ECCLESIASTES
The book of Ecclesiastes is a fascinating read and has a relevant message for our day because it is the faithful and wise sage’s attempt to see life through the eyes of a person who believes that the physical world is the only reality and that human life in the here and now is as good as it gets.

Background

1. Authorship

1.1. Who is Qoheleth?
The author presents himself to us by the title “The Preacher”. The Hebrew word behind this translation is qôheleth. This word comes from the word qahal meaning to assemble. Qohel may mean one who convenes a congregation (i.e., a preacher). The Greek translation of this word is ekklesiastes derived from ekklesia, “assembly or congregation.”

1.2. Is Qoheleth King Solomon?
The identity of the author of the book of Ecclesiastes is a matter of debate. The claims of tradition and, some would say, a literal interpretation of 1:1 and 1:12, inform us that this book was penned by King Solomon. But he is not mentioned by name in Ecclesiastes, so how can we be sure? It has been suggested that the following verses do not seem congruent with Solomon authorship: 4:13; 7:19; 8:2-4; 9:14f. 10:4-7. “Son of David” (1:1) could refer to any king. 1:16 and 2:9 say that he increased in wisdom more than any king before him (but if it is Solomon there are only two kings before him). This is not very convincing evidence for Solomon as author.

It seems that the author is aware of Proverbs, which began with Solomon but was not fully realized until after Hezekiah (in the 7th century, per Prov. 25:1). Scholars believe the structure of the book is postexilic in its use of words and structure of the text. Since Solomon essentially turned away from God in his later years (1 Kings 11), it is argued that that Solomon would not have written this as an older man as some scholars assert.

Purpose & Theme

2. Qoheleth’s Purpose Set Forth in His Opening Poem (1:1-11)
The key to unlocking this perplexing book may be found in understanding the following three terms used here in 1:1-11: “vanity” נַפְלָא (hebel), “toil” עֵמֶל (‘amal), and “advantage” נִיטְרֹן (yitrōn).

2.1. Understanding the Cry of Frustration: Hebel (1:2). Hebel is used 86x in the OT, 38x in Ecclesiastes. The word literally meant “breath” or “vapor”. It frequently designated that which was transitory, useless, powerless, or lacking in significance (cp. Deut. 32:21; Isa. 57:18; Jer. 8:19; 10:8; 51:18; Prov. 13:11; 21:6; Ps. 78:33). It was also used by individuals to express their exasperation or even sense of pain (cp. Isa. 49:4; Job 7:16; Ps. 31:5, 5, 11; 62:9; 78:33; 94:11; 144:4).

But is hebel as the author of Ecclesiastes used it to be understood in this sense of emptiness, meaninglessness, or vanity? Hebel passages in Ecclesiastes: 1:2 [5x], 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 16; 5:6, 9; 6:2, 4, 9, 11; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14 [2x]; 9:9 [2x]; 11:8, 10; 12:8 [3x].
The way to get a full sense of how the author employed the term is to explore several key passages and complementary expressions that help us round out its meaning (cp. 1:14 – “chasing the wind”):

2.1.1.3:16-19 – There are no easy answers to why life is so hard. This doesn’t make life meaningless; it just means there are unanswered questions we all have to live with. Here hebel seems to communicate “life is a frustrating mystery sometimes” rather than “life has no meaning”.

2.1.2.4:7-8 – Ogden: “Picture for us is the lonely workaholic, whose bank account continues to rise as he climbs the corporate ladder. But to what purpose? He never stops to ask the important question: ‘for what purpose am I doing all this?’ This failure to ask a most basic question is something which Qoheleth finds difficult to comprehend; it is hebel.” (Ogden)

2.1.3. Complementary expression in 4:8 “grave misfortune” (here pictures the sad soul which cannot ask the crucial question. Why is this? This defies human comprehension and grieves us).

2.1.4.6:1-2 – why does God not allow this person the ability to enjoy all the good things bestowed upon him? This blessing of things yet withholding of capacity to enjoy is a riddle (i.e., hebel).

2.1.5. Complementary expression in 6:2 “evil affliction” (here denoting a painful or traumatic situation rather than a moral issue).

2.1.6.8:14 – why does the Retribution Principle fail? Why does a just God allow such inconsistencies in His universe? There is no apparent answer to this riddle; therefore, it is also hebel.

2.1.7. Contrary to popular interpretation, the author is not given over only to a pessimistic view of life. He understands and teaches that enjoyment in life is possible with God: 2:24-26; 3:12-14, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10.

