

ECCLESIASTES

NAME AND AUTHOR

Ecclesiastes is the Latin transliteration of the Greek rendering of the pen-name of the author, known in Hebrew as *Qohelet* (also *Qoheleth*), which literally means “Gatherer” or “Acquirer” (of wisdom, wealth, pleasures). The Hebrew term indicates something of the acquisitive environment in which the author lived and taught. The Greek term, though, meant a member of an assembly and “Ecclesiastes” was soon interpreted, incorrectly, to mean “one who gathers the assembly,” hence, “Preacher.” Modern scholars noting that the author of the book is more like a philosopher than a preacher, sometimes prefer to translate the name as “Teacher” (cf. 12.9). The superscription of the book (1.2) presents Qohelet as “the son of David” who ruled in Jerusalem, evoking the memory of Solomon, king of Israel (968–928 BCE), the consummate sage and gatherer of wealth and wisdom (see 1 Kings 3–4; 10). Apart from the superscription and 1.12–2.11, however, the author never speaks as king, and the epilogue portrays the author as a teacher rather than as a king (12.9–14). Moreover, the perspective in most of the book is that of an outsider to the royal court (3.16; 4.13–16; 8.1–6; 10.16–20).

CANONICAL STATUS AND LOCATION IN THE CANON

Ecclesiastes is one of the poetical and wisdom books in the Christian canon. It shares many generic features of form and content with Proverbs and Job, the other books commonly referred to as wisdom literature. In the Jewish canon, it is placed in the third division of the canon, the Writings, as one of the Megillot or “five scrolls” (Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther). Perhaps because of its radical ideas, it was a controversial book in antiquity. In Jewish tradition the canonical status of Ecclesiastes was debated as late as the second century CE. Although Ecclesiastes is included on second-century Christian canonical lists, Bishop Theodore of Mopsuestia (fifth century) questioned its sacred status.

DATE OF COMPOSITION, HISTORICAL CONTEXT, AND INTERPRETATION

The date of the book is disputed, although most scholars argue on linguistic grounds that it should be dated to the postexilic period (after 539 BCE). The presence of two indisputable Persian loan words (“parks” in 2.5; “sentence” in 8.11) points to a date some time after 450 BCE, for there are no Persian loan words or Persian names in the Hebrew Bible that can be dated earlier. The abundance of Aramaisms (i.e., Aramaic loan words, forms, and constructions) also points to the postexilic period, when Aramaic became widely used in Palestine. A number of specific idioms regarding inheritance, grants, prisons, social abuses, judicial problems, and socioeconomic classes are attested in documents from the Persian period; in no other periods in history do we find such a coincidence of terminology. These features, together with the absence of Greek loan words or ideas with an indisputably Greek origin, suggest that the book should be probably dated sometime before the Hellenistic period, between 450 and 330 BCE, although many scholars date it a century later, based in part on putative links between Ecclesiastes and Greek philosophical ideas. The book is better understood, however, against the background of the ancient Near East.

The Persian period was characterized by tremendous economic activity, spurred on by the introduction of standardized coinage by the Persian central government beginning around 515 BCE. Money subsequently became a commodity, desired for its own sake (cf. 5.10; 7.12; 10.19). Standardized currency helped to democratize economic opportunities, so that it became possible for even the poorest people in society to become wealthy. As in any era of significant economic innovation, the Persian period brought both opportunities and risks to the average person in the empire.

The volatile economy led to widespread insecurity as people toiled to get ahead or simply to gain some control over their lives, and thus understand what was happening in their world. Qohelet uses the attitudes in that uncertain period as a trope to speak theologically about human attempts to control their lives and understand a world that is contradictory, if not altogether absurd. The sense of the individual as a small part of a large scene is evident in the political allusions (e.g., 4.1), which should be read against the background of the empire. Many descriptions of life and death emphasize the impotence of individuals to change their

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environment (8.8). The inevitability of one's fate (3.15; 6.10), the unavoidability of death (3.19), and the repetitions of life (3.1–8) all work together to create a vision of the remoteness, the inscrutability, and ultimately the indifference of the world to the individual. In a vision of bleak grandeur the author faces this indifference, acknowledges it, and admits an inability to transcend it, but nevertheless derives from it a hard-won wisdom: This is how the world is.

