Introducing Ecclesiastes

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The words of Congregationalist, son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Mere breath, a mere breath,

Congregationalist said.

Mere breath, a mere breath,

everything is a mere breath.[[1]](#footnote-1)

What an intriguing introduction to this intriguing book! The opening expression “the words of Congregationalist” makes him sound like a prophet. The Book of Amos begins “the words of Amos” and the Book of Jeremiah begins “the words of Jeremiah.” But the introduction to Amos goes on to complement that description by speaking of what Amos “saw,” using the word for a visionary seeing (*ḥāzāh*), and the introduction to Jeremiah goes on to speak of “Yahweh’s word” coming to Jeremiah. In contrast, Ecclesiastes will go on to tell us that it is the product of human thinking, experiment, and reflection; it is not a prophetic book.

Nevertheless, it counts as one of the “sacred writings” that are “God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:15 – 16). What does its being “God-breathed” imply? References elsewhere in the New Testament to the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures indicate that being “God-breathed” draws attention to the extraordinary capacity the Scriptures have to speak beyond their original context, often saying things that we would never have dreamed of (e.g., Acts 1:16; 4:25; 28:25). Ecclesiastes does that, all right.

In connection with the way the book will say things that raise eyebrows, the description of it as “the words of Congregationalist” constitutes a preemptive strike against anyone who might question whether it is authoritative, infallible, and inerrant. “Congregationalist” translates the Hebrew word *qōhelet*. It is not a name but a title. The term occurs in Hebrew only as a designation of the person who speaks in this book; perhaps the author invented the word. Its form corresponds to that of a feminine word such as the term for a queen, *mәleket*. Perhaps the author was a woman? There were women scribes in the Middle East. But if the author was a woman, she adopts the persona of a man, and specifically of a king. The word comes from the term for the “congregation” of Israel, the *qāhāl*; hence it was translated into Greek as *ekklēsiastēs*. English translations usually render it “preacher” or “teacher,” but that is rather specific and may obscure the title’s implications. The author speaks as someone who belongs to the congregation, to the people of God, and gives what one might call good church teaching. The title constitutes an affirmation that we are not going to read something unorthodox or heretical.

Congregationalist was “son of David, king in Jerusalem.” That description fits many people; many descendants of David reigned in Jerusalem. Set in the company of Proverbs and Song of Songs, the description would make readers think of Solomon, but it then confuses them by not actually naming him like the Wisdom of Solomon and the Psalms of Solomon, as well as Proverbs and Song of Songs. It’s as if the title both does and does not want the readers to think of Solomon.

Which makes entire sense. On one hand, Solomon provides the ideal person for readers to picture reflecting about the value of thinking about issues and enjoying life and achieving things, as Congregationalist does in the opening chapters. And his testimony matches the quasi-autobiographical reflections of other Middle-Eastern kings.[[2]](#footnote-2) On the other hand, in the testimony and in the chapters that follow, Congregationalist often doesn’t speak in the way Solomon would. He doesn’t speak as if he is only the second king in Jerusalem, and sometimes he doesn’t speak as if he is a king at all. Further, the book’s language shows that the author lived way after Solomon’s time. As Hebrew changed over the centuries, there is a difference between the Hebrew of the time up to the Babylonian era (e.g., Kings) and the Hebrew of Second Temple times (e.g., Chronicles). Ecclesiastes belongs in the second category. It also has expressions that fit the later Hebrew of the Mishnah, and it has two words imported from Persian, words for garden (*pardēs*; 2:5) and edict (*pitgām*; 8:11).

Because it discusses big quasi-philosophical questions in a way characteristic of Hellenistic times, the dominant scholarly view is that it was written in the Hellenistic period, 300 BC or sometime later in that century.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet the big questions about the meaning of human life and the possibility of an afterlife had long been topics of discussion in the Middle East, and Ecclesiastes has no concrete points of connection with Greek works of that kind and no words imported from Greek (unlike Daniel). So I myself don’t see any reason to locate it in the Hellenistic period rather than the Persian period.[[4]](#footnote-4) But the question of date doesn’t make any great difference to the book’s meaning, because whatever the period it belongs to, it is discussing perennial questions.

Its intriguing introduction goes on to open up the matter it focuses on and it does indeed shock, after that affirmation that we are about to read something orthodox: “Mere breath, a mere breath, everything is a mere breath.” Is there a more dramatic beginning to a book anywhere in the Scriptures? Genesis? Song of Songs? Amos? John’s Gospel? Ecclesiastes repeats its opening statement just before the end of the book, and is there a more dramatic ending to a book within the Scriptures? Exodus? Judges? Matthew? Mark?

