



THE *END* OF ECCLESIASTES: AN INTRODUCTION TO AN ENIGMATIC BOOK

DOUGLAS SEAN O'DONNELL
Elgin, IL

INTRODUCTION

The Westminster Confession of Faith 1.8 states that “all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all.” The book of Ecclesiastes certainly falls under these assertions. Put simply, it is a tough read. You know Ecclesiastes is a tough read when commentaries—books designed to help clarify the complexities—contain sentences such as: “This book is one of the more difficult books in all of Scripture, one which no one has ever completely mastered,”¹ and “Two thousand years of interpretation . . . have utterly failed to solve the enigma,”² and “Ecclesiastes is a lot like an octopus: just when you think you have all the tentacles under control—that is, you have understood the book—there is one waving about in the air!”³ Without overlooking the complexities, in this article I will argue for a simple reading strategy, namely, that Ecclesiastes is best understood as (1) wisdom literature (2) with a unified message (3) that makes better sense in light of the crucified, risen, and returning Christ.⁴ By setting this unmasterable masterpiece within its literary and canonical context, I hope to provide the diligent and discerning reader a hermeneutical path to follow, or at least three safe steps to avoid getting pushed off course by some unruly octopus’s tentacle.

WISDOM LITERATURE

We begin with genre. Ecclesiastes should be read as wisdom literature. It is not an epistle (like Galatians), a lawbook (like

Leviticus), or an apocalyptic revelation (like Revelation). And as a book of wisdom, it shares characteristics found in Proverbs, Job, and the Song of Songs. There is a plethora of poetry. There are piles of parallelisms (synonymous, antithetic, synthetic, and inverted), as well as many metaphors, similes, hyperboles, alliterations, assonances, and other wonderful wordplays. There is even onomatopoeia! There are proverbs. There are short narratives with pointed, parable-like endings. There are practical admonitions. There are rhythmic-quality refrains. There are rhetorical questions. There are shared key terms, such as “wisdom,” “folly,” and “my son.” There are shared concepts, such as “the fear of God.” And as is true of much other biblical wisdom literature, it was written by or about or by *and* about Solomon, the Old Testament’s ultimate wisdom sage (1 Kings 4:29–34).⁵

In the Christian canon, the order of the wisdom books is Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Proverbs begins: “The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel” (Prov. 1:1). Ecclesiastes is introduced with: “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Eccles. 1:1) = Solomon? The Song starts out: “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s” (Song 1:1). Regarding Ecclesiastes, because Solomon wrote wisdom literature and was literally a “son of David” as well as a “king in Jerusalem” (Eccles. 1:1; see also 1:12), commentators before the nineteenth century thought Solomon was the author. Yet for legitimate reasons,⁶ most scholars today shy away from Solomonic authorship.⁷ They claim that Ecclesiastes might have been written about Solomon (a fictional autobiography)⁸ or in the tradition of Solomon, but probably not by Solomon.

Whatever the truth, for this introductory essay I will call “the Preacher” (as the ESV translates קהלת) “Solomon,” as I am not completely convinced by the consensus of modern scholarship.⁹ Moreover, I will add the title “Pastor” because of the book’s pastoral tone, motive, and message and also because the word קהלת is the Qal feminine singular participle of the verb קהל, which means “to assemble.” This verb was used of Solomon when he assembled God’s people together for the temple

consecration ceremony in 1 Kings 8:1 (cf. 2 Chron. 5:2). The implied setting for Pastor Solomon's speech—the body of the book of Ecclesiastes itself—is that of an assembly or a 'church' (ἐκκλησίᾳ).¹⁰ This is why Philip Ryken writes that הלל or the Assembler is 'not so much a teacher in a classroom but more like a pastor in a church. He is preaching wisdom to a gathering of the people of God'.¹¹ Whoever the original author was (Pastor Solomon, King Qoheleth, Simon the Sage, Ephraim the Editor, or whatever we want to call him)—and whenever he wrote it (tenth century or third century B.C.)—his timeless message is what matters most. We turn to that message next.

