Ecclesiastes 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0:00] Ecclesiastes chapter 1. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north. Around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full.

To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness. A man cannot utter it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.
What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, See, this is new? It has been already, in the ages before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be, among those who come after. I the preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem, and I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.
It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity, and a striving after wind.
What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. I said in my heart, I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge, and I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceive that this also is but a striving after wind, for in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. The book of Ecclesiastes is part of what has been called the biblical wisdom literature. Traditionally, although there is no direct identification or clear claim to have been authored by Solomon, the book has been attributed to King Solomon on the grounds of verses 1 and 12 of chapter 1. The author speaks of himself as king over Israel in Jerusalem. We know that it isn't David, and given the split in the kingdom after Solomon, the Solomon connection seems natural. Taking into account the fact that Solomon was a king so renowned for wisdom, the idea that a book of the wisdom literature should be attributed to his authorship is far from unreasonable, especially when we consider that many of the other books are written by him. The strength of the tradition of Solomonic authorship should not be lightly dismissed.
[2:49] On the other hand, there are statements in the book that seem strange coming from the mouth of Solomon. He speaks of all who were over Jerusalem before me, which, while possible for Solomon to say, Jerusalem had been a city for centuries prior, many commentators think it rather odd. However, 1 Chronicles chapter 29 verse 25 uses a very similar mode of expression about Solomon.

And the Lord made Solomon very great in the sight of all Israel, and bestowed on him such royal majesty as had not been on any king before him in Israel. The purpose of the speaker's self-identification as the preacher, or Koheleth, should also be considered here. Why speak of himself as Koheleth and not simply as Solomon? Koheleth is itself arguably a pseudonym. Furthermore, as we move beyond the opening chapters, the idea that the author of the book was a king seemed less obvious, and a number of the book's statements would make a lot more sense on the lips of someone who wasn't. See chapter 8 verse 2 to 4, for instance, I say, keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him. Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, what are you doing? Relatively few commentators make the identification with Solomon nowadays, and even conservative commentators largely reject it. That said, the majority

of commentators believe that the author of the book was intending its heroes or readers to associate the speaker with Solomon in some manner. While we should weigh such claims extremely carefully, we should also be clear that what might be the use of a persona as a literary device, for instance, should not necessarily be considered as falsehood. There are many cases where writers and poets have adopted the persona of a historical character and put words in their mouths. Generally, with genre expectations and the recognition of the distinction between the author or speaker and their persona, all parties understand what is taking place in such instances, and don't believe that the author is actually claiming that the historical figures themselves made the statements. Likewise, fictions are not falsehoods, and much of the greatest wise literature of the world has adopted the form of fiction.

For this reason, we should be aware of rejecting non-Solomonic authorship out of hand, even though doing so might require expanding our notion of the sort of genres that inspired scripture could include. On the other hand, we do need to distinguish sharply between forms of pseudepigraphical literature that are designed to deceive hearers and readers, something that would be directly contrary to a belief in the truthfulness of scripture, and forms of such literature that are adopting historical personae as a device in a manner that is well within the mutually understood bounds of genre of the author and his original audience. Michael Fox is an example of someone holding such a position, someone who believes that the preacher or Koheleth is intended to evoke Solomonic features without being identified as Solomon, even as a persona. He writes, This commentary assumes that Koheleth is a persona, a fictional figure, through whom the author speaks.

This persona, at least in the first two chapters, is portrayed as a king whose lineaments are taken from the biblical image of Solomon. For purposes of the intellectual exercise that Koheleth undertakes, the author wants us to conceive of the persona's wisdom, power and prosperity as Solomonic in quantity and quality, at least in chapter 1 verse 2 to 2 verse 26, without necessarily trying to make us believe that Koheleth truly was Solomon, or to give the book full Solomonic authority. If Solomon was the author of the book, then the book in its original form needs to be dated to the 10th century BC.

That said, the frame narrator who introduces the character of the preacher at the beginning of the book and speaks concerning him at the end complicates matters. For those who advocate Solomonic authorship, this character may be largely translucent, but for those who support non-Solomonic authorship, the frame narrator is likely the creator of the persona of the preacher that dominates the book. While arguments for Solomonic authorship would focus upon the figure of Solomon in terms of the authority of the book, leaving supporters of Solomonic authorship dismayed by opposition to it, those advocating non-Solomonic authorship may be more attentive to the way that the persona of the speaker is constitutive of the message of the text. For instance, it makes a difference if Shakespeare said something wise himself, or whether he put it in the mouth of one of his characters. In the latter case, the hearer must weigh the words differently. Belief in non-Solomonic authorship tends to go hand in hand with a much later dating for the book, commonly to around the 3rd century BC. The late dating is supported by the presence of many words and other linguistic features that are characteristic of post-exilic period writings, not least a number of Aramaisms. If the book dates to the time of Solomon, many have argued that it would throw our understanding of the history of the Hebrew language into utter disarray. Others have argued for intertextual references to works like Isaiah, which would also support a much later date than Solomon would give us. There are references and allusions to Ecclesiastes in 2nd century BC writings, such as the work of Ben Sirah, and the fragments of the text of Ecclesiastes that have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, so it must be dated before that date. Young Xiao, an important recent commentator on the book, has suggested a window of time between the late 5th and early 6th centuries

