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**K O H E L E T**

**The Book of Ecclesiastes**

Translated and annotated by

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**T H E H E V E L P R E S S D E N V E R**

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Dedicated to my beloved wife Susan who has helped me to understand the depth of Kohelet’s message, and to our congregation – Kohelet – who have demonstrated that a community can be built on the principles of paradox and continual growth that are learned from the words of Kohelet.

**Chapter One**

1. *The words of Kohelet, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*
2. *Only vanishing mist, vapor, says Kohelet, evanescence and mere appearance, everything is a vanishing mist.*[[1]](#footnote-1)
3. *Does a person benefit from all his work at which he labors under the sun?*[[2]](#footnote-2)
4. *Does one generation pass, another generation comes! And the earth abides forever.*
5. *The sun rises and the sun sets; and it persists in its place where it shines.*[[3]](#footnote-3)
6. *The wind goes to the south, and it turns around to the north. It continually repeats its rounds.*
7. *All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full. The way the rivers flow, they repeat and flow again.*
8. *All things wear on, and a man is unable to describe it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing.*
9. *What has been is what will be, and what was done is what will be done, there is nothing new under the sun.*
10. *Is there anything of which to say, "See this is new!" It already has been in the worlds which preceded us.*
11. *There is no remembrance of those that preceded, neither will there be any remembrance of those that follow among those that follow after.*[[4]](#footnote-4)
12. *I Kohelet have been king of Israel in Jerusalem.*
13. *And I set my heart to explore everything which is done under the sun. It is a difficult task which God gave mankind to respond to.*
14. *I have seen all the deeds that are done under the sun, and look, everything is merely vanishing mist and befriending the wind.*[[5]](#footnote-5)
15. *What is distorted cannot be corrected, and what is lacking cannot be counted.*

1. *I said to myself sincerely, "Look, I have increased my great knowledge, more than all that were before me in Jerusalem, and my intellect perceives plenty of wisdom and judgment.*[[6]](#footnote-6)
2. *So I set my mind to know wisdom and knowledge, wildness and foolishness*[[7]](#footnote-7) *and I know that even this is an idea of wind.*[[8]](#footnote-8)
3. *For in great knowledge is great frustration, and improving discernment increases pain.*[[9]](#footnote-9)

# Chapter 2

1. *I said in my heart,[[10]](#footnote-10) "Let us go now, I will shelter myself with rejoicing and seeing things positively," and look, even this is a vanishing mist!*
2. *Of laughter, I said it is dissolute; and of joy, what does this do?*
3. *I searched my heart to drag my body along with wine[[11]](#footnote-11) and to conduct my heart with wisdom and to hold onto folly until I could see which way was better for people to do under the heavens during the number of the days of their life.*
4. *I increased my productivity and built buildings, and I planted vineyards.*
5. *I made gardens and orchards, and I planted in them fruit trees.*
6. *I made ponds to water the forests of growing trees.*
7. *I acquired servants and maids and house boys. I also had more sheep and cattle than anyone before me in Jerusalem.*
8. *Silver and gold I accumulated, and tribute of kings and cities. I had baritones and sopranos, and the pleasures of men and nymphs and satyrs.*
9. *I became greater and accumulated more than anyone before me in Jerusalem, and yet my wisdom still stood with me.*
10. *And whatever my eyes asked for was not withheld from them; I did not deny my heart any joy because I rejoiced in all my work, and this was my portion from all my work.*
11. *Then I turned to all the work that my hands had done, and on the work that I had done, and look: everything was a vanishing mist and misleading perception, and there was no benefit under the sun.*
12. *I turned to look at wisdom and wildness and foolishness, for what can a king do after something has already been done?[[12]](#footnote-12)*
13. *But I saw that there is an advantage to wisdom over foolish­ness, like the advantage of light over darkness.*
14. *The sage, his eyes are in his head; but the fool walks in darkness. And I also know that the same thing can happen to all of them.*
15. *I said in my heart, since what happens to the fool will also happen to me, why then have I been more wise? I said to myself, this is also a vanishing mist.*