A UNIFIED MESSAGE

The book of Ecclesiastes can be, and too often has been, read as a noninspired, postexilic Hebrew wisdom book that is as unorthodox as it is disjointed. I hold that Ecclesiastes should not be read that way. I find it unlikely, as some estimate, that an editor got hold of the raw material of what we now call Ecclesiastes and tried to clean up the contradictions and clear up the confusions by adding a corrective verse here and there as well as tacking on an appropriate theological addendum at the end, and still in the end botched the whole project (i.e., that the canonical book remains slightly unorthodox and disjointed). Rather, the best way to read Ecclesiastes is as God's wisdom literature *with a unified message*.¹² For as we will see there is persistent literary intention and a consistent theological argument to the book.

With that claim and clarification made, it is nevertheless true that if you look at all the separate parts of Ecclesiastes, the book is an enigma. What is meant by saying "the race is not to the swift" (Eccles. 9:11) or by the image "the grinders cease because they are few" (12:3)? Ecclesiastes is also filled with seeming contradictions. How does the maxim "For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?" (6:12) fit with the refrain-like call to eat, drink, and find satisfaction in our work? And how

does the observation “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money” (5:10) blend with the claim that “money answers everything” (10:19)? Ecclesiastes is like a thousand-piece puzzle taken from the box, thrown on the floor, and kicked around by the kids. But if you discipline the children, quiet the house and your heart, start to lift the scattered pieces from the ground, lay them on a clean table, and slowly, humbly, and prayerfully piece the pieces together, a clear picture emerges.

The obvious edge pieces are all filled with the unmistakable and undesirable word “vanity.” In Hebrew it is the word הבל, which is the same Hebrew spelling as the name of the first man to die, Abel (Gen. 4:8), and it is an example of an onomatopoeic word! As Daniel Fredericks notes: “One must aspirate twice with the initial he-sound, then again with the soft bet, pronounced as ‘-vel’. So the speaker illustrates what the nature of a breath is simply by saying the word.”¹³ This word is found thirty-eight times throughout the book, most prominently at the bookends—“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Eccles. 1:2; cf. 12:8). This word is translated in various ways, including temporary, transitory, meaningless, senseless, futile, ephemeral, contingent, incomprehensible, incongruous, absurd, empty, and more visually as a striving after wind, a bubble, smoke that curls up into the air,¹⁴ mist, or breath/mere breath.¹⁵

Man is like a breath [הבל];
 his days are like a passing shadow. (Ps. 144:4)
 Behold, you have made my days a few
 handbreadths,
 and my lifetime is as nothing before you.
 Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath [הבל]!
 (Ps. 39:5)

However, we are to translate הבל (in most contexts ‘breath’ is best), look below at the short list of Solomon’s long list of mist.¹⁶ What is like hot breath on a cold day disappearing into the air?

Every effort	1:14; 2:11, 17, 19
Any fruit of our labors	2:15, 21, 26
Pleasure	2:1
Life	3:19; 6:4, 12; 7:15; 9:9
Youth	11:10
Success	4:4
Wealth	4:7–8; 5:10; 6:2
Desire	6:9
Frivolity	7:6
Popularity	4:16; 8:10
Injustice	8:14
All future events	11:8
Everything!	1:2; 12:8

Ecclesiastes 1:2 begins the curse-filled concept: “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” In Hebrew, as in English, there is a nice wordplay on this superlative genitive: הַבַּל הַבָּלִים. As “the Song of Songs” is the best of all songs, “the God of gods” is the greatest or the only God, and ‘the heaven of heavens’ is the highest heaven, so Solomon sounds this sad and sober message of “vanity of vanities”—everything is utterly futile. Put differently, because of God’s curse on creation (the consequences of the fall recorded in Genesis 3:14–19 are assumed throughout),¹⁷ in all human endeavors we cannot find much meaning or sustainable joy in this world or present age.

The thirty-eightfold repetition of הַבַּל are the dark pieces to the puzzle. They constitute the black border that connects to the dark gray pieces of death, injustice, and other bleak realities. Yet like a Rembrandt, in which darkness and light play off each other and blend together in seemingly inexplicable ways, those gray pieces of Ecclesiastes do eventually connect with אֱלֹהִים, who is at the center of the picture and is bright in all his incompressible glory and wisdom.

