

# Vanity of Vanities

The Preacher

**Ecclesiastes 1:1** The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup> Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

<sup>3</sup> What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

<sup>4</sup> A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

<sup>5</sup> The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.

<sup>8</sup> All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already in the ages before us.

<sup>11</sup> There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.

(Ecclesiastes 1:1-11)

# OOParts and Ancient Civilizations

Ever since *In Search Of...* with Leonard Nimoy came out in the 1970s, I've been fascinated with the ancient mysteries of our human past.

- *The Antikythera Mechanism*. Discovered in a shipwreck off the coast of Greece in 1901, it is an ancient Greek computer made up of bronze gears that puts modern watches to shame. It predicts eclipses, keeps a 19-year lunar calendar, and shows the current location of the sun, moon, and planets years in advance. The likes of it would take another 1,600 years to approximate.
- *The Dorchester Pot*. In 1851, buried at a depth of several meters under sedimentary rock, a vase jar made of zinc and silver was discovered encased inside a solid rock that was exploded from a hill in Massachusetts.
- *The Buache Map*. Made in 1739, it depicts Antarctica, some say without ice, even though the continent would not be discovered for nearly 100 years (1820).
- *Machined coils and springs* composed of copper, tungsten, and molybdenum were discovered between 1991-93 in the Ural Mountains, these objects are as small as .0001inch and appeared in geological strata 30 feet deep.
- *A battery* inside a clay pot discovered in Baghdad in 1936 dating to before 226AD.

- *Impossibly gigantic megaliths* moved dozens of miles, down ravines and up mountains with by unknown means, scattered across the globe, connected by similar lost technology, cut with machine precision, sometimes fitted together as if they were melted, with highly advanced astronomical and mathematical information encoded in their structures.
- *Earthen mounds found with giant bones* found with ornate jewelry exist by the hundreds throughout much of the eastern third of the United States and Europe.

While none of these OOPARTS (Out Of Place ARTifactS) or megalithic structures are without controversy (mainstream science loves to associate them all with the *ad hominem* “fringe-science”), they are but the tiniest sampling of thousands of bizarre, unexplained relics and buildings and structures that date from forgotten ancient times on planet earth.<sup>1</sup>



Antikythera Mechanism  
Recovered in Shipwreck, 1901



Replica of the Antikythera Mechanism  
arstechnica.com

<sup>1</sup> For example, **Michael A. Cremona** and Richard L. Thompson, *The Hidden History of the Human Race: The Condensed Edition of Forbidden Archeology* (Bhaktivedanta Book Publishing 1999).



Buache Map, 1739 Depicting Antarctica without Ice?

Source: oncient-origins.net



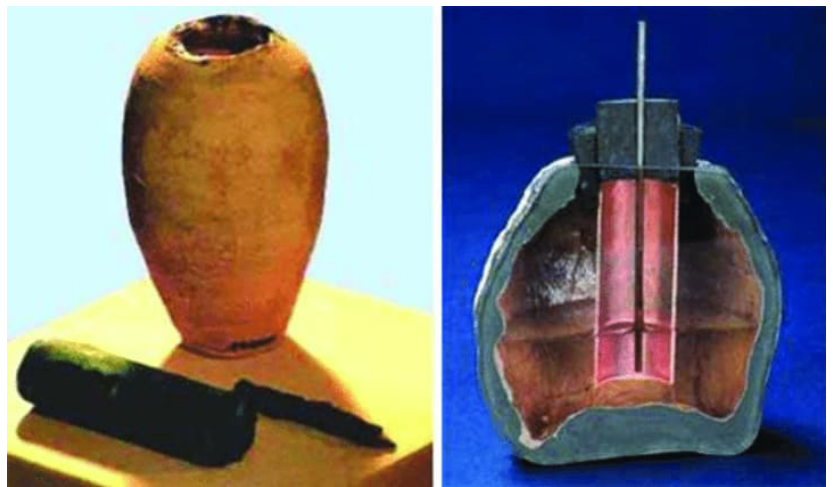
Coil Metal Object, Ural Mountains

Picture, ancient-origins.net



The Dorchester pot, recovered 1851

Source: ancientpages.com



Baghdad Battery, discovered 1936

Source: ancient-arigins.net

**Fig. 1. OOPARTS**

As far as ancient history is concerned, the relatively near contemporary of Solomon (d. 931 BC), **Hesiod** (b. 750 BC), tells us from his darkened pagan Greek perspective about the ancient days:

First of all [110] the deathless gods who dwell on Olympus made a golden race of mortal men who lived in the time of

Cronos [Time] [before the Flood] when he was reigning in heaven. And they lived like gods [115] without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief: miserable age rested not on them; but with legs and arms never failing they made merry with feasting beyond the reach of all evils. When they died, it was as though they were overcome with sleep, and they had all good things; for the fruitful earth unforced bare them fruit abundantly and without stint. They dwelt in ease and peace upon their lands with many good things, [120] rich in flocks and loved by the blessed gods.

