

Proverbs 1-4, 15-16, 22, 31; Ecclesiastes 1-3, 11-12

Episode 168

Proverbs

Proverbs is a collection of traditional sayings supplemented by instructional literature, presented as the teaching of father to his son. This kind of literature is called “wisdom literature” because of the frequency with which words for wisdom and foolishness occur.

As to Solomon’s authorship of proverbs, he is said in I Kings 4:33 to have spoken thousands of them, covering all facets of the relationships of nature, man and God. Whether the extant proverbs in the Bible include all of them, and whether all that are attributed to him are really his would be difficult to tell now. In any case, Proverbs, chapters 1–9 are entitled ‘Proverbs of Solomon.’¹

In the Hebrew Bible, the wisdom literature is represented by Proverbs, Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes), and Job, and by some Psalms, such as Psalms 1. The Apocrypha includes two major wisdom books, Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon, and there is a hymn to wisdom in the book of Baruch.²

Authorship

The Book of Proverbs *mishlei* (for *Mishlei Shlomo*, מִשְׁלֵי שְׁלֹמֹה "Proverbs of Solomon," παροιμίαι Σαλωμώντος [Greek]), is one of three biblical books ascribed to Solomon. According to tradition, he wrote the love lyrics of the Song of Songs when he was young, the wisdom of Proverbs in his midlife, and the disillusioned complaints of Ecclesiastes when he was old (*Song Rab.* §10). Some sections of the book are ascribed to other sages (24.23; 30.1-14; 31 .1-9; and probably 22.17). In fact, actual Solomonic authorship of any part of the book is doubtful. Neither the language nor the content fits Solomon's time.³

Most likely Proverbs is a collective work that has come to us from anonymous authors from many walks of life and from many time periods. The texts in the Bible that are called “Wisdom Literature” are Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, which need to be read within the framework of an international Near Eastern wisdom tradition. Proverbs and the postbiblical book of Sirach belong to the genre of didactic wisdom. They offer instructions and observations directing the reader in the formation of ethical character and in leading a successful and happy life. Ecclesiastes, in spite of its sometimes unorthodox ideas, belongs in this group. Books very similar in character and content were written in Egypt and Mesopotamia, starting in the late third millennium BCE and extending to the Hellenistic period, as late as the third century BCE. Egyptian wisdom books in particular are close in form and content to Proverbs. Most important is the [Instruction of Amenemope](#) (probably dating from the 13th or 12th century),

¹ Institute Manual, Proverbs. See also: Ellis T. Rasmussen, *An Introduction to the Old Testament and Its Teachings*, 1969, 2:45.

² John Collins, [A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible](#), Fortress Press, 2007, p. 248.

³ Berlin and Brettler, [The Jewish Study Bible](#), Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 1447.

which is the source of much of Proverbs 22:17-23.⁴ Many scholars give the priority position to the Instructions of Amenemope, when comparing the two texts.⁵

Issues with Proverbs

Although Proverbs, in contrast to Job and Qohelet⁶, strikes certain recurrent notes of traditional piety and evinces great confidence in a rational moral order that dependably produces concrete rewards for virtue and wisdom, it is in some ways, like Job and Qohelet, not altogether a likely book for inclusion in the canon. **The Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 30B) in fact brackets Proverbs with Qohelet as a text that perhaps might have been excluded from the canon—in particular because it contains contradictory assertions.** The sequence of verses 4 and 5 in chapter 26 is a vivid case in point: “Do not answer a dolt by his folly / lest you, too, be like him. / Answer the dolt by his folly, / lest he seem wise in his own eyes.” What, then, the earnest reader may wonder, is one to do about answering a dolt? It is probably misguided to argue for a dialectic or subtly complementary relationship between these two admonitions. **The contradiction between them stems from the anthological character of the book⁷:** the two sayings have been culled either from folk-tradition or from the verbal repertory of Wisdom schools and have been set in immediate sequence by the anthologist because of the identical wording—first in the negative and then in the positive—of the initial clause of each saying.⁸

Influence

Proverbs was probably influenced by its setting in the ANE. There is a well-attested genre of wisdom instruction, especially in Egypt, that dates back to the third millennium BC. Examples include the teachings of Amenemhet and Ptahhotep. (M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* 1:58-80; 2:135-63) These instructions were copied in scribal schools, and new instructions were composed, down to Hellenistic times. They deal with relations between superiors and inferiors, friends and enemies. They often caution about relations with women.

There are close parallels between the writings of Proverbs 22:17-23:11 and “The Instruction of Amenemope,” which suggest that the Hebrew composition was modeled on the Egyptian. The Egyptian instructions were copied for scribes in schools sponsored by the pharaohs. It is not clear whether such schools existed in Jerusalem before the exile. Nonetheless, the analogy with the Egyptian instructions suggest that this literature was developed under the monarchy to serve the needs of the court.⁹

⁴ A brief analysis of the Instructions of Amenemope and Proverbs 22-23, with a side by side comparison of the texts can be seen [here](#).

⁵ Nili Shupak, University of Haifa, “The Instruction of Amenemope and Proverbs 22:17-24:22 from the Perspective of Contemporary Research,” in R. L. Troxel, K. G. Friebel, and D. R. Magary, eds., *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, Eisenbrauns, 2005, 203-217. Shupak explains, “The Instruction of Amenemope remained buried in the basement of the British Museum for approximately 40 years before its translation into English was published in 1923. Subsequently, the question of the relationship between the Instruction of Amenemope and the book of Proverbs has not ceased to occupy researchers. A variety of answers to this question were proposed, until in the 1960s the consensus was reached that the Instruction of Amenemope influenced the book of Proverbs, rather than the reverse.”

⁶ Ecclesiastes.

⁷ Alter asserts that Proverbs is “not merely an anthology but an anthology of anthologies.” Alter, p. 345.

⁸ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary: Volume 3, The Writings*, W.W. & Norton Co., 2019, p. 345.

⁹ John Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, p. 249.

Scholars speculate that literature from Egyptian wisdom schools made its way into Israel and that these wise sayings were incorporated into the Hebrew Bible at some time during the monarchy.¹⁰

Nephi and the Wisdom Tradition

One scholar noted the similarity between Nephi's works and the writings of the wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible:

For Nephi, the learning of the Jews may also have meant a mastery of Hebraic learning that included chiasmus and other scribal literary devices such as paronomasia (word-play and punning), whether expressed in Egyptian or Hebrew characters or a mixture of those languages and scripts. Accordingly, one intriguing possibility is that the learning of the Jews constituted the principles and themes expressed in the ancient Israelite sapiential or Wisdom tradition. This tradition was passed down from a father or a king to a son or a prince or from a scribal teacher to a new scribe. Thus Nephi's scribal training would make him competent in the ancient Israelite Wisdom tradition. Another connection between Nephi's record and the Old Testament Wisdom tradition is Nephi's assertion that he has drawn upon "knowledge" in making his record (1 Nephi 1:3). The word "knowledge," or *daat* in Hebrew, is tied up in the Wisdom tradition. In fact, of the 89 instances of *daat* in the Old Testament, 61 are found in Wisdom literature, nearly 70% of the total instances of this word in the Old Testament. And of that total, 39 of 89 are found in the Book of Proverbs, constituting 44% of the overall total usages of the word *daat* in the Old Testament.¹¹ **While Nephi upholds the learning of the Jews, which may be represented by the Wisdom tradition, he rejects the manner of the Jews, perhaps represented by their culture and behaviors:**

For I, Nephi, have not taught them many things concerning the manner of the Jews; for their works were works of darkness, and their doings were doings of abominations. (2 Nephi 25:2)

If Nephi is influenced by the Wisdom tradition, then reading Nephi's writings through the lens of ancient Near Eastern Wisdom literature may open the records of the Book of Mormon in new and fruitful ways.¹²

Proverbs 1:7 reads יִרְאַת יְהוָה רֵאשִׁית דָּעַת חֲכָמָה וּמוֹסָר אֲוִילִים בְּזוֹ: "The fear/reverence of Yahweh is the **head/first/beginning** of *daat*/knowledge, for wisdom and discipline fools despise."¹³

¹⁰ The question also arises how the Egyptian wisdom material reached the hands of the author-editor of the collection "The Words of the Wise." Although any answer to this question is necessarily speculative, we can assume that the corpus taught in the educational framework in ancient Israel included instructions such as the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope. Furthermore, we may assume that a copy of this instruction— a subject of great popularity in Egypt that was still copied in schools a thousand years after its composition— reached the author-editors of the book of Proverbs (whether they were part of the educational framework in Israel or not), who used it in an intelligent and sophisticated manner. They succeeded in incorporating this foreign, Egyptian material into Hebrew wisdom (literature). Shupak, p. 217,

¹¹ The Wisdom tradition word "knowledge" appears in these Proverbs passages: 1:4; 1:7; 1:22; 1:29; 2:5–6; 2:10; 3:20; 5:2; 8:9–10; 8:12; 9:10; 10:14; 11:9; 12:1; 12:23; 13:16; 14:6–7; 14:18; 15:2; 15:7; 15:14; 17:27; 18:15; 19:2; 19:25; 19:27; 20:15; 21:11; 22:12; 22:17; 22:20; 23:12; 24:4–5; 29:7; 30:3.

