EXPOSITION OF ECCLESIASTES

---

by

Jason Coke

Dec 2025

EXPOSITION OF ECCLESIASTES

Canonical Context

All 66 inspired books of the Protestant canon relate to the progressively revealed Messiah-redeemer-ruler metanarrative of the Bible, but not in the same way. Each book either *carries* the metanarrative,[1] *contributes* to it but does not carry it,[2] or *contemplates* the metanarrative.[3] A book's placement into one of these three categories does not necessarily depend on genre, even though a correlation frequently exists. Rather, a book's categorization depends on its contents and its relationship to other books.[4]

In the Messiah-redeemer-ruler metanarrative of Scripture, the following compose the major elements of the story:

Table 1: Elements of the Metanarrative of Scripture

Setting:	Heaven and earth	Gen 1–2
Hero:	God the Father	Gen 1–2
Hero's desire:	Image bearers to rule the earth	Gen 1:26–28
Problem:	Image bearers gave their rule to the serpent	Gen 3
Solution (the plot):	Promise seed will strike the serpent and restore rule to image bearers	Gen 3:15–Rev 19
Turning point:	The Cross	Gospels
Climax:	The Great Tribulation	Rev 6–19
Resolution / denouement:	Image bearers again rule the earth	Rev 20–22

[1] The carrier category refers to biblical books that carry the primary plotline of the Messiah-redeemer-ruler metanarrative of the Bible. Many books of historical narrative and certain parts of prophetic books fall into this category because they carry the Messiah-redeemer-ruler metanarrative. Such books describe the outworking of the promise in Genesis 3:15–16.

[2] The contributor category refers to biblical books that contribute to, but do not carry, the plot of the Messiah-redeemer-ruler metanarrative of the Bible. Most prophetic books and certain parts of the NT epistles fall into this category because while they do not carry the Messiah-redeemer-ruler metanarrative, they contribute important (often prophetic) information about that metanarrative. Additionally, certain historical narratives run in parallel to one another (e.g., Kings and Chronicles, the four Gospels). In these cases, 1–2 Kings function as the carrier and 1–2 Chronicles as the contributor. Among the Gospels, Matthew functions as the carrier and the other three as contributors.

[3] The contemplator category refers to biblical books that neither carry nor contribute to the plot of the Messiah-redeemer-ruler metanarrative of the Bible. Rather, these books reflect upon (contemplate) the realities of that narrative. Books of wisdom, poetry, and most NT epistles fall into this category, because in light of the Genesis 3:15 promised seed having come, they address how the people of God should live until he returns to establish his kingdom.

[4] For this reason, certain biblical books fit into more than one of these three categories.

As shown in Table 1, the Bible as a whole presents God as the hero of the story who desires his image bearers to rule the world on his behalf. This metanarrative begins in the book of Genesis and concludes in the book of Revelation. Genesis presents the setting,[5] the characters,[6] the plot problem,[7] and the beginning of the rising action.

Ecclesiastes neither carries the Messiah-redeemer-ruler metanarrative nor contributes prophetic information to it. However, the author of Ecclesiastes wrote the entire work *in light of* the metanarrative's plot problem described in Genesis 3. Because the image bearers rebelled against God, not only did a serpent assume their place of rulership over the earth, but all humanity became subject to sin and death, and creation itself was cursed. Sections below will describe the extensive intertextuality between Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1–4, and how the author examines life in a fallen and cursed world as articulated in Genesis 3. Many allusions are made in Ecclesiastes to the works of Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel in early Genesis. The author of Ecclesiastes thus examines life "under the sun," meaning life in a cursed world (as per Gen 3) with the certainty of death, and finds it to be meaningless—apart from the fear of God. Ecclesiastes therefore functions entirely as a *contemplator* of the biblical metanarrative.

Occasion

Determining the occasion of Ecclesiastes is profoundly difficult. The history of interpretation is so vast and varied that one despairs at reading the scholarly works on Ecclesiastes. Proposals for the date range from the 10th century to the 2nd century BC. Locales include anywhere from Israel to Egypt. Debates over authorship rage, and the proposed messages and interpretations of the book are contentious and contradictory. Linguistic evidence is posited as evidence for date and author, but likewise disputed. In terms of the structure of the text, "There is hardly one commentator who agrees with another."[8] It is therefore with humble trepidation that this paper aligns with the traditional view of Solomonic authorship.

Who?

The text does not explicitly identify its author by name, but instead uses the pseudonym קֹהֶלֶת, "Qoheleth." This name comes from the Qal feminine participle of the verb קהל, "to assemble." The title literally means "Assembler," although it typically is translated as "Preacher" or "Teacher." The traditional view held to King Solomon as the author of Ecclesiastes. Scholarly consensus today—even among conservatives—has certainly moved away from Solomonic authorship. While there are many arguments leveled against Solomonic authorship, none are determinative, and neither is the cumulative weight of their arguments. The text itself identifies the book as the words of "Qoheleth," the "Assembler" who was "the son of David" (1:1), the "king in Jerusalem" (1:1), "king over Israel in Jerusalem" (1:12), one whose

---

[5] Heaven and earth, Genesis 1–2.