The author appears to have drawn lessons from the wider wisdom tradition, yet he often approached the preoccupation of his audience through socioeconomic idioms current in his generation. Despite the newness of their environment, the fundamental problems they faced about the possibility of coping with life in a world that is inconsistent, if not contradictory, were not new after all (see 1.10). Every generation must deal with the fact that mortals inevitably live in a world in which they do not have control ("all is vanity") and life can only be lived before a sovereign God who alone determines all that happens on earth.

LITERARY STRUCTURE AND GUIDE TO READING

Opinions as to the literary structure of Ecclesiastes have ranged from the claim that there is no structure at all to attempts to work out intricate patterns. Most readers, however, discern only a rough structure. Clearly marked is the superscription (1.1) and the epilogue (12.9–14), and the motto of the book ("vanity of vanities"), which appears first in 1.2 and for the last time in 12.8. The opening poem (1.3–11) is matched at the end by a concluding poem (12.1–7). Between them the book has two halves of approximately equal length (1.12–6.9; 6.10–11.10). Within each half the first part presents a problematic situation (1.12–4.16; 6.10–8.17), and the second part contains advice on how to cope with that situation (5.1–6.9; 9.1–11.10).

Because the book is relatively short, it should be read in a single sitting. Readers should be alert for the repeated phrases that underline the recurrent perceptions of the author (e.g., "vanity of vanities," "chasing after wind," "under the sun"). Also, the reader is likely to note certain tensions, if not contradictions, in the book. Whether these represent the author's quotation and refutation of current opinion or whether they represent the author's own internal sense of contradictory experience remains debated. But the different perspectives, as well as the ironic tone, give the book a lively quality and the reader the sense of having been plunged into the midst of a conversation about important ideas.

Choon-Leong Seow

1 The words of the Teacher,^a the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

² Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,^a vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

³ What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

⁴ A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

⁵ The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises.

⁶ The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.

⁷ All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow.

⁸ All things^b are wearisome; more than one can express;

the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.

⁹ What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done;

there is nothing new under the sun.

¹⁰ Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”?

It has already been, in the ages before us.

¹¹ The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them.

¹² I, the Teacher,^a when king over Israel in Jerusalem, ¹³ applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with.

^a Heb *Qoheleth*, traditionally rendered *Preacher*

^b Or *words*

1.1: Superscription. The author is identified by his pen-name, *Teacher* (Heb “Qohelet”; cf. 12.9), properly, “Gatherer”—one who is supposed to have accumulated plenty of everything, including wisdom, wealth, and pleasure. The description of the author as *the son of David, king in Jerusalem* evokes images of Solomon, the consummate gatherer of wealth, wisdom, and pleasure (see also 1.2–2.11; 1 Kings 3–4; 10).