¹² Taylor Halverson, "Reading 1 Nephi with Wisdom," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, Volume 22 (2016), pp. 279–293.

¹³ My translation. The word for fools in this verse is אֲוִילִים the plural of אֲוִיל, a word that denotes those that despise wisdom or make a mockery of discipline and instruction. 'E-veel,' fool, comes from the noun, 'ee-ve-let,' which

Proverbs: Composition

There are 7 distinct collections, introduced by distinct headings or superscriptions:

1:1-9:18	The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David
10:1-22:16	The Proverbs of Solomon
22:17-24:22	The words of the wise
24:23-34	These also belong to the wise
25:1-29:17	Other proverbs of Solomon that Hezekiah's men collected
30:1-14	The words of Agur, son of Jakeh
31:1-9	The words of King Lemuel

The Wisdom Tradition and the Book of Mormon

There are many parallels to the advice of the wisdom literature in Proverbs and the Book of Mormon. I find the connection between the idea that Wisdom is a Tree of Life (Proverbs 3) to the primary vision in Nephi's writings (1 Nephi 8-11) to be provocative of these ideas.

The Wisdom Tradition Advocates Listening to and Recording the Words of a Wise Father

Proverbs, a representative repository of Wisdom literature in the Old Testament, advocates that a wise son cherish the words of the father:

My son, keep my words, and lay up my commandments with thee. Keep my commandments, and live; and my law as the apple of thine eye. Bind them upon thy fingers, write them upon the table of thine heart. (Proverbs 7:1-3)

Nephi's record begins with what may be a declaration of his upbringing in the Wisdom tradition and his authenticity and reliability as a wise son and scribe:

Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians.¹⁴ And I know that the record which I make is true; and I make it with mine own hand; and I make it according to my knowledge. (1 Nephi 1:2-3)

The Wisdom Tradition Values Learning and Education

means stupidity, foolishness, and nothing beyond that. It is very likely that the closeness between the Hebrew word, 'e-veel,' and the English word, 'evil,' is the culprit for the mistranslations in the Bible. E-veel is also the Biblical name of the Babylonian king, awīl-Marduk, also known as Amel-Marduk, the son and successor of Nebuchadnezzar II, king of Babylon. Eveel, or Evil, was known to be a good towards the nations that he conquered and this verse attests to this fact: "And it came to pass in the thirty seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty seventh day of the month, that Evil- Merodach king of Babylon in the year that he began to reign lifted up the head of Jehoiachin king of Judah from prison; And he spoke kindly to him, and set his throne above the throne of the kings who were with him in Babylon" - 2 Kings 25:27-28. [Hebrew word of the day](#), accessed 7.22.22.

¹⁴ I find that Nephi's reference to the "language of the Egyptians" opens us up to more acceptance of the wisdom texts of Proverbs having an Egyptian influence.

Proverbs' opening statement declares that to be wise is "To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding" (Proverbs 1:2). Nephi states that he makes the record "according to [his] knowledge" (1 Nephi 1:3). This aligns with Proverb's thesis that "the fear [i.e., trust in and respect] of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10). Soon after Lehi's vision, departure from Jerusalem, and wise counsel to Laman and Lemuel, these older brothers rejected the words of their father, labeling them "foolish imaginations" (1 Nephi 2:11). Nephi, on the other hand, sought after learning and knowledge.¹⁵

Nephi understood the value of the education and learning that written records could provide. It was this logic, including a reference to wisdom, that Nephi used as he attempted to encourage his brothers to return to Laban a second time to request the Brass Plates.

And behold, **it is wisdom** in God that we should obtain these records, that we may preserve unto our children the language of our fathers; and also that we may preserve unto them the words which have been spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets, which have been delivered unto them by the Spirit and power of God, since the world began, even down unto this present time. And it came to pass that after this manner of language did I persuade my brethren, that they might be faithful in keeping the commandments of God. (1Nephi 3:19– 21, emphasis added)

Elder Maxwell taught:

Laman and Lemuel also displayed little lasting spiritual curiosity. Once, true, they asked straightforward questions about the meaning of a vision of the tree, the river, and the rod of iron. Yet their questions were really more like trying to connect doctrinal dots rather than connecting themselves with God and His purposes for them.¹⁶

The Wisdom Tradition Teaches Hard Work

Similarly, just as the wise should labor to learn, they should also find benefit in hard work and avoid idle talk for "in all toil there is profit: but mere talk leads only to poverty" (Proverbs 14:23, nrsv). We see this in the Book of Mormon when Nephi immediately engages in the seemingly impossible and arduous task of building a boat.¹⁷

The Wisdom Tradition Instructs One to Seek Knowledge from the Lord Despite Suffering

Like other prominent figures in Wisdom literature, Nephi seeks knowledge from the Lord despite the suffering he personally experiences. Indeed, Nephi describes himself as "having seen many afflictions in the course of [his] days" (1 Nephi 1:1). Like righteous Job, Nephi declares that notwithstanding his trials he still trusts (i.e., fears) the Lord.¹⁸ This is essentially Nephi's thesis statement as he opens his record:

¹⁵ Halversen, p. 286.

¹⁶ Neal A. Maxwell, *Ensign*, Nov. 1999, 8.

¹⁷ Halversen, p. 288.

¹⁸ Halversen, p. 289.

I, Nephi, will show unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith, to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance (1 Nephi 1.20).

The Wisdom Tradition Clarifies the Difference Between the Wise Man and the Fool

Proverbs contrasts the wise man with the fool, “A wise son maketh a glad father: but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother” (Proverbs 10:1). Nephi’s record provides characters that align with that proverbial contrast. Immediately obvious are Laman and Lemuel, who never truly “hear” the wise words of their father. In the Book of Mormon, they play the role of the fool, the foil to the wise Nephi.¹⁹

Unfortunately, the rebellious brothers may have enacted, or attempted to enact, the seven abominations listed in Proverbs 6:16–19:

These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: a proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, an heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.

Another foolish figure in Nephi’s record, who beautifully plays into the sapiential drama expected of Wisdom literature, is Laban. Likely by literary and paronomastic design, Laban’s name is an anagram of the Hebrew word *nabal*, meaning “fool.”²⁰ Like a true fool, Laban despises the word of God and fails to value the Brass Plates in his possession, in direct contrast to Nephi.

Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. (Proverbs 3:13–15)

Like a fool who lusts for spoil, Laban seeks the property of Nephi’s family even though “the getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a vanity tossed to and fro of them that seek death” (Proverbs 21:6). In contrast, wise Nephi is willing to give away his most “valuable” earthly possessions in order to gain the pearl of great price — the wise sayings of the Lord and his prophets as recorded on the Brass Plates.²¹

Proverbs 1: Listen to Wisdom

1. “The Proverbs of Solomon” (Prov. 1.1).
2. “To give subtilty to the simple” (Prov. 1.4).²²

¹⁹ We read that Laman and Lemuel spoke “many hard words” unto Nephi. This could be connected to the idea that the Wisdom Tradition teaches that דְּבָרִים בְּרַב וְקוֹל קָסִיל בָּרַב “a fools voice *is known* by multitude of words” (Ecclesiastes 5.3).

²⁰ For a Biblical story of paronomasia involving the name Nabal, see the story of David, Abigail, and Nabal in 1 Samuel 25.

²¹ Halversen, p. 290-91.

²² shrewdness . . . / cunning. This book uses in a positive sense a cluster of terms—“designs” in the next verse belongs to the cluster—that in other contexts have a connotation of deviousness and scheming. (“Shrewdness,” ‘ormah, for example, is the word used for the primeval serpent in Genesis 3:1.) Such usage fits in with the pragmatic curriculum of Proverbs. Intelligence of the most practical sort, involving an alertness to potential deceptions and seductions, is seen as an indispensable tool for the safe, satisfying, and ethical life, and a fool is repeatedly thought of as a dupe. Alter, p. 353.

3. "A wise man will hear, and will increase learning, and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels: to understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings" (Prov. 1.5-6).²³
4. Advice to ignore those that would entice you to sin or offend (Prov. 1.10-19).²⁴
 - a. "My son" (Prov. 1.10).²⁵
5. The Voice of Wisdom as she calls out (Prov. 1.20-33).²⁶
 - a. "Wisdom crieth without"²⁷ חֲכָמוֹת בַּחוּץ תִּרְנֶה
6. "How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity?" (Prov. 1.22).²⁸
7. "I will make known my words unto you" (Prov. 1.23).²⁹
8. "But ye have set at nought all my counsel" (Prov. 1.25).
9. "Whose hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil" (Prov. 1.33).³⁰

²³ "Let the wise man hear and gain learning, and the discerning acquire designs. To understand proverbs and adages, the words of the wise and their riddles" (Alter translation). Alter, p. 353-54.

