

Ecclesiastes: Big Ideas

1. Qoheleth: The traditional Greek title for this work assumes the traditional translation of Qoheleth as Preacher is correct. But we don't really know what it means. Since it is Persian narrative, it probably wasn't narrated by Solomon.
2. Sheol vs Heaven or Hell. The speaker is older and is concerned with aging and the necessity that we all die. There is no sense of an "afterlife." The word "sheol" is sometimes translated as "hell," but it really means "pit" or just "grave." (The New Testament word, Gehenna, refers to a suburb of Jerusalem.)
3. Breath. The KJV translation of "hebel" is Vanity, and that translation is so influential that most people use it. But hebel means "breath." One way of reading this philosophical text is to trace its repeated "motifs" or theme words: **Thirst, breath, longing** in Chapter 1: **Breath (hebel); Wind or Spirit (Ruach); Soul or Life-breath (Nephesh), Longing or Herding (Rehooth); Slaking or Drinking and Thirst (Saba); Panting or Longing (Shawal); Circling and Returning (Shoob, Sabeeb)**.
4. Water. Ecclesiastes is often performed at Succot, one of three holidays when people came to Jerusalem to sacrifice at the temple. So it is a festival scroll or Megilla. Succot (Sukkot, Succos, Sukkoth, etc.) is loosely linked with water and with rainfall. Rain and the pleas for it to fall are a critical part of the observance of this holiday. It is celebrated during the rainy season. According to traditional Judaism, Sukkot is the time of year in which God judges the world for rainfall. There is dancing and music and joy as the members of the community celebrate not only the joyousness of the holiday of Sukkot (it is also referred to as Zman Simchateinu—The Season of Our Joy), but also the importance of recalling the rejoicing of the water offering ceremony.
5. Wisdom Literature. As a complement to Proverbs, which talked about prosperity and success and marriage, this text is rebellious, even subversive. Like the other "writings" or wisdom books, it is concerned with the Big Questions. It deals with meaning and spirit and the reasons we exist. It talks about paradox with questions like
 - Why do we have to die while the earth goes on without us?
 - Why do the good suffer?
 - What is the point of working, learning, or experiencing pleasure?
 - Why do we long for everything we can't have?
6. Stop Reading! Go outside and play. The last few verses seem to have added later as a comment or PS on the rest of the text. It is a layer that suggests its early biblical readers found it difficult and maybe even depressing.

Discussion Question: Proverbs and Ecclesiastes were both written around the same time, during the second-temple period, probably under Persia. What does it say that such different texts would be written at the same time and both included in the Hebrew bible?