Ecclesiastes
and
Song of Songs
Edward M. Curtis

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Associate Editor
This volume is dedicated to my excellent wife, Joy who has patiently encouraged me in ministry and in projects like this one. Her wise insights in reading through the various drafts of this commentary have made it a better volume. Her love for me gives me regular glimpses of what God’s ḫesed looks like, and I greatly appreciate her partnership for the last forty-seven years.

The volume is also dedicated to my two grandchildren, Ryken and Aven. They have brought immeasurable delight to their Pop-pop. I pray that they may continue to grow in their love for God and others and have the wisdom and courage to live out God’s truth in the world. I trust that they will find meaning and fulfillment in the world that Qoheleth describes as they live in trusting dependence on our sovereign Lord.
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Contents

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Welcome to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

Why another commentary series? That was the question the general editors posed when Baker Books asked us to produce this series. Is there something that we can offer to pastors and teachers that is not currently being offered by other commentary series, or that can be offered in a more helpful way? After carefully researching the needs of pastors who teach the text on a weekly basis, we concluded that yes, more can be done; this commentary is carefully designed to fill an important gap.

The technicality of modern commentaries often overwhelms readers with details that are tangential to the main purpose of the text. Discussions of source and redaction criticism, as well as detailed surveys of secondary literature, seem far removed from preaching and teaching the Word. Rather than wade through technical discussions, pastors often turn to devotional commentaries, which may contain exegetical weaknesses, misuse the Greek and Hebrew languages, and lack hermeneutical sophistication. There is a need for a commentary that utilizes the best of biblical scholarship but also presents the material in a clear, concise, attractive, and user-friendly format.

This commentary is designed for that purpose—to provide a ready reference for the exposition of the biblical text, giving easy access to information that a pastor needs to communicate the text effectively. To that end, the commentary is divided into carefully selected preaching units, each covered in six pages (with carefully regulated word counts both in the passage as a whole and in each subsection). Pastors and teachers engaged in weekly preparation thus know that they will be reading approximately the same amount of material on a week-by-week basis.

Each passage begins with a concise summary of the central message, or “Big Idea,” of the passage and a list of its main themes. This is followed by a more detailed interpretation of the text, including the literary context of the passage, historical background material, and interpretive insights. While drawing on the best of biblical scholarship, this material is clear, concise, and to the point. Technical material is kept

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to a minimum, with endnotes pointing the reader to more detailed discussion and additional resources.

A second major focus of this commentary is on the preaching and teaching process itself. Few commentaries today help the pastor/teacher move from the meaning of the text to its effective communication. Our goal is to bridge this gap. In addition to interpreting the text in the “Understanding the Text” section, each six-page unit contains a “Teaching the Text” section and an “Illustrating the Text” section. The teaching section points to the key theological themes of the passage and ways to communicate these themes to today’s audiences. The illustration section provides ideas and examples for retaining the interest of hearers and connecting the message to daily life.

The creative format of this commentary arises from our belief that the Bible is not just a record of God’s dealings in the past but is the living Word of God, “alive and active” and “sharper than any double-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12). Our prayer is that this commentary will help to unleash that transforming power for the glory of God.

The General Editors
Introduction to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

This series is designed to provide a ready reference for teaching the biblical text, giving easy access to information that is needed to communicate a passage effectively. To that end, the commentary is carefully divided into units that are faithful to the biblical authors’ ideas and of an appropriate length for teaching or preaching.

The following standard sections are offered in each unit.

1. Big Idea. For each unit the commentary identifies the primary theme, or “Big Idea,” that drives both the passage and the commentary.

2. Key Themes. Together with the Big Idea, the commentary addresses in bullet-point fashion the key ideas presented in the passage.

3. Understanding the Text. This section focuses on the exegesis of the text and includes several sections.
   a. The Text in Context. Here the author gives a brief explanation of how the unit fits into the flow of the text around it, including reference to the rhetorical strategy of the book and the unit’s contribution to the purpose of the book.
   b. Outline/Structure. For some literary genres (e.g., epistles), a brief exegetical outline may be provided to guide the reader through the structure and flow of the passage.
   c. Historical and Cultural Background. This section addresses historical and cultural background information that may illuminate a verse or passage.
   d. Interpretive Insights. This section provides information needed for a clear understanding of the passage. The intention of the author is to be highly selective and concise rather than exhaustive and expansive.
   e. Theological Insights. In this very brief section the commentary identifies a few carefully selected theological insights about the passage.