²⁴ חֲטָאִים - One immediately sees why the traditional rendering of *hata'im* as "sinners," perpetuated in many modern translations, is not quite right. These are offenders in the strict criminal sense, a gang of violent thugs. Alter, p. 354.

²⁵ **My son**, many scholars understand the "son" to be a student in a school and "father" to be a schoolteacher, but there is no evidence for this. Egyptian instructions are consistently presented as a father's words to his actual son, and the mention of the mother in 1.8; 4.3; 6.20 points to a family context, at least as the fictional setting of wisdom instruction. The texts could secondarily be used in schools, as they were in Egypt. *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1450.

²⁶ *Wisdom cries out in the streets*. Lady Wisdom, an important personage in the first large unit of Proverbs, is as close to an allegorical figure as the Hebrew Bible comes. Attempts to derive her from the Greek Sophia are questionable, and it is by no means clear that any of this book was written as late as the Hellenistic period. Female figures as symbols of nations—most notably, Zion—are common in biblical literature, but not as embodiments of abstractions. Perhaps the centrality of the quality of wisdom in this poetic book led to a feminine personification. The Hebrew *hokhmah* is a feminine noun, but here it appears in a plural form, חֲכָמוֹת *hokhmot*, construed grammatically as a singular (like Behemoth in Job). This could be a plural of intensification or an archaic form.

²⁷ Wisdom is here described as a woman. (In Hebrew, the word for wisdom, "hokmah," is a feminine abstract noun.) Such personification is briefly suggested in 2.3; 2.13-20; 4.8-9; 7.4. There are various theories to account for the origins of the wisdom personification. Some commentators believe that it derives from a goddess, such as a Canaanite wisdom goddess (though no such deity is known) or the Egyptian Ma'at, goddess of truth and justice, or the Egyptian Isis, goddess of wisdom. Lady Wisdom does bear some similarities to ancient Near Eastern goddesses, but in Proverbs she is a literary figure created as a vivid and memorable way of speaking about human wisdom. Wisdom is by no means secret or esoteric. She is public, frequenting the busiest parts of the town (the gates of a city were the location of much public and private business) and calling to all to accept her. *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1451.

²⁸ Robert Alter renders עַד־מָתַי פְּתִים תֵּאָהֲבוּ פְתִי as "How long, dupes, will you love being duped?" Alter, p. 356. The Hebrew word פְתִי can be used as a noun or an adjective and means simplicity, naivete, or simple, foolish, or open-minded, depending on the context with which it is used.

²⁹ Mike Wilcox discusses the idea that God's many voices are heard throughout history and in many different religious texts from all traditions. He works to illustrate how the basic truths that bring light into our lives are taught throughout all time and in all cultures. See: [Mike Wilcox, God's Many Voices: A Conversation with Michael Wilcox, September 19, 2021, Faith Matters Podcast](#).

³⁰ 33But who heeds me will dwell secure, and tranquil from the fear of harm (Alter translation).

Proverbs 2: The Lord gives Wisdom

1. “Incline thine ear unto wisdom, *and* apply thine heart to understanding” (Prov. 2.2).
2. “When wisdom entereth into thine heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul” (Prov. 2.10).
3. Discretion to avoid the evil man who speaks perversely and the strange woman (Prov. 2.12-16).
 - a. The Strange Woman who “flattereth with words, her house inclineth unto death, her paths unto the dead” (Prov. 2.16-18).³¹

Proverbs 3: Trust in the Lord

1. “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding” (Prov. 3.5).
2. “Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil” (Prov. 3.7).
3. “Honour the LORD with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase: So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine” (Prov. 3.9-10).
4. “Happy is the man³² that findeth wisdom... she is more precious than rubies³³... her ways are pleasantness... she is a tree of life... happy is everyone that retaineth her” (Prov. 3.13-18).
5. “My son, let not them depart from thine eyes” (Prov. 3.21).³⁴
6. “life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck” לַחַיִּים לְנַפְשְׁךָ וְחֵן לְגֵרְתֶּיךָ (Prov. 3.22).³⁵

³¹ לְהַצִּילְךָ מֵאִשָּׁה זָרָה “To deliver you from the strange woman” (Prov. 2.16). The meaning of the Hebrew *zarah* has been much debated. The usual English designation, “strange woman,” is misleading because it implies that she is strange—that is, somehow bizarre. She is not, as some have claimed, a prostitute because verse 17 indicates that she is married. There is also scant suggestion that, as others have argued, she is a foreigner, even though the parallel term in this line, *nokhriyah*, “alien woman,” often means foreigner. In cultic contexts, a *zar* is someone prohibited from entering the sacred zone of the sanctuary because he is not a priest. That sense is relevant to our text: the married woman, because she is contracted to another man, is prohibited to the susceptible youth. The paired term *nokhriyah*, then, in the poetic parallelism, **probably has the force of “another man’s wife”—alien in a sexual rather than a national sense.** Alter, p. 358.

³² **Happy the man.** After the general exhortation to follow the words of the wise that takes up verses 1–12, a new unit begins here. The ‘ashrey formula, “happy the man,” often marks the beginning of a textual unit, as in the Wisdom psalm (Psalm 1) that stands at the head of the canonical collection. The subject of this poetic sequence, which ends at verse 20, is a celebration of the transcendent powers of wisdom. Alter, p. 361.

³³ **rubies.** As with most precious stones in the biblical lexicon, the precise identification is uncertain. In modern Hebrew, *peninim* means “pearls,” which might possibly be its biblical sense. Alter, p. 361.

³⁴ This can be translated “let not these things depart from your eyes,” or “do not turn *this counsel* aside from your eyes.” The point is that the counsel in the previous verses, which are an exhortation to cling to wisdom, must be remembered.

³⁵ The Greek reads ἵνα ζήσῃ ἡ ψυχὴ σου καὶ χάρις ᾗ περὶ σὺ τραχήλῳ. “In order that it (*the previous counsel*) will be life to your soul and that it may be grace around your neck.” (My translation). Robert Alter explains this enigmatic verse this way, “Because of the poetic parallelism, the probable sense of the multivalent *nefesh* here, as frequently in Psalms (see, for example, Psalm 69:2), is “neck.” The idea of wisdom as an ornament around the neck (compare verse 3) is common in Proverbs, but “life to your neck” sounds odd. The reference might conceivably be to a life-protecting amulet, worn around the neck.” Alter, p. 362. *Nefesh* can be translated in a number of ways. It can be translated “neck,” or “throat,” or “that which breaths,” as well as “soul.”

One commentator explained it thus: “It is difficult to determine when the notion of soul first emerged in Jewish writings. The problem is partly philological. The word *nefesh* originally meant “neck” or “throat,” and later came to imply the “vital spirit,” or *anima* in the Latin sense. The word *ruach* had at all times meant “wind” but later came to refer to the whole range of a person’s emotional, intellectual, and volitional life. It even designated ghosts. Both terms were widely used and conveyed a wide variety of meanings at different times, and both were often translated as “soul.” See: [Death, Encyclopedia Britannica](#). Accessed 8.6.2022.

7. "The wise shall inherit glory, but shame will be what fools will carry" (Prov. 3.35 my translation).

Proverbs 4: Wisdom is the principal thing

1. "Get wisdom, get understanding" (Prov. 4.5).
2. "Wisdom is the principal thing" (Prov. 4.7).
3. "She shall give to thine head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory shall she deliver to thee" (Prov. 4.9).
4. "Keep her, for she is life" (Prov. 4.13).
5. "Enter not into the path of wicked" (Prov. 4.14).
6. The two ways: the path of the just and the way of the wicked (Prov. 4.18-19).³⁶
7. "My son, attend to my words..." stay on the path and ponder where you are heading! (Prov. 4.20-27).

Proverbs 5: Drink water out of your own cistern

1. "My son... the lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb" (Prov. 5.3).³⁷
2. "Drink waters out of thine own cistern" (Prov. 5.15).³⁸

Proverbs 6: Seven things the Lord hates

1. "My son, if thou be surety for thy friend" (Prov. 6.1).³⁹
2. Seven things the Lord hates (Prov. 6.16-19).
3. Stay away from the evil woman (Prov. 6.24-32).

