Contents

11  
Series Introduction

15  
General Editor's Preface

17  
Author's Preface

19  
Abbreviations

23  
Introduction to Ecclesiastes

43  
Outline of Ecclesiastes

44  
Select Bibliography on Ecclesiastes

49  
Text and Commentary on Ecclesiastes
We move swiftly, as the book opens, from the speaker to words that are spoken, yet the speaker intrigues us. He is, according to the NIV, "the Teacher" (vv. 1-2). Traditionally rendered as "Preacher" (KJV, NASB), the Heb. is qohelet, probably meaning "participant in an assembly" (Heb. qahal, Gk. ekklēsia, "assembly"; see the Introduction), or perhaps "one who assembles (a group)". We will refer to him for the sake of simplicity as "Qohelet" in the commentary, without meaning the reader to take this as a proper name.

Qohelet addresses his gathered listeners, the Israelites. He is "son of David, king in Jerusalem" (v. 1). We immediately think of Solomon, yet it is not likely that the historical Solomon is truly the speaker. More likely Qohelet merely adopts the persona of a Davidic king for a while (probably to be identified with Solomon by his readers, although "son" itself need only imply a descendant) in order to facilitate those aspects of his exploration of "life under the sun" that require Solomon's type of experience. He "becomes" for a while a king within the world of the text (see the Introduction), later abandoning this disguise in favor of others.

In the same way that Qohelet thus presents himself to us in different guises so that we may explore different aspects of reality with him, so too Qohelet himself is "presented" to the reader by still another person—the one who transmits his words to us and who makes himself known to us explicitly in 12:9-14. For all we know, we only have access to Qohelet's words at all because this person thought them of sufficient value to pass on to his "son" (12:12).

Whether this "editorial voice" is also to be identified throughout 1:1-2 is unclear. It is true that Qohelet is referred to in 1:1-2, as in 12:9-14, in the third person, and it is possible therefore that our "second voice" is here adding to his later epilogue an introduction to Qohelet and his words. Yet it is also possible for authors to refer to themselves in the third person, especially when introducing previously delivered sayings or previous writings that were produced, as it were, by "another person" (the author as he was back then). It is therefore difficult to know for sure whether parts of 1:1-2 derive from Qohelet himself or not.

This issue in any case is only important if one believes there is some conflict of perspective between Qohelet and his admirer, so that the speaker and the transmitter of his words are not saying quite the same thing. It has indeed been suggested that 1:2, along with its parallel in 12:8, represents too much of an overstatement:

1:2: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."

12:8: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Everything is meaningless!"
Qohelet does not elsewhere, it is argued, speak of everything as *hebel* (the Heb. word behind NIV’s problematic “meaningless”; see further below). It has even been suggested that 1:3 is overly anthropocentric, being focused on the usefulness of the world for human beings, whereas the remainder of the book is not (e.g., 12:1-7).

The second of these points may quickly be addressed: It is not at all clear why one author (or an author with his editor) cannot look at the world now from one perspective and now from another. The whole book of Ecclesiastes, as we will see, contains such shifts in perspective, as human existence is considered from different points of view, with the aim of commending certain viewpoints over others. The first point, however, requires a more extended discussion, for everything depends on what we think *hebel* means. Here we come to a crucial matter of interpretation, given the frequency with which *hebel* occurs in Ecclesiastes (more than thirty times outside 1:2) and its importance in Qohelet’s thought.

It is certainly true that to translate *hebel* as “meaningless,” as the NIV does, causes serious difficulties for the interpretation of the book as a unified work, for even a cursory reading of Ecclesiastes demonstrates that Qohelet does not consider everything “meaningless.” On the contrary, he is constantly to be found recommending certain ways of being to his listeners precisely because it is possible for human beings to know the goodness and joy of existence (cf., e.g., 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22). “Everything” is not “meaningless.”

Consideration of the use of *hebel* elsewhere in the Old Testament does not lead us in this direction for its meaning either. *Hebel* means “breath” or “breeze” (Isa. 57:13), and thus by extension things that are insubstantial or fleeting or actions that are in vain or to no purpose (BDB, 210-11). Ephemeral is thus one of the main associations of *hebel*, including actions that are “passing” in the sense that they make no permanent impact or impression on reality; they are futile or pointless, and their effects do not last. It is plainly true that everything to do with human (indeed, all mortal) existence, even if not meaningless, is nevertheless “ephemeral” or “fleeting.” Consider the following texts (Ps. 39:5; 144:4; Prov. 31:30):

You have made my days a mere handbreadth,
    the span of my years is as nothing before you.
Each man’s life is but a breath [*hebel*]. (Ps. 39:5)

Man is like a breath [*hebel*],
    his days are like a fleeting shadow. (Ps. 144:4)