2.1.8. Even so, our author remains faced with the cold, hard facts of life ‘under the sun’:

In Qoheleth’s view, humanity is set in a world over which mortals have no control. It is a world that is full of inconveniences, inconsistencies, and contradictions. Nothing that human beings do or have is ultimately reliable: not wealth, not pleasure, not wisdom, not toil, not life itself. There are no fail-safe rules, no formulas that guarantee success. Justice may not be found where one might expect it. People may not get what they deserve. There is no telling who will have a good life and who will not. And even if one has a good life one moment, it may be gone the next. It is an arbitrary world in which human beings live, one that is full of risks but no guarantees. Social, economic, and political forces are at work, creating uncertainties to which everyone is subjected. There are dangers in daily life, too, as accidents happen even amid life’s routines. Some amount of wisdom may help reduce the
risks, but accidents happen nonetheless. This is what it is like “under the sun.”
(Seow, p. 55)

2.2. **A Puzzling Problem Presented: No Advantage to Toil (vs. 3-4).** The human experience is a mystery (i.e., hebel). This is seen specifically in verse three when one considers the mystery of toil (‘amal, Heb. עַמָּל). Qoheleth asks if there is anything advantageous (yitrōn, Heb. יִתְרוֹן) about toil. The question asked is whether all the work, labor, effort, and productivity of individuals or even mankind as a whole (vs. 9-11) results in an extra “edge” or surplus for the inhabitants of earth. Qoheleth asks rhetorically with the expected answer to be “No. There is no advantage for all the toil of man.” Why? To this conundrum, Qoheleth exclaims hebel, “What a mystery!”

2.2.1. **TWOT on ‘amal**: The root ‘amal relates to the dark side of labor, the grievous and unfulfilling aspect of work. A biblical view of labor based on this word alone would be defective, but this aspect of work should be included in a full induction. Thus Moses uses this term to describe the frustration and struggle of the worker in this ephemeral, transitory world (Psa 90:10). No wonder he cries out to the eternal God "and let thy beauty (eternal, lovely work) be upon us" (v. 17).

2.2.2. **TWOT on yitron**: Truly the best advantage belongs to one with wisdom (Eccl 7:11). He uses yitrôn in the manner of "advantage," "gain" or "profit." There is advantage for an agricultural community to have a king, no doubt so that its production can be fully realized (Eccl 5:9 [H 8]). He also finds advantage or benefit in wisdom over folly (Eccl 2:13). Wisdom shows man how to overcome a difficult problem and knowledge allows wisdom to preserve the life of its owner (Eccl 7:12; Eccl 10:10). Proverbs points out there is advantage in toil over laziness (Prov. 14:23). But Eccl probes deeper by continually asking what profit does one gain from his toil (Eccl 1:3; Eccl 3:9). The answer is nothing, especially if it is to accumulate goods which cannot be taken at death (Eccl 2:11; Eccl 5:15). Eccl here feels the full force of the curse on man's work which makes it toil and he clearly sees that ultimate value cannot reside in man's labor or its results.

2.3. **This Reality for Mankind is Echoed in Nature (vs. 5-7).** Even when he looks at nature, Qoheleth finds that for all its wonder, power, and energy it too experiences the frustration of finding no advantage for all that is expended in the cycle of life. “Toward its destination the sun struggles – the participle here implies that the sun is both stomping towards and panting – only to start all over again. The sun participates vigorously in the daily routine, but it seems to have gained no advantage from its tedious work.” (Seow, *The Anchor Bible Commentary*, pp. 114-115)

2.4. **The Ramifications: Is There Any Escape from Life's Frustration? (vs. 9-11).** Sin has the distinct “advantage” in that it has imprisoned mankind and indeed the cosmos in a weary universe where even the greatest energies cannot produce a breakthrough to the endless and seemingly insignificant cycles of life. Is there no way out of this? How can we be rescued from a world where nothing is really “new”? Is there deliverance from a life that cannot rise above historical insignificance of toil?
Literary Features

1. Wisdom Literature
   For the ancient Hebrews, “wisdom” was understood to mean “applied skill in living which incorporated observation, intelligence, knowledge and experience to daily living” (Wegner). Proverbs is a perfect example of wisdom being employed in order to instruct individuals in moral principles for behavior. Here in Ecclesiastes, wisdom is used as a catalyst for readers to experientially investigate life’s dilemmas “under the sun”. Job, Psalms 1, 37, 49, 112, Song of Solomon as well as portions of Isaiah and Amos are also considered wisdom literature.

