Ecclesiastes: Responses to Questions

Two related questions:

1. Chapter 9 – there is nothing after life. Enjoy life on earth because once you are gone there is nothing. God favors you on earth, yet everything on earth is meaningless and we will never understand it. What in the world is this person’s view of after life, purpose of life, Kingdom of God, etc…
2. If this book is an invitation to doubt (or at least something that says it’s okay to doubt at times), what brings comfort or reassurance from our doubt? What is an answer to these problems other than simply acknowledging their existence?

\*\*I think the NIV translation “meaningless” is misleading. The word hebel literally denotes a (mere) breath. So the idea is that nothing has much substance to it. What the book means is spelled out by its many examples. No matter how hard we try, we can’t find the answers to big questions (such as the problem of evil) and we can’t bring about justice in the world (bring about the kingdom of God), and there is no evidence of resurrection life after death. So the question is, how do you live with those facts? And the answer is, enjoy what God does give you and be realistic about what God has not given us.

Two overlapping questions:

1. Within this book, as in Job, I find embedded a sort of “scientific” understanding of God’s presence in the universe such that God is actively making things and causing things and enabling things etc. I do not demean the ancient authors for filling the scientific gaps with God activity, for we still do it today if only in a smaller way, but it seems peculiar that Ecclesiastes speaks of God so often in light of its realist approach to the world. I wonder if the author’s refusal to doubt that God even exists hangs on his pious faith, or if it was simply a part of the fabric of understanding of the ancient near east, so much so that not having it was not even considered?
2. What is meant by the phrase “under the sun?” It seems to be describing the aspects of the world that are outside of God’s will or maybe that are not properly prioritizing God, which would make them meaningless. Or is it saying that literally everything is meaningless?

\*\*I’d say “under the sun” means “as you can see things in the world.” It means you can’t bring in things for which there is no empirical evidence, like the idea of final judgment. Yet it doesn’t mean leaving God out, which is inconsistent to us but not to a traditional society—they assumed you could see the evidence of God’s reality everywhere. It isn’t filling the gaps, explaining things that seem inexplicable (our “God of the gaps” is different). “Under the sun” thus doesn’t mean “outside God’s will or not properly prioritizing God” but simply as you see things empirically—yes, scientifically. When you look at the world and life (even when you factor God in) you can’t see a final meaning in it. It’s just one darned thing after another.

I’m still uncertain about what Ecclesiastes is saying about wisdom and foolishness. In some verses it seems to imply that it doesn’t matter, we will all end up in the same place and wisdom will not matter there. Yet on the other hand the verses praise wisdom over foolishness. Can you provide some insight on this?

\*\*The point is that wisdom can’t answer the ultimate questions about what life is about but it can help you live your everyday life.

What does Ecclesiastes 6:3 mean when it talks about it being better for someone to die at birth rather than live and not be satisfied with the goodness of life? What does being satisfied with goodness mean?

\*\*It means being satisfied with the good things God does give—one’s food and drink, one’s work, one’s relationships—and not being endlessly ambitious about getting or understanding everything.

I want to know the context in which it was written, because it seems just like our own world. What was the intended audience?

\*\*My guess is that it’s people in Judah in the Second Temple period for whom it’s hard to hold onto the traditional faith of Israel with its focus on great events like the exodus (which was a long time ago!) and with its hope that God is bringing his purpose for Israel to its fulfillment (which seems not to happen) and on the way individuals find their identity in membership of the community. The book may imply that in this period the individual’s fate is becoming more important and the sense of community is reduced. Ecclesiastes thus seeks to speak to people within that framework; other contemporary works such as Chronicles complement it by pushing the idea of community.

How did the Israelites respond to this message knowing that they believed that suffering and oppression was a result of their covenant unfaithfulness?

\*\*While they knew that their suffering was often the result of their unfaithfulness, they also know that they often suffered despite their (relative) faithfulness. The Second Temple period was an example. So like Job, it’s a book to help the cope with that experience.

I was especially interested in how much death is a theme of Ecclesiastes, and how my understanding of death (that it ultimately leads to new life) would make our lives purposeful rather than pointless.

\*\*Yes, though the significance of the book for us is then to make us face the reality of death and not evade it by too quick recourse to the reality of resurrection life.