1.2–11: Preface. Despite constant activity, the world seems always to remain the same. **2:** *Vanity*, Heb “hebel,” which literally means “breath” or “vapor” (Isa 57.13; Ps 62.9). In Ecclesiastes, it is used as a metaphor for things that cannot be grasped either physically or intellectually, things that are ephemeral, insubstantial, enigmatic, or absurd. Elsewhere in the Bible, the human life span and human beings themselves are said to be “hebel” (see Pss 39.4–11; 62.9; 78.33; Job 7.16). *Vanity of vanities* is a way of expressing the superlative in Hebrew; hence the phrase means “utter vanity.” Virtually identical words are found in 12.8, the last verse of the book before the epilogue (12.9–14); the epigram thus frames the book. **3:** The term *gain* does not mean just “benefit,” but “excess,” “advantage,” or “surplus.” *Toil* is not the same as “work.” The normal Hebrew word for the latter is also the word for “worship,” but the word for *toil* typically bears negative connotations. *From all the toil* may also be translated as “in exchange for all their toil.” Here, as elsewhere in the book, *toil* refers not only to the process of toiling, but to the fruit of one’s toiling (see 2.10). The phrase *under the sun* occurs in the Bible only in Ecclesiastes, but it is attested elsewhere in the ancient Near East. It is a near synonym of “under the heavens” (1.13; 2.3; 3.1). “Under the heavens,” however, is a spatial designation (referring to what is happening “everywhere in the world”), whereas *under the sun* refers to the realm of the living as opposed to the realm of the dead (cf. 4.15; 9.6,9). **4:** *The earth remains forever*, better “the world always stays the same.” Despite human toiling and the coming and going of human generations, the world remains as it was. **5–7:** The elements of nature—light, air, and water—are also engaged in daily activities, with no new results. *The sun . . . hurries* (lit. “stomps” or “pants”) to its destination, only to have to recommence its routine. The winds blow every which way and streams flow endlessly, with no new results. **8–11:** As with nature, so with knowledge; human speculations and endless instructions produce nothing new. **11:** Cf. 2.16; 9.5.

1.12–2.11: The author’s experiences and accomplishments. The style of this passage is similar to that of many royal inscriptions in the ancient Near East. The author, in his assumed role as king, has experienced it all and done it all, but even he has to admit that nothing is ultimately reliable. **1.12:** The author takes on the persona of Solomon (1.1n.; 2.9). **13:** *Unhappy business* or “terrible preoccupation” may refer to human anxiety

¹⁴ I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.^a

¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

¹⁶ I said to myself, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.”¹⁷ And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind.^a

¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.

2 I said to myself, “Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But again, this also was vanity.² I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?”

³ I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine—my mind still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life.⁴ I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself;⁵ I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.⁶ I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.⁷ I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines.^b

⁹ So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me.¹⁰ Whatever

my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind,^a and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

¹² So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the one do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done.¹³ Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.

¹⁴ The wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness.

Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of them.¹⁵ Then I said to myself, “What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?” And I said to myself that this also is vanity.¹⁶ For there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How can the wise die just like fools?¹⁷ So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind.^a

¹⁸ I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me¹⁹—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.²⁰ So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun,²¹ because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom

^a Or *a feeding on wind*. See Hos 12.1

^b Meaning of Heb uncertain

over all that is happening in the world. **14:** *Under the sun*, see 1.3n. *Chasing after wind*, i.e., pursuit of futility (Hos 12.2; Prov 15.14; Sir 34.1–2). **15:** A proverb about humanly impossible tasks (cf. 7.13). **2.4–11:** A summary of accomplishments like those found in royal inscriptions. Despite his worldly successes, the author concludes that everything is but “vanity”—that is, beyond the grasp of mortals. **11:** *Nothing to be gained*, cf. 1.3n.

2.12–26: *The leveling effect of death*. Whatever advantage anyone might have in life is negated by death. **12–17:** Wisdom is better than folly (*as light excels darkness*, v. 13), yet the wise and fools face *the same fate* of death (v. 14; cf. 3.19–20; 9.2–3), and they are all *forgotten* after their death (cf. 1.11). **17:** *Chasing after wind*, see 1.14n. **18–23:** Toil does not give an advantage in the face of death. People cannot take the fruit of their toil with them when they die, and thus are discontented with it when they live. Even the possibility of passing an inheritance to heirs does not give enjoyment, for the heirs may not deserve the inheritance. **18:** *Under the sun*, see

and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.²² What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun?²³ For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

²⁴There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God;²⁵ for apart from him^a who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.^b

3 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
²a time to be born, and a time to die;
 a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
³a time to kill, and a time to heal;
 a time to break down, and a time to build up;
⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
 a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
⁵a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

