

# Wisdom Literature

BOT252



In dealing with the subject of "purpose," it is useful to discern between philosophy and religion; and the insights of Peter Kreeft are helpful here:

The difference between philosophy and religion is the difference between speaking and listening, between man's speaking about God and God's speaking about man with man listening. This is the difference between reason and faith. Philosophy is man's search for God; the Bible is the story of God's search for man. Philosophy is words flying up; the Bible is the Word sent down. Ecclesiastes is the only book in the Bible in which God is totally silent. The author appeals to no divine revelation, only to natural human reason and sense observation. God is only the object of his quest, not the subject....

Kreeft, as he expands on these thoughts likens Ecclesiastes with the Book of Job in that except for the beginning and ending sections of Job, God is completely silent otherwise. But because of those two passages it makes all the difference between Job and Ecclesiastes. Because God speaks, Job has everything though he has nothing. Because God is silent, Ecclesiastes has nothing even though he has everything.

All the Bible is divine revelation, divine speech; but God never speaks in Ecclesiastes. It is an ongoing monologue but never a dialogue, but inspired monologue, nonetheless.

## Excursus on the Hebrew word, "Hebel."

The term *hebel* הֶבֶל occurs 36 times in Ecclesiastes. Below is the partial entry for the word from the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament

There are three basic categories or contexts in which *hebel* is used. First, it is used as a designation for false gods worshipped by the people of God and hence is usually translated in this context by the RSV as "idols": Deut 32:21; 1Kings 16:13, 26; 2Kings 17:15; Jer 2:5; Jer 8:19 (parallel to *pesel*); Jer 10:8, 15; Jer 51:18; Jon 2:9; Psa 31:6.

## Excursus on the Hebrew word, "Hebel."

Secondly, the term represents the individual and sometimes exasperating sentiments of individuals: Isa 49:4 where the servant Israel says, "I have labored in vain (rîq), I have spent my strength for nothing (tœhû) and vanity (hebel)." Job complains about the brevity and uncertainty of his life (Job 7:16). Cf. the similar idea in the Psalter: Psa 39:5, 6, 11; Psa 62:9; Psa 78:33 (in which hebel is parallel to behlâ, from the root bhal "to hasten"): Psa 94:11; Psa 144:4 (hebel parallel to sel). Hence, hebel seems to mean here "short-lived."

## Excursus on the Hebrew word, "Hebel."

Third is the cluster of references found in Ecclesiastes (thirty-six). These may be grouped into several subdivisions. First are those passages in which the author states his inability to find fulfillment in work, both in his failure to be creative and in his lack of control over the privilege of free disposition of his possessions; this is "vanity": Eccl 2:11, 19, 21, 23; Eccl 4:4, 8; Eccl 6:2. Second are those verses in which the author struggles with the idea that the connection between sin and judgment, righteousness and final deliverance is not always direct or obvious. This is an anomaly about life and it is "vanity": Eccl 2:15; Eccl 6:7-9; Eccl 8:10-14. The meaning of hebel here would be "senseless." Thirdly are those verses in which the author laments the shortness of life; this is "vanity": Eccl 3:19; Eccl 6:12; Eccl 11:8, 10. Life, in its quality, is "empty" or "vacuous" (and thus unsubstantial), and in its quantity is "transitory."

The noun form of the word "hebel" is also found in Genesis 4 and the following entry is again instructive:

The proper name, Abel, the second son of Adam, is also written hebel. Whether or not there is a connection between this and the substantive under discussion is another matter. Most of the Hebrew lexicons have connected "Abel" with the cognate Akkadian word ablu/ aplu "son. " One will note that Abel is named in Gen 4 without any explanation, a fact that can hardly be without significance since almost all the proper names in Genesis are explained by assonances.

The abstract uses of the word therefore are superficial, ephemeral, insubstantial, incomprehensible, enigmatic, inconsistent, or contradictory.

Commentators attempt to find the right nuance of the word to bring its full import to the text. Unfortunately, no single term can adequately encompass the sense of this key term in Ecclesiastes.



The term "hebel" then has the following implications which help us to understand its full meaning in light of the book:

1. It has a *negative* connotation.
2. It portrays the *mystery* of life and leads to many *unanswered* and *unanswerable* questions that must be recognized by the person of faith.

Like Job, the book of Ecclesiastes confirms the notion that the *Lord* defines *meaningful* life.

## The Nature of Ecclesiastes

Solomon gives five reasons for his major premise, that everything "under the sun" is vain. These five are described by Kreeft as cancers that extend their tendrils into every corner of our lives, and any one of them is enough to kill meaning; life is infected with all five. They are:

# The Nature of Ecclesiastes

1. The *sameness* and *indifference* of all things.

This, too, I carefully explored: Even though the actions of godly and wise people are in God's hands, no one knows whether God will show them favor. <sup>2</sup> The same destiny ultimately awaits everyone, whether righteous or wicked, good or bad, ceremonially clean or unclean, religious or irreligious. Good people receive the same treatment as sinners, and people who make promises to God are treated like people who don't... <sup>11</sup> I have observed something else under the sun. The fastest runner doesn't always win the race, and the strongest warrior doesn't always win the battle. The wise sometimes go hungry, and the skillful are not necessarily wealthy. And those who are educated don't always lead successful lives. It is all decided by chance, by being in the right place at the right time. (Ecc 9:1-2, 11 NLT)

# The Nature of Ecclesiastes

## 2. *Death* as the *certain* and *final end* of life.

For people and animals share the same fate—both breathe and both must die. So people have no real advantage over the animals. How meaningless! <sup>20</sup> Both go to the same place—they came from dust and they return to dust. <sup>21</sup> For who can prove that the human spirit goes up and the spirit of animals goes down into the earth? (Eccl. 3:19-21 NLT)

# The Nature of Ecclesiastes

## 3. Time as a *cycle* of endless *repetition*.

<sup>11</sup> Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end. (Ecc 3:11 NLT)

# The Nature of Ecclesiastes

## 4. *Evil* as the *perennial* and *unsolvable* problem.

There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless.  
(Ecclesiastes 8:14 NIV)

I also noticed that under the sun there is evil in the courtroom. Yes, even the courts of law are corrupt! (Ecclesiastes 3:16 NLT)

# The Nature of Ecclesiastes

## 5. God as an *unknowable* mystery.

And it is a good thing to receive wealth from God and the good health to enjoy it. To enjoy your work and accept your lot in life—this is indeed a gift from God. 20 God keeps such people so busy enjoying life that they take no time to brood over the past. (Ecc. 5:19-20 NLT)