4. Teaching the Text. Under this second main heading the commentary offers
guidance for teaching the text. In this section the author lays out the main themes and applications of the passage. These are linked carefully to the Big Idea and are represented in the Key Themes.

5. **Illustrating the Text.** Here the commentary provides suggestions of where useful illustrations may be found in fields such as literature, entertainment, history, or biography. They are intended to provide general ideas for illustrating the passage’s key themes and so serve as a catalyst for effectively illustrating the text.
# Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASV</td>
<td>American Standard Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ca.</td>
<td><em>circa</em>, about, approximately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cf.</td>
<td><em>confer</em>, compare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g.</td>
<td><em>exempli gratia</em>, for example</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESV</td>
<td>English Standard Version</td>
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<td>Heb.</td>
<td>Hebrew</td>
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<td>KJV</td>
<td>King James Version</td>
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<td>ll.</td>
<td>lines</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAB</td>
<td>New American Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>NASB</td>
<td>New American Standard Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>NLT</td>
<td>New Living Translation</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>pp.</td>
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<td>v(v).</td>
<td>verse(s)</td>
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Introduction to Ecclesiastes

Qoheleth and the Issues of Life: A Broader Biblical Perspective

Qoheleth\(^1\) (the Hebrew name for the teacher credited with the material in this book; see the commentary on Eccles. 1:1), or the “Teacher” (NIV) or “Preacher” (ESV), describes an imperfect world where things often do not work the way it appears they should. It is a world seemingly characterized by randomness and arbitrariness, abounding in things we cannot understand or control. Inequities of all sorts occur; people sometimes work hard but are unable to enjoy the fruits of their labors, while others who have done little useful work are able to enjoy the pleasures of life. Our knowledge of the patterns that constitute wisdom is always partial, and attempts to discover how the world works in any comprehensive way always end in failure. For Qoheleth these are the realities of life under the sun. There is injustice, there are abuses of power, the potential for success is not evenly distributed among individuals, and people will encounter difficult circumstances, despite the fact that they seem to be doing the right things.

Qoheleth’s observations leave us wondering how a person should live in the light of such realities. He obviously sees value in recognizing the realities of life and does not set us up to expect a life free of difficulty.

Qoheleth warns that power and achievements will not bring ultimate fulfillment. However, the numerous monuments, steles, and statues erected by rulers in the ancient world highlight the allure of those goals. This stele of King Adad-Nirari III, king of Assyria (810–783 BC), describes his military campaigns into Palestine. The end of the inscription reads, “At that time I had an image of my royal self made. The power of my might, the deeds of my hands, I inscribed thereon.”

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and trouble. At the same time, he does not conclude that these distressing realities justify disengaging from life, but he tells us to be diligent and proactive as we live. The many proverbs in the book emphasize the importance of living wisely and rejecting the path of folly. Qoheleth emphasizes the importance of living a balanced life and encourages developing significant interpersonal relationships. He also warns against attempts to find meaning and fulfillment in money, power, or achievements. While Qoheleth recognizes that there are inequities in the opportunities that are available for people to enjoy, he affirms the importance of enjoying life and recognizes that opportunities for pleasure and enjoyment exist even in the most difficult circumstances.

Most people today would acknowledge that the world we experience is imperfect and is characterized by randomness and chaos, and many would argue that life as we experience it is all that there is. There is no life after death to which a person might look for hope; there is no supernatural or spiritual realm, and our task as human beings is to make the best of life in this world. There is no meaning to life except what we determine for ourselves. These people would concur with much of Qoheleth’s pragmatic advice, but they would also conclude that ultimately we must agree with Macbeth:

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (act 5, scene 5)

Such perceived realities lead many to resignation and despair, while others find some satisfaction and fulfillment in useful and productive lives, healthy relationships, and helping others.

The worldview reflected in Ecclesiastes is very different from that of modern secular culture. Qoheleth embraces the view that is normative throughout the Old Testament. He affirms the existence of God and recognizes that God’s providence is at work in the world and in human history, though often in ways that we are unable to understand fully. But the fact that God is at work does not alter the way Qoheleth (or anyone else) experiences the world, so given the apparent randomness and the chaotic nature of human experience, what are we to conclude? Is it not the case that the providence of God somehow lies behind all the outcomes that we observe, including the anomalies and inequities? How does this relate to our understanding of who God is and how he works in the world?