Did the author have any hope?

You mean hope for resurrection? What the book is doing is inviting people to be realistic about what there is evidence for, and he knows there is no evidence for resurrection. Or do you mean hope within this life? His point is then to maintain an expectation that God is involved with us now in our everyday lives.

What are the “days of trouble” in Ecclesiastes 12? It reminds me of the “Dies irae” I have heard in Requiems. Is this referring to Christ’s second coming or perhaps just a difficult period that all humans go through at some point in their lives?  Also, this section seems to be particularly poetic in 12:2-7.  It's beautiful, in a depressing sort of way.  Is there a reason for this change in tone?

\*\*Yes, you’re right it’s very poetic, maybe because the book is working its way to its end (compare 1:3-9 at the beginning). The trouble is that the poetic nature makes it harder to understand (while also making you focus on its and think about it). Over against “your youth” it looks as if the days of trouble denote the time when you are getting old and you lose your good health and faculties and eventually die. It’s not the “day of wrath,” the day of final judgment (Ecclesiastes doesn’t have such a day in its purview).

How did Ecclesiastes affect the way King Solomon ruled?

I think the logic is the opposite: the book is saying “It would be nice to think that this is the kind of thing that a wise man such as Solomon could have seen.”

What does this verse mean: “Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird in the sky may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say” (10:20)?

\*\*Compare the proverb “walls have ears.”

Is the Teacher presenting this information as factual, absent of emotion or are his conclusions a source of pain? It's often taught/preached the Teacher is a disillusioned or disenchanted old man failing to see the purpose of life.

\*\*It looks as if he does feel some emotion about what he says (who wouldn’t) but it’s not just that he’s depressed. You could say that he is disillusioned or disenchanted, because he has given up his illusions and stopped being enchanted by ideas that fail to face facts. He is pointing to facts about how things are.

Bearing in mind their understanding of the afterlife and their conception of Sheol, what inspiration does this book have to offer the audience in regard to living a holy life? If we all meet the same end, why not live however you want?

\*\*Yes, the book thereby faces us with the question that Job raises at the beginning. The reason for living a holy life is that it is the right thing to do. It’s not what we get out of it. If that was the reason we were living a holy life, it wouldn’t count as a holy life! Compare the argument of Romans 6.

This is quite an exceptional book within the canon. Is it widely referenced in other books and in Jewish liturgy? Was there controversy about whether it should be in the canon?

\*\*I think the NT scholars find some references in Romans 1—3 and in Romans 8:20, which picks up the reference to everything being “empty.” But most of its links are the other way—it is picking up Genesis 1—4 and Proverbs. The Jewish community reads it each year at Sukkot, the fall harvest festival, which links with its encouragement to enjoy the good things of the life God gives us. We don’t know anything about the canon process. There are questions raised about Ecclesiastes in rabbinic discussions, but these do not indicate that the question of canonicity had not been resolved (any more than Luther’s comments about James).

Should difficult books such as Ecclesiastes be taught irrespective of the audience’s spiritual maturity?

\*\*That’s what the rabbis asked. Vut who is to decide who is spiritually mature? Is not the whole congregation indwelt by the Spirit who inspired Ecclesiastes? And in the long run it doesn’t pay off when we withhold truth from people.

3:19-21 no difference between man and animal they both have the same fate. Who knows if the Spirit of man rises up and the spirit of animals go down to the earth. 12:7 the spirit returns to God who gave it…. What does this mean for the soul of a man and do animals have souls as well?

\*\*Interesting that you move from “spirit” in the text to “soul”! Spirit is ruah, which here means life breath (e.g., 8:8; 12:7; Pss 31:5; 76:12; 104:30). So yes, animals have life breath. On “soul” in the OT, see w.

Is this book the somber reflections and doubts of an experienced preacher and lover of God, or is it a warning to the secularist and the worldview that preaches futility and gloom.

\*\*Both?