1. *For there is no remembrance of the wise as with the fool in the world that has already been. In the days to come, everything will be forgotten. How the wise die with the foolish![[13]](#footnote-13)*
2. *I hated life since what is done under the sun appeared wrong to me, since everything is a wisp of vanishing mist and mislead­ing perception.*
3. *I hated all my work that I made under the sun because I have to leave it to a person who will succeed me.[[14]](#footnote-14)*
4. *And who knows if he will be a sage or a fool, but he will rule over all my work with which I have labored and used my wisdom under the sun. This is also a vanishing mist.*
5. *I turned my heart to despair concerning all the work which I had done under the sun.*
6. *For there is a person who works with wisdom, knowledge and righteousness, and to a person who does not work, he gives his portion, and this is also a vanishing mist and a great wrong.*
7. *For what will be for a person from all his work and the ambition of his heart at which he labors under the sun? And who knows if he will be a sage or a fool, but he will rule over all my work with which I have labored and used my wisdom under the sun. This is also a vanishing mist.*
8. *For all his days are pain and his task is aggravating. Even at night his mind does not go to bed. This is also disappearing vapor.*
9. *There is nothing better for a person than to eat and drink and cause his soul to see good in his work. I also see this, that this is from the hand of God.[[15]](#footnote-15)*
10. *For who will eat and who will feel except for me?*
11. *For to the person who is good before Him, He gives wisdom and knowledge and joy, and to the one who misses the mark, He gives the task to increase and to gather up and to give for good before God. This is also a vanishing mist and misleading perception.*

**Chapter 3**

*1 To every time and season there is a desire under the heav­ens.[[16]](#footnote-16)*

*2 A time to be born and a time to die;*

*A time to plant and a time to pluck that which is planted.*

*3 A time to kill and a time to heal;*

*A time to break down and a time to build up.*

*4 A time to weep and a time to laugh;*

*A time to mourn and a time to dance.*

*5 A time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together;*

*A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing.*

*6 A time to seek and a time to lose;*

*A time to keep and a time to cast away.*

*7 A time to rend and a time to sew;*

*A time to keep silence and a time to speak.*

*8 A time to love and a time to hate;*

*A time for war and a time for peace.*

*9 What benefit is to the worker in his labor?*

*10 I have seen the task which God gives a person to engage him.*

*11 Everything does beautifully in its time, the world is set in their hearts without a person being able to discover what God has done from the beginning to the end.[[17]](#footnote-17)*

*12 I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do what is good in their lives.*

*13 Even more, every person who eats and drinks and sees what is good in all his work, this is a gift of God.*

*14 I know that what God does will be forever; there is nothing to be added or taken away; and God makes it so that people should be in awe before Him.*

*15 What was has already been, and what is to be already was, and God seeks what is pursued.[[18]](#footnote-18)*

1. *Moreover, I have seen under the sun that in the place of jurisprudence, there is wickedness; and in the place of righ­teousness, there is wickedness.[[19]](#footnote-19)*
2. *I said in my heart, God judges the righteous and the wicked, since there is a time for every desire, and for every deed, a place.[[20]](#footnote-20)*
3. *I said in my heart, concerning the character of people, God selected them to discern whether they serve as animals each to the other.[[21]](#footnote-21)*
4. *So what happens to men happens to animals; the same thing happens to them[[22]](#footnote-22); as one dies, so the other, and breath of one is to all; the preeminence of person over animal is nothing, everything is a vanishing mist.*[[23]](#footnote-23)
5. *Everything goes to one place; everything was from the dust, and everything returns to dust.*
6. *Who knows the spirit of a person which goes upward to the heights from the spirit of the animals which goes down to the depths of the physical earth?*
7. *So I perceived that there is nothing better for a person than to rejoice in the work which is his portion, for who will bring him to see what will follow for him?*[[24]](#footnote-24)