For those convinced that God is a part of the broader reality and that his providence plays an active role in human affairs, the issues that Qoheleth points out are significant. How can God be all-powerful, just, and good when life works the way it does? Some attempt to resolve the problem by redefining the nature of God and conclude that the God who governs the world cannot be the loving and compassionate God whom many parts of Scripture describe. An all-powerful god who oversees the kind of world in which we live could only be a capricious and unjust tyrant. Others, like Rabbi Harold Kushner, argue that while God is good and compassionate, the moral governance of the universe is such an immense
task that he is unable to address every issue that arises, and some things just fall through the cracks. After years of reflecting on the tragic illness and death of his son, Rabbi Kushner says, “I believe in God. But I do not believe the same things about Him that I did years ago. . . . I recognize His limitations. He is limited in what He can do by laws of nature and by the evolution of human nature and human moral freedom.” He goes on to say that despite this discovery, we should continue to love God and forgive him. If you can do this, Kushner says, it is possible “to live fully, bravely, and meaningfully in this less-than-perfect world.” Scripture, however, declares that Yahweh is the sovereign and all-powerful Lord who created and upholds all things; Scripture also declares him to be compassionate, good, and just. The struggle of Christian theology has been to understand how these things can be true given the realities that are the common experience of those who live in the world. It is these questions that Qoheleth sets in stark relief, though for the most part without giving his readers clear and explicit answers.

Christians have understood the lack of perfection in the world to be a consequence of human disobedience in the Garden of Eden, and it seems clear that Qoheleth is describing a fallen world. The toil and struggle that he portrays could be viewed as flowing out of the judgment on human beings because of their rebellion against God, and the limits to human understanding stemming from their finitude are further diminished by the fall. Human rebellion and refusal to live according to God’s order could be seen as contributing to the chaos that characterizes life under the sun. While these ideas account for some of the lack of congruence between what we see and the way things should be, Qoheleth never does more than obliquely allude to these theological ideas.

A crucial issue that any person of faith must grapple with is the tension between Scripture’s numerous unequivocal theological statements about the nature of God and life experiences that seem to contradict those statements, and Qoheleth was not the only person in Israel who dealt with such challenges. Walter Brueggemann notes...

Ecclesiastes does not directly address the reason why life is filled with hardship and toil, although Qoheleth would not disagree that it is a result of the fall. Adam and Eve try to hide behind fig leaves after they succumb to temptation in this relief on the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (d. AD 359).
a pattern of orientation–disorientation–reorientation in the psalms. People are oriented to see the world in ways that reflect the general orderliness, goodness, and reliability of life. Sometimes, though, difficult experiences are disorienting, bringing into question that understanding of the world. Personal tragedies, or threats or disasters that impact a community or nation, may cause people to question the worldview that they comfortably embraced when things were going well. Such circumstances force them to struggle with the dissonance between the way they thought things were and the new realities that seem incongruent with the old worldview. Out of the tension created by such experiences, people come to a reorientation that integrates the previous understanding and the new experience.

Unlike most biblical examples, where a personal or corporate crisis is the catalyst that forces the worldview modification, Qoheleth focuses more broadly on realities of life that are in tension with what was probably the typical orientation of many Israelites. He seems determined to challenge his readers and force them to struggle toward new understandings consistent with the realities he observes in the world.

Qoheleth raises questions and challenges us in ways that contribute to disorientation and struggle, but he does not normally answer the questions for us. One could conclude from Qoheleth’s evidence that we must embrace an agnostic position where no certain conclusions about God or the meaning of life are possible. Obviously, many of Qoheleth’s questions cannot be answered on the basis of the experiences of life, and if any answers are possible, they will have to come from some outside source.

For Israel that outside source was God’s self-revelation to his people through the prophets and through his works in creation and history. It is likely that Qoheleth’s own answers would include this revelation, since he tells us to “fear God and keep his commandments” (12:13), but how does one live by faith in God’s revelation in ways that are consistent with reality? Obviously a naïve faith that flies in the face of reality does not reflect wisdom, but how does a person strike the balance in ways that do?

Gerhard von Rad identifies one aspect of the answer in his comment about Proverbs 21:30–31, which recognizes that outcomes ultimately depend not on human skill and determination but on God’s providential oversight. Von Rad translates the verses, “There is no wisdom, no understanding, no counsel against Yahweh; the horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to Yahweh.” He recognizes that the point of this proverb is not to discourage a person from diligence and planning.