⁹What gain have the workers from their toil? ¹⁰I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. ¹¹He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. ¹²I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; ¹³moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. ¹⁴I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. ¹⁵That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.^c

^a GkSyr: Heb *apart from me*

^b Or *a feeding on wind*. See Hos 12.1

^c Heb *what is pursued*

1.3n. 24–26: People do not have control over their future; the only good is to partake of life fully in the present, for enjoyment is *from the hand of God* (v. 24). Cf. 3.13; 5.18; 9.7–10. The sovereign God arbitrarily gives the possibility of enjoyment to those who are somehow favored, but not to *the sinner*, a term that may simply mean “the one who misses out,” the loser (cf. 7.26; 9.2,18; Prov 8.36; 13.22; 14.21; 19.2; 20.2).

3.1–15: **The determination of events.** God determines time and timing. 1–8: A rhythmic series of contrary pairs (seven sets, each with two pairs of opposites) that together represent the totality and variety of the times and seasons humans encounter. These events include those that simply happen to people (like being born and dying) and occasions to which they must respond (like planting and plucking up what is planted). 9: The rhetorical question is essentially the same as in 1.3; 2.22; 6.11, except that human beings are called *the workers* (lit. “the one who acts”), even though God is the one who acts effectively in the following verses. 10: *Business*, see 1.13n. 11: The same God who *made everything suitable for its time* ironically puts *a sense of past and future* (lit. “eternity”) into human consciousness. Human beings must live with this paradox of knowing the reality that transcends the moment (“eternity”) while being able to cope only with the moment. 12–13: In view of human limitations, one should partake of good, for it is *God's gift* to do so; cf. 5.18. 14: *Whatever God does endures forever*, the Hebrew should be taken to mean that God's deeds are “eternal,” i.e., not bound by time (see 3.11n.). The timeless, eternal character of God's doing stands in stark contrast to the “eternity” that exists only in human hearts (v. 11). Human activity is always only “in its time” (v. 11), whereas God's activity is not bound by time. The language of adding and subtracting is used elsewhere for matters that are decisive, authoritative, and invariable (Deut 4.2; 12.32; cf. Jer 26.2; Prov 30.6). God establishes the difference so that human beings might know their place, that is, *stand in awe* of God. 15: *What has gone by*, lit. “what is pursued.”

¹⁶ Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well. ¹⁷ I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work. ¹⁸ I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. ¹⁹ For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. ²⁰ All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. ²¹ Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth? ²² So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?

4 Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them. ² And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; ³ but better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

⁴ Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person's envy of another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.^a

⁵ Fools fold their hands and consume their own flesh.

⁶ Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil, and a chasing after wind.^a

⁷ Again, I saw vanity under the sun: ⁸ the case of solitary individuals, without sons or brothers; yet there is no end to all their toil, and their eyes are never satisfied with riches. “For whom am I toiling,” they ask, “and depriving myself of pleasure?” This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

⁹ Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. ¹¹ Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? ¹² And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

¹³ Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king, who will no longer take advice. ¹⁴ One can indeed come out of prison to reign, even though born poor in the kingdom. ¹⁵ I saw all the living who, moving about under the sun, follow that^b youth who replaced the king;^c ¹⁶ there was no end to all those people whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a chasing after wind.^a

^a Or *a feeding on wind*. See Hos 12.1

^b Heb *the second*

^c Heb *him*

3.16–22: The determination of humanity's fate. There are injustices in the world, even in places where one might expect justice; cf. 8.14. God will, however, adjudicate the situation in God's own time; cf. 12.14. **19:** As far as mortality is concerned, human beings have no advantage over animals: All must die. **20:** *One place*, Sheol, the abode of the dead (9.10). *Dust*, 12.7; Gen 3:19. **21:** *Who knows*, a rhetorical question. The author is apparently skeptical about the belief in survival after death, an idea which was beginning to be developed.

