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# THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES (QOHELET)

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**Version:** 9 September 2017; 17 September 2017; 19 September 2017; 20 September 2017

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## MY NOTES

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## PRAYER

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Read the quotation from Julian of Norwich (1342-1416 CE) that is in Give Us This Day missalette as today's "Reflection", 19 September 2017.

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## SOME ACCESSIBLE STUDIES OF ECCLESIASTES

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The most important thing is to read the Book of Ecclesiastes itself. One does not need a "study" or a reading aid to be able to learn a great deal from the Author directly. And study Bibles (ones with Introductions to each Book and explanatory footnotes in the text itself already give the Reader much assistance.

Always a good and accessible guide to both the Old Testament and New Testament is the famous Daily Study Bible series. See Robert Davidson, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1986).

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## THE NIGHT SCHOOL – SERIES 2

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1. Author of the Book of Ecclesiastes (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE)
2. St. Ignatius of Antioch (d. 110 CE)
3. St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109 CE)
4. Karl Rahner, SJ (1904-1984 CE)

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### THE JAMNIA ARGUMENT (90 CE)

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The rise of the Rabbinic traditions after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (70 CE).

Jamnia was a gathering of Rabbis, who argued about what the “canon” of the Scriptures was (and was not). They also formally excommunicated any Jew who proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah.

**At all events, by the end of the first century C.E., Ecclesiastes was included in the Hebrew canon—at least according to the majority in the Jamnia academy.** Josephus, the Jewish historian writing in the last decade of the first century C.E., refers to twenty-two books that were accepted, including the five “books of Moses,” thirteen books of the prophets, and four books that contained “hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life” (*Contra Apionem* 1.38–41). The book of “hymns to God” no doubt refers to the Psalter, **while the books of precepts for life probably are Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs.**<sup>1</sup>

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### DATE OF THE BOOK

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**Scholars usually agree that the book grew among the intellectual circles in late post-exilic Jerusalem and was completed slightly before 250 BCE.**

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### LOCATION OF THE BOOK IN THE CANON

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**In Christian Bibles, the 21st book of the OT, immediately following Proverbs.** In the Hebrew Bible it is grouped with the Megilloth (the five scrolls used in the major religious celebrations of Judaism). The book is read in its entirety during Sukkoth (the Feast of Booths)

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<sup>1</sup> C. L. Seow, [\*Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary\*](#), vol. 18C, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 4.

or Tabernacles) when Israel both remembers its sojourn in the wilderness and celebrates the end of another harvest season in the Promised Land.<sup>2</sup>

**Dianne Bergant in her Introduction to the Wisdom Books in the *Catholic Study Bible*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (2016), Reading Guide, 271 writes concerning “The Wisdom Books”:** “In addition to the narrative collection, some book treat aspects of life that have universal appeal, aspects such as: the meaning of life; success in living; and the mystery of suffering. These books have to be known as “the wisdom tradition.” Their reaching focuses on human values, human pursuits, and human fulfillment. This traditions maintains that people encountered God, not merely through some supernatural means such as dreams or divine communication, but through the ordinary experiences of life. Rather than trace the unfolding of ‘salvation history’, these books provide a kind of guide for a successful life.”

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## FOUR FUNDAMENTAL CONVICTIONS OF QOHELET

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**Ecclesiastes’ general world-view rests on four positions:** 1) all human achievements are impermanent; 2) the life of the human being is in the end uncertain, and wealth and social position are no guarantee of success; 3) human beings have no way to attain knowledge or insight into the workings of God in the world; and 4) considering all this, the goal of human endeavors should be to experience joy, which is a divine imperative. It is customary to discuss how the book treats individual themes like futility, death, God, wealth, and so on. In what follows, these themes are discussed in their relationship with each other, with a focus on the fourth position above.<sup>3</sup>

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## THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

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The Epic which we visited in Series 1, written around 2500 BCE, told of a man, Gilgamesh, who experienced the limit of his existence, and its contingency, when he lost his friend Enkidu to death ... and could not do a thing about it. His first experience of the certainty of his own death created a profound riddle for Gilgamesh, which he sought to

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Farmer, [“Ecclesiastes, Book of,”](#) ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 367.

<sup>3</sup> Agustinus Gianto, [“Ecclesiastes, Book Of,”](#) ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006–2009), 182.

“solve” by going in search of the one human being who was said to have found eternal life – Utnapishtim.