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting [*hebel*],
    but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. (Prov. 31:30)

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Nothing lasts—neither beauty nor life itself. It is particularly clear that throughout Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8, hebed most naturally refers to this transient nature of human existence. It makes little sense for Qohelet to advise a young person to be happy while living reverently before God only then to remind him that "youth and vigor are meaningless" (11:10)! It makes great sense for him, however, to offer this advice in the context of the brevity of youth, just as people generally are urged to enjoy their years because "everything to come is fleeting" (11:8, pers. trans.). The summarizing conclusion that follows the graphic description of aging and death in 12:1-7 as well as all of Qohelet's words (12:8) most naturally refers likewise to the fleeting nature of all things, not to their meaninglessness. If 12:8 has this meaning for hebed, then 1:2 most likely does so as well. Other verses where hebel is best translated in a similar way include 6:12, 7:15, and 9:9.

There is no conflict between Qohelet and his editor. Both wish us to understand, as the foundational truth on which Qohelet premises all his words, that life is "like a breath." The seriousness with which they wish their readers to grasp the point is indicated in the structure of 1:2, which is better seen in the NASB than in the NIV: "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." The fivefold repetition of the word hebel (translated here "vanity"), and in particular the repetition of the phrase b'hebel b'halim, "vanity of vanities"—a construction that conveys intensity and superlative, as in "heaven of heavens" (lit., Deut. 10:14; NIV "the highest heavens") or "Song of Songs" (Song 1:1, i.e., the best of songs)—drives home the message. We may translate Ecclesiastes 1:2 this way:

"The merest of breaths,"
says Qohelet,
"The merest of breaths.
Everything is a breath."

It is not, however, just the ephemeralty of reality, from the mortal point of view, that Qohelet has in mind in using hebel. It is also the elusive nature of reality, that is, the way in which it resists our attempts to capture it and contain it, to grasp hold of it and control it. This is true at the level both of understanding and of action. The way in which the world works is in some measure comprehensible to us, yet in significant measure beyond our grasp. It resists our attempts to sum it up (thus passages like 1:12-18, 7:23-29). Connected with this is also a resistance to our attempts to manipulate the world through our actions so that it produces consistent and predictable outcomes. The world has its own rhythm and order, to be sure, but it is not controllable by mortal beings.

At times Qohelet underlines this truth by representing reality as a solid and relentless entity on which human activity does not have significant
impact and in respect of which human achievement seems trivial and insignificant (e.g., 1:1–11). Here it is the ephemeral, phantomlike nature of the human being when contrasted to the larger ongoing reality that disallows mortal control, for mortal actions have a fleeting, insubstantial nature in respect of the universe. The case is similar to that in Psalm 39:6, 11 (following on from 39:5, cited above):

Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro.
He bustles about, but only in vain [hebel];
he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it....
You rebuke and discipline men for their sin,
you consume their wealth like a moth—
each man is but a breath [hebel].

The very thought of Psalm 39:5 is found in Ecclesiastes 2:18–19 and elsewhere. However, the truth that human activity characteristically does not make the impact on reality that people hope for and may indeed have been led to expect—that it is from this perspective pointless or futile—is not only represented in terms of phantoms who are unable to exert force on solid reality. Qohelet frequently underlines the same truth by using a quite different metaphor—by combining a hebel-saying with a reference to “chasing after the wind” (Heb. ṣut/ra‘yōn ru‘ab, as in 1:14, 17, 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16, 6:9). Here the image is of something that is solid trying to grasp something that is not. To chase the wind is to seek to grasp hold of and control something beyond our grasp and uncontrollable. This is self-evidently futile, it makes no more sense for a person to expect to grasp wind than for a ghost to expect to get hold of a chair.

Again, the point is not that human activity intrinsically, whether in the realm of thought or action, is “meaningless”—Qohelet clearly does not believe this. He commends wisdom over folly (e.g., 2:13–14) and advocates all sorts of activity as good and worthwhile in itself (e.g., 9:7–10). The emphasis lies not on whether certain ways of being or doing possess meaning in themselves, but on whether these ways of being or doing succeed in achieving the goals that humans often set before themselves.