Proverbs 8: Wisdom and Creation

1. Wisdom calls out, stands at the top of the heights, cries at the gates (Prov. 8.1-3).⁴⁰
2. Her mouth speaks truth, and wisdom is better than rubies (Prov. 8.7-11).
3. "Counsel is mine... by me kings reign... my fruit is better than gold" (Prov. 8.14-19).

³⁶ These verses could have a strong connection to 2 Nephi 9 and Jacob's powerful message of the two ways: the way of life and death. 2 Nephi 9 seems to be drenched in the symbolism of the wisdom tradition from Nephi's time period.

³⁷ This reminds us of Alma's counsel to his son Corianton ([Alma 39](#)). It is interesting that in this chapter, Corianton has been boasting of his own wisdom, rather than listening to the wisdom of his father (Alma 39.2). Alma also teaches this bit of wisdom, "Seek not after riches nor the vain things of this world; for behold, you cannot carry them with you" (Alma 39.14).

³⁸ The association of the well with female fertility and especially with the womb is reflected both in the Song of Songs and in the recurrent betrothal type-scene, where the young man encounters his future bride by a well. The pure waters of the well are an antithesis to the sweet honey and smooth oil of the seductress's mouth. It is not clear whether the young man is already married or is being urged to enter marriage and its pleasures before he succumbs to the lure of the stranger-woman. Alter, p. 368.

³⁹ To guarantee a loan for others could be an act that would lead to financial ruin.

⁴⁰ In 1839 Joseph Smith told Zina Diantha Huntington that one day she would see not only her deceased mother, but "your eternal Mother, the wife of your Father in Heaven." When Zina asked "I have a Mother in Heaven?" Joseph Smith said, "You assuredly have. How could a Father claim his title unless there were also a Mother to share that parenthood?" Susa Young Gates, "Eliza R. Snow Smith," *History of the Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints from November 1869 to June 1910*, Salt Lake City, Deseret News, 1911, p. 15-15.

4. "The Lord possessed me in the beginning... I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning... before the mountains... when he prepared the heavens... when he established the clouds" (Prov. 8.22-28).
5. "I was by him... I was daily his delight" (Prov. 8.30).⁴¹

Proverbs 9: Wisdom Built Her House

1. "Wisdom hath builded her house... out of her seven pillars" (Prov. 9.1).
2. "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine which I have mingled" (Prov. 9.5).⁴²
3. The Foolish Woman (Prov. 9.13-18).

Proverbs 15-16: Wisdom Sayings

1. "A soft answer turneth away wrath" (Prov. 15.1).
2. "A wholesome tongue is a tree of life... a fool despises his father's instruction" (Prov. 15.4-5).
3. "Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith" (Prov. 15.17).⁴³
4. "He that is greedy of gain troubleth his own house; but he that hateth gifts shall live" (Prov. 15.27).⁴⁴
5. "When a man's ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Prov. 16.7).⁴⁵

⁴¹ Val Larsen has spent a great deal of effort to articulate that Heavenly Mother is located in several places within canonized scripture. See: [Larsen, Hidden in Plain View: Mother in Heaven in Scripture. Square Two, Vol. 8, Summer 2015](#). Some early Christians conceived of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, as a mother figure, thus creating a three member Godhead of sorts consisting of a father, mother, and son. See: Elaine H. Pagels, "[What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity](#)," *Signs*, Winter 1976, p. 293-303. Pagels gives this description of God as an example of early Christian thought: One source, *the Secret Book of John*, for example, relates how John, the brother of James, went out after the crucifixion with "great grief," and had a mystical vision of the Trinity: "As I was grieving ... the heavens were opened, and the whole creation shone with unearthly light, and the universe was shaken. I was afraid ... and behold ... a unity in three forms appeared to me, and I marvelled: can a unity have three forms?" To John's question the vision answers: "It said to me, 'John, John, why do you doubt, or why do you fear? ... I am the One who is with you always: I am the Father; I am the Mother; I am the Son'" (Pagels, p. 296). See: *Apocryphon Johannis*, ed. S. Giversen (Copenhagen: Prostant Apud Munksgaard, 1963), 47.20-48.14.

⁴² I see this as the invitation to come unto the Tree of Life, personified as Lady Wisdom, the Divine Mother. By doing so, one is liturgically standing in the Holy of Holies and is in the presence of God.

⁴³ "Better a meal of greens where there is love than a fatted ox where there is hatred" Alter translation, p. 400.

⁴⁴ This has reference to taking bribes. Proverbs is conflicted on this issue. For example, Proverbs 17.23 says, "A gift out of the bosom a wicked man takes" **שֶׁחָדַשׁ מִחֵיק רִשָּׁע יִקַּח**. In this context a *šōḥaḏ* is a bribe. It is sometimes translated as a present or gift. But in Proverbs 17, taking a bribe is what wicked people do. But Proverbs 21.14 **עֲזָה בְּחֵיק חֲמָה עֲזָה** states, "A gift in secrecy will soothe anger, and a **bribe/gift** in the bosom fierce fury." **So which is it? Are bribes good or bad? The author (if one author had a final editorial oversight) seems to leave it to the reader to decide which is correct.**

⁴⁵ Abraham Lincoln was a master at bringing his enemies into a space where he could work with them. For example, Edwin Stanton was not a fan of Lincoln when they first met. Mr. Stanton treated Lincoln with utter contempt at their initial acquaintance when the two men were involved in a celebrated law case in the summer of 1855. Unimaginable as it might seem after Stanton's demeaning behavior, Lincoln offered him "the most powerful civilian post within his gift"--the post of secretary of war--at their next encounter six years later. On his first day in office as Simon Cameron's replacement, the energetic, hardworking Stanton instituted "an entirely new regime" in

6. The importance of just weights and balances (Prov. 16.11).⁴⁶
7. Wisdom is more valuable than gold (Prov. 16.16).
8. "The hoary head is a crown of glory" (Prov. 16.31).

Proverbs 22: A Good Name is Better than Riches

1. "A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches" (Prov. 22.1).⁴⁷
2. "Train up a child the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22.6).⁴⁸
3. "The mouth of a strange woman is a deep pit" (Prov. 22.14).
4. "Rob not the poor, because he is poor: neither oppress the afflicted in the gate" (Prov. 22.22).⁴⁹

the War Department. After nearly a year of disappointment with Cameron, Lincoln had found in Stanton the leader the War Department desperately needed. Lincoln's choice of Stanton revealed his singular ability to transcend personal vendetta, humiliation, or bitterness. As for Stanton, despite his initial contempt for the man he once described as a "long armed Ape," he not only accepted the offer but came to respect and love Lincoln more than any person outside of his immediate family. He was beside himself with grief for weeks after the president's death. See: Doris Kearns Goodwin, [Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln](#), Simon & Schuster, 2006, p. 260/1655 electronic version. We see a similar theme in Lincoln's approach with William Seward, senator from New York (made secretary of state by Lincoln), as well as former Missouri congressman Edward Bates. These men came to view Lincoln as a great leader who was needed at this very moment of the country's greatest need.

⁴⁶ These instruments for conducting trade, elsewhere in Proverbs referred to literally, are here a metaphor for the fairness and precision with which God judges the world. Alter, p. 402. We see these ideas repeated in the Proverbs. For example, see Proverbs 20.10, 23.

⁴⁷ Proverbs 22.1 reads **וְיָבָחָר שֵׁם מֵעֲשֹׂר רֶבֶב מִכֶּסֶף וּמִזָּהָב חֵן טוֹב** "A name is more choice than **great wealth**, more than silver and more than gold, **even** good favor" (my translation).

⁴⁸ Speaking of the importance parents play in the lives of their young children, President Hinkley taught: Opening your purse and handing a son or daughter money before you rush off to work will not do. It may only lead to more evil practice. The proverb spoken of old said, "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" [Prov. 22:6](#). Another wise saying reads, "As the twig is bent, so the tree's inclined" (Alexander Pope, *Moral Essays*, vol. 2 of *The Works of Alexander Pope, Esq.*, "Epistle I: To Sir Richard Temple, Lord Cobham" [1776], 119; line 150). Gordon B. Hinckley, "[Your Greatest Challenge, Mother](#)," October 2000 General Conference.

Referencing this verse in Proverbs, Elder Richard G. Scott said, "Some of you have children that do not respond to you, choosing entirely different paths. Father in Heaven has repeatedly had that same experience. While some of His children have used His gift of agency to make choices against His counsel, He continues to love them. Yet, I am sure, He has never blamed Himself for their unwise choices. **As a mother or father, are you in trouble because the pressures of the world lead you from effectively fulfilling your divine role? Is your life unconsciously fueled with the burning desire for more things that could compromise eternal relationships and the molding of a child's developing character?** You must be willing to forgo personal pleasure and self-interest for family-centered activity, and not turn over to church, school, or society the principal role of fostering a child's well-rounded development. It takes time, great effort, and significant personal sacrifice to "train up a child in the way he should go." [Prov. 22:6](#) But where can you find greater rewards for a job well done?" Richard G. Scott, "[The Power of Correct Principles](#)," April 1993 General Conference.