(Hesiod, *Works and Days* 109ff)

These are people who lived long, long ago. Who knows how long? And they did some remarkable things. The biblical version of those days is not a golden age, but a gilded age. It was an age of pseudo-spirituality, indeed false religion. Where most English Bibles translate what happened after Seth gave birth to a son as, “At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD” (Gen 4:26), the Targums interpret “began” as “pollute” (a possible meaning of *chalal*) and thus say, “That was the generation in whose days they began to err, and to make themselves idols, and surnamed their idols by the name of the Word (*memra*)”

of the Lord” (PsJon) or “Then in his days the sons of men desisted (or forbore) from praying in the name of the Lord” (Onk).

“That” generation which corresponds theologically in the line of Cain shows both an epic fall into godlessness and a simultaneously spectacular explosion of technology. Lamech has sons who all develop high technology at the very same time: **Jabal**—husbandry and tent making; **Jubal**—music and instruments (**Gen 4:20-21**); **Tubal-Cain**—forging weapons for warfare (**21**). In extra-biblical Jewish tradition (which is implied in throughout the Scripture), this corresponds to the fallen watchers or sons of God coming down on Mt. Hermon to give us this technology in exchange for our women. The angel **Gader’el** shows us various ways of killing one another. **Pinem’e** teaches us roots and writing. **Kasadya** teaches women how to have abortions. (**1En 69:6-12**). **Azael** teaches women how to decorate themselves (**8:1**). **Semiaza** teaches enchantments, **Barakiel** astronomy, **Chociel** astrology (**3**), and so on. And this parallels the way the Babylonians understood history with the equivalent of the watchers, their Apkallus.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See **Amar Annus**, “On the Origin of Watchers: A Comparative Study of the Antediluvian Wisdom in Mesopotamian and Jewish Traditions,” *JSP* 19 (2010): 287-90.

Add to this now the **many underwater legends** of cities just off coasts scattered all around the world, ancient prediluvian cities intentionally buried in the sands of Turkey such as **Göbekli Tepe**, or the massive water erosion on the **Great Sphinx** that has been situated in an arid desert for thousands of years, and you get deep mysteries, mysteries that many people have forgotten even existed.

In that realm of the so-called **pseudo-science**, which has made so many inroads into the popular mind today through programs like *Ancient Aliens* and a proliferation of books and documentaries and podcasts on these fascinating, fun, sometimes foolish but often addicting subjects, one of the gurus of the day, Graham Hancock says, “**We are a species with amnesia.**” And I agree. Thing is, Solomon told us about this long ago in our passage today. “**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**” (**Ecc 1:9-10**).

But whereas the goal of the mystics and pagans and occultists and new agers and many pop-researchers are simply interested in the study is to try to somehow **rediscover our past in hopes of ushering us back into a**

golden age, and whereas there might be some reason to relate our past eschatologically and in a biblical counterpart to the Millennium and/or the Return of Christ as some are prone to do, Solomon takes the past and looks at it from a *very different* point of view. Rather than looking to the past to build a brave new world in the future for ourselves, The Preacher is much more concerned with *the present* and what it means to be here, now. And this is wisdom. This is how we are going to begin our study of Ecclesiastes.

## Ecclesiastes 1:1-11—Structure and Context

Ecclesiastes begins with a *superscription* (Ecc 1:1) which introduces us to *our author*. This will parallel the *postscript*, which gives us a little more biographical information about him and summarizes the entire book (12:9-13). He is called *Qoheleth*—*The Preacher*. The word comes from the verb meaning *to assemble* (*qhl*). The setting is therefore either a classroom or, better, a congregation.<sup>3</sup> “*Ekklesiastēs*,” is the Greek translation of this word.