2. Other types of literary genres found in Ecclesiastes:
   2.1. Reflections: or confessions beginning with phrases such as “And I applied my mind” (1:13, 17), “I have seen everything” (v.14) “again I saw” (4:1, 7; 9:11)
   2.2. Allegory: (12:1-8) “old age poem”
   2.3. Proverbs: “The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain” (5:10), “Do not be quick to anger, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools” (7:9).
   2.4. Antiproverbs: “For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.” (1:18)
   2.5. Rhetorical questions: “What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun?” (2:22)

3. A Masterful Use of inclusios:
   An inclusio is a type of repetition found in Hebrew poetry. The poet uses it to return to key words used at the outset of the literary work (an example is found in Psalm 118:1, 29). Inclusio is utilized in Ecclesiastes beginning with 1:2 and ending in 12:8 with the term “All is vanity.”

   We see this use of inclusios in three sections and in three different forms:
   • 1:12-6:9: 8x “(vanity and) a chase after wind”
   • 7:1-8:17: 7x “not find out/who can find out”
   • 9:1-11:6: 9x “do not know/no knowledge”

Outline (by Addison G. Wright):

Title (1:1)
Poem on Toil (1:2-11)
I. Qoheleth’s Investigation of Life (1:12-6:9)
   A. Double introduction (1:12-15)*
   B. Study of pleasure-seeking (1:16-18)*
   C. Study of wisdom and folly (2:1-11)*
   D. Study of the fruits of toil (2:12-17)*
      1. One has to leave them to another (2:18-26)*
      2. One cannot hit on the right time to act (3:1-4:6)**
      3. The problem of having a “second one” (4:7-16)*
      4. One can lose all that one accumulates (4:17-6:9)*
II. Qoheleth’s Conclusions (6:10-11:6)
A. Man cannot find out what is good for him to do (6:10-12)
   1. Critique of traditional wisdom – on the day of prosperity and adversity (7:1-14)*
   2. Critique of traditional wisdom – on justice and wickedness (7:15-24)*
   3. Critique of traditional wisdom – on women and folly (7:25-29)**
   4. Critique of traditional wisdom – on the wise man and the king (8:1-17)***
B. Man does not know what will come after him (9:1-11:6)
   1. He knows he will die; the dead know nothing (9:1-6)*
   2. There is no knowledge in Sheol (9:7-10)*
   3. Man does not know his time (9:11-12)*
   4. Man does not know what will be (9:13-10:15)**
   5. He does not know what evil will come (10:16-11:2)*
   6. He does know what good will come (11:3-6)***

Poem on Youth and Old Age (11:7-12:8)
Epilogue (12:9-14)

Theological Themes Developed:

   Wisdom literature (Proverbs, Job, Psalms) presents a theologically informed world-view which involves “deed and destiny”. In other words, what you are determines what you become. This is set forth plainly in the book of Proverbs: 10:1-3, 5, 11-12, 21, 26; 11:7; 12:3-4, 9-11, 13-15, 25; 17:1, 7-9; 21:30-31; 22:22-23; 23:10-11. In the ancient world, this concept was bound tightly to the truth that God will bless the righteous and curse the wicked. In other words, we can expect to see good things happen to good people and bad things to bad people. Scholars call this particular aspect of the ancient near east worldview “the retribution principle.”

   Whereas the book of Proverbs proclaims that the way of wisdom leads to life and understanding in line with the retribution principle, other wisdom books like Job and Ecclesiastes offer a different viewpoint. In Job, we see the righteous Job (and his friends) struggling with unanswered questions as to why he is suffering (3:1-26; 10:1-17; 13:1-28; 16:6-17). His three friends insist that Job is secretly evil and is getting what he deserves! Job rejects this and protests his innocence before God. In Ecclesiastes, the principle is found in 3:16-22 and 8:10-14. Qoheleth accepts the retribution principle theoretically but understands that it is not a guarantee as to how one’s life will turn out. Time and chance seem to be key factors in life’s course (9:11).

2. Is Wisdom the Answer?
   Is there an edge (a “gain”, an advantage) that will enable me to live above the frustration of this world? If not self-indulgence (2:1-11), if not hard work (2:18-4:16), if not wealth, power, or fame, (5:8-6:9), then what about wisdom? He has already touched on this (2:12-17). Wisdom is a great blessing and provides tremendous benefit for those living life “under the sun.” But wisdom has its limitations as well.

