

# A brief intro to the wisdom literature

Our lens: 1 Cor. 1:18-31

## Proverbs

- 1-9 Fatherly passionate instruction – “Get wisdom!!”  
1:1 - wisdom for the royal son, the christ  
1:4-5 - wisdom for everyone; LORD as Father – 3:11-12  
1:7 - wisdom that flows from the fear of the Lord<sup>1</sup>  
walk and heart – 4:23-27  
wisdom is moral - good versus evil – 6:16-19  
two ways, two destinies – ch. 9  
wisdom woven into creation – 3:19; 6:6; ch. 8  
big issues – sloth (6:6-11), adultery (ch. 5-7)  
wisdom for covenant times - 3:9-10
- 10-30 Two part, parallelism  
Generally true – 10:1-4  
Realistic about the world – 10:15 cf. 17:8; 18:16  
Sometimes similar proverbs gathered – e.g. words – 10:17-21  
Eternal destinies – 10:24-30; 11:4-8  
Situational discernment – 26:4-5  
Proverbs to chew on with all the Scriptures in mind
- 31 The King and the Wife – cf. Psalm 45, Song of Songs

Takes Proverbs together with Job & Ecclesiastes

- so not moralism or prosperity gospel – good do not always prosper

## Ecclesiastes

- *What are the verses and passages we hear most often from Ecclesiastes?*
- *How do we apply this book as Christian scripture?*

How do you get any kind of grip on this book?

**The theme** is pretty clear. The Hebrew word *hebel* occurs 38 times, 5 times in the second verse of the book and another three times at the other end of the book (12:8). It's variously translated, more or less literally: breath, vapour, mist, vanity, what is transient, ephemeral, profitless, meaningless. This *hebel* is total – affecting every sphere of life. You might gain some fleeting enjoyment but there

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<sup>1</sup> The 'fear of the Lord' is the only possible response when someone's eyes are opened to see God as he is in all his holiness and power in judgment and salvation (Exodus 14:31; Joshua 4:23-24; Psalm 130:4). The fear of the Lord "is prized throughout Scripture because it is such a mature response to God. It comes when we know that God is King, Lord, and Father. He is the High and Exalted one as well as the Suffering Servant. He both hates sin and delights in forgiving sinners." (Edward T Welch, *Running Scared*)

is nothing lasting, nothing you can hold onto, no enduring profit or significance, no quenching of the thirst. The world under the sun is nauseatingly chaotic or circular or confused. There is good but also a pervasive evil, injustice and restlessness. And what frustrates everything is death and decay. Everything returns to dust and is blown away by the wind. In particular two things are brought to nothing – work and wisdom.

Another pretty clear thing is that there are two voices in the book - someone introducing and concluding (1:1-2; 12:8-14) and in the middle the words of the 'Preacher' (*Qohelet*). Some commentators think the editor/narrator is disagreeing with or qualifying the Preacher's words but in the conclusion he seems to agree with him completely (12:9-10) just as the conclusion of the book of Job endorses the laments of Job.

Structure (based on de Jong and Clemens)

- 1:1 – Introduction: "The words of the preacher..."
- 1:2 – The theme: *hebel*
- 1:3-11 – Poem: impermanence of life
- 1:12-4:16 – Observation – "I perceived..."
- 5:1-9 – Instruction – "Guard your steps..."
- 5:8-6:12 – Observation – "I have seen..."
- 6:10-7:22 – Instruction – "It is better... Consider..."
- 7:23-29 – Observation – "I have tested..."
- 8:1-9 – Instruction – "Keep the king's command..."
- 8:9-9:12 – Observation – "I saw..."
- 9:7-11:6 – Instruction – "Enjoy life..."
- 11:7-12:7 – Poem: impermanence of life
- 12:8 – The theme: *hebel*
- 12:9-14 – Conclusion: The words of the preacher

So the main idea and shape of the book is fairly clear – the Preacher looks around him, sees everything is transitory and frustrated and draws some cautious conclusions. But what is this doing in the Christian Bible? How do we handle this book?