Our Preacher identifies as “*the son of David, king in Jerusalem*.” Most have said that he must be king *Solomon*, given that Proverbs begins so similarly: “*The proverbs of*

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<sup>3</sup> August H. Konkel and Tremper Longman III, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 6: Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2006), 264.



Solomon, son of David, king of Israel” (Prov 1:1). The authorship has since ancient times been debated, but perhaps the name Solomon is left off because there is a higher and greater Author that we are meant to see here.

The Lord Jesus himself calls Solomon a type of himself! “The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, *something greater than Solomon is here*” (Matt 12:42). Jesus, of course, is the King of kings (Rev 19:16), the King of the Jews (Luke 23:38), and was himself ushered into Jerusalem on a Donkey like king Solomon was of old (John 12:12-15; cf. 1Kgs 1:38-40). Hence the good words of Evagrius of Pontus, “Ecclesiastes is Christ, the author of [all] knowledge” (*Scholia on Ecclesiastes* 1.1.1).<sup>4</sup> And Gregory of Nyssa, “The true Ecclesiast [is] he who collects into one body what has been scattered and assembles (*ekklēsiazon*) into one whole those who have been led astray in many ways by various deceits” (*Homilies on Ecclesiastes* 1). And thus, contrary to many who think of this as merely a Jewish book or as some relic of the OT that is no longer for modern people, “The teaching of this book looks exclusively to the

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<sup>4</sup> Many of these Fathers’ quotes are in J. Robert Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT 9 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

conduct of the church and gives instruction in those things by which one would achieve the life of virtue.” Therefore, at the start of our many lessons, you must understand that the One from whom you are hearing is no mere man, but God himself come to preach to you through the human preacher ancient truths, deep truths, with words that echo down the corridors of time as they leap off the pages of a scroll long since destroyed yet preserved by the Holy Spirit. Harken to them. Listen to the teaching. And learn wisdom.

After this introductory verse, our passage today consists of **Ecc 1:2-11**. The words are poetic. They speak of things created. They ring out words that belong to the world that is profane or mundane, that is *common to all men*. That makes this a subject not “spiritual” enough for some Christians, yet so omnipresent to our physical reality that those same people can’t escape them for a single second of their lives. The sun, the earth, the wind, streams and the sea, eyes and ears, work and labor, they all appear here. Thus, Norbert Lohfink calls it *a poem about Cosmology* and sees its parallel near the end of the book with *a poem on ethics (9:7-12:7)*.<sup>5</sup> We might also think of them as reflections upon Genesis 1-2.

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<sup>5</sup> Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth, A Continental Commentary*, trans. Sean McEvenue (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 8.

The poem also *speaks of time*, that inescapable jailer who holds us all captive such that we are never free from his shackles. We all see him. We all hear him. No one can escape him. Things which have been. This which are now. This which have not yet come to pass. These temporal aspects of life are contemplated by the Preacher. Hence, James Hamilton summarizes this section as discussing *the circularity of life* and sees its parallel near the end of the book with a second dealing with *Youth and old age* (11:7-12:8).<sup>6</sup>

Lohfink	Hamilton
1:2-3 Frame	A. 1:1: The messianic wisdom of the son of David”
<b>1:4-11 Cosmology (poem)</b>	<b>B. “1:2–11: The circularity of life</b>
1:12-3:15 Anthropology	C. 1:12–6:9: Pleasure, wisdom, and toil are a grasping for wind, but the gift of God is to eat, drink, and enjoy your labor.
3:16-4:16 Social critique I	C’. 6:10–11:6: Man is unable to understand God’s work by finding what is good or knowing what will be, but the gift of God is to eat, drink, and enjoy your labor.
4:17-5:6 Religious critique	<b>B’. 11:7–12:8: Youth and old age</b>
5:7-6:10 Social critique II	A’. 12:9–14: The messianic wisdom of the one shepherd: fear God and keep his commandments.”
6:11-9:6 Deconstruction	
<b>9:7-12:7 Ethic (concludes with a poem)</b>	
12:8 Frame	

Fig. 2. Chiasms of Cosmology and Time in Ecclesiastes

Some also see the book itself as being *cut in half* such that things near the beginning of the first half are mirrored in things near the end of the first half, and things at the beginning of the second half mirror things near the end of

<sup>6</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), Table 4.6, p. 319.

the second half, thus forming two chiasms. So for example with our poem, “There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after” (Ecc 1:11) is very similar to “There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him” (Eccl 4:16).<sup>7</sup> Who cares? These structures help us understand that **we begin where we are going to end**, and we will not escape these ideas even in the middle. This means you must **pay attention now** to what is before us so that when we return to it later, you might better see through the Preachers eyes the new things he will say about this same temporal existence and God’s creation.