Some questions about the end of the book:

1. Is it possible to read the end as having some hope for resurrection?
2. I guess my only question would have been to get a clear understanding of the solution or last statement of reverence for God and obeying his commands which is our “duty in life.”
3. It seems like the last two verses about fearing God and keeping his commandments don’t fit in with the rest of the book. Is this a later editor trying to clean up the messiness of a book whose message is to enjoy life? Or is this the Teacher having a new insight after all of his musing? How does 12:13-14 fit in with the rest of the book?
4. With the apparently conflicting statements in the book, Ecclesiastes is difficult to interpret. Given the possible options, how do I know that the true “bottom line” of the message of the book is the epilogue? or can we safely assume that is so given the structure of the book and the concluding position of the epilogue?

I take it that the end is saying “Don’t treat what you have read as the whole truth, don’t let it make you abandon God or commit suicide, don’t let it make you give up your discipleship. Hang on.” So yes, it is trying to clean up the mess, but it’s also leaving the mess. It’s not denying what the book says. The declaration about God bringing every deed to judgment may refer to judgment after death or may refer to God making things work out in this life—the Bible talks about both. The neat thing about the epilogue is that it sums up the two conflicting sides to the book. That’s the basis for saying that it is the bottom line (the double, conflicting bottom line!).

Why is Sheol mentioned under love (9:9-10)?

\*\*Because your loving relationship with your spouse is one of the things that gives life meaning as long as life lasts, and the fact that we are going to end up in Sheol makes it the more worth valuing.

How could we connect Ecclesiastes with message of Jesus?

\*\*A few examples: Jesus’ warnings about overvaluing wealth; about being too wordy in prayer; about it being God’s business to bring in God’s kingdom (we can’t do it); about the fact that there will always be poverty; about human wisdom not being able to find ultimate answers; about death catching you out when you don’t expect it; about how power works.

I noted that the book assumes the same thing Job's friends assume: 2:26.

Actually I think it means something different—it means God decides who gets wisdom, wealth, etc., and you can’t control whether you get it or how long you have it; which is more what Yahweh says in Job!

7:16 says not to be over-righteous or too wise or else one will be destroyed, what does that mean?

It means don’t kid yourself about what you might achieve by way of seeking to gain moral perfection or ultimate wisdom. You’re not going to get there. The word for “destroyed” is like the English “shattered”—some translations have “dumbfounded.”

Some questions about life after death

1. Ecclesiastes doesn’t seem to me to have a view of heaven in mind- is that correct? It seems to acknowledge God’s blessings and purposes for us for this life, but it doesn’t seem to acknowledge the hope and joy in being eternal beings and getting to live with God forever in heaven. Moreover, not all people have the same destiny right?- there are those that will live eternally with God and those that will be separated from God- so how can Ecclesiastes say we all have the same destiny?
2. I’m still wondering about Sheol. The book consistently mentions that death awaits each of us and that afterlife is uncertain, “all are from dust and all turn to dust again”, and “who knows whether the human spirit goes upward” (3:20-21). Did Jews have a concept of afterlife other than Sheol? Was there an alternative? If this is the case, then what consequence would God’s judgment have?
3. The book repeatedly warns that all will descend to Sheol and be subject to God’s judgment. But does the OT acknowledge a post-death opportunity for judgment? Clearly this judgment will not come in life since the author notes that consistently wickedness is observed in the place of justice (3:16, etc). How would the original readers have understood this concept?

\*\*Actually I think it mentions Sheol only once, and Sheol is not related to judgment. Part of the point about 3:16 etc is that judgment (often) does not come in this life and there is no evidence for its coming after this life. Sheol is just a place of sleep-like existence, not linked to judgment. As anyone can see, there is no difference between what happens at death to the righteous and the unrighteous; everyone goes to this place of sleepiness. No, there is no expectation of an afterlife in the OT, for the good reason that until Jesus rose from among the dead there was no prospect of our rising from death. (See w. on Death and Afterlife in the OT.)

Do you think Scripture is ever a negative influence on people’s lives? I’m thinking of a fundie that reads Ecclesiastes and attempts to literally live it out.

\*\*Yes, Scripture certainly can have a negative influence on people’s lives. E.g., Eusebius the church historian said that Origen castrated himself because of Matthew 19:12. But I don’t see what would be the harm in someone living by Ecclesiastes. In fact, I try to do so. (It doesn’t mean you repeat “Solomon’s” experiments; the point is that you don’t need to, because he has done the experiments.)

Is there an explanation for verses like 8:12, or are such statements simply meant to be held in tension with the rest of the book?