⁴⁹ **Do not crush the poor in the gate.** The gate was where courts of justice were held, and the sense of subverting the legal rights of the poor is spelled out in the first verset of the next line. Alter, p. 421. The wretched man's wretchedness is a reason not to cheat him. The city gate was where disputes and legal cases were adjudicated. The poor may lack a human protector, but they have a divine one. *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1482.

5. "Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set" (Prov. 22.28).⁵⁰

Proverbs 26: Answering a Fool

1. "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit" (Prov. 26.4-5).⁵¹
2. "As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly" (Prov. 26.11).⁵²

Proverbs 31: The Words of Lemuel

1. "The words of Lemuel, king of Massa⁵³, with which his mother reproved him" (Prov. 31.1).⁵⁴
2. "Who can find a virtuous woman?⁵⁵ For her price is far above rubies" (Prov. 31.10).⁵⁶
3. Latter-day leaders have spoken about the virtues expressed in Proverbs 31.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ We also see this instruction in Proverbs 23.10 and Deuteronomy 19.14. Robert Alter explains, "This injunction, which has a close parallel in the Egyptian source-text, reflects the general view that real property should be inalienable." Alter, p. 422.

⁵¹ Berlin and Brettler explain, "The dullard (Heb קִסִּיל "kesil") is not merely a man of low intelligence. He is the kind of fool who is obtuse because of smug overconfidence. We have here (Proverbs 26.4-5) two contradictory proverbs. The second one seems like a rejoinder to the more standard message of the first. If you answer the fool in kind (that is, in a crude and harsh fashion), you will resemble him, but if you do not, he will think that he has impressed or confounded you. Some interpreters think that this juxtaposition suggests the paradoxical difficulties of being wise. *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1488-89.

⁵² We see this idea repeated in 2 Peter 2.22 and in 3 Nephi 7.8.

⁵³ A kingdom in northern Arabia.

⁵⁴ The name is unusual and nothing is known about him, not even whether he is a historical figure or a literary invention. In any case, this is still another unit of Wisdom exhortation, distinctive stylistically and rhetorically, that the anthologist has culled from an unknown source and decided to include. The advice here of a queen mother to her son has no precedent elsewhere in the book. Alter, p. 450.

⁵⁵ אִשָּׁת־חַיִּיל מִי יִמְצָא "Who can find a woman of power/strength/valor?" **Chayil can mean strength, force, efficiency, wealth, might, force, valor, or power.** Berlin and Brettler prefer "strength" as the best translation in this instance. See: *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1497. Robert Alter translates אִשָּׁת־חַיִּיל as "worthy woman."

⁵⁶ So far, the book of Proverbs has been devoted to inculcating the ideal of a wise man. It now concludes with a poem describing a **wise woman**, praising her energy, her economic talents, and her personal virtues. This is not one specific woman but an ideal, a paragon of female virtues. These virtues are essentially shared by the ideal man described elsewhere. She is a proud and splendid woman, mistress of a prosperous manor. Contrary to a common notion of woman's status in the ancient world, **this woman has considerable independence in interacting with outsiders and conducting business, even in acquiring real estate.** This allows her husband to spend his time sitting in the city gates, presumably conducting civic business and serving as a judge. Some commentators have interpreted the passage as an allegory, with the wise woman representing wisdom itself. But this woman has a husband and children and is very much a human being, though an ideal one. The poem is traditionally recited by Jewish men to their wives on Sabbath evening, before the Kiddush (the sanctification of the Sabbath over wine). It is also often recited at funerals of women. The poem is an acrostic (Proverbs 31.10-31), with each line beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in sequence. *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1497.

⁵⁷ President Margaret Nadauld taught, "When you observe kind and gentle mothers in action, you see women of great strength. Their families can feel a spirit of love and respect and safety when they are near her as she seeks the companionship of the Holy Ghost and the guidance of His Spirit. They are blessed by her wisdom and good judgment. The husbands and children, whose lives they bless, will contribute to the stability of societies all over this world. Grateful daughters of God learn truths from their mothers and grandmothers and aunts. They teach their daughters the joyful art of creating a home. They seek fine educations for their children and have a thirst for knowledge themselves. They help their children develop skills that they can use in serving others. They know that the way they have chosen is not the easy way, but they know it is absolutely worth their finest efforts."

Ecclesiastes

Qohelet is in some ways the most peculiar book of the Hebrew Bible. The peculiarity starts with its name. The long tradition of translation into many languages, beginning with the ancient Greek version, uses some form of “Ecclesiastes” for the title. The Septuagint translators chose that title because it means “the one who assembles,” and the Hebrew root *q-h-l* does mean “to assemble.” Some have claimed that what it refers to is the assembling of sayings, but this Hebrew verb always takes people, not words or things, as its object, so it may reflect the assembling of audiences or disciples for these discourses.⁵⁸

Authorship

Classical rabbinic tradition generally accepted that Koheleth was really Solomon, and thus that the book originated from the Solomonic period, but **internal evidence points to a much later date of origin**. Thus, the book's two Persian words, *pardes* ("garden," 2.5) and *pitgam* ("sentence," 8.11) indicate that **in its present form it does not date from before the postexilic period** (latter 6th century BCE on) and the emergence of the Achaemenid Persian empire that ruled Judah and most of the ancient Near East. This date comports with the variety of late grammatical features of Koheleth's Hebrew.⁵⁹ Some scholars have been tempted to see in it an influence of Greek philosophy, but C. L. Seow argues convincingly on

They understand what Elder Neal A. Maxwell meant when he said: “When the real history of mankind is fully disclosed, will it feature the echoes of gunfire or the shaping sound of lullabies? The great armistices made by military men or the peacemaking of women in homes and in neighborhoods? Will what happened in cradles and kitchens prove to be more controlling than what happened in congresses?” [“The Women of God,” *Ensign*, May 1978.]

Daughters of God know that it is the nurturing nature of women that can bring everlasting blessings, and they live to cultivate this divine attribute. Surely when a woman reverences motherhood, her children will arise up and call her blessed (Prov. 31:28). Women of God can never be like women of the world. The world has enough women who are tough; we need women who are tender. There are enough women who are coarse; we need women who are kind. There are enough women who are rude; we need women who are refined. We have enough women of fame and fortune; we need more women of faith. We have enough greed; we need more goodness. We have enough vanity; we need more virtue. We have enough popularity; we need more purity. Margaret Nadauld, “[The Joy of Womanhood](#),” October 2000 General Conference.

James E. Faust taught, “How should those who bear the priesthood treat their wives and the other women in their family? Our wives need to be cherished. They need to hear their husbands call them blessed, and the children need to hear their fathers generously praise their mothers (Prov. 31:28). **The Lord values his daughters just as much as he does his sons. In marriage, neither is superior; each has a different primary and divine responsibility.** Chief among these different responsibilities for wives is the calling of motherhood. I firmly believe that our dear faithful sisters enjoy a special spiritual enrichment which is inherent in their natures.

President Spencer W. Kimball stated: “To be a righteous woman during the winding up scenes on this earth, before the second coming of our Savior, is an especially noble calling. ... **Other institutions in society may falter, and even fail, but the righteous woman can help to save the home, which may be the last and only sanctuary some mortals know in the midst of storm and strife**” (*Ensign*, Nov. 1978, p. 103, emphasis added). James E. Faust, “[Keeping Covenants and Honoring the Priesthood](#),” October 1993 General Conference.

⁵⁸ Alter, p. 673.

⁵⁹ *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1605.

linguistic grounds⁶⁰ that the text was probably written a few decades before the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great in 333 B.C.E.⁶¹

Theme

The dominant and defining theme of Qohelet is *hebel*, ritually and almost exclusively translated as “vanity.” It is emphatically announced at the very start as Qohelet’s motto:

VANITY OF VANITIES, VANITY OF VANITIES, IT IS ALL VANITY (*hebel*).

Thereupon it spreads its pessimism through the entire book, occurring thirty-seven times as a refrain, typically in the formula “this too is *hebel*.”

“Vanity” is only an interpretation, however, since the *peshat* or literal meaning of *hebel* is “breath,” yielding different and more complex valences:

A BREATH OF BREATHS, A BREATH OF BREATHS, IT IS ALL BREATH.