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**Chapter 4**

1. *Returning, I see all the oppression which is done under the sun, and look at the tears of the oppressed and there is no one to comfort them. In the hand of their oppressors is power, and they have no comforter.[[25]](#footnote-25)*
2. *So I praised the dead that are already deceased more than the living that are still alive.*
3. *But better than both of them is he that has not yet been, since he does not see the wrong that is done under the sun.*
4. *I saw all the labor, and all the skill of the workers that it is jealousy of a person against his friend. This is also a vanishing mist and misleading perception.[[26]](#footnote-26)*
5. *The fool folds his hands and consumes his flesh.*
6. *Better a handful of contentment than both hands full of labor and befriending the wind.*
7. *Then I returned and considered the vanishing mist under the sun.*
8. *There is one who is single, without a second; neither son nor brother has he, and there is no end to his labor. Neither is his eye satisfied with riches. For whom do I labor and deprive myself of what is good? This is also a vanishing mist and a bad idea.*
9. *Two are better than one since they have a good reward for their labor.*
10. *Since if one falls, his fellow will lift him up; but if one falls alone, there is no second to lift him up.*
11. *When two lie together, they warm each other; but one alone, how can he keep warm? If one is attacked, both can stand up against him; and a three-fold cord cannot be quickly broken.*
12. *Better a miserable child who is wise[[27]](#footnote-27) than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to be cautious.[[28]](#footnote-28)*
13. *For out of constraint, he (the child) emerges to rule, and from his (the king's) ruling is a pauper born.[[29]](#footnote-29)*
14. *I saw all the living who are walking under the sun with the second child who is to supplant him. no end to all the people, to all who preceded them, and even those who follow do not appreciate him. And this too is a vanishing mist and an idea of wind.[[30]](#footnote-30)*
15. *Watch your step when you approach God's house, and draw near to understand that when fools give sacrifices, they do not even know what they are doing wrong.*

**Chapter 5**

* 1. *Do not be quick with your mouth nor rush your intellect to express something before God;[[31]](#footnote-31) for God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.*
  2. *For illusion*[[32]](#footnote-32) *comes with too much activity; and the voice of a fool, with too many words.*
  3. *When you make a vow to God, do not postpone its fulfillment, for He has no desire for fools. What you vow, fulfill! and destroy the work of your hands,*
  4. *Better not to vow than to vow and not to fulfill.*
  5. *Do not allow your mouth to bring your flesh to make a mistake, and do not say before the messenger that it was not on purpose. Why anger God with your voice?*
  6. *Because of great dreams and vacuity and too many words? But revere God!*
  7. *If you see the oppressor of the poor and the perverter of justice and righteousness in the state, do not wonder at the purpose, for one higher than the overseer is observing, and there are even higher than them.*
  8. *But benefit to the land is in everything when the king makes himself a servant of the field.*
  9. *One who loves money will not be satisfied with money; nor one who loves abundance, with crops. This is also a vanishing mist.*
  10. *When goods increase, those who eat them increase, and what right comes to their owner except to see it with his eyes?*
  11. *Sweet is the slumber of the worker with little or with much to eat; but eating himself to satiety, the wealthy person cannot fall asleep.*
  12. *There is a grievous illness that I have seen under the sun, wealth keeps a wealthy person to his detriment.*
  13. *But the wealth is lost in misfortune, and a child is born, but there is nothing left at all.*
  14. *As he came from the womb of his mother, naked will he return as he came, and he will carry nothing from the work which goes in his hand.*

*15 This is also a grievous illness that just as he came, so will he go, and what benefit will he have that he labored for the wind.*

*16 Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness and great aggrava­tion, sickness and anger.*

*17 But look, I have seen well that it is beautiful to eat and to drink and to discern good in all the effort that he exerts under the sun, and to number the days of his life that God gives him, for this is his portion.*

*18 Every person to whom God gives wealth, resources or power of government with which to feed himself, and to take his portion and to enjoy his work, this is a gift of God.*

*19 For not much will be remembered of the days of his life, since God answers him in the rejoicing of his heart.[[33]](#footnote-33)*

**Chapter 6**

*1 There is something wrong which I have seen under the sun, and it is frequent among people.*

*2 A person whom God has given wealth, resources and honor, and nothing is lacking for his soul, yet for all his appetite, God has not given him the ability to be nourished with it, but a stranger is nourished by it. This is a vanishing mist and a grievous illness.*

*3 If a person bring forth a hundred children and live many years, and many are the days of his years, and his soul is not satisfied with what is good, and he even has no funeral, I say that a stillborn child is better than he.*

*4 For from vapor he came, and in darkness he went, and his name is covered with darkness.*

*5 He will not see the sun, and he will not know contentment from here to there.*

*6 And even if he lived a thousand years twice told, but did not see what is good, is it not to one place that everyone goes?*

*7 For a person labors for his mouth, yet his soul is not filled.*

1. *For what more is the wise person than the fool, what does the poor one perceive that he goes against life?*
2. *Better the eyes should see than the soul should just go. This too is a vanishing mist and misleading perception.*
3. *What has been, its name has already been called and acknowl­edged, for he is human, unable to make law for one more powerful than himself.*
4. *For there are many things which increase what is transitory, what more is there for a person?*
5. *For who knows what is good for a person in his life, numbering the fleeting days of his life as he does them like a shadow, and who can tell a person what will follow for him under the sun?*