   In his expanded discourse on wisdom (6:10-7:14), Qoheleth wants us to see that wisdom does give us an edge in facing life’s adversity. This is something that even the secular can see. So then is wisdom the “edge” we’ve been looking for? In other words, can we finally escape life’s frustrations by becoming more and more wise? He explains how wisdom helps in 7:1-10 and
then tells us why wisdom helps in 7:11-12. But Qoheleth reminds us in 7:13-24 that even wisdom, for all its benefits, cannot break us out of this world of frustration.

How can he say this? Wisdom offers no guarantee of avoiding temptation or succumbing to temptation (7:25-23). Wisdom doesn’t change the reality that others still exert power over us whether we like it or not (8:1-9). Wisdom doesn’t make us immune to life’s injustices (8:10-17). And, ultimately, wisdom cannot help us escape our greatest foe – death (9:1-12).

3. The Fear of the Lord:
Qoheleth directs his readers to “fear God!” (5:1-7 and 12:9-14; cp. 3:14; 7:18; 8:12-13). Where wisdom and other advantages fall short, this is Qoheleth’s central piece of advice. We must face this frustrating world regardless of our lack of a way out of the grind. And the only way forward is to place our trust and fear in Him and Him alone.

4. Death, Life, and Aging:
Of all that Qoheleth has found frustrating – whether injustice, ignorance, or death – the most vexing of all these has been death (2:14-16; 3:19-22; 9:3). Yet ironically, in facing death, Qoheleth finds a persistent and motivating source of instruction for the living (cp. 7:4). We should rejoice over life’s early opportunities and enjoyments (11:7-9; cp. 9:4-6, 10) and make the most of life remembering that we will be accountable for how you we (11:9). As we age, we must remove from our lives those things that consume our ability to make the most of the life God has given us (11:10; cp. 5:13-16).

Conclusion:
1. First, we are forced to affirm Qoheleth’s “big picture” view of mankind and of nature. It is frustrating and puzzling why all the effort that we expend produces no dramatic change in the long run. To this we again are amazed that God doesn’t run away from man’s most difficult questions. In asking them, God doesn’t always supply a simple answer. Most often, He simply points to Himself and says “Trust me”.

1.1. The Bible is the most honest book in the world. God inscripturated our frustrations over life’s mysteries and our grief over its unanswered questions. It doesn’t gloss over them or dwell hopelessly on them. It doesn’t ask us to rise and meet its counsel in the rosy-colored heavens; rather it simply comes and meets us where we are. It acknowledges our perspective. It is that friend who looks into your eyes and tells you, “I know where you’re coming from. I understand how you feel. I don’t have the answer or even the right words now, but I do get it.”

1.2. God really does understand people. What’s more, He hears their cries of frustration. Our Creator is acutely aware of our struggles and He wants us to know that He is aware. So you have permission to express frustration in those times when you fail to see the meaning in it all (cp. Psa. 13).

2. Second, in view of this, we are led to ask “Why? Why is it that toil – whether at the hands of men or the forces of nature – brings with it no surplus, edge, or advantage?”
2.1. Perhaps another good question to ask at this point is “Has this always been true?” (cp. Gen. 2:5-6, 8-9, 15, 18-20; 3:17-19)

2.2. Ecclesiastes reminds us that apart from a pursuit and delight in the personal knowledge of God, life seems brutal, harsh, unfair, and incomplete. For the lost and unregenerate this is especially the case. For the believer, he must remember that he is not promised “mountain peak” closeness with God all his days. In fact, most of his time will be spent in the valleys where God seems remote and the coldness of life’s realities crowd in. We must not give ourselves over to despair. Even though in this world God cannot be touched or felt or seen or heard with our senses, He is there and He is with us. The Incarnation, the Cross, and the Resurrection all break through this otherwise closed world and remind us that we are a “visited planet” (cp. Rom. 8:28ff).

3. Third, since sin has brought us a world of frustration and wearying cycles that do not culminate in any great change we are forced to ask: “How am I to continue living in this world knowing that, like nature, there is nothing I can do of myself to gain a distinct edge in life?” It is at this point that we are led to Jesus Christ (Matt. 11:27, 28-30; John 8:12; Rev. 22:14, 17). He gives to us the edge we long for to deal with life now and the distinct edge we will need to enter into the sin-free world (Rev. 22:3) to come. Life’s seemingly endless routine and perpetual disappointment is most definitely temporary (cp. Rom. 8:18-21). No even death, which preoccupies the Preacher, can leave us despairing. And all this is thanks to Christ!