## Ecclesiastes 1:1-11—Structure and Context

Have you ever thought about **the futility of life**? Have you ever struggled with understanding why you are here? Have you ever thought that life often seems meaningless and empty? Many will be afraid to answer “yes.” Those are not very spiritual or “Christian” thoughts. And you would

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.bible.literarystructure.info/bible/21\\_Ecclesiastes\\_e\\_1.html](http://www.bible.literarystructure.info/bible/21_Ecclesiastes_e_1.html) is an example of seeing two chiasms. They do not see the center of the book in the same place as we saw in the Introduction. Nevertheless, the general idea is worth thinking about.

never dare admit it in such company. Yet, this is how the Preacher begins! The poem affirms at the outset, “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Ecc 1:2).

Google “vanity” and you will usually get one of two results. Either a bathroom sink and cabinet or a rather lovely singer who Prince made popular in the 80s, who later became a Christian but died a few years back of kidney disease brought on by years of cocaine addiction. The Preacher has in mind neither of these. When you look at the word in a dictionary, the first entry is usually, “Excessive pride in or admiration of one’s own appearance or achievements.” This is also *not* what he has in mind, though that topic will certainly come up more than once in the book and is thus conceptually related to it.

Other translations render it as “futility” (NET). This is often the second definition of vanity. *This is what is in mind.* Other translations say “meaningless” (NIV) or “smoke” (The Message) or “mere breath.”<sup>8</sup> One even says, “absurdity.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible Volume 3 The Writings Ketuvim: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W Norton & Company, 2019), Ecc. 1:2.

<sup>9</sup> Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, The JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 3.

The word (*habel*) often means **breath** or **vapor**. When you breathe, what comes out? *Small water vapors*. When it is just cold enough, *you can see it*. And how long does it last? *A second or maybe two*. This then becomes a profound word. One commentary tells us that it “**connotes what is visible or recognizable, but unsubstantial, momentary, and profitless.**”<sup>10</sup> There is much to ponder here, for the Preacher says *all things are like this!* You can see it, right in front of your face. You recognize it. You think you know what it is. You’ve identified it. You’ve put a name on it. You’ve classified it. You own it. It’s yours. And yet, the second you try to touch it, it melts. The moment you think you’ve grasped it, it’s gone. The instant you think it is valuable to your life, it is rendered worthless.

Not only are these things what is behind this word, but “vanity” appears **five times in our verse**—twice in pairs, once alone, for a total of three sets to make for the **greatest superlative** possible (think big, bigger, *biggest*).<sup>11</sup> Vanity. Vanity! ALL IS VANITY!

**That’s not the way we usually think a good sermon should begin!** Most modern churches would already fire this

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<sup>10</sup> R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs / Ecclesiastes*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1965), 202.

<sup>11</sup> Alter, “a superlative or an extreme case.”

preacher, and he's only spoken one sentence. How dare he go around telling delicate little snowflakes that everything is absurd and meaningless. (I choose this slang word because nothing more fleeting, more ephemeral, more transient than a snowflake. It seemed appropriate to the book.) That won't boost self-esteem. That won't help them make it through Covid and Monkey Pox. It will only lead to despair and perhaps even suicide.

No. This *is* how the preacher begins. And this is what you must think deeply upon. So what does it mean? We are going to see the vanity to be grasped in things that exist properly in the physical universe. We will also see how this vanity is related to **time** that is quickly passing away for us. There may, however, also be **spiritual** overtones in this word.

*Habel* is closely related to another Hebrew word: *hebelim*. *Hebelim* appears in the context of **the gods** on many occasions.<sup>12</sup> “**They have made Me zealous by ‘no-god,’ They made Me angry by their vanities**” (**Deut 32:21** YLT). Vanities is translated by the ESV as “idols.” The OT calls the gods *vanities*.<sup>13</sup> *DDD* says, “**By calling indigenous Canaanite**

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, our second word “vanities” is identical to “vanities” in **Jer 10:8** which describes the gods/idols.