This God of glory and wisdom is touched, if you will stay with the puzzle analogy, only through the *fear of God*, which is highlighted five times in Ecclesiastes (Eccles. 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12–

13; 12:13). This is the central concept of biblical wisdom literature, and, as it relates to Ecclesiastes, we can summarize the idea as *trembling trust*. Those who, in the midst of all the hard truths and awful troubles of this fallen world, come before the Lord with trembling trust are given by him the gift of grateful obedience, steady contentment, and surprising joy.¹⁸ The puzzle of Ecclesiastes includes the black border, the seemingly random gray pieces, the white, bright center, and the multicolored blessings given to those who have given themselves to God. “The fear of God . . . is not only the beginning of wisdom; it is also the beginning of . . . purposeful life.”¹⁹

In order to arrive at the picture above, I have taken key words—such as vanity (thirty-eight times), wise/wisdom (fifty-three times), God (forty times), toil (thirty-three times), give/gives/given (sixteen times), death (mentioned or alluded to twenty-one times), sun, as in “under the sun” (thirty-three times), and joy and derivatives such as rejoice, enjoy, enjoys, enjoyed, and enjoyment (seventeen times)—as well as key themes such as God and humanity, futility and fleetingness, time and chance, gain and portion, work and toil, wealth and poverty, power and domination, wisdom and folly, justice and judgment, eating, drinking, and pleasure²⁰—and attempted to show what Ecclesiastes looks like. It might be better, however, to simply state what the unified message is.

Three authors on Ecclesiastes have summarized the book as follows. (These are the three best I have found.) Michael Eaton claims that Ecclesiastes “defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative.”²¹ Jeffrey Meyers says that “true wisdom” that Ecclesiastes offers us “is to fear God and keep his commandments, to receive and use the gifts of God with joy and gratitude.”²² And Sidney Greidanus writes this excellent summary admonition: “Fear God in order to turn a vain, empty life into a meaningful life which will enjoy God’s gifts.”²³

Another way to get at the unified message is to answer the key questions raised by Pastor Solomon. The first key question is the one raised in Ecclesiastes 1:3, “What does man gain by all the

toil at which he toils under the sun?" The implied answer is "nothing." Death makes all human work and wisdom and wealth and pleasure הבל. From a mere observation of this world and its workings, human work, wisdom, wealth, and pleasure appear to be of no eternal value or significance.

The second key question follows that blunt and realistic reality: "In light of such vanity—the fact that our work and knowledge and pleasures and possessions are ultimately made futile by death—how, then, should we live this temporary life under the sun?" The answer to that riddle is simple. We are to live our earthly lives by abandoning human "illusions of self-importance" and "all pretense of pride" and by embracing divine wisdom.²⁴ This is done, according to Ecclesiastes, by trusting the Lord and doing what he says: "[This is] the end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments, for that is the whole duty of everyone" (Eccles. 12:13, NRSV). Obedient trust is the *end* (or goal) of Ecclesiastes.

IN LIGHT OF THE CRUCIFIED, RISEN, AND RETURNING CHRIST

That might be the end of Ecclesiastes (its goal and its conclusion), but it is not the end (the conclusion) of God's story of salvation. When the last chapter of Ecclesiastes was completed, hundreds of chapters in God's inspired book were yet to be written. Soon Ezra and Jeremiah, as well as Peter and Paul and all the others, would pick up their pens and add their voices to the divine drama ultimately fulfilled in Jesus.

While Ecclesiastes contains no obvious messianic prophecy or promise, and while the New Testament rarely quotes from or alludes to the book, the ultimate concern of the Christian preacher should be to preach the words of "the Preacher" in light of the words and works of the Word incarnate. This is not a concern or commission laid upon pastors by their local churches or the denomination in which they are ordained, but by Jesus himself. The Lord taught his followers to read the Old Testament with him in mind—"everything written about *me*

in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). Even “the Psalms” (or “the Writings”), which includes Ecclesiastes, bear witness to him (John 5:39) and can “make [us] wise for salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15). So woe is we if Christian preachers preach through Ecclesiastes as though Jesus had never touched his feet on this vain earth!