“Mere breath” is *hebel*; although the name of Abel doesn’t sound the same in English, it is actually the same. The word doesn’t mean breath in the general sense, the breath that means you are alive. It means breath in the sense of something thin and insubstantial. The translation “mere breath” comes from Robert Alter.[[5]](#footnote-5) More literally, one would translate the double expression “mere breath of mere breaths.” It is an expression like “song of songs,” the best song, or “holy of holies,” the holiest place. The phrase in Ecclesiastes is a hyperbole: in a moment Congregationalist will talk about God, so he does not actually think that *everything* is a mere breath.

The Septuagint translated *hebel* by the word *mataiotēs*, which could suggest something vain in the sense of fruitless, and the Vulgate has *vanitas*, which has similar implications. In the King James Version *vanitas* became “vanity,” but that word now has different implications in English. More modern translations have expressions such as “perfectly pointless” or “totally meaningless,” but these renderings are rather abstract. Occurrences outside Ecclesiastes imply that *hebel* denotes something more concrete that is flimsy, empty, and hollow, or fleeting, ephemeral, and evanescent. It suggests the kind of mere breath the Psalms speak of (e.g., Psalm 39:5, 6, 11; 144:4). Both connotations, flimsy and fleeting, are significant for Ecclesiastes. As well as being rather abstract, negatively-formed translations such as “pointless” or “meaningless” give a more radically gloomy impression of human life itself than Ecclesiastes suggests in other contexts. Although Ecclesiastes is keen for people to recognize the flimsy and fleeting nature of human life, those characteristics do not mean it is without value or point or meaning. On the contrary, Ecclesiastes says, the flimsy and fleeting nature of your life is reason to enjoy it now.

The logic of that statement might seem confused and confusing. In light of the tension between the more gloomy and the more positive perspectives expressed in the book, creative attempts to understand Ecclesiastes have gone through three stages over the past century or so. At the end of the nineteenth century, a commentator such as Carl Siegfried most systematically expounded the theory that Ecclesiastes originally expressed a rigorously skeptical view about whether there was any point in human life, but that the book had been expanded to incorporate more positive views so as to make it less discouraging.[[6]](#footnote-6) In the mid-twentieth century, a commentator such as Robert Gordis turned that idea on its head and suggested that the sayings expressing a positive view were the oldest material in the book; Ecclesiastes was then quoting them in order to question them.[[7]](#footnote-7) On the eve of the twenty-first century, a scholar such as Carol Newsom suggested that Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on dialogic truth as opposed to monologic truth makes it possible to work with Ecclesiastes as it is.[[8]](#footnote-8) Perhaps this is a Hegelian solution, and it will no doubt be an interim one. In the mid-twenty-first century, the world of scholarship will have generated another approach.

But it will continue having to deal with the two sides to the book. On one hand, Ecclesiastes says, “Don’t think that you are going to discover the ultimate meaning of life or the ultimate meaning of the world or the purpose that God has in the world, or find ultimate satisfaction in your own life through theology or enjoyment or possessions or worship or working for justice, because you are not.” On the other hand, Ecclesiastes says, “Therefore make the most of your enjoyment of the ordinary things of life that God gives us: food, drink, work, a relationship with someone you love.”

The two sides find recurrent expression all the way through the book. Every chapter but one refers to things being a mere breath (chapter 10 is the exception). But six times Ecclesiastes urges readers to enjoy those simple things of life (2:24–26; 3:12–13; 3:22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10). The occurrences of the two sorts of statement manifest two different patterns. The declarations about mere breath recur randomly and come to an end with the repeat of the opening statement: “mere breath, a mere breath, Congregationalist said, everything is a mere breath” (12:8). This declaration thus forms a bracket round the main part of the book. The encouragements to enjoyment are more varied and they are scattered about in a way that also looks random, though they nicely work their way towards the most detailed statement, the one that includes the reference to someone you love (9:9) – which thus neatly follows up Congregationalist’s comments about the wrong kind of woman (7:23 – 29).

The relative lack of order in the recurrence of the two kinds of statement accompanies a lack of any order or structure to the book as a whole. A number of commentaries and translations have divided the book into three parts, but then they all locate the threefold division at different points. Really, after recounting the king’s testimony (1:12 – 2:26), the book simply wanders from one topic to another: from time, to economics, to worship, to possessions, to power, to death. . . . On the other hand, there are sometimes links between one section and another, as Proverbs can incorporate verbal links between one saying and anther. But the randomness of the book’s order expresses something of the nature of its teaching.