Three views:

## **1. Everything is meaningless without God but once God is back in the picture then it all makes sense.**

In this view, the preacher is first showing the futility of a secular/existentialist/godless viewpoint – everything is dismal and meaningless "under the sun". Then, towards the end of the book, he brings in God and an eternal perspective – "Remember your Creator" (12:1). Once we know there is a God in heaven and more to life than this world then we can see the meaning of life – to enjoy life, fear God and keep his commandments. Commentators who take something like this view include Eaton and Tidball and it is influential in our context.

The main problem with this view is that God doesn't just make an appearance at the end – He is there throughout – both in the observation and instruction portions (e.g. 1:13; 2:24-26; 3:10-22; 5:1-7, 18-20; 6:1-2; 7:13-14; 18,20; 8:2, 11-17; 9:1,9). And crucially, as Barry Webb points out, "the verdict of *hebel* is consistently maintained, whether God's involvement with the world is on view at a particular point or not. Belief in God does not relieve the observed and experienced fact of *hebel*."

(*Five Festal Garments*, p. 95-96). The Preacher is a theist not an atheist and as such he concludes his whole work with the verdict: “Meaningless” (12:8).

The other problem with this view is that it can tend to suggest that once you are a Christian you will not experience the frustration and pain and evil that Ecclesiastes talks so much about. And that doesn’t fit either with real life or the New Testament.

## **2. Everything in this age is groaning under the frustration of the Fall. Our Hope is future.**

In this view, the Preacher is a godly man throughout, struggling with the reality of life in a fallen world. The whole book is really an exposition of Genesis 3. It is about life outside the Garden of Eden, under the curse and condemnation, subjected to frustration. David Clemens suggests *Hebel* could be rendered ‘fallen’ ([Themelios 19.3](#)). Some of the pre-fall goodness remains to be enjoyed – in marriage, work and food (cf. Gen. 2) – but everything has been deeply marred and brought under the rule of death and decay. Even as Christians, this is still the world that we live in – Romans 8:18-25. As Goldsworthy argues in *Gospel and Wisdom*, Ecclesiastes is an antidote to an over-realised eschatology (all the blessings now) that forces us to deny the reality of the brokenness and frustration and sickness and pain and sin all around us and in us. As Nigel Styles points out (following Goldsworthy) the key thing that makes sense of everything is this eternal perspective of the Judgment Day. So a summary sentence would be, “Everything under the sun is meaningless, but it all matters because God will judge: fear him!” The Christian life is, like Ecclesiastes, about being brutally honest about this world, looking to eternity and the Day of Christ and groaning for that Hope.

<http://vimeo.com/66728868#>

This view makes a lot more sense of Ecclesiastes than the first view. The Genesis 3 allusions are clear throughout and the Romans 8:18-25 control is very helpful. The main mark of the Spirit-filled person in this life should be groaning. We shouldn’t expect to escape the frustrations and ambiguity and darkness of this fallen world until Christ returns. Pastorally this is hugely helpful (as Nigel Styles points out in the video above). Ecclesiastes does not allow unreality and superficial happy clappyness.

All this is to be taken on board as we read and preach Ecclesiastes. However, a question remains, How *Christian* is the book of Ecclesiastes *in itself*? Are the answers that the Preacher and his editor giving us really *Christian* answers? Ecclesiastes’ dominant ways of talking about God are as transcendent Creator and Judge. But this is not specifically Christian. Other religions would strongly affirm God as transcendent Creator and Judge. And how are we to deal with this reality of God and judgment? Ecclesiastes urges us to “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man” (12:13). Is that the gospel? It doesn’t initially sound much like it.