Further, given the synonymy of *hebel* with “wind” in the Qohelet text, an expanded literal rendering of the opening motto would be:

BREATH OF WINDS, WIND OF BREATHS: IT IS ALL WIND-BREATH.⁶²

All along, Qohelet has thought much about the inescapability of death because it is the prime instance of how everything is mere breath: we dream and hope and lust and love, grasp for power and prestige, but the end that awaits everyone is the ineluctable condition of moldering in the grave. Thus the same words that initiated the prose-poem at the beginning aptly conclude the poem at the end: “Merest breath, said Qohelet. All is mere breath.”⁶³

Peter Enns gives a more direct interpretation of the theme of Ecclesiastes:

⁶⁰ Seow explains, “The linguistic evidence in Ecclesiastes indicates a date in the Persian period for the book, specifically between the second half of the fifth and the first half of the fourth centuries B.C.E. This long has been considered a “dark age” in the history of Israel on account of the paucity of information on it.” Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Yale Anchor Bible, Yale University Press, 1997, p. 21. He elaborates, “After a thorough study of the language, Schoors concludes that there are thirty-four features in Ecclesiastes that are typical of Late Biblical Hebrew (*Pleasing Words*, pp. 221-24). The language of the book appears to have greatest affinities with the postexilic works of Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

Indeed, one may observe that a number of expressions in the book can be dated to the fifth century and beyond. A. Hurvitz has demonstrated, for instance, that the expression *kol aser hapes asa* “he does everything he desires” (see 8:2) belonged originally to the domain of jurisprudence and is found only after 500 B.C.E. (“The History of a Legal Formula, pp. 257-67). Hurvitz argues that the Hebrew expression was influenced by Aramaic legal terminology. In Early Biblical Hebrew and in Old Aramaic, the expression is not “he does all that he desires” but “he does whatever is good in his sight” (see Josh 9:25; 2 Sam 10:12; 2 Kgs 10:5; Sefire, KAI 223.C.I-3). Thus, the expression “he does whatever is good in his sight” is the standard idiom before 500 B.C.E., whereas “he does everything he desires” is the expression of choice after 500 B.C.E. By the same token, one may note that the repeated idiom *natan leb* “to pay attention” occurs only in Late Biblical Hebrew, whereas Early Biblical Hebrew uses *sam leb* or *sat leb* for the same thing. Seow, p. 19.

⁶¹ Alter, p. 673-4.

⁶² T.A. Perry, *The Book of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) and the Path to Joyous Living*, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. xi.

⁶³ Alter, p. 677.

The main character of this book, named Qohelet, is at the end of his rope. He's seen enough in his life and thinks wisdom is one big fat waste of time and effort. He drops bombs like, "For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow," and later, "Do not act too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself?"

He sounds upset. Maybe he hasn't read Proverbs yet. Or maybe he has and it's not working for him.

Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, sitting side by side as they are in our Bible (the Christian Bible, at least), are a beacon fire on a hill, telling us in no uncertain terms that the Bible is not an instructional manual for the Christian life, but something to be wrestled with.

Qohelet is the most pessimistic person in the entire Bible. You can't count on God, he says, and wisdom makes no practical difference, because at the end of the day we all die anyway. For Qohelet, death, in a word, sucks. Death is permanent, life is temporary, so death ultimately wins. **Seeking wisdom to live better, as Proverbs says, is a cruel divine joke.**

And don't try telling Qohelet that everything will work out in the afterlife—he's not convinced there is one. He's never seen it and neither has anyone else. All we know is that we die, and, to add insult to injury, after you die you will be quickly forgotten just like you've already forgotten those who died before you.⁶⁴

Ecclesiastes 1: Vanity of vanities... all is vanity

1. "The words of the preacher, the son of David" (Eccl. 1.1).⁶⁵
2. "Vanity of vanities... all is vanity" (Eccl. 1.2).⁶⁶
3. "The rivers run into the sea" (Eccl. 1.7).⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Peter Enns, [*The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It*](#), HarperOne, 2015, p. 126-7/226 electronic version. He continues, "Proverbs puts us on the path toward gaining true wisdom for all that life throws at us. After reading Proverbs you're supposed to say, 'I've got a lot to learn, but I can do this. God's wisdom is guiding me. I'm learning more every day, and I'll get there, eventually.'" **Qohelet is angry with God and pretty much dares him to show up and make a miserable world right. But at the end, the miserable world stays as is and Qohelet doesn't come to a happily-ever-after conclusion.** After reading Ecclesiastes you're left with, "Everyone dies, life is absurd, God is to blame, and I don't like him very much. Not sure I can keep taking one step after another on this journey—but I'm going to try to keep moving anyway." Qohelet is in despair, his "dark night of the soul" as the medieval Christian mystics put it.

⁶⁵ **The words of Qohelet son of David.** This editorial superscription, together with the account in the second half of the chapter of Qohelet's amassing wisdom, is the basis for the traditional ascribing of authorship to Solomon, though Solomon's name is never mentioned in the book. **Virtually all scholarly assessments date the text nearly six centuries after Solomon.** Alter, p. 679.

⁶⁶ **Merest breath.** The form of the Hebrew, הָבֵל הָבָלִים *havel havalim*, is a way of indicating a superlative or an extreme case. Rendering this phrase as an abstraction (King James Version, "vanity of vanities," or Michael Fox's more philosophically subtle "absurdity of absurdities") is inadvisable, for the writer uses concrete metaphors to indicate general concepts, constantly exploiting the emotional impact of the concrete image and its potential to suggest several related ideas. *Hevel*, "breath" or "vapor," is something utterly insubstantial and transient, and in this book suggests futility, ephemerality, and also, as Fox argues, the absurdity of existence. Alter, p. 679.

⁶⁷ From this verse, the Midrash draws a parallel with the intellect: The whole of Torah that man learns, penetrates his heart, "yet the sea is not full," but the heart is always prepared to receive more. If you ask, does a man lose Torah when he imparts it to students, the answer is, "to the place where the rivers go, there they go again" it will return to him through his pupils, and the teacher's mind is sharpened. Yitzhak I. Broch, [*The Book of Ecclesiastes in Hebrew and English with a Midrashic Commentary*](#), Feldheim Press, 1982, p. 19.

4. "No new thing under the sun" (Eccl. 1.9).⁶⁸
5. Qohelet sets his task: Eccl. 1.12-28.
 - a. Various traditional commentaries (e.g., Rashi) sought to reconcile this image of Koheleth with the successful Solomon of 1 Kings by positing that Koheleth/Solomon is here looking back from the end of his life, after the excesses of his material and religious policies (1 Kings 11) had gone far to undermine his achievements. Alternatively, the Targum saw this pessimism as a prophecy of Solomon forecasting the collapse of his kingdom by division after his death.⁶⁹

Ecclesiastes 2: Wealth and Wisdom are Vanity – Thus Qohelet Enters into Despair

1. "All the works that my hands had wrought... all was vanity and vexation of spirit and there was no profit under the sun!" (Eccl. 2.11).⁷⁰
 - a. Indeed, everything the Qohelet did – build houses, vineyards, trees, pools of water, acquire servants, gather silver and gold, to the point of being the greatest in Jerusalem (Eccl. 2.1-9), was "vanity and vexation of spirit... and no profit under the sun" (Eccl. 2.11).
2. Qohelet speculates that even acquiring wisdom is pointless (Eccl. 2.13-16), as what happens to the wise also happens to the fool (v. 14-15), and the wise are not remembered (v. 16).
3. **His conclusion? "Therefore I hated life..."** for all is vanity and vexation of spirit!" (Eccl. 2.17).
 - a. "I went to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun!" (Eccl. 2.20).
4. "There is nothing better for man, than that he should eat and drink... For God giveth to man that is good in his sight wisdom and knowledge" (Eccl. 2.24-26).⁷¹

⁶⁸ Put another way, as the sun cycles, so there is nothing new beneath the sun. Some classical Jewish commentators argue, following on v. 2, that the problem under discussion here is a wrong-headed focus on daily human or natural activities at the expense of the spiritual. Rashi, in particular, elaborates on this in a midrashic play on the phrase nothing new beneath the sun - a phrase that is unique to Koheleth in the Bible, although with antecedents and parallels both in the ancient Near East (e.g., Mari and Phoenicia) and in the Greek world. In Rashi's interpretation, the phrase contrasts futile daily activity done "in place of the Sun (= Light = Torah)," i.e., in contrast to the spiritual activity of Torah study and living. *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1607. This is an example (and there are several in the commentaries) of how a reader can take Ecclesiastes and make it say what the reader expects it to say. Rashi, instead of seeing how the author of this text is emphasizing the futility of man's labor, takes the text to mean that Torah study is what is being emphasized in this text, which it clear is not!

Seow's explanation is more fitting to what is actually happening in the text of Ecclesiastes, "It (the text of Ecclesiastes) paints a picture of a universe that is full of activities by the elements of nature - the sun, the wind, the streams - and by human beings. The author uses a lively style to convey the vigor of all that seems to be going on in the cosmos. **But in the end, nothing new happens. The world is an unchanging stage on which the drama of natural and human activities is taking place. No advantage is gained despite all the activities, for everything is "vanity."** Seow, p. 47-48, emphasis added.