[6] God, the hero of the story; mankind, the object of God's desire; and the antagonist, the serpent.

[7] Despite God's desire for mankind to rule the earth on his behalf, the man and woman gave their rule over to the serpent (Gen 3).

[8] Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, vol. 23A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1992), xxxv.

autobiographical journey (chs. 2–11) shares numerous parallels with Solomon (1 Kgs 2–11), one with great wisdom (1:16) and wealth (2:4–9), and a wise sage who taught knowledge and arranged many proverbs (12:9). If these statements are taken at face value, then Solomon was in fact the only person who could meet the criteria in 1:1 and 1:12, much less *all* these criteria. After Solomon's life, the united kingdom of Israel split, and there never was another king based in Jerusalem who ruled over Israel. Instead, the kings of Israel ruled from Samaria, while the kings of Judah ruled in Jerusalem. Only David and Solomon ruled the united kingdom (i.e., "Israel") from Jerusalem, and of those two, obviously only Solomon fits as "the son of David" (1:1). Thus the description of Qoheleth in 1:1 and 1:12 alone, taken *prima facie*, could only be fulfilled by Solomon. Suggestions that such indicators in the text merely refer to the adoption of a "Solomonic persona" for rhetorical or literary purposes and not the historical Solomon (so Longman III) are interpretive rather than determinative.[9]

Many point to the alleged "past tense" of the Qal perfect הָיִיתִי מָלַךְ (1:12) as an argument against Solomonic authorship. They suppose that the verb implies the author has now ceased ruling and thus does not fit Solomon's life, since he ruled until his death. But this argument is rebutted by Garrett, who writes, "The use of the perfect tense in 1:12 proves nothing; certainly it does not establish that we here have a later author writing in behalf of the now-dead Solomon. It may indicate that Ecclesiastes was written by an aged Solomon near the end of his life."[10] The verb may be interpreted as a past perfect and translated as, "I have been king…" rather than "I *was* king." In any case, 1:12 does not conclusively prohibit Solomonic authorship.

Others likewise suggest that if Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, he would have no need to assume the pseudonym Qoheleth.[11] However, if Solomon had indeed written the book, then no audience at his time would doubt the references to kingship and Davidic sonship referred to Solomon. Instead, Solomon could have adopted the pseudonym Qoheleth in order to "distanc[e] himself from his role as absolute monarch and tak[e] on the mantle of the sage."[12]

Linguistically, the evidence for non-Solomonic authorship is likewise dubious. Many biblical and semitic language scholars strongly insisted that the Hebrew language of Ecclesiastes was late, and the book must therefore be a post-exilic composition. Some even insist on the basis of language that it *must* be late third century BC.[13] But these conclusions are vastly overstated. Instead, as the study of the ancient Hebrew language has advanced, scholars have realized that "Ecclesiastes does not fit into any known section of the history of the Hebrew language … Our conclusion must be that the language of Ecclesiastes does not at present provide an adequate

---

[9] For example, Longman III asserted, "the Solomonic persona is being adopted for literary and communicative purposes … the wise man who adopts the nickname Qohelet pretends to be Solomon while he explores avenues of meaning in the world. Solomon was known as the wisest and richest man to have ever lived. If he could not find meaning in the things of the world, who could?" (Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998], 4–5.)

[10] Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 261.

[11] R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 1074.

[12] Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC, 264.

[13] Knut M. Heim, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 18, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 4.

resource for dating."[14] Indeed, the debate over the datability of Hebrew texts *at all* based on linguistic or lexical patterns is ongoing and by no means settled.[15]

Lastly, scholars argue against Solomonic authorship because of alleged dual authorship between Qoheleth and an anonymous "frame narrator" who wrote 1:1–11 and 12:8–14 around the supposed words of Qoheleth (1:12–12:7).[16] If the assumption of a frame narrator were correct, then Solomonic authorship must certainly be abandoned and an anonymous author assumed. But the supposition of frame narration is itself dubious. Indeed, Garrett advances the idea that Ecclesiastes requires a more nuanced approach than mere redaction-history between an anonymous editor framing the words of Qoheleth in the middle. Instead, he discerns three levels of discourse in Ecclesiastes: (1) the frame narrator, who provides the biographical details of the author to firmly situate him in history, (2) Wisdom, who speaks universal truths corresponding with reality, and (3), Qoheleth, who offers first-person meditations and experiences from which the audience can learn.[17] He argues that "*All the levels of narration are a matter of literary technique and are not indications of redaction history*. The reason they all flow together so well is that they are all part of the single perspective of a single author. The frame-narrator, wisdom, and the Teacher are all masks behind which we hear the one voice of the author" (italics original).[18] Furthermore, the conclusion of the alleged frame narrator is to fear God and keep his commandments (12:13). Yet, the speech of Qoheleth offers at least four mentions of fearing God in anticipation of such a conclusion (3:14; 5:6 MT [5:7]; 7:18; 8:12–13). Scholars who assume a redactional history and multiple authors thus fail to account for what is, in fact, the unified argument of a single author throughout the entire work.