Scholars have noted various influences from other wisdom literatures of the ANE. From Egypt, for example, “The Harper’s Song” (*ANET*, 467) commends an “enjoy life while you can” attitude, and “The Instruction for Ptah-Hotep” (*ANET*, 412–14) offers advice concerning one’s goals in life. Texts from Mesopotamia, for example, “The Babylonian Ecclesiastes” (*ANET*, 438–40) and “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” (*ANET*, 72–100) assert that human existence inevitably leads only to death. Texts from the Stoics convey philosophical, and sometimes cynical, attitudes toward widely held opinions, including the meaning of suffering.

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### WHO IS QOHELET?

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It seems clear that the mysterious man who is called “Qohelet” is supposed to be King Solomon, the great collector of wisdom, collected even from the likes of the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba. But who this really is would seem an elderly man, who has given his whole life to God and to the study of the Scriptures. But he is also a sage; that is, a profoundly wise man to whom many come for “answers” about Life, and to whom were entrusted sons so that they might begin their lives with wise teaching.

But now he has come to the later part of his life. Perhaps as Moses is depicted on Mount Nebo, speaking out his final word about the meaning of all that has happened between him, the people, and God since Egypt, so here Qohelet is distilling as best he can the wisdom he has to give.

Qohelet seems especially sensitive not to pass on “packaged” wisdom, or “pat” answers, let alone falsehoods about the meaning of God and of Life.

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ANE Ancient Near East

*ANET Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Edited by J. B. Pritchard. 3d ed. Princeton, 1969.

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Perhaps what finally Qohelet teaches is how much wisdom is present in a person who is able to say, “I simply do not know; I do not (yet) understand; I am not nearly man enough to be worthy of the knowledge that I am being asked to pass on.”

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## WHAT IS QOHELET’S MISSION – TO INVESTIGATE LIFE

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### I. QOHELETH’S INVESTIGATION OF LIFE

**Twofold Introduction.** Ecclesiastes 1:<sup>12</sup> I, Qoheleth, was king over Israel in Jerusalem, <sup>13</sup> and I applied my mind to search and investigate in wisdom all things that are done under the sun.<sup>h</sup>

A bad business God has given  
to human beings to be busied with.

<sup>14</sup> I have seen all things that are done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a chase after wind.<sup>\*i</sup>

<sup>15</sup> What is crooked cannot be made straight,  
and you cannot count what is not there.\*

<sup>16j</sup> Though I said to myself, “See, I have greatly increased my wisdom beyond all who were before me in Jerusalem, and my mind has broad experience of wisdom and knowledge,” <sup>17</sup> yet when I applied my mind to know wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly, I learned that this also is a chase after wind.<sup>k</sup>

<sup>18</sup> For in much wisdom there is much sorrow;

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<sup>h</sup> Eccl 8:9.

\* *A chase after wind: an image of futile activity*, like an attempt to corral the winds; cf. Hos 12:2. The ancient versions understood “affliction, dissipation of the spirit.” This phrase concludes sections of the text as far as 6:9.

<sup>i</sup> Eccl 2:11, 17.

\* *You cannot count what is not there*: perhaps originally a commercial metaphor alluding to loss or deficit in the accounts ledger.

<sup>j</sup> Eccl 2:9.

<sup>k</sup> Eccl 1:3; 8:16.

whoever increases knowledge increases grief.\*<sup>4</sup>

## “VANITY”; “CHASING THE WIND”

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The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the noun and adjective “vain” – “Devoid of real value, worth, or significance; idle, unprofitable, useless, worthless; of no effect, force, or power; fruitless, futile, unavailing.”

**Recall Jesus and Nicodemus in conversation at John 3:** <sup>7</sup>Do not be amazed that I told you, ‘You must be born from above.’ <sup>8</sup>The wind\* blows where it wills, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”<sup>f5</sup>

But also at **Ecclesiastes 5:** <sup>1</sup>Be not hasty in your utterance and let not your heart be quick to utter a promise in God’s presence. God is in heaven and you are on earth; therefore let your words be few.<sup>a 6</sup>

**The obvious starting point in the consideration of Qohelet’s content is the notion of *hebel*, traditionally translated as “vanity.”** The importance of this term is indicated by the fact that it is part of the thematic statements that frame the main body of the book: “absolute vanity ... everything is vanity” (1:2; 12:8). The word is the first that one encounters after the superscription (1:1). **It appears thirty-eight times in the book.** Its literal meaning is “breath,

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\* *Sorrow ... grief*: these terms refer not just to a store of knowledge or to psychological or emotional pain. Corporal punishment, sometimes quite harsh, was also employed frequently by parents and teachers.