⁶⁹ *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1607.

⁷⁰ Here wealth has no lasting value.

⁷¹ Everything is ephemeral and is ultimately unreliable. In the face of this, then, people can only enjoy life's goodness as the opportunity presents itself. Even in this, however, human beings have no control. The possibility for joy is not determined by mortals: it is a gift of God, who decides who should have it and who should not (2:24-

Ecclesiastes 3: A Time and Season, the Fragmented Theology of Qohelet

1. To every thing there is a season (Eccl. 3.1-8).
 - a. A time to be born. A time to die.
 - b. A time to kill, and a time to heal.
 - c. A time to weep, and a time to laugh.
 - d. A time to mourn, and a time to dance.
2. Eternity, too, He has put in their heart" (Eccl. 3.11).⁷²
3. There is no justice in this universe (Eccl. 3.16).⁷³
4. That which befalls men happens to beasts (Eccl. 3.19).
5. "All go unto one place; all are the dust, and all turn to dust again" (Eccl. 3.20).⁷⁴
6. "I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?" (Eccl. 3.22).⁷⁵

26). Human beings are caught in such a situation where they are not in control; only God is in charge - just like a sovereign ruler who alone determines who should be favored and who should be left out. Seow, p. 48.

⁷² The KJV reads "also he hath set the world in their heart." The Hebrew *'olam* means "eternity" in the biblical language, though some interpreters argue that here it has the sense of "world" that it carries in rabbinic Hebrew—that is, God has planted in the human heart the love of the world. It seems more likely that the intended meaning is: man is conscious of the idea of eternity (Qohelet as philosopher surely is), but that is the source of further frustration, for he is incapable of grasping "what it is God has done from beginning to end." Alter, p. 686. Seow gives the following interpretation, "Qohelet knows is that all that Goel does will be *le'olam* "eternal." By this the author does not mean that everything that God does will last forever. The duration of divine deeds is irrelevant to Qohelet's point in this context. It is also not true that everything God does is everlasting. Rather, Qohelet reckons that whatever God does will not be confined by time. That is what *'olam* means: it is that which transcends time." Seow, p. 173-4.

⁷³ **There is no justice where justice ought to be found** (3.16). To this situation, Qohelet's response is that judgment belongs to God alone: "God will judge" (3.17). So, too, the fate of humanity is entirely in the hand of God: God will judge (3.17), as God will seek (3.15). People cannot know what will happen to the human spirit after they die, for God has not given them to know such things (3.18-22). All that humanity can do, therefore, is to accept their divinely given portion and enjoy themselves whenever they can (3.22). Seow, p. 49.

⁷⁴ The author of Ecclesiastes would do well to meet the prophetic writers of the Book of Mormon and the New Testament. For Ecclesiastes does not have a clue as to what happens when mortals die. As Seow explains, "Traditional wisdom teachers often affirmed that the plans of the diligent will certainly lead to "advantage" (Prov 21:5). **But for Qohelet, people do not even have advantage over animals because all living creatures "go to one place" and return to the dust from whence they came** (v 20). Elsewhere he speaks of what happens when a person dies: "the dust returns to the earth as it was, but the life-breath (*ruah*) returns to God" (12:7). This is a view found elsewhere in the Bible. **When mortals die, God takes the life-breath back, but the body returns to dust** (see, e.g., Job 34: 14-15; Ps 104:29-30). But here in 3:20-21, perhaps in reaction to the speculations of others in his generation, **Qohelet refuses to entertain any notion of separate destinies for the life-breaths of people and animals**. The issue is not whether the human spirit itself will ascend or descend, but whether the destiny of the human spirit is distinctly different from that of animals. Indeed, only two verses earlier, in v 19, he claims that there is only one life-breath for all, animals and human beings alike. So he suggests that no one knows if the life-breath of human beings leads upward, while the life-breath of animals goes downward to the netherworld . People and animals have the same fate." Seow, p. 176. For a better understanding of the state of spirits once they leave the mortal body, see [Alma 40.6-11](#). For an explanation of the resurrection of the dead, see [Alma 11.42-45](#).

⁷⁵ Qohelet is led to the conclusion he reached earlier in the book (2:24-26; 3:12-13), that people ought to find enjoyment in all their "activities."... The conclusion he draws from his observation of the lot of humanity is the same as the conclusion from his observation of God's activity in general (3: 12-13). The present is what really matters because people will not be led to see what will happen in the future, that is, when they die (v 22). Seow, p.

Ecclesiastes 5-6.9: A shift towards exhortation and instruction⁷⁶

1. "Be not rash with thy mouth" (Eccl. 5.2).
2. Keep your promises (Eccl. 5.4).
3. Do not love silver (Eccl. 5.10).
4. You cannot take your wealth with you when you die (Eccl. 5.15).
5. Enjoy your life (while you have it!) (Eccl. 5.18-19).
6. God can give your hard-earned fruits to someone outside your kinship group (Eccl. 6.1-2).⁷⁷

Ecclesiastes 9: Qohelet's Fragmented Understanding of Life After Death (part 2)

1. For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: **for a living dog is better than a dead lion.**⁷⁸ For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten (Ecclesiastes 9.4-5).⁷⁹

176. Essentially, the theological viewpoint of Qohelet is the opposite of Nephi, who warned against the idea when he wrote, "Yea, and there shall be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die..." [2 Nephi 28.7](#).

⁷⁶ Given the situation that is described at length in Eccl 1.3-4.16, namely, that human beings are caught in a world where everything is ephemeral and nothing is reliable, Qohelet turns to give some advice on how one should conduct oneself in the face of such a situation (5:1-6:9). The tone changes. The predominantly descriptive language in 1.2-4.16 gives way to the language of instruction and direct command and exhortation. The author moves, thus, from reflection (1.2-4.16) to ethics (5.1-6.9). First, he speaks of proper attitude before God, emphasizing divine transcendence and counseling caution and restraint (5.1-7). Then, in a passage that is arranged chiastically, he advises people to enjoy themselves but not to be too greedy (5.8-6.9). Seow, p. 49.

⁷⁷ There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is heavy upon men: 2a man to whom God giveth riches, wealth, and honour, so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it; this is vanity, and it is an evil disease. [Ecclesiastes 6.1-2 JPS Tanakh \(1917\) translation](#).

⁷⁸ We see a similar sentiment from Achilles when he speaks to Odysseus from his abode in the Underworld in Homer's *Odyssey*, book 11. Achilles, in a state of sadness, tells Odysseus, "Seek not to speak soothingly to me of death, glorious Odysseus. **I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as the hireling of another, of some portionless man whose livelihood was but small, rather than to be lord over all the dead that have perished.**" [Book 11, 486](#).

⁷⁹ The understanding of Qohelet is that nothing is really possible once we die. Berlin and Brettler explain, "Contrary to Ecclesiastes 4.2-3, being alive is better than being dead, because (Ecclesiastes 9.5-6, 10b) in Sheol, the netherworld, the place where all dead reside, no labor, reward, emotion, or thought is possible." *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1617. Commenting on the nature of death, the Prophet Joseph Smith stated:

All men know that they must die (Eccl. 9.5). And it is important that we should understand the reasons and causes of our exposure to the vicissitudes of life and of death, and the designs and purposes of God in our coming into the world, our sufferings here, and our departure hence. **What is the object of our coming into existence, then dying and falling away, to be here no more? It is but reasonable to suppose that God would reveal something in reference to the matter, and it is a subject we ought to study more than any other. We ought to study it day and night,** for the world is ignorant in reference to their true condition and relation. **If we have any claim on our Heavenly Father for anything, it is for knowledge on this important subject.** Could we read and comprehend all that has been written from the days of Adam, on the relation of man to God and angels in a future state, we should know very little about it. Reading the experience of others, or the revelation given to them, can never give us a comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God. **Knowledge of these things can only be obtained by experience through the ordinances of God set forth for that purpose.** Could you gaze into heaven

- a. The revelations of the Restoration teach that **the righteous experience joy** after death.
 - i. Where the righteous dead are, there is peace – D&C 138.22.
 - ii. The righteous are clothed with power and authority – D&C 138.30.
 - iii. Paradise, a state of rest, a state of peace, where they (the righteous) shall rest from all their troubles, care, and sorrow – Alma 40.42.
- b. The revelations of the Restoration teach that *Sheol* does have suffering.
 - i. The dead see the absence of their spirits connected with their bodies **as a bondage** – D&C 138.50.
 - ii. Where the wicked are, darkness reigns – D&C 138.22.
 - iii. A place of filthiness is prepared for that which is filthy – 2 Ne. 15.33-34.
- c. The revelations of the Restoration teach that **the dead can actually do things**.⁸⁰
 - i. They can repent – D&C 138.58.
 - ii. The righteous dead will continue to labor – D&C 138.52, 57.
 - iii. The wicked can be taught the truths of the Gospel – John 5.28-29, D&C 138.
- d. The revelations of the Restoration teach that **this condition is temporary**, as the resurrection will bring all mankind into a state where their spirits and bodies will be united, never again to be separated.
 - i. “Now this is the state of the souls of the wicked, yea, in darkness, and a state of awful, fearful looking for the fiery indignation of the wrath of God upon them; thus they remain in this state, as well as the righteous in paradise, *until the time of their resurrection.*” ([Alma 40:14](#); italics added.)
 - ii. “Now, there is a death which is called **a temporal death**; and the death of Christ shall loose the bands of **this temporal death**, that **all shall be raised** from this temporal death. The spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form; both limb and joint shall be restored to its proper frame, even as we now are at this time; and we shall be brought to stand before God, knowing even as we know now, and have a bright recollection of all our guilt. Now, **this restoration shall come to all**, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, both the wicked and the righteous...” (Alma 11.42-44, emphasis added).