[8:21] BC for its writing. Interpretations of the book also weigh in questions of dating and Solomonic authorship. Those who perceive influences of Hellenic philosophy, for instance, or who believe that the book represents a challenge to Israel's religious orthodoxy, are going to be much more likely to favour non-Solomonic authorship and late dating. Although one generally has to get into the less scholarly commentaries to find support for early dating and Solomonic authorship, Douglas Sean O'Donnell and Geoffrey Myers are both examples who support Solomonic authorship, for instance. There are more scholarly holdouts against the general consensus on the later dating of the book and its non-Solomonic authorship. One of the more notable of these is

Daniel Fredericks, who particularly takes on the linguistic argument for the late dating in some detail. He makes a case that, at the very least, significantly lessens the weight that that line of argumentation has hitherto enjoyed in certain quarters. He writes, Most scholars have thought the theory of a pseudonymous writer to be preferable, because

Ecclesiastes alleged lateness in its language and theology precluded Solomon as the author, and the work is then estimated to be 400 to 700 years later than the great king. However, the language of Ecclesiastes is either vernacular in dialect or transitional in the history of the Hebrew language. If transitional, it appears to be more transitional from early Biblical Hebrew to later Biblical Hebrew than between later Biblical Hebrew to the still later Mishnaic Hebrew. Therefore, no later than an 8th or 7th century BC date for the current text is probable, as we have it, if the language is not vernacular. If it is an example of a more vernacular dialect, then it could be earlier yet. Of course, this does not mean that the words are not those of a creative writer other than Solomon, just that the Hebrew dialect itself does not necessarily preclude him, especially if what we have is a crystallation of oral tradition. Transmission of this speech through the writing process could have modernised the language to the extent that it looks somewhat later than earlier written Hebrew. Furthermore, the probability that the book was in the first instance a speech might help to explain certain divergences of literary style from other texts that were originally composed as written.
Summing up his sense of the state of debate, Tremper Longman writes,
My conclusion is that the language of the book is not a certain barometer of date. This might leave us in a situation where, although the weight of the considerations against Solomonic authorship and the late dates seem substantial, it is nonetheless insufficient finally to decide the matter, leaving the interpreter to arrive at their positions cautiously on the balance of possibilities, given their own theological commitments, an interpretation of the book and its theology, and the shifting weight of the various lines of argumentation. Several commentators highlight keywords in the book as a way of discovering its unity and coherence, even as the author develops lines of argument that might push against each other. Fox, for instance, lists toil, do or make happen, and work an event, portion, senselessness or absurdity, wisdom, pursuit of wind, enjoyment or pleasure, good, and profit as examples of these keywords. Peter Enns expands the list. He includes keywords like guard, seek, walk, know, all, fool, heart, righteous, fate, evil, and under the sun. The author of the core material of the book is introduced to us as Koheleth, or the preacher. The meaning of this term is debated. The English name of the book, Ecclesiastes, comes from the Greek Septuagint title, referring to a member of an assembly.
However, the meaning of the original Hebrew term is less clear. Most now take it to refer to someone who addresses or speaks before the assembly, hence the preacher. The preacher begins by introducing the problem that will exercise him in his investigations, and simultaneously introduces a problem that exercises many commentators in theirs. What is the meaning of the keyword hebel? The way that we translate such an important keyword will cast its shadow upon our reading of the book more generally, and conversely, our reading of the book will have some influence upon our interpretation of this term. Translations commonly render the term hebel as vanity or meaningless. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the term is used to describe idols. It's also related to the name of Abel. The use of the term in relation to idols ways in favour of an interpretation as vanity. Other suggestions include absurd, worthless, incomprehensible, unknowable, futile, temporary, and transitory. More concretely, hebel means vapour or breath. This does not mean that such translation is automatically to be preferred. Many terms which do have a concrete referent of that kind have less concrete reference alongside it, in relation to which they operate as relatively weak or even dead metaphors. For instance, if I were to speak about broadcasting my opinions far and wide, you are unlikely to be thinking of someone casting seed. The original metaphor is no longer really operative. Fredericks criticises those who interpret the term as breath or vapour. He sees this as involving an equivocal switch between more specific meanings from context to context. Fox takes a similar approach, writing that, to do Ecclesiastes justice, we must look for a concept that applies to all occurrences, or failing that, to the great majority of them. Against such claims,
[13:52] Myers has, I believe correctly, taken vapour as a strong governing metaphor and interpreted the book accordingly. This is not equivocation in the manner criticised by Fox and Fredericks. Rather, the reader is being invited to see life as a vapour of vapours, and to explore different dimensions of that metaphorical association. There are few more potent and rich

metaphors for human life, activity and thought than that of vapour, breath or mist. Life is like groping through a dense fog which shrouds and veils reality, preventing us from seeing through to the heart of things. It's an experience of inscrutability.

