reality in human experience for the first time. However, as is explained below in connection with 12:13-14, he is critical of Qoheleth's thinking because Qoheleth remains under the sun; he does not look beyond this world toward heavenly realities.[155]

6. In 12:11 the author/narrator says that the words of the wise are like goads. A goad is a sharp-pointed stick used to direct animals, so he is saying that those in the role or position of "wise man" are influential, they are able to direct people by their teaching in the way they want them to go. He then repeats the point with the parallel statement, "like firmly implanted nails are the masters of collections."[156] David Hubbard says that "masters of the collection" was "the group of sages who belonged to the guild responsible for gathering and transmitting wisdom teachings."[157] The words of these wise men, their teaching, direct people like nails, the sharp point of a goad, direct animals when they are firmly implanted in their hide.[158]

---

[155] Longman (2006), 332-333.

[156] "Masters of collections" is the literal translation of the phrase בַּעֲלֵי אֲסֻפוֹת (*baʿălê ʾăsuppôt*). It is rendered that way in HCSB and CSB and as "masters of *these* collections" in NAS, NASU, and LSB. Fox (1989), 310 and Martin A. Shields, "Wisdom and Prophecy" in Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns, eds., *Dictionary of Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, and Writing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 879, also render it "masters of collections."

[157] David A Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, Communicator's Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 250.

[158] The parallel of the two clauses of v. 11a leads Fox to "suggest that the 'nails' are identical with the 'goads' and are 'implanted' either in the sense that they are stuck in the flesh or in the sense that they are fixed in the end of the staff." Michael V. Fox, "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 48 (1977), 102.

7. The last words of v. 11b describe the one doing the prodding as a shepherd, one involved in directing the flock. Those words commonly are translated "*one* shepherd," and shepherd is sometimes capitalized as though it is a reference to God. But the word "one" can function as an indefinite article as in Longman's translation, and I think that reflects the better understanding.

a. As Shepherd acknowledges: "More recently, most scholars seem to have adopted the position that the phrase is simply a continuation of the metaphor begun with 'goads' and 'nails' and that the 'one' should be treated here, as is certainly many times the case, as an indefinite article, thus resulting in the simple translation, 'a shepherd.'"[159] Shields translates it "*lone* shepherd" and ties his being alone to his need to employ the goad to direct the animals.[160]

b. Some who take the phrase as "one shepherd" understand it as a reference to God or the Messiah. Longman comments: "The proposed identification between the shepherd and God misleads some commentators, who assert that all of Qohelet's observations and advice are positive and optimistic, if not downright orthodox. This results in extremely strained exegesis in order to harmonize what Qohelet actually says with this evaluation."[161]

8. The point of the verse, as I see it, is that the teaching of those in the "wisdom profession" is very influential, like the sharp or nail-studded sticks a shepherd uses to move animals in the direction he wants. They are analogous in that regard to modern-day scholars (in fact, the NKJV translates "master of collections" as "words of scholars"). This is good or bad depending on the teacher's insight, depending on whether the shepherd does in fact know the right way. If the wise man is off base, as is Qohelet in significant particulars, the influence can be harmful.

9. Most translations take the opening words of 12:12 to mean "And in *addition to* them," which has the author warning his son of anything *beyond* or *in addition to* the wisdom writings to which he just referred. Other Hebrew scholars, however, like Longman, Shepherd, and Fox, take the opening words as "Furthermore, *of these*." In that case, the author/narrator is telling the immediate recipient of his work, his son (which may mean a disciple), to approach wisdom writings *like Qohelet's* with caution. Not all "wise men" are the same, and his perspective poses a danger to the unwary.

10. He adds in the second part of the verse that there is an endless stream of books written by people purporting to provide true insight, but we are limited by our bodies in how much we can study and absorb. That means we must be judicious in the use of our study time and select our study material wisely. And as the next verses (12:13-14) indicate, we need to major in the inspired word of God.