\*\*I guess I assume it’s an example of how the fact that 8:12a is often true shouldn’t make us give up the general truth in 8:12b-13, and vice versa.

Could this book have been a known source for James? I was really surprised by all the similar themes.

James would presumably have known the book as part of the Scriptures, and James’s thinking is quite similar to wisdom thinking.

Two questions about Ecclesiastes and social justice:

1. One of the things Ecclesiastes urges us to do is to understand and accept “our lot” (cf. 6:18-19). This seems good enough advice for myself as a member of the dominant culture. But does this text become oppressive for those who are facing injustice, poverty, and cruelty at the hands of those in power? Doesn’t this text breed complacency toward injustice? How would you balance this with God’s hatred for injustice as expressed in the prophets?
2. Many Christians are interested in and committed to working toward social justice. Ecclesiastes seems to be saying, “Relax. Change is an illusion, and it's certainly not something to spend all your energy working toward. Things are as they have always been, and no amount of effort or striving will make them any different.” Is that accurate? And if it is, is it something that Christians should pay attention to, or do Christians have a responsibility to work for change in the world?

\*\*It’s a book that comes from a community that is under the control of an imperial power. So the implication would be that for the oppressed it is liberating rather than oppressive. It gives them ways of thinking about their situation. It doesn’t imply that God doesn’t hate injustice—rather the opposite. Its point is rather that we should not think that we can bring in the kingdom of God. So yes, it carries an important message for people who think they can bring about social justice.

It seems like there may be a lot of parallels with the book of Job, especially pertaining to the retribution principle (3:16-22; 7:15-17; 8:10-14; 9:1-6), acceptance of prosperity and adversity mutually originating from God’s hand (ch. 7; cf. Job 1:21), and a refusal to dodge the hard questions of life while not granting easy answers. From your comparison of the two, is there any advice Qohelet might offer Job or vice versa? In other words, both books seem more concerned with learning how to think rather than what to think—with this mind, is there any additional light Qohelet might throw on suffering or Job on the lack of fulfillment and frustrations of life?

\*\*I guess you could say that Qohelet is saying what Yahweh says in his address to Job! It might be particularly significant for people who don’t then have God intervening to restore them in the way that Job then did.

How is one to compare 7:3 (that frustration is better than laughter because a sad face is good for the heart in context of heeding to the rebuke of the wise than to go with the fools in the house of pleasure) with Proverbs 15:13 (where heartache crushes the spirit and a happy heart makes one cheerful)?

\*\*It’s a good example of the way Proverbs and Ecclesiastes offer complementary insights—each of them say “Yes, but” to the other. There is truth in both statements.

Do Job and Ecclesiastes paint a different (even negative) side of who God is compared to the rest of the Scripture? I am tempted to say that these books show inconsistency with his characteristics, but on the other hand, they seem to be give a holistic understanding of who he is.

\*\*Yes, you have got it. They say some different things about God and life that need to help us fill out our picture.

I am wondering if the theology of Ecclesiastes is incomplete because when I have listened to some theologians like Dallas Willard, they talk about how our character development here on earth matters because in heaven we will continue to grow in character, is that right? If this is true then it would seem that there is ultimate value/meaning to our life on earth, name to grow in Christ-like character.

\*\*I don’t know of anything in the Bible that says we will continue to grow in character in heaven. But our growth in character does matter—Ecclesiastes is aiming to affect our growth in character. It matters now, not just in heaven. Certainly Ecclesiastes’ theology is incomplete—the theology of every book in the Bible is incomplete. The question is, what special contribution does this book make?

What is your perspective of using 3:1-8 and 4:9-12 as scripture for wedding messages, as often is the case?

\*\*I didn‘t know anyone ever preached on these passages at weddings. I can see that 4:9-12 makes sense (well, at least 4:9-12a—I don’t know what the preachers do with 4:12b!). 3:1-8 would be useful at weddings, divorces, funerals, baptisms….

How much of the influence of the philosophical systems of stoicism and Epicureanism do you see in Ecclesiastes? Are the ancient Egyptian principles that some authors allude to (eating and being merry etc.) better signposts to look at as far as seeing other cultural influence in Ecclesiastes? In other words, is emphasizing the “Hellenization card” valid or invalid in your opinion?