<sup>4</sup> [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ec 1:12–18.

\* *Wind*: the Greek word *pneuma* (as well as the Hebrew *rûah*) means both “wind” and “spirit.” In the play on the double meaning, “wind” is primary.

<sup>f</sup> Eccl 11:4–5; Acts 2:2–4.

<sup>5</sup> [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Jn 3:7–8.

\* Further counsels on prudence and circumspection in fulfilling one’s religious obligations. It is not the multitude of words but one’s sincerity that counts in the acknowledgment of God’s sovereignty (v. 1), especially through obedience (4:17) and reverence (v. 6).

<sup>a</sup> Ps 115:3, 16; Mt 6:7; Jas 1:19.

<sup>6</sup> [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ec 5:1.

whiff, puff, steam,” or the like, a meaning that one should certainly keep in mind as one interprets Ecclesiastes. It refers to anything that is superficial, ephemeral, insubstantial, incomprehensible, enigmatic, inconsistent, or contradictory. **Something that is *hebel* cannot be grasped or controlled. It may refer to something that one encounters or experiences for only a moment, but it cannot be grasped—neither physically nor intellectually.**<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps what is meant by *hebel* is what others such as Karl Rahner call “Mystery.” We cannot know Mystery, but we can let ourselves be grasped by it, and, as Paul Janowiak, SJ once told me, “we can walk through the Mystery.”

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## THE “MONEY” ECONOMY

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What Professor Seow so helpfully notices about the wider cultural context of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE onwards is how money had begun in the Middle East to exercise enormous power over people, such that *the real things* money stood for was not valued as much; such that money was not just a *medium* of exchange – a symbol of a personal transaction about real things – but it had become itself a *commodity* – “I have, need, must have more money,” etc.

But probably more importantly, money creates *a cultural expectation that everything can be monetized*, or its worth related to an amount of money. But the problem is that what people really need, in order to be able to find serenity and genuine contentment in Life is *wisdom*, which is impossible to acquire with money.

In this regard, money is a “vanity” – an empty thing, the acquisition of which does not make one wise or serene or content.

**One of the most important features of the economy during the postexilic period is the prominent role of money.**<sup>8</sup>

Money was used in everyday business transactions both large and small, given as gifts and bribes, and hoarded. Money had become not just a convenient medium of exchange; it had become a commodity.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> C. L. Seow, [\*Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary\*](#), vol. 18C, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 47.

<sup>8</sup> C. L. Seow, [\*Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary\*](#), vol. 18C, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 21.

<sup>9</sup> C. L. Seow, [\*Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary\*](#), vol. 18C, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 21.

When bounty increases, the author notes, the consumers “increase”—in every sense of the word (see Notes at 5:11 [Heb v 10]). Qohelet observes that the *’ōbēd* “worker” sleeps well, whether that one has consumed little or much, while the surfeit of the rich permits them no rest (5:12 [Heb v 11]). Those greedy consumers cannot get rest, either because of indigestion (overconsumption of food) or anxiety about their investments (overconsumption of wealth). While Qohelet clearly draws on timeless wisdom teachings, he also addresses people facing a new world of money and finance.<sup>10</sup>

**The problem seems to be the competitive economic culture, in which people are driven by envy to strive for success and they cannot seem to be satisfied (4:4–8).** In that environment the poor could not count on the legal system to protect them (see 3:16), no doubt because of corruption in the courts (see Notes and Comment at 3:16). In 5:8 (Heb v 7), Qohelet speaks of oppression (*’ōšeq*) of the poor and the taking away of justice in the province (*mēdîṅâ*), while “arrogant ones are above arrogant ones, and arrogant ones are above them” (5:8–9 [Heb vv 7–8]). **There, again, the problem is that people are driven by greed and ambition, and the evil of their greed is portrayed in terms reminiscent of the gaping mouth of personified Death, attempting to swallow up the whole cosmos** (see Comment at 6:7–9). In 7:7, Qohelet alludes to injustice (*hā’ōšeq*) and the taking of a bribe (*mattānâ*). **The impression one gets is that there are people who are willing to do anything in order to get ahead in that competitive economic environment, and the rich are somehow circumventing the law at the expense of others.**<sup>11</sup>