Derek Kidner writes that one way to read Ecclesiastes is to see “the shafts of light” (i.e., the call-to-joy refrain) and “the author’s own position and conclusions” to get to the purpose of the book.²⁵ To that helpful reading strategy, we may add that if we read the book through the lens of Jesus Christ—the true embodiment of wisdom who has crushed the curse of death on the cross, brought hope through his resurrection, and will bring justice at his return—we actually understand the book better. Put simply, the best way to read Ecclesiastes, as noted in the introduction, is as (1) God’s wisdom literature (2) with a unified message (3) that makes better sense in light of the crucified, risen, and returning Christ.

Earlier, I painted the picture of Ecclesiastes—with its black border, shades of gray, and white, bright center. There is another image of Ecclesiastes that I have found tremendously helpful in reading the whole book. It is the banner that Marge Gieser created for the original book jacket for Ryken’s commentary on Ecclesiastes, which is aptly titled *Why Everything Matters*. The banner has three colors—black, gold, and red. In the black section, which takes up the bottom third of the banner, are words such as meaningless, wearisome, twisted, toil, nothing, grievous, madness, and folly. Those words are in gold. Above the black section is a red section, also with words, such as pleasure, contentment, abundance, and joy. Those are also written in gold. The black and red sections are divided by a slanted, slightly off-center gold cross that is faintly lifted above the rest of the fabric. About the design the artist wrote:

Words such as meaningless, wearisome, . . . folly, etc., cover the background of the banner, describing life as it really is. Life without God is futile. But for the believer,

redeemed by the blood of Christ, life takes on meaning, and there is hope for all of life's tough questions.

The colors included in the banner all have a meaning. Black symbolizes life lived in struggle and confusion with no hope; the gold of the cross that cuts through the entire design symbolizes the redeeming work of Christ, who intercedes for us at the right hand of the Father in Heaven; the red background at the top of the design stands for Christ's blood shed for us, offering us a hopeful and eternal worldview.²⁶

Jesus Christ redeemed humanity from the vanity that Pastor Solomon so wrestled with and suffered under by subjecting himself to our temporary, meaningless, futile, incomprehensible, incongruous, absurd, smoke-curling-up-into-the-air, mere-breath, vain life. He was born under the sun. He toiled under the sun. He suffered under the sun. He died under the sun. But in his subjection to the curse of death by his own death on the cross, this Son of God "redeemed us from the curse" (Gal. 3:13). By his resurrection, he restored meaning to our toil. And by his return, he will exact every injustice and elucidate every absurdity as he ushers those who fear the Lord into the glorious presence of our all-wise, never-completely-comprehensible God.

LOVE AND DEATH...AND GOD!

In Woody Allen's comedy *Love and Death*, Allen's character, Boris, and Diane Keaton's character, Sonia, have the following exchange:

Boris: Sonia, what if there is no God?

Sonia: Boris Demitrovich, are you joking?

Boris: What if we're just a bunch of absurd people who are running around with no rhyme or reason.

Sonia: But if there is no God, then life has no meaning. Why go on living? Why not just commit suicide?

Boris: Well, let's not get hysterical; I could be wrong. I'd hate to blow my brains out and then read in the papers they'd found something.²⁷

In the small book of Ecclesiastes we discover a great God who brings rock-solid meaning to everything under the sun by means of his Son. We discover that he brings meaning to human work, learning, possessions, and pleasures. We discover that he will bring meaning even to the world's accidents, injustices, oppressions, absurdities, and evils. Ecclesiastes is a tough read, but a good one. It is worth studying, understanding, and teaching this enigmatic book's authentic truths. Take and read. Take and teach.

Take and Teach!