\*\*I don’t see any reason for the Hellenization card, but I don’t see much reason for the ANE card either. The questions in Ecclesiastes are perennial and cross-cultural.

Are the poetic, proverb type sections ([1.1](http://moodle.fuller.edu/mod/resource/view.php?r=37624)-11; [3.1](http://moodle.fuller.edu/mod/resource/view.php?r=38310)-8; [7.1](http://moodle.fuller.edu/mod/resource/view.php?r=39661)-13; 9.17-10.4; etc.) an interpolation added after the document was composed? They seem to interrupt the narrative.

\*\*I don’t see why the original complier shouldn’t have mixed prose and poetry.

In light of the New Testament and how God provides Jesus, how do we read Ecclesiastes on how it deals with death and the meaning of life?

\*\*The one totally new thing about the NT (in my opinion) is that it gives us a basis for believing that there will be resurrection, in the fact that Jesus rose. In a way it thereby grants Ecclesiastes’ argument that there was no evidence for believing in resurrection in Ecclesiastes’ day.

Ecclesiastes seems to promote a cyclical view of time. Nothing ever changes, things keep going around in the same old cycles. This seems to be in tension with a view in other parts of OT and NT that history is purposive and moving toward a grand conclusion in which God’s purposes and will are finally unveiled on earth. Ecclesiastes seems much more pessimistic in this regard. How would you explain this tension?

\*\*I don’t know anywhere where OT and NT suggest that history is purposive and moving towards a grand conclusion. I’d say they agree with Ecclesiastes that history is meaningless and going nowhere. See e.g. , Mark 13. What will bring the unveiling of God’s purposes is an intervention by God that stops history in its tracks.

Some questions about Ecclesiastes and the gospel:

1. In light of the NT, I seem to differ from the author of Ecclesiastes on at least two things: (a) Ecclesiastes says that everything we do on earth is ultimately meaningless. Yet, when we share Christ with someone on earth, doesn’t that have eternal value? (b) All Ecclesiastes knows in terms of an afterlife is Sheol - “for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going” (9:10b). Yet the NT shows that there is more than that – there is resurrection. Doesn’t this change our perspective on Ecclesiastes?
2. How do we read Ecclesiastes in light of Jesus? God has now given us a much more clear purpose as we commune with him and participate in his work in the world but the human experience (and even Christian experience) still often feels like Ecclesiastes within a limited given time for us, can the precepts of Ecclesiastes be real to my life?
3. How do we preach from something like Ecclesiastes and bring the gospel into it? Would it be correct to bring the gospel?

\*\*I’m not sure what “a limited given time” means but I would have thought that Ecclesiastes’ precepts were more practical than most. Don’t aim at ultimate wisdom, wealth, control, or achievement; enjoy food and drink and life with the one you love. It’s a liberating, gospel-like message. So it doesn’t need “the gospel” to be brought into it. One might well want to add that the fact that Jesus rose from the dead now means we have a basis for looking forward to the resurrection that Ecclesiastes didn’t have, though as the exodus that took place hundreds of years ago may have seemed remote for many people in Ecclesiastes’ day, Jesus’ resurrection two thousand years ago may seem a bit remote for people today. It would be important in preaching not to lose the particular message that the Holy Spirit was giving through this book by assimilating it to other parts of scripture. I guess the fact that the author bothered to write his book for people indicates that his conviction that everything was a mere breath didn’t mean it wasn’t worthwhile sharing God’s message with people—because that is what he is doing!

Chapter 7:27-28 has an obscure statement about only being able to find one man in a thousand and not one woman at all. What is this all about? Is this just some blatant sexism? Is the author referring to finding a man of wisdom? Is this a comment referring to those that have no learning?

\*\*Yes, it is an obscure statement! Note that the word for “man” is ’adam—so he seems to be saying he has not been able to find a human being, not a male. I wonder if his statement about not finding a woman is one example of the linkage between Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1—4; it suggests a reflection on how life doesn’t work out in the way God intended. He has not found the vision of Genesis 2 fulfilled; instead the warnings of Genesis 3 have been fulfilled. Admittedly there is then some tension with his encouragement to enjoy life with the woman you love, which shows he is not simply misogynistic. Maybe, then, he is just talking about himself—that is, he personally has not found the woman of his dreams.