In any case, the debate of authorship for Ecclesiastes could consume an entire paper. The point of this discussion has been to demonstrate two major points. First, textual and literary indications support the possibility of Solomonic authorship. Second, the scholarly arguments against Solomonic authorship are generally overstated and have reasonable answers in response to them. This present author does not presume to know with certainty that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes. However, this discussion has shown that there are numerous good reasons to support this conclusion, and the arguments against it are not as strong as their proponents suppose.

---

[14] Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 18, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 22.

[15] Benjamin J. Noonan, *Advances in the Study of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic: New Insights for Reading the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 223–60.

[16] See Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT, 8–9.

[17] Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC, 262–63.

[18] Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC, 263. Garrett rightly points out that, "The Teacher (Qoheleth) is obviously a pseudonym; there is no reason to suppose that the author who writes "the Teacher says" (the frame-narrator) and the author who gives us the bulk of the book (the Teacher) are two different people. Otherwise we would expect the frame-narrator to have given us the Teacher's actual name. When he says, "I, the Teacher" (1:12), any notion that the Teacher and the frame-narrator (or "author/editor") are actually two separate individuals must be abandoned as a fancy of biblical criticism" (263–64).

When?

If Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, then this would date the work to Solomon's life in the 10th century BC. If not Solomon, then the range of possible dates for composition becomes vast.

To Whom?

In his conclusion, Solomon explicitly addressed בְּנִי, "my son" (12:12).[19] All 28 imperative verbs in Ecclesiastes are masculine singular, suggesting that his commands in the book were intended for this "son." Quite reasonably, the son Solomon intended to write would be the one succeeding him on the throne of Israel, namely, Rehoboam. While this conclusion is neither explicit nor definitive, the text does permit it. This conclusion is not unreasonable especially when compared with Proverbs. If not Rehoboam, then it's unclear who the son of 12:12 would be. If not written by Solomon, then there becomes no basis at all for identifying the son, and we are merely left with a generic Israelite audience.

Where?

The text does not indicate the location of composition. If written by Solomon, then Jerusalem would be a logical—though not conclusive—location for its composition. If not Solomon, then the location is entirely unknown, although Jerusalem would still be a reasonable guess because many of the OT canonical works were authored there.

Why?

Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes as a literary work of wisdom for his son Rehoboam within the context of the fallen world explained and described in early Genesis. In fact, many have noted the deep influences of Genesis 1–4 in Ecclesiastes.[20] Indeed, the background of early Genesis is central to the purpose and message of Ecclesiastes. For that reason, considerable development of thought is given in the points below to demonstrate Qoheleth's frequent use of Genesis 1–4.[21] Thse connections include the following:

- The presence of creation language (earth, sun, sea, rivers, moon, stars, light) as bookends around the argument of Qoheleth (1:4–7; 12:2).
- "Both go to one place—both came from dust and both return to dust" (3:20) alludes to, "For from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19).
- "And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it" (12:7) alludes to Genesis 3:19 (as above) and also regarding the breath /

---

[19] This evokes memory of the same address בְּנִי, of his son in Proverbs some 30 times (e.g., Prov 1:8, 10, 15, etc.).

[20] See Matthew Seufert, "The Presence of Genesis in Ecclesiastes," *WTJ* 78, no. 1 (2016): 75–92. Seufert cites many others who have written on the connections between early Genesis and Ecclesiastes.

[21] This summary is gleaned from Seufert, "The Presence of Genesis in Ecclesiastes," *WTJ* 78, no. 1 (2016): 80–90.

spirit, "when Yahweh God formed the man of dust from the ground, and he blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Gen 2:7).

- "God made mankind upright" (7:29) alludes to, "God created humankind" (Gen 1:27).
- "… but they have devised many schemes (חֶשְׁבּוֹן)" (7:29) probably alludes to Adam and Eve's fall in the garden (Gen 3:6) while loosely alluding to "And Yahweh saw that the evil of humankind was great upon the earth, and every inclination of the thoughts (מַחְשֶׁבֹת) of his heart was always only evil" (Gen 6:5).
- "I set my mind to try to seek wisdom and the plan (חֶשְׁבּוֹן)" (7:25). The close connection between חֶשְׁבּוֹן (plan / schemes, spoken of negatively in 7:29) may point to Eve's observation of the forbidden fruit's ability to make her "wise" (לְהַשְׂכִּיל) (Gen 3:6).
- The entire unit of 7:23–8:1 may refer to the Fall.[22]
- אָדָם for "man" (7:28) in contrast to "woman," rather than the generic, אִישׁ "man / husband."
- בֹּוֹרְאֶיךָ as Creator (12:1) and God having created (בָּרָא) man (noted three times in Gen 1:27).
- The command to remember (זכר) your Creator (12:1) may recall God's creation of the male (also זכר) (Gen 1:27).
- The verb עָשָׂה as a creational term in Genesis (Gen 1:7, 25, 26; 2:2, 4, 18) and "God made (עָשָׂה) mankind upright" (7:29).
- God gave the man fruit to eat (אָכַל) (Gen 2:16) and Qoheleth notes eating is gift from God (2:24–25; 3:13; 5:17 MT [5:18], 5:18 MT [5:19]; 8:15).
- Seven times in Genesis 1, the narrator noted, "And God saw (רָאָה) that it was good" (or "very" good) (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), while Qoheleth noted just the opposite: וְרָאִיתִי כִּי אֵין טוֹב, "And I saw that there was no good" (3:22).
- Solomon's reminiscing of his accomplishments in planting gardens, fruit trees, pools of water, acquiring men, women, livestock, cattle, flocks and silver and gold (2:4–8) virtually parallels the description of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2. Qoheleth's refusal to withhold anything his eyes desired (2:10) then becomes a likely parallel to the woman's desiring of the forbidden fruit (3:5–6).
- A contrast between God's seeing everything and declaring that it was very good (Gen 1:31) and Qoheleth's observation: "I saw all the works that are done under the sun. Look! Everything is vanity (הֶבֶל) and chasing wind" (1:14). Both verses have these words in the same order: רָאָה, כֹּל, עָשָׂה, and הִנֵּה. That Qoheleth could look at everything and declare it הֶבֶל (meaningless) while God looked at everything and declared it טוֹב (good) is attributable to the fall of Genesis 3.