We can read neither the comings nor the goings of being. We can neither grasp nor control it. It slips through our fingers. It eludes all of our attempts at mastery. It is fleeting and ephemeral.
It leaves neither trace nor mark of its passing, but passes into nothing. It produces no lasting fruit nor gain, and has no permanent effects. It is insubstantial. It's formed of nothing. It provides no bedrock for security against decay or change. Humanity's attempts to fashion an understand the world for itself will all ultimately founder, as the unforgiving wind of time whisks away our kingdoms of dust. It's this metaphor that lies at the heart of the book of Ecclesiastes.
Ecclesiastes declares the ultimate futility of all of our attempts at building and figuring out the world for ourselves, comparing these to attempts at shepherding the wind. This is the character of life under the sun. Life lived beneath the veil of heaven is inescapably vaporous. Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, the preacher searches for some sort of profit or gain, some sort of lasting fruitful or enduring mark of his labours under the sun, and he finds none. He attempts later to find profit through pleasure, through wisdom and through work, and all ultimately prove futile. Whatever he does will ultimately fall apart, no labours seem to have a lasting effect on the earth. The vaporous character of the worlds that man seeks to create for himself stand in marked contrast to the fixity and permanence of the world in which he finds himself, which we see in verses 3 to 11. It's this contrast between permanence and ephemerality that manifests his activities as vapor. We might try to form and fill our own world, much as God formed and filled his world, but his will last, and ours will soon perish.
In verses 4 to 7, the preacher lists four cycles that illustrate the transitory character of life. Verse 4, the movement of the generations upon the enduring stage of the earth.
[16:31] Verse 5, the cycle of days and the enduring reality of the sun. Verse 6, the various occasions of the blowing of the wind, but its enduring circuits. Verse 7, the constant movement of waters to the sea, without ever filling the sea up or ceasing the cycle. What is there to show from any of these unceasingly repeating natural cycles?

Is there any gain to show for them? Any lasting residue? Do they make any enduring mark upon the world? All actions are transitory, yet the cycles seem to be unending. This is a source of frustration to human beings who want to escape incessant cycles and to leave some enduring mark for themselves.
We strive to attain to something eternal or lasting. We build our proud sandcastles only for the relentless cycle of the tide to break them down and erase all signs that they were ever there. However, the cycles of human life will repeat themselves, and there won't be anything that is truly and enduringly new. The past has faded into the mist of forgetfulness, and we too in our time will suffer a similar fate. If we are very lucky, we might be remembered for perhaps even 100 years after our death, but in time we also will be forgotten. Verses 12 to 15 and verses 16 to 18 are two brief sections in which the preacher applies himself to reflect upon human life and activity. Speaking as a Davidic king in Jerusalem in, at the very least, a Solomonic persona, the preacher devotes his heart to investigating human activity under the sun, another key expression in the book. As a powerful monarch, one would think that the Davidic king over all Israel and Jerusalem had achieved genuine gain.
However, he is all too keenly aware of the modest limits of human activity and the great constraints that we find ourselves in as we expend our efforts in the vapour in the sub-celestial realms below the heaven and the highest heavens. All such activity is vaporous, it's striving after wind, or perhaps, as Frederick suggests, the whim of the wind. There is no way in which we can alter or amend our fundamental condition, no matter how much we try, even though we might, with a well-built wall and broad moat, delay the encroachment of the incoming waves upon our constructions in the sand. The tide is inexorable and it will ultimately overwhelm all of our defences, wiping clean the beach and restoring it to its original state, so that all must begin again. The king in Jerusalem would have the advantage of leisure, access to the wisest counsellors, exposure to foreign sages, possession of the most learned books and chronicles, extensive opportunity to observe human nature up close, and the freedom and the resources to explore the potential of human enterprise. With such advantages, he devoted himself to the deep study of wisdom. We should recall the description of Solomon's wisdom in 1 Kings chapter 4 verses 29 to 34.

And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the men of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. But he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezraite, and Heman, Calcol, and Dada, the sons of Mahal. And his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon, to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish. And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom. However, the king's study of wisdom merely acquainted him more with the limits of human endeavour and purpose, and the ways that wisdom can fail. The more knowledge he gained, the more frustration and sorrow he experienced. Wisdom itself, for all there is to commend it, is not a solution to the vaporousness of life. It mostly deepens our awareness of it. A question to consider. In modern society, we tend to see the world in terms of progress, rather than in terms of futile repeating cycles. How might reflecting upon the teaching of the preacher in this chapter puncture some myths that we might hold?