If one were to remove [this proverb] from its context one could even perceive in it the expression of a radical, theological agnosticism. But this would be to misunderstand it completely. Its aim is, rather, to put a stop to the erroneous concept that a guarantee of success was to be found simply in practising human wisdom and in making preparations. Man must always keep himself open to the activity of God, an activity which completely escapes all calculation, for between the putting into practice of the most reliable wisdom and that which then actually takes place, there always lies a great unknown. Is that a dangerous doctrine? Must not—we might ask—as a result of this great unknown factor, a veil of resignation lie over all
human knowledge and action? This question can be answered only by the degree of trust which man is capable of placing in that divine activity which surpasses all planning. The double sentence of Proverbs 21.30f. can have a comforting effect, but, with different religious presuppositions, it could have a depressing effect.7

The same observation can be made about Ecclesiastes. The way one understands the book depends on the context in which it is set. If it is isolated from the broader biblical context, then its message can be understood in a profoundly negative way; if it is set into the context of Israel’s broader religious understanding, then its message can be encouraging and positive. The book’s impact on a person will depend largely on whether that individual can be confident about Yahweh’s favor. In the light of what Qoheleth points out about life, how can one ever be sure of God’s favor or confident of his steadfast love? The answer given throughout the Old Testament is that we know who God is and how he works, because he has revealed himself to his people. Even in the midst of the inequities and chaos of life, indications of his goodness and justice can still be found. The author of Psalm 42 describes the difficulties he is facing as “your [God’s] waves and breakers” (v. 7). John Goldingay says about the verse,

At first sight the belief that God is behind the trouble that comes to us is a frightening doctrine: what kind of God is this, whose purpose includes so much distress? But the alternative—a God whose purpose is continually being frustrated by evil—is even more frightening. Better a

God whose mystery we cannot understand (but who has given us grounds for trusting when we cannot understand) than one whose adequacy we cannot rely on, or whose interest we cannot be sure of.8

Throughout the Old Testament, God’s people are encouraged to reflect on who God is, to study his works in creation and in history, and to meditate on the truth he has revealed about himself. They are instructed to carefully examine the world for examples of his steadfast love. Such disciplines keep before God’s people some of those “grounds for trusting.” Qoheleth mentions none of these things, so if his readers are to explicate the message and application of Ecclesiastes the ideas will have to be brought in from outside the book. It does, however, seem legitimate to do so given the book’s place in the canon of Scripture.

One’s knowledge of God will determine whether one can live in this fallen world
with hope and anticipation or be resigned to a life of fear and frustration. Qoheleth makes it clear that life rarely gives unambiguous evidence that God is in control, or that God cares about us, or that his governance of human affairs is beneficent, just, and kind. That knowledge must come from God’s self-revelation and must be embraced by faith. It can be substantiated by experience as people live in the fear of the Lord, experience his provision and grace, and grow into a more intimate relationship with him. As the rest of biblical revelation makes clear, such knowledge, informed by Scripture, can penetrate to the depths of a person’s soul and provide a basis for hope and confidence in a world characterized by the uncertainties, inequities, and irresolvable conundrums seen by this Old Testament sage.

Two other points need to be made about this book. One has to do with the book’s lack of structure and the author’s habit of presenting ideas that stand in tension with ideas presented elsewhere in the book. This lack of a linear structure is likely related to the author’s purpose and pedagogy. As Craig Bartholomew has noted, this book “calls the reader to engage with Qoheleth’s journey and to enter into the dialogue he evokes.” The reader should “feel the agony of Qoheleth’s journey,” and such journeys are rarely characterized by linear logic and neat structure. Qoheleth’s approach is related to wisdom’s goal of developing skill in living. Skill does not result from simply receiving correct information from knowledgeable instructors. Qoheleth’s method seems designed to provoke the kind of dissonance in the reader that contributes to developing skill in living according to Yahweh’s order.