[22] This would explain Qoheleth's extremely negative view of the woman—he was referring to Eve and the results of her deception by the serpent.

- Qoheleth noted that everything had already been named (קָרָא) (6:10), a clear reference to God and Adam calling (קָרָא) everything in order to name them (Gen 1:5, 8, 10; 2:19–20, 23; 3:20).[23]
- Various word pairings are included in both early Genesis and Ecclesiastes:
  - שָׁמַיִם and אֶרֶץ, heaven and earth (Gen 1:1, 15, 17, 20; 2:1, 4; see Eccl 5:1 MT [5:2]).
  - יוֹם and לַיְלָה, day and night (Gen 1:5, 14, 16, 18; see Eccl 2:23; 8:16).
  - בֹּקֶר and עֶרֶב, morning and evening (Gen 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31; see Eccl 11:6).
  - אוֹר and חֹשֶׁךְ, light and darkness (Gen 1:4, 5, 18; see Eccl 2:13; 11:7–8; 12:2).
  - טוֹב and רַע, good and evil (Gen 2:9, 17; 3:5, 22; see Eccl 7:3; 8:12; 12:14).
- The עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם, birds of the heavens (Gen 1:26, 28, 30; 2:19, 20) mentioned by Qoheleth (10:20).
- The עֵץ פְּרִי, trees of fruit (Gen 1:11, 12, 29) also mentioned by Qoheleth (2:5).
- The phrase כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ, "all the days of your life" (Gen 3:14, 17) repeated identically—or similarly—by Qoheleth (2:3; 5:16 MT [5:17].
- The co-location of נָחָשׁ "serpent" and עֶצֶב "sorrow / pain" in the garden (Gen 3:14–17) and in Qoheleth's example of work resulting in wounds and snake bites (10:8–11).
- Adam's condemnation to toil the ground with sorrow (Gen 3:17–18) is reflected in Qoheleth's view of work bringing about injury (10:8–11).

In addition to the points made above, and quite central to his argument, Qoheleth's repetition of the word הֶבֶל (vanity / breath / mirage / vapor / meaningless / futility) some 38 times is almost certainly a play on the proper name הֶבֶל, "Abel." Qoheleth bracketed his entire reflection with his thesis statement: הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים הַכֹּל הָבֶל, "vanity of vanities … all is vanity!" (1:2; 12:8). Indeed, from the perspective of those aligned with the Serpent, Abel's life was meaningless and wasted. His worship of God did not result in any profit or any good in this life, and then he died at Cain's hand. Antic summarizes:

> Abel's name *Hebel* ("breath, vapor, vanity") stresses the transitory nature of human life, the sense of transience and worthlessness. It also emphasizes the fact that in the eyes of other people Abel did not amount to much. When he was born, he was called the "brother of Cain," and even after that event he was constantly referred to as "the brother," "Abel his brother," "Abel your brother," "my brother's keeper," "your brother's blood." Abel is a brother; yet "he does not have a brother, he is a brother only … His life gives the impression of being meaningless, absurd, sheer transience, worthless."[24]

---

[23] Seufert notes, "Without the Genesis background here this verse lies in obscurity. But with it, it makes sense. The coupling of קָרָא with שֵׁם, the Niphal's silent subject, Genesis's specific use of קָרָא, and the arguments already rehearsed and to follow concerning the Ecclesiastes-Genesis relationship in general, make a Genesis reference sure" ("The Presence of Genesis in Ecclesiastes," *WTJ* 78, no. 1 [2016]: 83–84).

[24] Radiša Antic, "Cain, Abel, Seth, and the Meaning of Human Life as Portrayed in the Books of Genesis and Ecclesiastes," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 44, no. 2 (2006): 207.

Continuing the connection with Abel, Qoheleth observed that "sometimes the righteous suffer what the wicked deserve, and sometimes the wicked receive what the righteous deserve" (8:14) a phrase bracketed by הֶבֶל before and after it. It's a virtual certainly that the author had Cain and Abel in mind here—yet if (for some reason) not, the brothers nonetheless perfectly embodied Qoheleth's sentiment. Qoheleth repeated that same observation elsewhere: "I have seen all these things in my vain life: Sometimes a righteous man perishes in spite of his righteousness, and sometimes a wicked man lives a long life in spite of his evil" (7:15). Abel, then, serves as "an appropriate fixed allusion throughout the book."[25] His life illustrated the post-fall futility of life under the sun.