4.1–16: Relative good. In the light of the author's insistence that there is nothing better for humanity than to enjoy work (3.22), these verses make plain that everything thought by mortals to be good is only relatively so. **1–3:** The living still have to witness the injustices of life, whereas the dead no longer have to do so and those who have never been born never have to do so. **4–6:** On the one hand, human toil and strivings are driven by envy. On the other hand, the idleness of fools is self-destructive. The better alternative, even if only relatively good, is to have a little (material goods, enjoyment, or both), but to have it with peace. **6:** Sayings of the form “*better . . . than*” are common in Proverbs (12.9; 15.16–17; 16.8). **7–8:** People toil for no reason other than habit or obsessive compulsion. **7:** *Under the sun*, 1.3n. **9–12:** There is relative advantage in numbers, but no guarantee. A three-ply cord may still snap, although not as easily as a cord with only two strands or one. **13–16:** It is better to start out poorly and end up well. Every generation will have its new underdog-turned-hero, who will seem to have limitless support from populace, until the next hero comes along. **16:** *Vanity*, 1.2n. *Chasing after wind*, 1.14n.

²³ All this I have tested by wisdom; I said, “I will be wise,” but it was far from me. ²⁴ That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? ²⁵ I turned my mind to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things, and to know that wickedness is folly and that foolishness is madness. ²⁶ I found more bitter than death the woman who is a trap, whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are fetters; one who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. ²⁷ See, this is what I found, says the Teacher,^a adding one thing to another to find the sum, ²⁸ which my mind has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. ²⁹ See, this alone I found, that God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes.

8 Who is like the wise man?
And who knows the interpretation of a thing?

Wisdom makes one’s face shine,
and the hardness of one’s countenance
is changed.

² Keep^b the king’s command because of your sacred oath. ³ Do not be terrified; go from his presence, do not delay when the matter is unpleasant, for he does whatever

he pleases. ⁴ For the word of the king is powerful, and who can say to him, “What are you doing?” ⁵ Whoever obeys a command will meet no harm, and the wise mind will know the time and way. ⁶ For every matter has its time and way, although the troubles of mortals lie heavy upon them. ⁷ Indeed, they do not know what is to be, for who can tell them how it will be? ⁸ No one has power over the wind^c to restrain the wind,^c or power over the day of death; there is no discharge from the battle, nor does wickedness deliver those who practice it. ⁹ All this I observed, applying my mind to all that is done under the sun, while one person exercises authority over another to the other’s hurt.

¹⁰ Then I saw the wicked buried; they used to go in and out of the holy place, and were praised in the city where they had done such things.^d This also is vanity. ¹¹ Because sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the human heart is fully set to do evil. ¹² Though sinners do evil a hundred times and prolong their lives, yet I know

^a *Qoheleth*, traditionally rendered *Preacher*

^b Heb *I keep*

^c Or *breath*

^d Meaning of Heb uncertain

26: *The woman who is a trap*, this is not a polemic against women in general but echoes in allegorical fashion the warnings in other wisdom writings against Folly, personified as a seductive woman (Prov 2.16–19; 5.20; 6.24–35; 7.5–27; 23.27–28). Wisdom is elusive, but Folly is on a hunt to catch people unawares. **27:** *Teacher*, see 1.1n. *Adding one thing to another*, an image of an accountant or merchant working on a ledger (cf. v. 25). **28:** *One man among a thousand . . . a woman among all these*, this notoriously difficult sentence may be a gloss prompted by misinterpretation of v. 26 as referring to women in general. The first part of the verse refers to the elusiveness of wisdom (cf. Prov 1.28; 3.13–15; 31.10).