<sup>13</sup> **Lohfink**, 36.

and other deities ‘vanities’, their formal existence and practical efficacy is negated.”<sup>14</sup> It’s like calling them “false.”

It goes on to say that the word, which bears no relationship to any other ANE word, is **onomatopoeic**—it **sounds like it is**. *Hebel* sounds like **breath**. In these other places, the gods are compared to breath, vapor, transiency and stand in contrast to the Everlasting God of the Bible who made them. In this way, through this close association with them being called virtually the same thing, we can at this point, just two verses in, contemplate *all* created things, even those beings—fallen like Satan or loyal to the Lord like Gabriel, who, compared to God, are but a breath. That’s a lesson Solomon had to learn the hard way at the end of his life as he became a gross idol-worshiper and paid a serious price for it.

## The Gospel of the Greeks

**However, instead of** going in any kind of supernatural direction, the Preacher stays with what we can see, feel, hear, and touch. The book is in fact almost if not exclusively

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<sup>14</sup> **B. Becking**, “Vanities,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999), 887.



dedicated to these things. He certainly knows the reality of the spiritual world, but to him, there is only one spiritual reality worth discussing in this sermon. He has a stock phrase that he will use nearly 30 times to describe it: “**under the sun.**” “**What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?**” (**Ecc 1:3**). Though many ancient peoples worshiped the sun (**Deut 17:3; Jer 8:2**), that’s not what’s in mind here. In fact, the phrase appears about as naturalistic as how we today in our post-supernatural rationalism often think of it. Under the sun is something **all humans have in common**. Everything we all do is under the sun. It is not specific to Jews or Christians.

This verse is **the first question in the book**. Questions **make us stop and think**. That’s one of the purposes of Ecclesiastes. We aren’t supposed to just be spoon fed all the answers to life. There is far too much of that in the contemporary church and it has created generations of shallow disciples who never learn to think for themselves. We are supposed to **contemplate** them. Some may not like to do this. It takes too much effort. Christianity and life are supposed to be easy, they are told. Just know that searching out the matter is **the job of kings**. “**It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings to search things out**”

(**Prov 25:2**). God created us to reign as kings. He has given this status back to his chosen people, for we are a **royal nation**. That's why the king of Jerusalem is now training us to act like sons of the king through his sermon.

The focus of this question is on **work**. Work is what everyone must do on their journey through this life. Even if you don't get paid for it, you must work. Rightly viewed, work is **a gift from God** given to us prior to any sin. “**There was no man to work the ground**” (**Gen 2:5**), so God created the man and put him in the Garden to “**work and keep it**” (15). Work is therefore a good and necessary thing that emulates God himself, who worked for six days and then rested (2).

But again, this is **not the way the Preacher is viewing work**. Instead, he uses a word much more familiar to 9-5ers who every Monday through Friday sing that Loverboy song, “**Everybody's working for the weekend.**”<sup>15</sup> The word he chooses is *toil* (*'amal*). Why do people work for the weekend? Because they *hate* their work. It is a burden to them. They do it only because they must, to survive. Listen to how this word is **translated in other places** in the OT: **misery, wrong, hardship, wearisome, trouble, labor.**

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<sup>15</sup> **Loverboy**, “Working for the Weekend,” Get Lucky, Columbia, 1981.

So the Preacher thinks of work as toil. But the point, and the thing you are to contemplate, is **not the toil by itself**, as if all he wants is your affirmation, “**You are right, Preacher! Work stinks!**” Rather, he gives it a context. “**What does man gain (yitron) by it?**” This word is unique to Qoheleth. One commentator says, “**The idea is that of surplus, and the question is asked from the perspective of someone who thinks of life in a particular way, as if it were raw material to be invested in, manipulated and shaped, given added value by what is done with it, and marketed as a means of accruing capital.**”<sup>16</sup> It is closely related to a word found in Proverbs, “**All hard work brings a profit (motar) [mtr // ytr – ytrn], but mere talk leads only to poverty**” (**Prov 14:23**). So now the question can be understood. If work is a great toil and everyone is engaged in it only for profit, what do you really gain by it?