This essay has focused on hermeneutics. We might say, in the context of the usual articles in this journal, that its value is that it reinforces the idea that foundational to biblical preaching is spending the time eyeing the inspired Word until what is obscure is obvious, or at least plain enough to preach it to our parishioners. Let me conclude, however, with some practical advice on homiletics, particularly related to helping pastors and Bible teachers take on the thrilling task of teaching this tricky text.

I will briefly state *why* God's workmen and workwomen should take and teach this text, and then cover *how* the sacred task can be done. The *why*, now more than ever, is evident. As I pen this paper, the COVID-19 pandemic is frontpage daily news around the world. Tens of thousands have died, and most people, for perhaps the first time in their lives, have the dominant themes of Ecclesiastes pinned to their consciences. What is the value of our lives and labors? How do we respond to the power and fear of death? Can joy be found at the end of this terrible tether? What does the God of the Bible have to say about such practical and pressing matters? Where can wisdom be found? In light of what this book teaches about God and our work, possessions, pleasures, mortality, and the coming judgment, how then shall we live? At the end of 2020, the book of Ecclesiastes

provides God's perfect vision for the coming year and months ahead.

By answering the question *why* preachers and teachers should take and teach Ecclesiastes, hopefully I have provided enough motivation to add Ecclesiastes as a small group Bible study and/or a sermon series. I will conclude by showing you *how* to develop a teaching series and gather the needed resources.

First, get your head around the hermeneutics. How does one read Ecclesiastes? Obviously, the body of this article attempts to help. Other resources include my book *The Beginning and End of Wisdom* (Crossway, 2011), David Gibson's *Living Life Backwards* (Crossway, 2017), Sidney Greidanus's *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes* (Eerdmans, 2010), and Barry Webb's *Five Festal Garments* (InterVarsity, 2000). Also check out the introductions to scholarly commentaries, such as Daniel Fredericks (Apollos, 2010) and Craig Bartholomew (Baker, 2009).

Second, divide the text of Ecclesiastes into preaching pericopes. If you desire to do a short series on Ecclesiastes, I suggest six sermons/lessons on these texts: 1:1–11; 2:1–11; 3:1–15; 5:1–7; 11:1–12:8; 12:13–14. If you want to tackle the whole text, feel free to follow the outline I used when I preached Ecclesiastes.²⁸

1:1–2	The <i>End</i> of Ecclesiastes: An Introduction
1:3–11	Why I Wake Early
1:12–18	A Crack in the Window of Wisdom
2:1–11	The Hollow House of Hedonism
2:12–26	Enjoyment East of Eden
3:1–15	The Terrific Truth about Time
3:16–22	Sights Under the Sun
4:1–16	It Is not Good for the Children of Man to Be
Alone	
5:1–7	Sandals Off, Mouth Shut
5:8–6:9	Grievous Evils, Great Joys
6:10–7:14	Instructions from the Grave
7:15–29	Finding the Fear of God in a Crooked World
8:1–15	Living within the Limits to the Limit

8:16–9:12	What to Know about Knowing Nothing
9:13–10:20	Dead Flies, a Serpent’s Bite, and Twitter
11:1–12:8	Before the Evil Days Come
12:9–14	Repining Restlessness

Third, to aid your exegesis further, and provide helpful illustrations and applications, use concise commentaries and homiletical commentaries on Ecclesiastes. Besides my commentary (P&R, 2017), I recommend Heim (IVP Academic, 2019), Shaw (Banner of Truth, 2019), Akin (Holman, 2016), Meyers (Athanasius Press, 2013), Ryken (Crossway, 2010), Limburg (Eerdmans, 2006), Wilson (Canon Press, 1999), and Kidner (InterVarsity, 1976).²⁹ Moreover, when I prepared to preach Ecclesiastes, I found Greek myths, church history, Christian hymns, popular songs, classic odes, modern poetry, plays, novels, television sitcoms, films, and comics rife with relevant lines, stories, and ideas.³⁰ From Huxley’s *Brave New World* to Anne Bradstreet’s “The Four Ages of Man,” and from John Calvin to *Calvin and Hobbes*, gather the necessary illustrations to bring God’s living Word to life in the imaginations of God’s people.