Thus, the above discussion has provided the textual / intertextual basis for Qoheleth's writing of Ecclesiastes in light of Genesis 1–4. Two of Qoheleth's major concerns—those of death and toilsome labor—explicitly derive from early Genesis. The reason for death, toilsome labor, unprofitable activities, why bad things happen to good people, why wisdom has limited benefit, and why life under the sun is הֶבֶל (meaningless) is because of Adam's disobedience to God's command in the garden, resulting in the fall. Thus in a post-fall world, Solomon offered a logical argument as to why his son Rehoboam should obey God's commands: since Adam's disobedience to God resulted in a world of הֶבֶל "vanity," Rehoboam had every reason to accept his father's conclusion that he should fear God and keep his commands in light of his coming judgments (12:13–14).

In summary, Solomon was probably at an advanced age and anticipating the soon succession of his son Rehoboam to the throne of Israel. In order that Rehoboam might govern Israel wisely, Solomon adopted the pseudonym "Qoheleth" and wrote Ecclesiastes in order to persuade Rehoboam to fear God and keep his commandments because this would result in his wise rule over the nation. Solomon's observations of the futility of life in a fallen and cursed world on account of Adam's rebellion resulting in toilsome labor and inevitable death demonstrate *why* Rehoboam should obey God. Since Adam's disobedience led to an existence full of pain and futility, disobedience to God's present commands in light of his future judgments would prove just as unproductive. Therefore, the ultimate duty of man—and how much more so the king of Israel?—was to fear God and keep his commandments (12:13).

Genre

Ecclesiastes is classified as wisdom literature.

Proposed Message Statement

In order to address his upcoming death and the succession of his son Rehoboam to the throne of Israel, King Solomon wrote a book of wisdom in the 10th century, likely in Jerusalem and near the end of his life, to his son Rehoboam in order to explain how Adam's disobedience to God's command resulted in the futility of life's toilsome labor, inevitable troubles, and death, so that in light of God's coming judgments, Rehoboam would not govern Israel according to the futile ways of man, but wisely, by fearing God and keeping his commandments.

---

[25] Seufert, "The Presence of Genesis in Ecclesiastes," *WTJ* 78, no. 1 (2016): 86.

Use of Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes

Classical rhetoric employs three modes and three species of rhetoric. The three modes of rhetoric include *logos*,[26] *pathos*,[27] and *ethos*.[28] The three species include judicial,[29] epideictic,[30] and deliberative[31] rhetoric.[32] In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon primarily made use of emotional rhetoric (*pathos*). The bulk of Ecclesiastes constitutes his examination of the absolute futility of life under the sun (i.e., life in a fallen and cursed world) and was intended to drive his son Rehoboam to a point of absolute dejection about the meaninglessness of life. Having developed the problem, Solomon then turned to the logical solution in his conclusion: fear God and keep his commandments in light of his coming judgments. Since the disobedience of Adam is what resulted in the world's cursed condition, Rehoboam would fare no better on the day of judgment if he lived in disobedience (*logos*). Instead, fearing God and keeping his commands would lead to a superior outcome, and was therefore the more logical path (*logos*). Solomon also included some ethical rhetoric to establish his credibility and demonstrate why his audience should listen to his conclusions (*ethos*).

Solomon thus used these elements of emotional, logical, and ethical rhetoric for his overall deliberative purpose that in light of God's coming judgments, Rehoboam would not govern Israel according to the futile ways of man, but wisely, by fearing God and keeping his commandments.

Proposed Outline

I. Introduction (1:1)
II. Reflections on life under the sun (1:2–12:8)
III. Conclusion (12:9–14)

---

[26] The rhetoric of *logos* employs logical arguments intended to appeal to rational principles found within the author's discourse.

[27] The rhetoric of *pathos* employs arguments intended to arouse an emotional reaction and play upon the audience's feelings.

[28] The rhetoric of *ethos* makes ethical appeals on the basis of credibility: good character or authority.

[29] With judicial rhetoric, the author seeks to persuade the audience to make a judgment about events that occurred in the past. This judgment often deals with questions of truth or justice, and can be positive (a defense or "apology" of correctness / innocence) or negative (a prosecution, emphasizing guilt).

[30] With epideictic rhetoric, the author seeks to persuade his audience to hold or reaffirm a certain point of view in the present time. The author wants to increase (or decrease / undermine) his audience's asset to a certain value or belief. To this end, epideictic rhetoric will frequently use examples of *praise* and *blame*.

[31] With deliberative rhetoric, the author seeks to persuade the audience to take (or not take) some action in the (often near) future. Deliberative rhetoric deals with questions of self-interest and future benefits for the audience, and appears in the form of exhortation (positive) or warning (negative).