8.1–17: Reflections on the limits of power. 1–5: Traditional advice on how to react to arbitrary power only shows the limits of wisdom. 1: *Makes one’s face shine*, elsewhere it is always God who “makes one’s face shine” (Num 6.25; Pss 31.16; 67.1; 80.3,7,19; 119.135; etc.). The idiom means “to be gracious” or “to be pleasant.” Wisdom causes one to act pleasantly. 2: *Because of*, perhaps “in the manner of.” *Sacred oath*, an oath sworn in the name of God (Ex 22.11; 2 Sam 21.7; 1 Kings 2.43), hence, the most solemn oath. A *king’s command* should be taken that seriously. 3: *Do not delay when the matter is unpleasant*, or “do not persist in a harmful thing,” possibly an allusion to sedition. In the face of overwhelming odds, one should not do anything dangerous. 5b–7: *Time and way*, lit. “time and judgment” (cf. 3.1,16–17). There are a proper time and a proper judgment, although no one knows when and how until after the fact. 8: *Power over the wind to restrain the wind*, or “power over the (life-) breath to hold back the (life-)breath.” No one has the power to avert death. *No discharge from battle*, better “no substitution in battle.” No one can send a substitute to take his or her place in the final battle that is death. 10: The wicked are properly interred and honored upon their death (Job 21.32–33). *Vanity*, 1.2n. 11: The slow judicial process encourages the wicked to do even more evil (Job 21.19–21). 12–13: The wicked may live long, but the human life span is finally limited: they will not *prolong their days* (that are) *like a shadow*, a transient and unreliable

that it will be well with those who fear God, because they stand in fear before him,¹³ but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will they prolong their days like a shadow, because they do not stand in fear before God.

¹⁴ There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.¹⁵ So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun.

¹⁶ When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one's eyes see sleep neither day nor night,¹⁷ then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.

9 All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate one does not know. Everything that confronts them² is vanity,^a since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil,^b to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and

those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath.³ This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone. Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.⁴ But whoever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion.⁵ The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost.⁶ Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun.

⁷ Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do.⁸ Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head.⁹ Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.¹⁰ Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.

¹¹ Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong,

^a Syr Compare Gk: Heb *Everything that confronts them* ²is everything

^b Gk Syr Vg: Heb lacks *and the evil*

thing (cf. 6.12; Pss 102.11; 109.23; 144.4; Job 8.9; 14.2; 17.7). **14:** *Vanity . . . vanity*, here means an incomprehensible situation (see 1.2n.). **15:** *To eat, and drink, and enjoy*, traditionally “to eat, and to drink, and to be merry” (KJV); cf. 2.24; 3.13; 5.18; 9.7. **16–17:** *One's eyes see sleep neither day nor night*, an idiom for constant effort. Even those who are so dedicated to understanding God's mysterious activity cannot find what they yearn to know.

9.1–10: Enjoy life. All people face the common fate of death, regardless of their character. Yet life is better than death and one should enjoy life whenever able to do so. **1–2:** *Love* and *hate* may refer to human emotions that accompany their *deeds*, or to divine favor and disfavor. Since death *comes to all* (cf. 2.14–15; 3.19), one cannot deduce God's attitude. *Vanity*, 1.2n. **4–6:** For all its limitations, life is still better than death, for the dead will not have whatever life has to offer. For the living, there are still some possibilities, however uncertain and ephemeral those may be. **7–10:** Enjoy life while you can, for God has already *approved what you do*; when you die this will be impossible. A similar passage in the ancient Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh suggests that the advice to enjoy life in the full knowledge of certain death was a piece of folk wisdom. **8:** *Let your garments always be white*, clean garments indicate a happy, prosperous life. *Oil . . . on your head*, another indication of happiness and prosperity (cf. Ps 23.5). **9:** *Vain life*, lit. “days of vanity,” here refers to the ephemeral nature of life (see 1.2n.). **10:** *Whatever your hand finds to do*, means one's ability to act (cf. Lev 12.8; 25.28; 1 Sam 10.7). *Sheol*, the abode of the dead.

9.11–10.15: The world is full of risks. **9.11–12:** The author disputes the cause-and-effect or act-and-consequence logic that characterizes Proverbs' view of life. Outcomes are not predictable. *Time and chance*, i.e., death

heart and the desire of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

¹⁰ Banish anxiety from your mind, and put away pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.