Certainly in 17th century England the conclusion of Ecclesiastes was understood in a very moralistic direction. A book entitled “The Whole Duty of Man” was hugely influential. In terms rather too familiar to our context, it presented the new covenant as a strongly *conditional* covenant – yes, Jesus has done everything for our forgiveness and complete redemption through his sacrificial death But the benefits purchased by Christ our only ours when we faithfully perform our side of the covenant:

“that is, set ourselves heartily to the obeying of every precept of Christ, not going on wilfully in any one sin, but bewailing and forsaking whatever we have formerly been guilty of”  
(*Whole Duty*, p. xviii)

J.C. Ryle describes the book as among the “poorest and weakest theological literature in the English language” (*Christian Leaders*, p. 17) and goes on to quote John Berridge, one of the 18th century revival preachers:

The 'Whole Duty of Man' was sent abroad with a good intent, but has failed of its purpose, as all such teaching ever will. Morality has not thriven since its publication and never can thrive, unless founded wholly upon grace... God has shown how little human wit and strength can do to compass reformation. Reason has explored the moral path, planted it with roses, and fenced it round with motives; but all in vain. (*Christian Leaders*, p. 240-241)

I'm not for a moment suggesting that any of the contemporary advocates of the second view above would want to take things in this direction but in our context that is going to be a strong temptation. How do we avoid preaching simply theism and moralism from Ecclesiastes?

### 3. The Preacher is a rubbish christ. We need a better one.

This is the view of Glen Scrivener. He has posted on it particularly [here](#) and [here](#). I'll explain his view then underline something that I think is particularly important.

Scrivener starts by taking seriously the description of the Preacher in the first verse: “the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” This is a christ (small ‘c’). But he is not the Spirit-filled Christ of Isaiah 61, he is the one who chases the *ruach* (Ecc. 1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4; 6:9). He is not the king of heaven but the king of Jerusalem. He is not The Son, he is under the sun.

And as such, much of what the Preacher says is simple pragmatism – true enough but not particularly Christian (e.g. “two are better than one”). And his theism doesn't get him much further. Even as he encourages us to enjoy God's gifts he reminds us that it is all meaningless: “Enjoy life... all the days of your vain life that [God] has given you” (9:9). The overall tone of the book is unremittingly dismal: Life's tough and then you die. The logical response is, “Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die” (cf. 2:24; 3:13; 5:18; 8:7; 9:7). Even the prospect of a judgment day (Ecc. 11:9) doesn't seem to relieve the *hebel* (11:10; 12:8). In fact the Preacher can caution us not to be too righteous (7:16).

Scrivener finds, in common with view 2 above, that the whole of creation is under sin and death, but he adds two further burdens: law and judgment (Ecc. 12:13-14). These are not the good news – they are part of the bad news – the lock down of the world. And crucially, the Preacher-King is under this quadruple lock.

What we need then is the true Christ, the true Son of David who can free us from all these things. The gospel is here, as Scrivener puts it, as in a photo negative. We see the great problems we need saving from and we see that even theism is not the answer – “Christ alone is solid rock, everything else is sinking sand.”

What do we say to this? Well, perhaps one criticism is that Scrivener is over-influenced by Luther in drawing a sharp distinction between Law and Promise, Judgment and Salvation. As Styles points out, judgment is often good news in Scripture. And maybe the encouragements to “enjoy life” resonate with other wisdom literature (e.g. Ps. 104:15; Prov. 5:18) and relieve the dark tone a bit. And maybe we should be reminded, from Proverbs, that the “Fear the Lord” is the spring of wisdom.

But basically I think Scrivener is on to something very important. It is interesting that Ecclesiastes always talks of ‘God’ (*Elohim*) rather than the ‘LORD’ (*Yahweh*). So actually it doesn't say, “Fear the

LORD”, it says, “Fear God” (5:7; 12:13). Webb thinks this isn’t very significant but I wonder whether it is.