Ecclesiastes is indeed a tough read! But, Lord willing, the tools and resources provided above will inspire you to take on the challenge of understanding and applying this often enigmatic but always relevant book for the good of Christ’s church and the glory of his name.

NOTES

-
1. Martin Luther, “Notes on Ecclesiastes,” in *Luther’s Works*, trans. and ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, 56 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 15:7.
 2. R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1989), 12.
 3. Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker

Academic, 2009), 13, summarized in Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 188. Gregory of Nyssa's analogy of "wrestling in the gymnasium" is good, too! *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, ed. S. G. Hall (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993), 33.

4. Portions of this article were taken with permission from *Ecclesiastes*; a Reformed Expository Commentary by Douglas O'Donnell ISBN 978-1-59638-398-2 by P&R Publishing Co. P O Box 817, Phillipsburg N. J. 08865 www.prpbooks.com.

5. Cf. 1 Kings 3:12; 5:12; 1 Chron. 29:25; 2 Chron. 1:12.

6. For a helpful, short summary of the grounds for non-Solomonic authorship, see Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), x.

7. What Brevard Childs wrote over three decades ago still well summarizes the situation today: "There is an almost universal consensus, shared by extremely conservative scholars, that Solomon was not the author." *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 582. But a growing number of conservative scholars now think Solomonic authorship probable (e.g., Walter Kaiser, Duane Garrett, Daniel Fredericks, James Bollhagen, and possibly Richard Schultz).

8. It might be that *Ecclesiastes* is a "royal autobiography," that is, that "the person who calls himself Qoheleth pretends to be Solomon in order to argue that if Solomon cannot find satisfaction and meaning in life in these areas, no one can." Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 7.

9. For a critique of the consensus, see Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary 14 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 254–67; and Daniel C. Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', in Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 31–36.

-
10. The Septuagint's rendering of קהלת is Ἐκκλησιαστοῦ from which we get, via the Vulgate (*Liber Ecclesiastes*), the English word for church (*ekklesia*). As Jerome notes, "Now the name 'Ecclesiastes' in the Greek language means 'one who assembles the gathering' (that is, the church)." *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, trans. Richard J. Goodrich and David J. D. Miller, *Ancient Christian Writers* 66 (New York: Newman, 2012), 33–34.
11. Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, ed. R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 16.
12. Since we do not know the prehistory of the book, Michael V. Fox's proposal that we read Ecclesiastes as a literary whole makes good sense. "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 48 (1977): 83–106. Moreover, I agree with Garrett that the book is "seamlessly joined" because of "literary technique," not later redactions. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 263.
13. Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 68.
14. See William Ernest Henley, "Of the Nothingness of Things," in *Poems* (London: David Nutt, 1919), 94–97. Jerome suggested "smoky vapor." *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 36.
15. For example, Fredericks's translation is "'Breath of breaths,'" said Qoheleth, 'Breath of breaths. Everything is temporary!'" "Ecclesiastes," 65. Robert Alter's is "Merest breath . . . All is mere breath." Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), 346.
16. From Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 30–31.
17. As Barry G. Webb summarizes: הַבַּל "is not simply a brute fact, something which happens to be there without cause or explanation. It is a judgment, a condition, imposed on the world, and on human beings in particular, by God. It is a manifestation of the fall and, positively, of God's rule as creator and judge." *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 10 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 104.
18. Eccles. 2:24; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7–9; 11:9–12:7.

-
19. Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 48.
 20. See Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth*, ed. Klaus Baltzer, trans. O. C. Dean Jr., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 1–5. I added “justice and judgment.”
 21. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 44.
 22. Jeffrey Meyers, *A Table in the Mist: Meditations on Ecclesiastes*, Through New Eyes Bible Commentary (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2006), 17.
 23. Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 22.
 24. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 278.
 25. Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes: An Introduction to Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 93.
 26. See “About the Book Jacket,” in Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, 319.
 27. Woody Allen, quoted in Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 51.
 28. See Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *Ecclesiastes: Enjoyment East of Eden*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017).
 29. If you can find it, see Leupold (Baker, 1952).
 30. For a list of illustrations, see O’Donnell, *Ecclesiastes*, 241–48.