The final point relates to a major theme of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth presents himself as one who has accomplished far more than most of us could ever imagine, and yet he concludes that it is all vanity and chasing after the wind. The fulfillment and satisfaction that he intuitively had desired has not been found in those accomplishments or things, nor have they brought about the advantage he had hoped to gain. Qoheleth concludes that the appropriate way to live is in the fear of the Lord, and other biblical passages agree that this will lead to peace and well-being. Ecclesiastes warns us of the folly of seeking ultimate satisfaction and fulfillment in anything other than God himself. Qoheleth encourages us to enjoy our lot in life but warns us about expecting life to be more satisfying than it was designed to be. As long as we see our toil for what it is, we can, and should, enjoy it and not be frustrated by it. As John Walton says,

The message of Ecclesiastes is that the course of life to be pursued is a God-centered life. The pleasures of life are not intrinsically fulfilling and cannot offer lasting satisfaction, but they can be enjoyed as gifts from God. Life offers good times and bad and follows no pattern such as that proposed by the retribution principle. But all comes from the hand of God (7:14). Adversity may not be enjoyable, but it can help make us the people of faith we ought to be.10

The New Testament and the teaching of Jesus elaborate on many of the same issues and make it clear that it is possible to live so as to gain a profit that death cannot destroy.
Jesus says, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matt. 6:19–20 ESV). Jesus also tells us that the key to this outcome is found in a life of faith or trusting dependence on God and obedience to his truth. Thus Qoheleth points his readers to a path of God-centered living that the fuller revelation of the New Testament will affirm is the way to life as it was meant to be. It leads to a life that brings glory to God and brings blessing to the person who lives by faith; it is also the key to a life that generates a profit that death cannot erase.
Where All Is *Hebel*, Can Life Have Meaning?

**Big Idea** Does life have meaning and lasting value?

**Understanding the Text**

**The Text in Context**

Ecclesiastes reflects the perspective of Old Testament wisdom literature in affirming that God created all things and that there is order because of God’s design and oversight. Wisdom teachings affirm that people, though limited by their finitude and fallenness, can discover elements of that order by observing the world, and a major goal of wisdom is to develop an understanding of God’s order. Ecclesiastes focuses on aspects of life that seem incongruent with the general order reflected in books like Proverbs; the author, Qoheleth, focuses on what he sees and experiences in the world, with little resort to special revelation. He describes a fallen world that no longer works the way God designed it. Qoheleth never specifically relates his observations to the fall, although allusions to the early chapters of Genesis suggest that these ideas remain in the background. His later references to the fear of the Lord show that he was writing in a context that presupposed Israel’s traditional religious values, and many of Qoheleth’s questions can be answered on the basis of only those values and ideas.

These introductory verses include a brief statement about Qoheleth (1:1), a declaration of the book’s overarching theme (1:2), the programmatic question of the book (1:3), and a poem (1:4–11) reiterating the themes and connecting readers emotionally to his assertions and questions.

**Historical and Cultural Background**

Qoheleth was perplexed by questions that confounded many in the ancient Near East: why pious people suffer, the mystery of the divine, the way things work in the world, whether life has meaning, and so on. The Epic of Gilgamesh relates how Gilgamesh, renowned for his superhuman abilities and accomplishments, found little fulfillment and satisfaction in them. The story “tells of one man’s heroic struggle against death—first for immortal renown through glorious deeds, then for eternal life itself; of his despair when confronted with inevitable failure, and of his eventual
realization that the only immortality he may expect is the enduring name afforded by leaving behind some lasting achievement.”

Gilgamesh develops these themes “in a distinctly Mesopotamian idiom,” while Qoheleth develops them in ways consistent with Israel’s Yahwistic perspective. However, as van der Toorn points out, the parallels between Gilgamesh and Ecclesiastes involve themes that are too common to require Mesopotamian influence: “Reflections on human mortality, the value of friendship, and the advantage of wisdom are the bread and butter of the sage all over the ancient Near East—and elsewhere.”

Interpretive Insights

1:1 the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem. The source of the book’s wisdom is identified as Qoheleth (Heb. qohelet), but the meaning of this term is unknown. The traditional translations, “Teacher” or “Preacher” (both of which will be used throughout this commentary), understand Qoheleth as one who convenes a group for worship or teaching.

1:2 Meaningless! The book begins with the assertion that everything is hebel (often translated “vanity” [KJV, ESV] or “meaningless” [NIV]) and ends with almost identical words (12:8), thus establishing a central theme of the book. The word hebel, which occurs almost forty times in Ecclesiastes, concretely refers to a puff of air, breath, or wind. It is often used as a metaphor, and the question becomes which aspect of hebel is intended in these uses (see the sidebar “Hebel”). Many understand the term as describing that which lacks meaning or value, that which has no substance, or that which is temporal and short lived.