The Preacher will **return** to this thought time and again throughout his sermon. But here, as we see when we keep reading, **he does not raise the question and then answer it** the way you might like him to or as you might here in a modern three-point sermon, especially as we tend to like nicely packaged, practical tips that we can take away and apply for

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<sup>16</sup> **Iain Provan**, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 54.

the week. Instead, *he seems to change the subject. But does he?* Basically, he’s forcing you to think. He begins presenting a series of *observations about the cosmos and the people who live in it.*

“A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever” (4). The meaning of this difficult word “*generation*” is disputed, but the ESV goes with the traditional sense—people. People are born. People die. This is *cyclical* and never-ending. It happens to each person in every generation that has ever lived. John Cougar Mellencamp dedicated his most famous album, *Scarecrow*, to his grandfather who had just died writing, “*There is nothing more sad or glorious than generations changing hands.*”<sup>17</sup> He apparently was still thinking about this two years later when he put this very passage on the record jacket of his *Lonesome Jubilee*, an album that even *Rolling Stone* admitted is but one of many Biblical references found therein.<sup>18</sup>

In saying this, the Preacher is contrasting the *impermanence of humans* over against the *permanence of the inanimate world.*<sup>19</sup> Jerome observed the irony, “*What is*

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<sup>17</sup> John Cougar Mellencamp, *Scarecrow*, Riva, 1985.

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Decurtis, “The Lonesome Jubilee,” *Rolling Stone* (Oct 8, 1987), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/the-lonesome-jubilee-251356/>.

See John Cougar Mellencamp, *The Lonesome Jubilee*, Mercury, 1987.

<sup>19</sup> D. Kidner, *A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976), 25.

more vain than this vanity: that the earth, which was made for humans, stays—but humans themselves, the lords of the earth, suddenly dissolve into the dust?”<sup>20</sup> We might imply meaning here, such as the famed medieval **Rashi** (1040-1105) did when he said the wicked will not outlive the wealth they gained by oppression, because their generation will pass away and another will come and take their wealth away from their children. But the humble, [who] inherit the earth (**Ps 37:11**), shall endure.<sup>21</sup> But at this point, Ecclesiastes is has not raised such ideas. This is getting ahead of ourselves.

Instead of being practical like that, he continues with a **litany of observations** that move to other parts of the creation. This fits the other possible meaning of “generation” which is that it refers not to humans, but to cycles of nature.<sup>22</sup> He’s just mentioned “the **earth**.” Now he will talk about “the **sun**,” “the **wind**,” “all **streams**” and “the **sea**.” In the parallel section at the end of the book (**11:1-12:8**), he talks about “the **waters**” (**11:1**), “the **earth**” (**2**), “**clouds**” (**3; 12:2**), “the **wind**” (**4**), and “the **sun**” (**7; 12:1**).

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<sup>20</sup> **James L. Crenshaw**, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, ed. Peter Ackroyd et al., First edition, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1987), 63.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in **Fox**, *Ecclesiastes*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> See the discussion in **Tremper Longman**, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 62-63.

“The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises” (1:5). We’ve all seen sunrises and sunsets, but we don’t often in our modern world go out and intentionally look at them and contemplate. Henry David Thoreau did and came away saying, “*Who looks into the sun will see no light else; but also he will see no shadow. Our life revolves unceasingly, but the centre is ever the same, and the wise will regard only the seasons of the soul.*”<sup>23</sup> The Transcendentalist poet looked at the sun and tried to derive some kind of meaning. That’s what we expect from such contemplation. Not so with our Preacher. The best we can derive from what we’ve seen thus far might simply be when the day goes and the night comes, it means we are another step closer to never seeing another sunrise.

But the Preacher is again not answering how we might derive meaning from this. He is simply observing that the sun rises and sets and hurries back to where it came from. This is the cycle of creation that God made, and it has continued, unabated, since the day he put that sun in the sky. Tremper Longman gives you the sense of the vanity of this,

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<sup>23</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Journal I 1837-1846*, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1906), 236.

Ancient Egyptians thought of the sun as conveyed on a ship during its nocturnal journey from west to east, and the Greeks pictured Helios driven by steeds on its daily circuit. According to Ps. 19:5 the sun leaves its chamber like a bridegroom and returns like a strong man, having run its course with joy. Qohelet's description lacks this mood of celebration and wonder. Instead of picturing a vigorous champion who easily makes the daily round, he thinks of strenuous panting to reach the destination. Having arrived, an exhausted sun must undertake the whole ordeal again.<sup>24</sup>

“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” (6). This spring has been by far the windiest season I've ever experienced, and hopefully we are finally coming out of it. It is maddening. They say that in the early years of the pioneers, that the number one cause of death in Wyoming (just to our north) was suicide ... because of the wind! That's why hardly anyone lives there to this day. Bob Dylan thought about the wind. Asking all kinds of questions about life he said, “The answer my friend, is blowin' in the wind.”<sup>25</sup> The German group Scorpions

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<sup>24</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 63.