12 Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”; ² before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with ^a the rain; ³ in the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly; ⁴ when the doors on the street are shut, and the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; ⁵ when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along^b and desire fails; because all must go to their

eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; ⁶ before the silver cord is snapped,^c and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, ⁷ and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath^d returns to God who gave it.

⁸ Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher;^e all is vanity.

⁹ Besides being wise, the Teacher^e also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs. ¹⁰ The Teacher^e sought to find pleasing words, and he wrote words of truth plainly.

¹¹ The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings that are given by one shepherd.^f ¹² Of anything beyond these, my child, beware.

^a Or *after*; Heb *‘ahar*

^b Or *is a burden*

^c Syr Vg Compare Gk: Heb *is removed*

^d Or *the spirit*

^e *Qoheleth*, traditionally rendered *Preacher*

^f Meaning of Heb uncertain

the gift of enjoyment. **12.1:** The mention of the *creator* anticipates v. 7. The Heb for *your creator* (“bore’eka”) sounds like the word “cistern” (“bor”) in v. 6. The call to *remember* points back to the injunction to enjoy while one is able (11.7–10), but it also points forward to the scene of death at the end of the passage and to the creator who gave and will receive the human life-breath (v. 7.) **2–7:** In a poem that uses eschatological language, the author takes poetic license in arguing that mortals should enjoy what they can while they still have a chance, for a time may come when no one can enjoy. With poetic exaggeration, the author depicts the end of human life in terms of the end of the world. **2:** The language of the darkening sky is reminiscent of prophetic eschatology (cf. Isa 5.30; 13.10; Ezek 32.7–8; Am 5.8; 8.9; Mic 3.6). The Heb text says that rain clouds return “after” (not *with*) the rain, a sign of disaster, perhaps implying the return of the Flood (Gen 7.11–12; 8.2). **3:** *In the day when* (cf. Mal 3.1–3). Even the strong and valiant are terrified of what is happening (cf. Rev 6.12–17). The women who work the mills suddenly stop work (cf. Mt 24.40–41; Lk 17.34–35). Women look out the windows in despair (cf. Judg 5.28). The domestic routines are interrupted. **4:** *The doors of the street-bazaar are shut*; the mills that produce meals are silenced. *One rises up at the sound of a bird*, better “the sound of the birds rises,” a reference to the cacophony of birds of prey descending. Thus, while the salutary sound of the mill drops, the unsavory sound of the birds rises. Moreover, the birds actually descend when they see the terror on the ground (v. 5). **5:** The translation of this difficult text depends on the interpretation of the scenario. The consonantal text of the Hebrew suggests the decline and dying of several types of trees. Thus, it is not the blossoming of *the almond tree*, but the tree becoming “hideous.” The “locust” tree, too, “droops” (NRSV: *the grasshopper drags itself along*), while the caper-berry tree defoliates (NRSV: *desire fails*). In short, nature languishes (Am 1.2; Joel 2.12; Hab 3.17; Rev 6.12–14), as humanity marches toward the grave, *their eternal home* and an imaginary funeral takes place. **6:** Symbols of the permanent end of life. **7:** See Gen 2.7; 3.19. **8:** *Vanity of vanities*, the words echo 1.2, which together with this verse frame the body of the book.

12.9–14: Epilogue. An assessment and apology for the author and the book. **9:** The author is a typical sage: He teaches, gathers wisdom sayings, and works with them. **10:** Like a sage, the author’s words have been deliberately chosen and rightly presented. **11:** The words of the wise are hard to hear but, like goads and nails, they have been deliberately applied as by a shepherd to his flock. **12:** A formulaic conclusion to establish the

Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

¹³ The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.

¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, including^a every secret thing, whether good or evil.

^a Or *into the judgment on*

authority of the text. Everything intended by the author has been laid out. 13: *The end of the matter*, these words originally ended the epilogue and, hence, the book. The words beyond this point are later additions. The call to *fear God* is found elsewhere in the book (3.14; 5.7; 8.12–13), but the call to obey God's *commandments* is not.