1:3 What do people gain? Throughout the book Qoheleth reflects on the idea of people’s gain or advantage as they live life. The primary word translated “gain” or “profit” (yitron) comes from a root that means “to be left over” or “remain.” The other words, motar and yoter, come from the same Hebrew root and, in Ecclesiastes, appear to have meanings generally similar to yitron. Commercially, profit is what remains after all the expenses have been paid. Qoheleth seeks a way to live to secure a gain or profit in life, and here his concern seems to involve the broad question of the meaning of life. Occasionally he asks the question in a way that...
suggests he is seeking a profit that death cannot eliminate, but this is never explicit, and the reader is left to consider the exact nature and extent of the profit Qoheleth is seeking.

1:4–11 *The sun rises and the sun sets.*

The poem in 1:4–11 engages readers to consider whether their lives are any different from these repetitive cycles of nature and whether a person can gain a lasting profit in life. It also prepares the reader for Qoheleth’s subsequent examples and may provide additional insight on the meaning of *hebel*. Poems work by drawing readers into the poet’s experience and impacting them holistically. According to Leland Ryken, ideas presented in this way “achieve wholeness of expression by appealing to the full range of human experience, not simply to the rational intellect.”

The poem emphasizes the transitory nature of human life (one aspect of *hebel*) by comparing human activity with natural phenomena that are always in motion but that show little evidence of purpose or movement toward a predetermined goal (another aspect of *hebel*). The sun rises, sets, and returns to do the same thing over and over. Rivers run into seas, which are never filled. The wind blows, first one way and then another, only to do the same thing again and again. For all the motion and activity, the earth never seems to be significantly impacted or changed. Similarly, generations come and go (1:4), and people are seldom remembered by those who follow them (1:11). The brevity of a person’s life and the recurrent patterns of human experience make it hard to imagine that one person can impact the
world in a truly significant way. Does the life of a single individual mean any more than a river rushing toward the sea or the constant movement of the wind? Kidner says, “The poem . . . sets the tone of the book by its motto-theme and by its picture of a world endlessly busy and hopelessly inconclusive.”

All things are wearisome. Ecclesiastes 1:8 likely emphasizes humankind’s limited ability to understand the way things work in the world (another aspect of hebel). Garrett says, “No one can explain, influence or control [the world]. Humanity, for all its intellectual investigations, must accept life and death and the coming and going of generations in this world as an unexplained and inexplicable given . . . . The resources of human reason leave humanity facing a blank wall.” The poem describes the tedious and tiring nature of life and personalizes the problem for the reader. It brings readers to acknowledge, both logically and experientially, the reality of the problem.

Theological Insights

Qoheleth emphasizes that life is characterized by difficulty and struggle; it is hebel—it is like a puff of air or wind. He raises the question of whether a person can secure a profit or advantage in life, and this question raises a more basic one: does human life even have meaning? When set against long-lived and unchanging phenomena like the sun, wind, rivers, and the sea, whose impact is not always readily apparent, how can one suppose that an individual life has significance in the larger framework of history? These examples make it difficult to imagine that life has meaning and is moving toward some glorious conclusion.

These verses illustrate Qoheleth’s propensity for asking questions that he does not answer and for asking them in ways

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Hebel

In 1:14–15 hebel describes things people lack the ability to change or control. Ecclesiastes 2:1 describes the pursuit of pleasure as hebel, while 2:11 describes major human accomplishments (building projects, the accumulation of wealth, pleasure, etc.) in the same way, probably because these endeavors do not bring the satisfaction that those who pursue them desire. In 2:15 Qoheleth acknowledges that wisdom provides significant advantages over folly but concludes that it is hebel because it cannot deliver a person from death. It is hebel when a person works hard and accumulates much but is unable to enjoy the benefits of labor (2:18–21, 26; 6:1–2). Work motivated by envy or obsession with work and the accumulation of wealth to the neglect of relationships and pleasure (4:7–8) are hebel, as are the changing fortunes of politics (4:13–16). Talk not backed up by deeds, dreams not matched by diligence (6:9, 11), and the laughter of fools (7:6) are hebel because they lack substance and do not accomplish any useful outcome. Anomalies, such as righteous people experiencing what wicked people deserve and vice versa (3:16–19; 8:14), are examples of hebel. Finally, youth and the dawn of life are hebel, presumably because they last such a short time (11:10).