[32] For a complete discussion of classical rhetoric in biblical studies, see George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, Studies in Religion (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

Proposed Argument Exposition

With his **introduction (1:1)**, Solomon established both his true identity and his adopted persona for this book of wisdom.[33] Instead of presenting himself first as the absolute monarch (although this was true), he adopted first and foremost the persona of a wise sage קֹהֶלֶת, "Qoheleth." The term means "Assembler" the verbal form appears twice (1 Kgs 8:1, 2) with Solomon as subject when he assembled Israel for the dedication of the temple. Thus, Solomon will write this book of wisdom not primarily from his kingly perspective, but rather from the viewpoint of a wise, aged, and religious man who had explored every aspect of life under the fall (see introductory section above) and now offered his reflections and advice to his son Rehoboam. Yet, Solomon did not entirely detach from his royal identity; calling himself both "the son of David" and "king in Jerusalem." These were extremely relevant titles for Rehoboam as he would soon become king in Jerusalem and was likewise a "son" (in the Hebrew sense) of David.[34] As noted in the introduction, the later comment that Qoheleth was king over Israel *in Jerusalem* (1:12) solidifies Solomonic authorship because no other king in all of Israel or Judah's history was both the son of David and king over Israel in Jerusalem. Following Solomon's life, the Kings over Israel reigned from Samaria, not Jerusalem.

Thus, Solomon's introduction of himself as Qoheleth the sage, the son of David, and the king of Israel lends credibility to his status (*ethos*) and provides a reason as to why Rehoboam should accept his conclusions. The introduction established Solomon's authorial credibility, and in this way, it prepared Rehoboam to respond positively to Solomon's overall deliberative purpose that in light of God's coming judgments, Rehoboam would not govern Israel according to the futile ways of man, but wisely, by fearing God and keeping his commandments.

With his **reflections on life under the sun (1:2–12:8)**, Solomon introduced and developed the *problem* of the futility of life in a cursed and sinful world prior to offering his *solution* in the conclusion (12:9–14). Solomon's reflections in this section serve a primarily emotional purpose—to drive Rehoboam to the point of absolute despair over the utter meaninglessness of life (*pathos*). As he examines the human experiences of pleasure, wisdom, justice and injustice, uncertainty / time / chance, unprofitable and toilsome labor, and the inevitability of death, his examination finds that life "under the sun" is meaningless. "Under the sun" is Qoheleth's way of describing a cursed and sinful world. This emotional anguish functions to prepare Rehoboam for Solomon's conclusion and the solution to life under the sun (12:9–14). Many, especially among critical scholars, have accused Qoheleth of contradictory and unorthodox thinking in this large section of Ecclesiastes. In reality, however, Qoheleth was pointing out the contradictions of life under the sun precisely to show their utter futility—they are הֶבֶל, meaningless. This is an intentional technique he used to drive Rehoboam to despair of life under the sun so that he would accept Qoheleth's conclusion about fearing God and keeping his commandments.

Qoheleth's thesis הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים הַכֹּל הָבֶל, "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" in 1:2 and in 12:8 forms an inclusio which brackets his entire examination of life

---

[33] In this paper, the names "Solomon" and "Qoheleth" are used interchangeably.

[34] In Hebrew, grandsons and further generations are still identified as "sons" of a father. That is why many successive generations of kings in the line of David could still call themselves "sons of David."

under the sun. Inside the inclusio, nearly every aspect of Qoheleth's study of life in a fallen world contributes to the thesis that life is הֶבֶל. This word conveys the meanings of a vapor, mist, breath, mirage, useless, futile, or meaningless. At certain points, Qoheleth does offer a preview of his conclusion by pointing to the fear of God and his judgment (e.g., 3:14, 5:6 MT [5:7]; 7:18; 8:12–13). Qoheleth's argument through this section is traced below.

(1:3–11) Like the endless cycles of the sun, wind, and rivers, generation after generation lives on the earth, but their toil is ultimately unprofitable because all return to the dust and are forgotten by future generations.

(1:12–18) Qoheleth had vast amounts of wisdom, but this only led to the increase of sorrow and grief. His wisdom, in fact, led him to realize that everything was as meaningless as chasing after the wind.

(2:1–11) Qoheleth tested his heart with pleasure through wine, building projects, vineyards, gardens, pools of water, and the acquisition of slaves and a harem.[35] Despite denying himself nothing his heart desired, he found that everything was ultimately meaningless, הֶבֶל.

(2:12–16) Qoheleth recognized the superiority of wisdom over folly, but even wisdom was unprofitable because the same destiny (death) would overcome both the wise and the foolish.

(2:17–26) Qoheleth recognized that after he died, his toil and labor would be left to another who may or may not use it wisely. This would particularly speak from Solomon as father to Rehoboam as the son who would inherit the Davidic dynasty. Not only does the dying generation leave all their labor behind to someone else, but the toiler also receives nothing from his labor except grief and pain.