**Chapter 7**

*1 A good name is better than good oil; and the day of death, than the day of one's birth.[[34]](#footnote-34)*

*2 It is better to go to the house of a mourner than to go to a party; for it is the end of everyone and the living will take it to heart.*

*3 Sorrow is better than laughter, since a sad face may improve a good heart.*

*4 The heart of the wise is in the house of a mourner, and the heart of the fool is at a party.*

*5 Better to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools.*

*6 As the sound of thorns under the pot*,*[[35]](#footnote-35) so is the laughter of fools. This is also a vanishing mist.*

7 *As oppressing makes dissolute the wise, so a gift destroys good judgment.*

*8 The end of a thing is better than its beginning; better the patient spirit than the proud spirit.*

*9 Be not hasty in your spirit to anger since anger is comfortable in the breast of fools.*

*10 Do not say, "How is it that the early days were so much better than these," for it is not wise to ask concerning this.*

*11 Wisdom is good with an inheritance,and it is even better for those who see the sun.*

*12 As in the shelter of wisdom, in the shelter of money; and the benefit of knowing wisdom is that it brings life to its owner.*

*13 Look at the work of God for who can correct what is distorted?*

*14 In fortunate times, do good; and in times of misfortune, consider. God made one as well as the other so that a person cannot in any way discover what is to follow for him.*

*15 I have seen everything in my fleeting days, the righteous perish in his righteousness, and the wicked live long in his wrongdoing.*

*16 Do not be overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why make yourself desolate?*

*17 Do not be overly wicked, and do not make yourself a fool. Why die when it is not your time?*

*18 It is good to take hold of this and also of that; do not relax your grip since awe for God can flow from all of these*.[[36]](#footnote-36)

*19 Wisdom strengthens the wise more than ten conquerors who are in a city.*

*20 For there is not a righteous person on earth who does what is good and does not err.*

*21 Moreover, do not pay attention to everything so that you do not hear your servant disparage you.*

*22 For many times your heart knows that you have also disparaged others.*

*23 All this I have tested with wisdom; I said I will make myself wise, but it was far from me.*

*24 Far away, what has been, and exceedingly deep. Who can discover it?*

*25 I turned around, I and my good judgment, to know and compre­hend, and to search for wisdom and the essence, and to know wickedness is foolish and foolishness is dissolute.*

*26 I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is a trap and disgrace, binding are her hands. It is good before God to escape from her; and the one who errs will be caught by her.*

*27 Look, this I have found: the gathering of women speak one to another to find the reckoning.*[[37]](#footnote-37)

*28 And still my soul has sought, and I have not found. One man out of a thousand, I have found; and a woman in all these I have not found.*

*29 Only look at this, I have found that God made people direct, but they sought out many schemes.*

**Chapter 8**

*1 Who is like the wise, and who knows the meaning of a thing? The wisdom of a person brings light to his face,[[38]](#footnote-38) and an arrogant face is changed.[[39]](#footnote-39)*

*2 (Say) I, Observe the voice of the king, especially concerning the words of an oath of God.*

*3 Do not be in a hurry[[40]](#footnote-40) to go away from his face, but do not stand fast in what is wrong, for whatever he desires, he will do.*

*4 After all, the word of the king controls, and who can say to him, "What are you doing?"*

*5 The one who observes the mitzvah will not know any wrong, and the good sense of the wise knows the time and the appro­priate rule.*

*6 To everything**, there is a time and a rule; so the wrong of a person bears greatly upon him.*

*7 For he does not know what will be, for who can tell him when it will happen?*

*8 No person controls the spirit to restrain the spirit; there is no controlling the day of his death; there is no sending a delega­tion in war; and wickedness will not rescue its owner.*

*9 All this I have seen and set in my heart; in everything that is done under the sun, there is a time when a person controls another to his detriment.*

*10 And so I saw the wicked were buried, and those from the holy place came, they departed and were forgotten in the city that they even made. This is also a vanishing mist.*

*11 Since the actions of the wicked are not quickly summarized in a proverb, therefore people's hearts are filled with doing wrong.*

*12 Although a blunderer does wrong a hundred times and prolongs himself, still I know that it will be well for one who reveres God and stands in awe before Him.*

*13 It will not be well for the wicked, and his days will not be prolonged; like a shadow, he that is not in awe even before God.*