The two sides to the book’s emphases might then confront two different sorts of people. Some Middle-Eastern works and Hellenistic works that might be known to the readers of Ecclesiastes come to pessimistic and depressing conclusions akin to those of Ecclesiastes about the nature of human life. Ecclesiastes would urge people inclined to such conclusions not to undervalue those simple things of life. Other sorts of people have ways of avoiding the tough facts that Ecclesiastes wants people to face. We immerse ourselves in work or theology or striving for justice, or we look for enjoyment in worship, or we try acquire wealth, or we tell ourselves that this life is not the end (that conviction will come true, but not until Jesus has died and rose again, which has not happened in Congregationalist’s time). Ecclesiastes would urge people not to evade the limitations of such things, though they are worthwhile if not overvalued.

The dramatic force of the way the book repeats its opening declaration near the end (12:8) is enhanced and complicated by the footnotes that then follow (12:9 – 14). All the way through the bulk of the book, Congregationalist speaks for himself, but at the beginning and at the end someone speaks about him. Actually, the footnotes say such different things from the main body of the book that one might infer the involvement of more than one commentator or curator in adding them. I do not imply that the footnotes contradict one another or contradict Congregationalist. That idea is perhaps belied by the observation that sayings such as come in Ecclesiastes all derive from one shepherd (12:11). Jerome, the European scholar who went to study the Bible in Africa and then moved to Asia where wrote his commentary on Ecclesiastes, suggests that here Ecclesiastes “turns the passage against those who think there is one God of the Old Law, and one God of the Gospels, since one shepherd taught the advice of the wise.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

But the footnotes do stand back from the main part of the book, and make comments on it. They do so in two main ways. One is to say, “You mustn’t be put off from this book by the way it wants you to face some tough facts”:

Truthful words,

the words of wise people—like spurs.

And like implanted nails—the masters of the collections,

which were given by one shepherd. (12:10 – 11)

The other is to imply, on the other hand, “You do need to set this book in the context of the instruction of the Torah and the promises and threats of the Prophets”:

Be in awe of God and keep his orders, because this is everyone’s. Because God will make every deed come to judgment, with everything that has hidden, whether good or bad. (12:13 – 14)

That final declaration draws attention to the biggest unanswerable question about the book. Why does it make no direct reference to the distinctive nature of God’s involvement with Israel, of which the Torah and the Prophets speak? It’s not that Congregationalist does not accept the Torah and the Prophets or thinks that his readers do not; a number of his sections of teaching have people such as Jacob and Joseph in the background, as well as David and Solomon. But he refers to them only indirectly and not in connection with his big question. He correctly comments that life under the sun offers no clue regarding the big picture of the meaning of the world and of what God is doing, and it is precisely those questions that the Torah and the Prophets offer insight on. Ecclesiastes leaves them on one side. It speaks of God simply as God; it never uses the name Yahweh which God especially gave Israel.

One cannot say what was in the author’s mind in making it work the way it does. But I have suggested already that one effect of it might be to offer encouragement to people who doubt whether life has any meaning, while it would more obviously disturb people who think they know the secret to what life is about. Perhaps those were the author’s aims.

Nor can we trace the process whereby Ecclesiastes came to be among the Scriptures, any more than is the case with other Scriptures. When rabbis in the Mishnah(*Yadaim* 3:5) and the Babylonian Talmud(*Megillah* 7a) discuss whether Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Esther “defile the hands,” they are not debating whether these books belong in the Scriptures; there was no doubt about that. They may rather be asking whether or not they were produced by prophetic inspiration, or discussing the possible implications of their not using the name Yahweh.[[10]](#footnote-10)

But one way or another Ecclesiastes had come to be part of the Scriptures. And what an important message it conveys. Theology, work, enjoying yourself, commitment to justice, worship, wealth: people need to face some facts about all of them. The people of God, the faithful, need to face those facts as much as outsiders do, and then go back to the Torah and the Prophets and the Writings, or to the Gospels and the Epistles, and read them with new eyes, but not to forget those facts.

1. All translations are my own, based on a commentary on Ecclesiastes that I hope to publish in 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Tremper Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography: A Generic and Comparative Study* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1991); Yee-Von Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 369 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the discussion in Anton Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (Leuven: Peeters, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2010), 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Prediger und Hoheslied* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1898). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. E.g., *The Wisdom of Koheleth* (London: Horovitz, 1950). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," Journal of Religion 76 (1996) 290-306 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (New York: Newman, 2012), on the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See, e.g., Michael J. Broyde, “Defilement of the Hands, Canonization of the Bible, and the Special Status of Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs,” *Judaism* 44 (1995) 65–79; Timothy H. Lim, “The Defilement of the Hands as a Principle Determining the Holiness of Scriptures,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 61 (2010) 501–15. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)