Qohelet thinks not. The human attempt to impose self on reality in this way is a foolish undertaking, which can only end in pain and frustration. Human goals should be set in accordance with the nature of reality, not in defiance of it; otherwise human existence becomes embroiled in pointless striving. The nature of reality is that human beings cannot grasp it and mold it to their own ends, any more than they can as solids grasp and mold the elusive and invisible wind, or as phantoms shape the universe in their own image. Their thought and actions in this regard cannot bring them the control they desire.
The term Qohelet often uses to signify that which mortals are aiming for and might achieve, if only they could gain control over reality, is found in the question that follows in verse 3: "What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?" The Hebrew word יִתְרָן (NIV "gain") is unique to Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament; it derives from the verb יָטָר, meaning "to remain over, be left over." The idea is that of surplus, and the question is asked from the perspective of someone who thinks of life in a particular way, as if it were raw material to be invested in, manipulated and shaped, given added value by what is done with it, and marketed as a means of accruing capital. A closely associated word is מְתוּר, found in Ecclesiastes 3:19 and in Proverbs 14:23; 21:5 (where it is used of financial gain):²

All hard work brings a profit [מְתוּר],
but mere talk leads only to poverty. (Prov. 14:23)

The plans of the diligent lead to profit [מְתוּר]
as surely as haste leads to poverty. (Prov. 21:5)

The person who asks about יִתְרָן brings a capitalistic, consumer-oriented perspective from the world of business and commerce and applies it to life more generally. What kind of profit accrues, asks Qohelet from this perspective, from a person's labor "under the sun"—another unique Ecclesiastes phrase, which refers to life in this present world and is synonymous with the phrases "under heaven" (e.g., 1:13) and "on earth" (e.g., 8:14). What reward is there on the balance sheet of life for all the "labor at which he toils" (lit., "toil at which he toils," Heb. תָּמוּר, often with the sense of sorrow and trouble, although in Eccl. one can also find joy in it, e.g., 2:10), that is, all the effort and hard work that human beings put into the business of living?

This question receives no explicit answer at this point in the book. The response is implicit, however, in the reflection that is offered in 1:4–11 on the nature of creation and history, particularly if we accept that NIV's "wearisome" in verse 8 is not the best translation. The rare Heb. word יָגֵד, if it has the idea of weariness in it at all, must refer here to the metaphorical weariness of "all things" as people endlessly and ceaselessly follow the circuit of life (and thus become, like any human worker toiling endlessly and ceaselessly, "tired"), rather than to the effect that watching their toils has on the human observer. The very rarity of the word (only found elsewhere in Deut. 25:18; 2 Sam. 17:2) should caution us in our understanding of it, however,

² Other associated words are יָרֶה, which can sometimes be used of abundance or affluence (e.g., Job 22:20), יָרֶם, riches (Isa. 15:7; Jer. 48:36), and יַדוּר, found almost exclusively in Ecclesiastes and used in different ways to express the idea of more (Eccl. 2:15, 6:8, 11:7, 11, 16, 12:9, 12).
for the verbal root יָכָת is itself used to refer to the hard work that produces weariness as well as to weariness itself (cf. also the related noun יָכָה, which can refer to labor and its fruits).

Certainly a statement that "all things are hard at work" fits the context much better as a summary of verses 4–7 than the statement "all things are weary." The remainder of verse 8 (which commentators have struggled convincingly to connect with an opening statement about weariness) then makes good sense as a threefold response of human wonder to the threefold exposition of creation's workings in verses 5–7. Creation is a vast and intricate reality, which escapes the grasp of human beings in speech, sight, and hearing, we are unable to find the words for it, and all our looking at it and listening to it cannot comprehend it.

With such an understanding of verse 8 in mind, we may return to the remainder of verses 4–11, the argument of which proceeds as follows. The world is an essentially unchanging place, unaffected by the "generations" that come and go (v. 4)—those specific periods of time that elapse within the larger span signified by "forever," periods inhabited by human beings who enter a stage of history and exit again after only the brief performance of life. The sun rises and sets as it always has, only to "hurry" (lit., "gasp, pant," in its eagerness and speed to fulfill its mission) back to its starting point and rise once again in the new morning (v. 5).

In a similar manner, the wind blows south and north (directions chosen to balance the east-west movement of the sun), endlessly moving through the world yet remaining within its prescribed circuits (v. 6). The water cycle remains the water cycle, as moisture evaporates and returns as rain to feed the streams (v. 7); all the flowing of the waters does not change anything about the volume of the sea. All these various natural phenomena toil steadily away, around and around, going about their appointed tasks without variation (v. 8); there is "nothing new under the sun" (v. 9), no "thing" (v. 10) that breaks the rule of regularity and predictability seen in "all things" (v. 8).

The human participants in the drama of creation—those who pass across the stage that creation provides—are relatively insignificant when considered in this context. The sands of passing time sweep over and erase the marks they have made, so that they are obliterated: "There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow" (v. 11). It is as certain as the erosion of footprints on the seashore, as they too concede to the overwhelmingly repeated reality of the tide. It is only because there is no remembrance, indeed, that the illusion of radical newness can captivate anyone: If there were remembrance, it would be acknowledged that the allegedly new things were already "here before our time" (v. 10).