(3:1–17) Qoheleth's observation that there is a time for everything underscores the brevity of human activity because of death, despite a longing for eternity.[36] The logic of the exposition (3:9–14) of the poem (3:1–8) is summarized well by Garrett:

> First Conclusion: Our entrapment in time is another indication of our mortality (v. 9).
> Second Conclusion: Our labor is thus a lifelong affliction with no eternal results (v. 10).
> Qualification: Yet every aspect of life is appropriate in its time and should be accepted as such (v. 11a).
> Counterqualification: But we long for eternity and cannot be content with time alone (v. 11b).
> First Addendum: People prefer the joys of life to the sorrows (v. 12).
> Correlative to First Addendum: But the ability to enjoy life is itself a gift of God and thus under his control (v. 13).
> Second Addendum: Only God's work has the perfection and eternal worth for which people long (v. 14a, b).
> Correlative to Second Addendum: God uses time and mortality to humble the human race (v. 14c).[37]

---

[35] The language and imagery of this section evokes Genesis 1–2. See "Why?" in introductory section above.

[36] Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC, 297–98.

[37] Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC, 298–99.

Thus, the brevity of life and inevitability of death drive humanity either to despair or to fear God. With the poem (3:1–8) and its exposition (3:9–14), Qoheleth therefore previewed his conclusion that the despair brought about by the futility of life under the sun should drive man to fear God (3:14; see 12:13) because while injustice reigned on earth (3:16), God would ultimately judge everyone (3:17).

(3:18–22) Qoheleth observed that because man and beast both shared the same fate in the dust of the earth, living as a human was unprofitable as compared to an animal. Life was therefore meaningless, הֶבֶל.

(4:1–3) While Qoheleth had already noted how the inevitability of death resulted in the futility of life, he saw that due to the oppression and evil committed on the earth, the dead were actually better off than the living. And even better was the one never born to see the evils committed on earth.

(4:4–6) Seeking wealth from toil was based on envy, and while hunger consumes the lazy fool, it's better to have little than be consumed with burdensome labor. These nearly contradictory observations show the absurdity of laboring to accumulate possessions which cannot be kept.

(4:7–12) Furthermore, some toil for no one but themselves, and yet it is better to have the help of a companion. Yet one will die and leave their toil to another (2:17–26), and so toil and labor under the sun is therefore futile, הֶבֶל.

(4:13–16) Qoheleth observed that no matter who ruled, whether wise or foolish, young or old, large following or small, there would always be some dissatisfaction with leaders, so advancement to leadership was also futile, הֶבֶל.

(4:17–5:6 MT [5:1–7]) Religious aspirations and views of one's religious grandeur are but dreams and the many words of a fool, so it is better to be silent and fear God. This admonition to fear God also anticipates Qoheleth's conclusion.

(5:7 MT [5:8]–6:9) Neither riches nor poverty profit anything. People are born and die with nothing, and the rich may not enjoy their wealth. The best one can do is fulfill their appetite for food, but even then, hunger returns day after day. Length of life likewise does not profit, for the man who should live for 2,000 years still returns to the dust just as a stillborn child does. Life and toil are thus futile and meaningless, הֶבֶל.

(6:10–7:4) In light of Adam's fall,[38] Qoheleth offered several proverbs (7:1–4) pointing to the importance of living in light of one's inevitable death. While not making an explicit connection, the certainty of death provides strong rationale for Qoheleth's conclusion that man should fear God and keep his commandments.

(7:5–14) While wisdom does have some benefits, it can be corrupted, and it provides no advantage in knowing the future, nor the ability to change the outcomes God has determined. Even wisdom, then, is meaningless, הֶבֶל.

(7:15–8:1) Qoheleth recognized the limited benefits of righteous acts and wisdom against the backdrop of universal sin. Cain killed Abel and lived long (the wicked prospered) while righteous Abel had his life cut short (7:15). Qoheleth's strong words about the woman being a snare (7:26) refer to Eve in the garden. While God had created humanity upright, they went in search of many schemes (7:29). Wisdom thus does not ultimately profit because it cannot

[38] Adam named the animals of creation and contended with God, who was stronger than he (6:10), and it was his rebellion which resulted in death (6:12).

overcome humanity's sinfulness and it cannot reveal the interpretation of a matter (8:1), so making it meaningless, הֶבֶל.

(8:2–9) Qoheleth's advice for dealing with a king (8:2–6) is then balanced with the reality that no one may predict the future (8:7–8). So even someone who acts wisely before a king cannot hedge with certainty against a king's negative reaction, even to the king's hurt (8:9).

(8:10–9:12) Qoheleth observed that in a cursed world, the wicked may prosper and the righteous suffer (like Cain and Abel). Yet both share the same destiny in the grave, and both may meet an unexpected and sudden end because time and chance happen to all. Life and death are therefore meaningless, הֶבֶל. Nevertheless, Qoheleth foreshadowed his conclusion by suggesting that those who fear God will have a superior outcome as compared to the wicked (8:12–13).

(9:13–11:8) In this lengthy section, Qoheleth examined the futility of wisdom and the wearisomeness of labor. By an example of wisdom saving a city and by proverbs concerning wisdom, he demonstrated how easily wisdom is overcome by human folly. So wisdom does not ultimately profit, and neither does work: toil is wearisome and injurious. Yet laziness (failing to work) is no better, for it brings misfortune. Furthermore, uncertainty plagues all human activity. Thus, wisdom and folly, hard work and laziness, time and chance, are all meaningless because of the inevitability and permanence of death. Life under the sun is therefore הֶבֶל, futile.