<sup>25</sup> Bob Dylan, “Blowin' in the Wind,” *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, Columbia, 1963.

watched the Berlin Wall fall to the ground and sang about “the winds of change.”<sup>26</sup>

The Preacher still isn't seeking meaning in this, the way we hunger for such application. Rather, he is talking about vanity and vapor. The wind blows here. The wind blows there. It blows and blows and blows. And then it returns to its circuits. But it isn't just that it blows here and there. What way does the wind blow here? South and north. What way does the sun in the previous verse traverse the sky? East to west. The wind is thus contrasted with the sun. Both return to where they started only to begin the cycle anew. It just keeps on going. Over and over. Day after day after day. It never changes. It never stops. Vanity.

“All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again” (7). Dan Fogelberg ends his first album by saying, “I was born by a river ... I was raised by a river ... I ran far from the river ... I will die by a river.”<sup>27</sup> Again, this is man taking the creation and seeing meaning in it. That's fine, and it's a great song. But the Preacher is not doing that.

He raises two significant problems that cause the minds of children to wonder in awe. One is, how can you have all

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<sup>26</sup> Scorpions, “Wind of Change,” *Crazy World*, Goodnight LA, 1990.

<sup>27</sup> Dan Fogelberg, “The River,” *Home Free*, Columbia, 1972.



these rivers that never stop flowing going into the same place, and yet **the sea never fills up**? One could think of Grand Lake with the Colorado River constantly feeding it. But of course, Grand Lake has an outlet where the waters continue on down their course. But what about something like the **Dead Sea** with the Jordan always pouring water into it, yet the Dead Sea has no outlet. Why does it not fill up? If I put a cup of water under a faucet, the cup quickly fills. Not so with the Dead Sea, yet its water source never stops. How is this possible?

The other question is, how do these streams themselves keep giving water? How is it that **a river is always flowing, it never runs dry**, it always has water? In Missouri, Arkansas, or Louisiana, you see the **mighty Mississippi** which at one point reaches 11 miles in width. You look at it. You think, where does all that water come from? If you follow it up to its headwaters at Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota, you can walk across it. You put the two together and you wonder, how can a lake like that create such a river? **The Colorado river** is even stranger. This thing cuts through the mighty Grand Canyon and makes its way into the Pacific Ocean where the river's delta appears to be 20 miles wide at high floods. But you can walk right on up to Colorado National

Park and hop across its headwaters where it is a couple inches deep and a couple feet wide. How can such a river as created the Grand Canyon start like that? Where does all the water come from? The questions are wonders!

Of course, most of you know the answers because you've been to school. But in **answering the question scientifically** through things like evaporation and condensation, **you are missing the point** of Qoheleth. You are taking the wonder away. His point is this is vanity. They just keep on giving and receiving water and it never ends. It's the same as with the wind and the sun and the earth with its generations who come and go.

Perhaps **this very thought** was in the Preacher's head as he raises the next observation. "**All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing**" (8). The very moment a puzzle is produced, **we seek out its solution and answer**. The eye and ear are brought into the discussion. This is how we gather information, through our senses. That's how we know about the earth, the sun, the winds, and the sea. We are always seeking more things. Show me this. Tell me that.

But its more. The eye and the ear cause us to want, want, and want some more. This is like nature which is relentless in its movement and ineffectual in changing itself. The Preacher is saying **all things are like this!** This produces weariness. Cake hits the nail on the head with their song, “Sick of You,” when they sing, “Every shiny toy | That at first brings you joy | Will always start to croy and annoy | Every camera every phone | All the music that you own | Won’t change the fact you’re all alone | Every piece of land | every city that you plan will crumble into tiny grains of sand | Everything you find | that at first gives you shine | always turn into the same old crime ... I’m so sick of work | so sick of play | I don’t need another day | I need to fly away.”<sup>28</sup> Weariness!