**Ecclesiastes seems to be showing the impossibility of knowing the true saving God – the LORD – from the bottom up.** The theme of wisdom is very strong in the book and again this wise man – the wisest of them all (1:16) – finds that wisdom, even if it has some temporary use, is very limited, frustrated by death and futility (1:17; 2:12-16; 4:13-16; 6:8; 7:16, 23; 8:17; 9:11-10:1). I wonder whether Ecclesiastes is making the same point that Paul is making in 1 Corinthians 1:20-21 and that Karl Barth rediscovered in the last century, that God is not knowable by man, by wisdom, by philosophy, by ‘natural theology’.

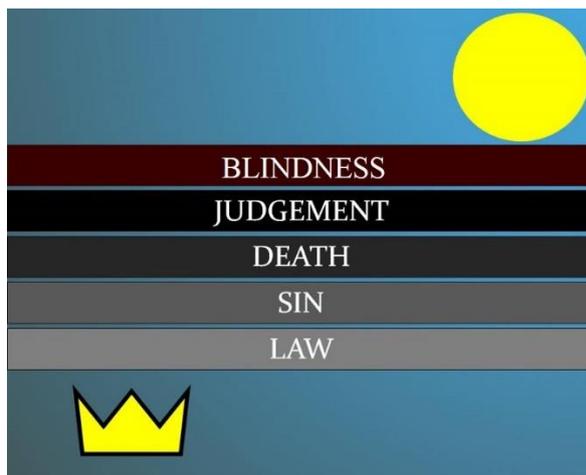
So for example, when the Preacher looks around at Creation he doesn’t learn about Christ (as he should – Ps. 19 cf. Rom. 10:17; 2 Cor. 4:6) but just has some vague awareness that there is a Creator in charge of everything. And when it comes to the afterlife and the possible nature of a future judgment, the Preacher’s wisdom cannot get him clear answers. Barry Webb notes that there is “a stubborn ambiguity which cannot be resolved” (*Garments*, p. 99). He is simply not clear what is going to happen. If he does go to judgment, what sort of judge will he find? He doesn’t know. He can’t know because human wisdom, even theistic wisdom can’t get at that reality.

“he cannot find out what God has done” (Ecc. 3:11)

“even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out” (Ecc. 8:17)

“I said, “I will be wise”, but it was far from me... and deep, very deep...” (Ecc. 7:23-24)

It’s similar to the poem in Job 28 where we find that true wisdom is beyond the reach of man. To use long words, Ecclesiastes is showing us that all our epistemological and theological foundations are sinking sand. In this book, as in the gospel, God is smashing and making foolish the wisdom of the wise (1 Cor. 1:19-20). He is saying, if you work from the bottom up then you’ll just come up with the transcendent Creator God of philosophy or the other monotheist religions. You will never find a God who comes down to save his people, a God whose glory is revealed as he hangs on a cross.



The way out of all this is hinted at in the conclusion of Ecclesiastes – the “One Shepherd” (Ecc. 12:11). As Webb suggests, this is almost certainly a reference to God. But not just ‘God’. By saying ‘shepherd’ the editor of Ecclesiastes is connecting to a rich seam of revelation about the LORD (Psalm 23; Ezek. 34:1-22; Micah 2:12), about David (2 Sam. 7:8; Psalm 78:70-72) and about the new ‘David’ to come (Ezek. 34:23 – where it says “One Shepherd”; Micah 5:4; 7:14).

This One Shepherd is the one who gives true wisdom (Ecc. 12:11). He is the One and Only who is at the Father's side who can make him known (John 1:18). Man cannot know God but in the One Shepherd we have God revealing God to us (1 Cor. 2:10; John 1:18; Matt. 11:25-27).

So maybe I'd add to Glen's diagram one more burden/lock – that of blindness, the frustration of wisdom, the futility of theism and deism.

But thanks be to God for Jesus Christ our saviour from all this. He doesn't relieve all the tensions straight away, we will still labour with the frustrations of a fallen world until he returns, but at least we can begin to know the true God - our Father, our elder brother and our comforter - amidst the pain and brokenness.