It is unlikely that the semantic range of hebel can be captured by a single English word. Ogden concludes, “Qoheleth does not mean to claim that life is empty, vain, and meaningless . . . . Life is replete with situations to which even the sage, the philosopher theologian, has no answer. It is the word hebel that Qoheleth applies to describe these situations.” Provan adds that hebel refers “to the fragile, fleeting nature of existence,” stressing “the ephemerality of existence or its elusiveness and resistance to intellectual and physical control.” This understanding of hebel is also consistent with the phrase “chasing after the wind,” with which it is often paired. That metaphor describes attempting to accomplish something impossible—catching or controlling the wind. Both phrases emphasize that life is filled with situations beyond our ability to fully understand or control and that people cannot discover that which gives meaning to life.

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Edward M. Curtis, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs

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that provoke reflection and frustration on the part of his readers. He shows where the path will lead if one attempts to answer such ultimate questions from the limited perspective of human experience and sets in clear relief the tension that often exists between the way we experience the world and what special revelation tells us about how things work.

**Teaching the Text**

Qoheleth wants us to understand the realities of life “under the sun” (1:3), and his perspective is deliberately limited to what one sees and experiences in the world, with little appeal to God, faith, or special revelation. When teaching this section, one needs to affirm the difficulty and complexity of life and its enigmatic character. There are many things that we cannot understand and many things that we cannot control. Our lives are but a breath, and in the whole scope of creation and history, what does a single life matter? How does one even begin to answer the questions that Qoheleth raises here? Ecclesiastes makes it clear that questions about the meaning of life or how a person can live so as to make a significant and lasting impact cannot be answered on the basis of the experiences of life. The data of life are far too ambiguous and unclear for that.

Our culture constantly proclaims the message that everything that matters revolves around us, and that through education, hard work, and creative insight people can find meaning and make a lasting impact. We suppose that advances in technology will lead to new heights of human advancement. Qoheleth, however, raises serious questions about whether we are building something that is always advancing. His assertion that all is hebel highlights our limited understanding and control as human beings and suggests that our accomplishments rarely make the impact we would like. His observations cast a dark shadow over the idea that we can, through human effort, create an ideal world. The realities of life preclude that, and our obsessive effort to bring about those outcomes is as futile as pursuing the wind.

Qoheleth, though, saw value in struggling with these issues and grappling with the tension that his examples create. It is helpful to provide some answers and
direction while teaching this book, but it is also important to teach in ways that keep aspiring sages engaged in the struggle rather than simply delivering “right answers” to them. Qoheleth’s teaching methods reflect wisdom’s goal of helping people develop skill in living according to Yahweh’s order. Such skill is never developed apart from practice and struggle, including the kind of intellectual struggles that the conundrums of Qoheleth provoke in those who choose to travel the path of wisdom.

Illustrating the Text

Human perspective, experience, and effort cannot answer the dilemmas of life.

Personal Testimony: In preparation for a class on Ecclesiastes, I (Edward) asked my students to read Ecclesiastes 1:1–11 at least five times before our first session and to reflect on it. A few students concluded that this was a good description of the life of a non-Christian but did not think it had much relevance for a believer. Others vigorously disagreed with this assessment and said they felt that the author was describing their own lives. Several said that they frantically move from one activity to another, wondering if all the pursuits lead to anything or if they really matter. One girl said she often feels like the gerbil on the wheel—frantically running but never getting anywhere. Another said that he resonates with the puff-of-smoke metaphor and sometimes wonders if anything in his life has any more substance than a puff of smoke that disappears into the sky.

One generation fades into another, and little is remembered of most individuals.

Personal Testimony: We have little difficulty understanding that generations come and go, and our generation too is passing away. Qoheleth tells us that there will be no remembrance of former things; anyone who has tinkered with family genealogies can relate to his point. My (Edward’s) efforts to trace my family tree have had limited success. Two women in my history are fascinating precisely because I can find so little about them. I know they existed, and their names appear on birth records and marriage certificates, but I know nothing about them or their legacy. I am here because of them, but I know little else. I often wonder what part of my efforts at life and ministry will remain—precisely the kinds of questions that Qoheleth’s words are meant to provoke in us.

Many of the repetitive activities in life leave little record of their significance.

Human Experience: Many duties, like dusting or weeding or home maintenance, take up our time, only to become necessary again and again. The next generation, or even the next person who owns the house, will see little to indicate the huge amounts of time we have expended to keep things looking just right.