

Ecclesiastes

Josh Cogliati

2021-August-15

1 Intro Reading

Ecclesiastes, choose a reasonable one for reading like New King James Version.

1:1 - 1:18
2:12 - 2:16
3:1 - 3:8
3:16 - 3:22
4:1 - 4:6
4:9 - 4:16
5:8 - 5:17
7:1 - 7:14
7:23 - 7:25
8:14 - 8:17
9:1 - 9:18
12:1 - 12:8

2 Sermon

“There is nothing new under the sun” describes a lot of how 2020 and 2021 have felt to me. We kept doing the same thing over and over, with very little change.

Personally, Ecclesiastes is my favorite book of the Hebrew bible,¹ I have read it multiple times thru out my life and I think the questions in it are fascinating.

¹That is, Ecclesiastes is my favorite book in Jewish scripture portions of the Christian Bible.

Ecclesiastes is the traditional Christian name, but the Hebrew name for the book is Qohelet. Qohelet possibly means assemble, with the -et either meaning the feminine form, or possibly to indicate a vocation.²

The traditional author of Qohelet is considered to be Solomon because of the first line “The words of Qohelet son of David, king in Jerusalem.”³ which would imply that the author was David’s son Solomon and from that it was written around 900 BCE.

However, most scholars think that is written later. C. L. Seow, for example, argues that it is written a few decades before 333 BCE, since there are Persian loan words in the text, but no Greek loan words.⁴ Basically, Qohelet was probably written after Judea became part of the Persian empire in around 500 BCE and before Judea was conquered by Alexander the Great in 333 BCE. Qohelet along with the other books of the five scrolls (such as Song of Songs and Ruth) are some of the newer books in the Hebrew bible.

Qohelet starts and ends with the words “Vanity of vanities” in the New King James version which are a translation of havel havalim. The word “hevel” is literally breath or vapor,

²Page 337, *The Wisdom Books* by Robert Alter

³Ecc 1:1

⁴Page 338, *The Wisdom Books* by Robert Alter

and “havel havalim” is an extreme case of that.⁵ Robert Alter translates that verse as “Merest breath, said Qohelet, merest breath. All is mere breath.” Qohelet plays with this metaphor of air more when Qohelet talks of grasping or herding the wind.

Qohelet’s metaphors and discussions lead to many questions. I think it interesting that Qohelet questions whether wisdom has any advantage over foolishness.⁶ That is an unusual perspective. Tho’ I will point out that it very much an open question whether humans’ big brains will destroy ourselves or save ourselves.

Qohelet asks another question, which I think is Qohelet’s most important question, is where is the meaning in life, because it is not coming from the world. You can spend your whole life looking for meaning in the universe, and I think the result will be that you will never find: The definitive answer to what the purpose of everything is.

I am not sure a full and definitive answer is possible, but I think asking the question is important, and seeking the answer is important.

The traditional Judeo-Christian answer is right in Ecclesiastes, inserted at the end, probably by a later writer:

12:12 Furthermore, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

13 This is the end of the matter. All has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. 14 For God will bring every work into judgment, with every

hidden thing, whether it is good, or whether it is evil.⁷

So the Judeo-Christian answer is God. Look outside of yourself and look to God to find your meaning. As the book Micah⁸ says:

8 He has shown you, O man, what is good. What does Yahweh require of you, but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

I would warn those who think saying the word “God” is a definitive answer that there is an entire Talmud worth of discussion on how to keep God’s commandments and so this is by no means an easy rule to apply.

Buddhism emphasizes that we need to look outside our current individual life. Thich Nhat Hanh states:

We are in the habit of identifying ourselves with our bodies. The idea that we are this body is deeply entrenched in us. But we are not just this body; we are much more than that. The idea that “This body is me and I am this body” is an idea we must get rid of. If we do not, we will suffer a great deal. We are *life*, and life is far vaster than this body, this concept, this mind.⁹

An older verse from the Way of the Bodhisattva has:

Whatever happiness there is in the world

⁵Page 346, *The Wisdom Books* by Robert Alter

⁶Such as “he who adds wisdom adds pain” in 1:18 or “nor bread to the wise” in 9:11 or the story in 9:13-16

⁷Ecclesiastes 12:12-12:14, *World English Bible*

⁸Micah 6:8, *World English Bible*

⁹Thich Nhat Hanh, *you are here*, pg 127

All comes from desiring others to be
happy.
And whatever suffering there is in the
world
All comes from desiring oneself to be
happy.¹⁰

So the Buddhist answer was to look outside of the body and to help others, and the Christian to look outside yourself to God. I agree with both Christianity and Buddhism that we do need to find meaning outside of our own individual life.

Atheist Greta Christina has her own answer:

In a world without gods, who cares about us? We do. We care about ourselves, and we care about each other, the other flawed, confused, messy animals living on the same mortal scale. There's no immense, eternal, perfect being watching our every move, elated at our triumphs and devastated by our failures. We matter because we matter to each other, in our own short time span, on our own small scale. We make each other important.

Being an atheist doesn't mean life isn't important. It means we make our own importance. The human scale is where we live. It's what we have. And if we decide that's the most important scale, there's nobody out there to tell us otherwise.¹¹

I think we can find meaning in life, but I think Qohelet's writings are useful to keep us from being overconfident in this. Our life may be mere

¹⁰pg 146, *Mind In Comfort and Ease*, The Dalai Lama, quoted from *The Way of the Bodhisattva*

¹¹Greta Christina, *The Way of the Heathen*, pg 38

breath, but we can connect ourselves to something more.

3 Closing Reading

Read Ecclesiastes 11:1-10 and 12:1-12:8 from Robert Alter as closing reading. (Revised Standard Version could work instead.)