---

[159] Shepherd (2008), 362.
[160] Shields (2008), 879.
[161] Longman (2026), 287.

B. The Conclusion: Fear God (12:13-14)

13 *The end of the matter. All has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of humanity.*
14 *For God will bring every deed into judgment including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.*

1. The author/narrator then gives his final conclusion, announcing abruptly, "The end of the matter. All has been heard." Longman observes, "The Hebrew is very abrupt as he turns to this final statement. It is almost as if he is saying, 'We've heard enough of Qoheleth, now let me state clearly what is really important.'"[162]

2. He says the whole duty of humanity in a nutshell is to fear God and keep his commandments. He is referring to the proper and healthy fear of God that is encouraged throughout Scripture, the fear that Ps. 111:10 and Prov. 9:10 say is the beginning of wisdom. Whereas Qohelet seems to have had in mind a kind of distance-inducing terror, a fear of God as unpredictably and inscrutably dangerous, the author/narrator is urging a proper attitude of respect and subservience, a rightful fear of the consequences of rebelling against the loving and mighty God.

3. Having this fitting fear of God, understanding who he is and what he has done and understanding who we are, leads to obeying his commandments. We are to do so, and will do so, without resentment or annoyance but with peaceful and joyful hearts because we have seen something of his glory and thus know how right it is to obey him in everything.

4. Note that we have no duty, no divine obligation, to comprehend everything about our existence, so the fact we are too limited to do so must not be turned into an accusation against God, as though he somehow failed in not giving us what we needed to fulfill his demand. We certainly are free to ponder this reality as creatures uniquely capable of doing so, but we must not allow an unwillingness to accept our inability to grasp all things to generate an understanding that is inconsistent with what God has revealed in his word. If our conclusions contradict the word of God, as does Qohelet's insistence that everything is meaningless, we have misjudged our ability to figure things out.

5. As we willingly and joyfully obey God, we do so knowing that death is not the end, that there will be a full accounting at the final judgment where all things will be set right.

a. Shepherd comments:

> There will be a judgment that will include everything that is now hidden and unknown. Surely the narrator is no less observant than Qohelet and certainly knows as well as Qohelet that wicked people live to be old and that righteous people die young. For him to make this statement so forcefully at the end of the

[162] Longman (2006), 333.

book suggests a belief in an accounting that must take place beyond the grave and beyond this life.[163]

b. The author/narrator knew this truth because OT texts reveal the continuing existence of the dead as disembodied spirits in *Sheol* (e.g., Isa. 14:9-10; Ezek. 32:21-31), and provide glimpses not only of the final judgment (e.g., Dan. 7:21-27; Ps. 96:10-13; Ps. 98:7-9) but also of the resurrection of the dead (e.g., Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2) and the new heaven and new earth (Isa. 65:17, 66:22). Unlike Qohelet, the author/narrator allowed this revelation to inform his convictions. He leaned not on his own understanding.

c. Longman states:

> These two verses, though short, present the father's instruction to the son (and through the son to the reader) and point the son to what we might call an "above the sun" perspective in contrast to Qohelet's "under the sun" viewpoint. First, he tells the son to establish a relationship with God characterized by fear that acknowledges God's sovereignty and that leads to the call to obey God's commandments. Finally, the son should live in the light of the coming judgment. The implication is that the ultimate meaning of life can only be found, not in work, wisdom, pleasure, wealth, but by putting God first.[164]

d. And, of course, the truth of everlasting resurrection life came to full clarity and prominence in the NT. We worship one who died and was raised to immortal life, and we live in the certain hope that we too will be raised to immortal life when he returns. As Paul said so beautifully in 1 Cor. 15:53-57:

> 53 For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body
> must put on immortality. 54 When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the
> mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:
> "Death is swallowed up in victory." 55 "O death, where is your victory? O death,
> where is your sting?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.
> 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

[163] Shepherd (2008), 364.
[164] Longman (2026), 289.