The Preacher turns his attention now away from ontology—the things themselves, to **the time** in which they find themselves. “**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**” (9-10). There are **two huge pitfalls** people immediately fall into with this verse. One is **ignorance of history**. Some know nothing

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<sup>28</sup> **Cake**, “Sick of You,” *Showroom of Compassion*, Upbeat Records, 2010.

about ancient history and so think that everything I said at the beginning must be quackery. This is, as C. S. Lewis called it, [chronological snobbery](#). Others know nothing about recent history and thus are doomed to repeat it. That itself is vanity. We could think of many bad examples that being doomed to repeat history could be applied, but we are particularly seeing the dangers of this vanity express it in a world-wide fascism that clothes itself in new garbs but is the same old thing that we saw in Germany, Italy, and other places. All because so many people are obliviously running headfirst into it, thinking they have found utopia! If you don't know *that* these things have been, then you can't understand anything the verses are telling you.

The other problem is taking these verses and trying to pursue the knowledge of our ancient past with the goal of understanding and then applying it to the modern world. In the deepest conspiracies that have been carried on since [the Tower of Babel](#), men are seeking knowledge long lost, especially esoteric knowledge, in hopes that they might take that knowledge and most the world a place fit better for themselves.

It can become an addiction to pursue ancient mysteries. I brought them up at the beginning both because I find them

interesting, and because a lot of people do not think they even exist. But **why does he bring this up?** Not to have us try to figure out what was in the past in order to reproduce it as some are in the custom of doing. But the opposite. So that we will understand that *we can't do anything truly new.* As a Canadian group sings in one of their Ecclesiastical moods, **"It's all been done before."**<sup>29</sup>

And where are these people now? Dead. Gone. **"There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after"** (11). As crazy and insane as covid, the vaccine, the election, the riots, the media—all of the last two years have been, and as even more crazy as I think it is likely to get, and as much as it sometimes feels like this is the craziest thing in history, even if it turns out to be that way, **give it a hundred years.** Give it 10,000 years. For some people even though they are still right in the midst of it, they've **already forgotten!** They don't remember much of what's gone on, if they ever knew it to begin with.

This is the verse that ends our poem. **How absurd, how futile is this then?** We work and toil and we gain nothing because we die. **Generations** come and generations go. The

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<sup>29</sup> **Barenaked Ladies**, "It's All Been Done," *Stunt*, Reprise, 1998.

**sun** is always working hard to simply do the same thing the next day. Forever. The **wind** is constantly changing but blows for who knows what purpose only to return and do it again. The **waters**, never running empty, don't fill anything up. We humans love to try and puzzle things like these out, but it is a wearisome task. There is no end of our inquiry or our want. And yet, everything we do has already been done. We can't do anything new and even if we did, no one would care or **remember** it, leastwise us who will pass with our own generation.

This is the way of it as our eyes see and our ears hear. It is vanity. **Are you wanting answers to these things now and why they are raised at the beginning of the book?** Are you looking for some kind of a positive spin here at the end of my sermon? I have a different ending in mind for us. Perhaps you are just here because you have to be, and you don't care at all. I have the same ending in mind for you. I want the power of his observations to hit you so that you will either think on them or not.

Long ago I was a youth pastor, and we had a bunch of kids that just didn't give a hoot about anything spiritual. Week after week this was so. So one week, I decided to read Jesus' **Parable of the Sower**—the one where the Lord

finishes by saying that he tells them parables *so that* people may be ever hearing, but never perceiving. I read the parable and then I told them we were done. It took all of two minutes. “Go home.” They didn’t believe me. I was serious. “Go home,” I told them. “Call your parents.” Many of them did. I hope that is not you today.

Importantly, a handful stayed and wanted to know what on earth I was doing. For the next hour and a half, we had **the best Bible study ever**. They were hungry for truth. They were thinking. They were reflecting. The Preacher has given you truth here at the beginning of his sermon. And he ends it with there being no remembrance of things that were or things that will be. The Jewish commentator Robert Alter says of this, “This is a radical and deeply disturbing idea for the Hebrew imagination, which, on the evidence of many earlier texts, sets such great store in leaving a remembrance, and envisages the wiping out of remembrance as an ultimate curse.” As you leave, will you forget what you have heard? Or will you ponder it as Qoheleth has asked you to do. Do the work of a king and search out the meaning of vanity. Then, as we return to these ideas later, you will come to know wisdom.

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