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### QOHELET AS “THEOLOGY FROM BELOW”

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So the book is arguably better characterized as an “anthropology,” a discourse about humanity. But that, too, is not a satisfactory label, for the deity’s presence is pervasive in the book. Qohelet thinks of humanity in relation to what God has done in the universe. **Indeed, Qohelet seems to be reflecting on the human condition in a world where God is undeniably in control, although the cosmos and God are both still a mystery. True to the tendency of the wisdom tradition, the sage’s starting point in his reflection is not God, but the cosmos, society, and humanity.** If Qohelet’s thought may be called a “theology,” then it is a “theology from below.” It begins with humanity, but it also reflects on the fate of humanity in God’s hands and it speaks of the mysterious ways of God. **The author begins not with divine revelation, nor with divine demands, but with the cosmos that the deity has brought into being, a complex web in which mortals are inevitably caught. It is a world with no discernible**

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<sup>10</sup> C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 18C, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 21–22.

<sup>11</sup> C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 18C, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 34–35.

**design, no order.** Everything seems to be in the power of the deity who determines it all. In such a world and before such a God the mortal lives. This is Qohelet's "theological anthropology."<sup>12</sup>

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## THE EPILOGUE TO QOHELET

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It appears that this Epilogue was added later, by Jewish scholars who were clearly uncomfortable with the "edgy" insights of Qohelet, and who here tried to "baptize" the Book by saying that finally it was all just about this: "Fear God and keep His commandments...."

**Epilogue.** <sup>9</sup>\* Besides being wise, Qoheleth taught the people knowledge, and weighed, scrutinized and arranged many proverbs. <sup>10</sup> Qoheleth sought to find appropriate sayings, and to write down true sayings with precision. <sup>11</sup> The sayings of the wise are like goads; like fixed spikes are the collected sayings given by one shepherd. <sup>12</sup>c As to more than these, <sup>\*</sup> my son, beware. Of the making of many books there is no end, and in much study there is weariness for the flesh.

<sup>13</sup>\*d The last word, when all is heard: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this concerns all humankind; <sup>14</sup>e because God will bring to judgment every work, with all its hidden qualities, whether good or bad. <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 18C, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 54–55.

\* A disciple briefly describes and praises the master's skill and reputation as a sage.

\* *One shepherd*: perhaps referring to the book's author, who gathers or "shepherds" together its contents. God could also be "the one shepherd," the ultimate depository and source of true wisdom.

c Eccl 1:18.

\* *As to more than these*: the words seem to refer to the writings of Ecclesiastes and other sages. They are adequate and sufficient; any more involves exhaustive labor.

\* These words reaffirm traditional wisdom doctrine such as fear of God and faithful obedience, perhaps lest some of the more extreme statements of the author be misunderstood. Although the epilogue has been interpreted as a criticism of the book's author, it is really a summary that betrays the unruffled spirit of later sages, who were not shocked by Qoheleth's statements. They honored him as a *hakam* or sage (v. 9), even as they preserved his statements about the futility of life (v. 8), and the mystery of divine judgment (8:17; 11:5).

d Eccl 5:6.

e Eccl 11:9.

<sup>13</sup> *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ec 12:9–14.

## RELIGION AND THE HUMAN MESS

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Religion and its traditions is always challenged by the fact of unceasing human messiness. Sometimes Religion and the Traditions are not sure how best to be in relation to the messiness we humans have an infinite capacity to spawn. Should Religion and the Traditions portray an human *ideal*, so that humans in their mess can aim themselves towards what, or towards Whom? Should Religion and Traditions “hold the line” on behaviors, so that at least in fear humans might be slow to sin? (St. Paul understood the “pedagogical” function of the Law in this way, but through his experience of the risen Christ he noticed the religiously dangerous power of the Law to make people pay attention to *It*, who try to “perform” their lives for It (as if this is what true Religion was), rather than recognizing the Law as being about God Himself, about access to Him.)

Part of the genius of the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes is that he openly, and fearlessly, leans into the fact that human mess is the norm, the human propensity to run after what does not matter - VANITY – and his recognition that “knowing God” (not to mention God’s will!) by humans is ridiculous. (But remember that Qohelet did not have Jesus Christ! “Knowing God” would undergo a profound transformation of meaning when God became Incarnate. Suddenly we *could* know Jesus, and in the Spirit come to knowledge of God (but always in the partial way – “I see now through a glass darkly”, as St. Paul says – that is our lot in this world).