(11:9–12:8) In light of his entire argument, Qoheleth's charge that the young man (Rehoboam, his son) enjoy his youth is somewhat muted by his earlier observations that pleasure is meaningless. Indeed, soon enough age would erode the pleasantness of life, and then death would come. Therefore, before the dust returns to the ground (i.e., a man dies) and his spirit goes to God (12:7), Qoheleth appealed that Rehoboam remember his Creator (12:1). Because of the inevitability of death, everything is futile, הֶבֶל (12:8).

Qoheleth's repetition of his thesis that הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים הַכֹּל הָבֶל, "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" from 1:2 and again here in 12:8 forms an inclusio which brackets his entire examination of life under the sun, that is, life in a fallen and cursed world where death reigns and one's toil is wearisome and unprofitable. His reminder to young Rehoboam that age and death would both inevitably come forms the capstone of his argument which was intended to drive Rehoboam to a point of complete despair (*pathos*).

Thus, Solomon's reflections on life under the sun (1:2–12:8) examined aspects of life in a cursed and fallen world. By assuming / alluding to Genesis 1–4 and its attendant realities, Solomon examined pleasure, wisdom, work, justice and injustice, uncertainty / time / chance, and most significantly, the inescapable reality of death. He discovered that life under the sun was futile. His intended goal in this section was to have Rehoboam agree with his thesis that because of Adam's disobedience, everything under the sun is utterly meaningless, הֶבֶל. Agreement would drive Rehoboam to a point of existential crisis; a place of anguish and hopelessness whereby he longed for a solution (*pathos*). Yet, as Qoheleth had indicated at numerous points through his argument, the fear of God is the necessary respite from the futility of life (3:14; 5:6 MT [5:7]; 7:18; 8:12–13). Thus, by driving Rehoboam to despair, this section contributed to Solomon's overall deliberative purpose that in light of God's coming judgments, Rehoboam would not govern Israel according to the futile ways of man, but wisely, by fearing God and keeping his commandments.

Having spent twelve chapters developing the *problem* that life in a fallen world is absolutely futile (הֶבֶל) on account of Adam's disobedience, Solomon's **conclusion (12:9–14)**

then directed Rehoboam to the *solution*. The notes of Qoheleth's wisdom, knowledge, and proverbs (12:9) and the remark of his words being upright and true (12:10) and like goads or pricks (12:11)[39] lend credibility and gravity to both his description of the problem (1:2–12:8) and the solution he offered (12:9–14) (*ethos*). Since Adam's disobedience led to a world of futility, Rehoboam's disobedience would likewise be futile in light of God's future judgments (12:13–14) (*logos*). Instead of disobeying as Adam did, Rehoboam should fear God and obey his commandments (12:13). As the future king, Rehoboam's obedience would lead to righteous governance of the Israelite kingdom, and this was Solomon's concern. Solomon's argument was both logical and emotional: logical because of the futility and negative outcomes of disobedience (*logos*), and emotional because after developing twelve chapters of reasons to despair of life under the sun, Solomon now offered the only ray of hope: fearing God and obeying his commands could result in an implied positive outcome on the day of judgment (12:14) (*pathos*).

Solomon's logical and emotional rhetoric in the conclusion thus provides the capstone and conclusion to the entire work. Life "under the sun," a reference to the fallen world on account of Adam's sin, was utterly meaningless because of its toilsome labor, its unpredictability—and yet also its circularity—and the inevitability of death. Wisdom, pleasure, and gain were all negated because of death. The only reprieve available to the הֶבֶל nature of life was to fear God and keep his commandments. Thus, having driven Rehoboam to the reality of the depths of misery concerning life under the sun, Solomon then provided the one and only release and escape from futility. In this way, Solomon contributed to his overall deliberative purpose that in light of God's coming judgments, Rehoboam would not govern Israel according to the futile ways of man, but wisely, by fearing God and keeping his commandments.

[39] Goads and pricks are painful, as are words of truth.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Antic, Radiša. "Cain, Abel, Seth, and the Meaning of Human Life as Portrayed in the Books of Genesis and Ecclesiastes." *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 44, no. 2 (2006): 203–11.

Athas, George. *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*. Edited by Tremper Longman III and Scot McKnight. The Story of God Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020.

Eaton, Michael A. *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*. Vol. 18. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983.

Garrett, Duane A. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*. Vol. 14. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993.

Harrison, R. K. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969.

Heim, Knut Martin. *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary: Commentary*. Edited by David G. Firth. Vol. 18. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. London: InterVarsity Press, 2019.

Longman, Tremper, III, and Raymond B. Dillard. *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Second Edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007.

Longman, Tremper, III. *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998.

Murphy, Roland. *Ecclesiastes*. Vol. 23A. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1992.

Noonan, Benjamin J. *Advances in the Study of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic: New Insights for Reading the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020.

Provan, Iain. *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001.

Seufert, Matthew. "The Presence of Genesis in Ecclesiastes." *The Westminster Theological Journal* 78, no. 1 (2016): 75–92.