Ecclesiastes 11-12.8: The need for charity and the finality of death

1. “Cast your bread upon the waters” (Eccl. 11.1).⁸¹

five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject. Joseph Smith, *TPJS*, p. 324.

⁸⁰ This contradicts the theological perspective of Qohelet as well as the teachings of Jesus regarding those that die. See: [John 5.28-29](#) where Jesus teaches, “Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.” Clearly those in their graves will hear “the voice” of the Son of Man, and will come forth into their appropriate resurrection.

⁸¹ The initial advice, about casting bread and giving a portion, was understood by rabbinic Sages (e.g., Eccl. Rab.) to mean to act generously to others, because it may be repaid you, and even in a time of your own misfortune. *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1619. Seow offers the interpretation that some have made that this has to do with foreign investment. Seow disagrees with this interpretation, saying, “We should take lehem to mean “bread.”... The verse

2. Don't waste time calculating the weather, or you won't get on with planting. We don't even know much concerning our birth, therefore how can we understand what God is doing? (Eccl. 11.4-5).⁸²
3. "All that cometh is vanity!" Another translation reads, "the only future is nothingness!" (Eccl. 11.8).⁸³
4. "Remember now thy creator in the days of thy youth" (remember your vigor in the days of your youth, before those days of sorrow come). Eccl. 12.1, JPS translation.
5. "The silver cord loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern" (Eccl. 12.6).⁸⁴
 - a. "Before the silver cord snaps and the golden bowl crashes, The jar is shattered at the spring, And the jug is smashed at the cistern" (JPS Tanakh).⁸⁵
6. "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, all is vanity" (Eccl. 12.7-8).⁸⁶

Ecclesiastes 12.9-14: Epilogue⁸⁷

is not about foreign investments, but about liberality." Seow, p. 335. Alter agrees with Seow regarding the interpretation of Ecclesiastes 11.1 not being about foreign investment. Alter, p. 704.

⁸² "Just as you do not know how the life-breath gets [into] the fetus in the belly of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the action of God, the one who does everything." Seow translation, p. 328.

⁸³ *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1620.

⁸⁴ The finality of death is reinforced by a series of metaphors. The first is the destruction of the "silver tendril" and the "golden bowl" (12:6a). The silver tendril in this case probably refers to a part of the lampstand and, by extension, to the lampstand itself; it refers to the branch or **branches of a stylized tree of life**, which the typical lampstand symbolized. In some examples uncovered by archaeologists at Tell Beit Mirsim and Tell en-Nasbeh, the receptacle for the oil is a bowl cradled by the branches of a stylized tree. In one example from the Persian period, there is a protrusion at the bottom of the lamp, apparently so that the lamp may be fitted into a cylindrical lampstand or a branch of the lampstand. In any case, our example here is a lampstand with silver tendril and a golden bowl (compare Zech 4:2-3). Whatever the case may be, in our text, the tendril and the bowl are made of different materials: one is of silver (the tendril), the other of gold (the bowl). **The point of our text is that the whole lamp, perhaps in the form of a stylized tree of life, is destroyed. The symbol for the light of life is destroyed.** Seow, p. 381, emphasis added.

⁸⁵ Moreover, the author speaks of **the shattering of various pots** (12.6b). **This metaphor may have been taken from a funerary custom.** Such a custom may help explain the number of sherds and broken pots found in the tombs, particularly those discovered in sealed contexts, where it is clear that they were placed only after they had been broken. The pots may have been smashed at funerals—a custom still evident among some Jews today—to symbolize death. Since the human body is likened to an earthen vessel (compare 2 Cor 4:7), we may conjecture that the breaking of earthen pots at the funeral is symbolic not only of death, but of the return of the body to the earth: dust to dust. In our text, the pots are broken at the fountain, the source of life, and crushed at the pit, perhaps here meaning the grave. Seow, p. 381.

⁸⁶ That Qohelet's book ends, therefore, on the dark note of old age is no accident; rather, it reaffirms the transitory nature of life, with no certainty of continuity or afterward, that has been stated throughout (e.g., 2.18-21; 5.12-16; 9-5-6). *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1620-1.

⁸⁷ The strong consensus of scholarship is that the verses from here to the end of the text are an epilogue added by an editor, with the aim of bringing Qohelet's radical vision in line with more conventional piety. Alter, p. 708. Seow agrees, as he states, "There is wide consensus among scholars that 12:9-14 is an appendix of some sort. The unit falls outside the framework marked by the nearly identical statements in 1:2 and 12:8 that everything is absolute 'vanity.' The text itself begins with *weyoter* 'additionally' or 'an addition/postscript' (v 9). Moreover, these verses refer to Qohelet in the third person, whereas the first-person style is typical of the rest of the book—except for the superscription (1.1), the editorial framework (1.2; 12.8), and an editorial comment in 7.27. Most importantly, this

1. "And more than being wise, Qohelet further taught knowledge to the people and weighed and searched out and framed many maxims. Qohelet sought to find apt words and wrote honestly words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads and like nails driven in—from the composers of collections, given from a certain shepherd" (Eccl. 12.9-11, Alter translation).
2. "And more than these, my son, beware: of making many books there is no end, and much chatter is a weariness of the flesh" (Eccl. 12.12, Alter translation).
3. "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man!" (Eccl. 12.13).⁸⁸
4. "God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Eccl. 12.14).

appendix appears to look back at the book and reflect on the work of Qohelet. Modern scholars agree, therefore, that 12.9-14 constitutes additional material. Seow, p. 391.

⁸⁸ What do we do with Ecclesiastes 12.13? It has been read in different ways. Some see this verse as undermining the entire text of Ecclesiastes. Imagine if Nephi's final words read like this, "Now remember, the sum of the entire matter is this: It is vital that we eat, drink, and be merry. For tomorrow we die. We don't know when, therefore, make merry while the sun shines!" A verse like this would seem out of context when read in connection with Nephi's overall themes and objectives. As much of Ecclesiastes is emphasizing the idea that we are all going to die, and that the thing that makes the most sense is that we enjoy our time with our loved ones while we are alive, this verse seems to subvert the objectives of the author. But not everyone agrees with this conclusion. Berlin and Brettler offer the following observation:

"This second part strives to sum up Qohelet's teaching with the instruction (v. 13b) to fear (revere) God and to keep His commandments, a common trope in wisdom literature (cf. Prov. 1.7; Job 1.1; 28.28)... Some modern critics, on the other hand, have understood this instruction to fear and to keep as the work of a later orthodox editor, who wished to tone down, if not to reshape, what he regarded as the radical challenge of Qohelet to the tradition of God's covenantal demands with their assurance of a strict reward-and-punishment justice. It is true that the instruction here to keep God's commandments does not appear as such elsewhere in Qohelet (but cf. 8.5, where, however, the reference is to the command of a human king), but the other clause, to fear God, is found (3.14; 5.6; 7.18; 8.12-13), as is the statement about God's judgment (3.17, cf. 3.15; 11.9). **Thus, this concluding instruction may in fact be congruent with the views in the rest of the book.** The point would be, in sum, that just because human rational inquiry leads nowhere, in terms of demonstrating a system of reward and punishment or lasting achievements, it does not invalidate the power and sovereignty of God nor disprove the possibility that in some way He does call everyone and everything to account." Berlin and Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1622. Seow concedes these points that are made, but in the end states, "The charge to keep God's commandments in the epilogue, therefore, is an additional dimension to the teachings of Qohelet. Even Fox, who argues vigorously for the unity of the whole epilogue, concedes that "[t]he attitude expressed here is close to the traditional Wisdom epistemology, except insofar as it assumes a revelation of God's commandments" (Michael V. Fox, [*Qohelet and His Contradictions*](#), Sheffield Academic Press, 1989, p. 328). Seow, [*Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*](#), Yale University Press, 1997, p. 394.