*14 There is something ephemeral that occurs on earth, that there is a righteous person who achieves according to the deeds of the wicked; and there are wicked people who achieve for them­selves according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this is also a vanishing mist.*

*15 And I praised rejoicing since there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat, drink and rejoice, and to be accompa­nied by his work the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.*

*16 When I set my heart to know wisdom and to see the matter that is done on earth, since both by day and by night one sleeps and his eyes do not see,*

*17 Then I saw that God makes it so that a person cannot find out the deed that is done under the sun; for though he strive and search, a person will not find out, and also even if a wise person claims to know, he is not able to find out.*

**Chapter 9**

*1 To all this I set my heart, to clarify all this, that the righteous and the wise and those that serve them are in the hands of God. A person does not know about either love or hate; everything stands before them.*

*2 Everything happens to everyone; one thing to the righteous and the wicked, to the good, the spiritually sensitive and to the insensitive, to the one who makes amends, and to the one who makes no amends; as the good, so the mistaken one who swears wrong even when he professes reverence.*

*3 There is wrong in everything that is done under the sun, since one thing happens to all, even the heart of mankind is filled with wrong, wildness is in their hearts and their lives and after that, to the dead.*

*4 For the one who is joined entirely to life, there is security -- as a living dog is better than a dead lion.[[41]](#footnote-41)*

*5 Yet the living know that they will die, and the dead know nothing at all, and they have no further reward since the memory of them is forgotten.*

*6 Their love, their hatred, their acquisition, already lost; and there is no share for them of eternity in anything done under the sun.*

*7 Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a good heart, for God already desires what you are doing.*

*8 In every season, may your garments be white, and may your head not lack oil.*

*9 See life with the woman whom you love all the fleeting days of your life that He gave you under the sun, all your fleeting days that are your portion in life and in your labor that you work at under the sun.*

*10 Whatever your hand finds to do with your power, do it, for there is no deed, nor reckoning, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the abyss where you are going.*[[42]](#footnote-42)

*11 I returned and saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, not bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the discerning, but time and chance meet them all.*

*12 For a person does not even know his own times. As fish that are taken in a bad net and as birds that are caught in a trap, so are people caught when bad times suddenly fall upon them.*

*13 This I also saw, wisdom under the sun, and it was overwhelming to me.*

*14 A small city and few people in it, when a great king came upon it, turned on it and built against it great armaments;*

*15 And there was found in it a poor but wise man. He saved the city by his wisdom, but no one remembered that poor man.*

*16 I said, "Wisdom is better than strength, but the wisdom of the poor is despised, and his deeds are not heeded."*

*17 The words of the wise are heard in quiet, more than the shouting of a ruler among fools.*

*18 Better wisdom than weapons, but one scoundrel dissipates much good.*

**Chapter 10**

*1 A dead fly makes the oil of the perfumer reek with stench; more valuable than wisdom or honor is a little silliness.[[43]](#footnote-43)*

*2 The good sense of a wise person is at his right side, and the good sense of a fool is at his left.*

*3 The way the fool goes, his good sense is lacking, telling everyone that he is a fool.*

*4 If the spirit of the ruler arises against you, do not relax in your place, for the cure will cause great wrong to depart.[[44]](#footnote-44)*

*5 There is a great wrong which I have seen under the sun that comes inadvertently from the ruler;*

*6 The fool is set at great heights, and the wealthy sit in a low place.*

*7 I have seen servants on horses and ministers walking as slaves on the ground.*

*8 The one who digs a pit falls into it, and the one who breaks into a wall is bitten by a snake.*

*9 The one who takes the stone will carve it, and the one who fells trees will be sheltered by them.[[45]](#footnote-45)*

*10 If the iron is dull, and he does not break up the edge, the soldiers will become stronger; but the advantage of the direct way is wisdom.*

*11 If the serpent strikes without a sound, there is no success to the master of speech.*

*12 Words from the mouth of the wise are kind, but the lips of a fool will swallow him up.*

*13 The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his words is wrong and dissolute.*

*14 The fool multiplies his words. A person does not know what will be, what will come up from behind him, who can tell him?*

*15 The labor of fools will tire him who does not how to go to the city.*

*16 Woe to the land whose king is a lad, and the ministers dine in the morning.*

*17 Happy is the land whose king is liberated, your ministers will eat in time, in strength and not in drinking.*

*18 By slothfulness, the framework will vanish, and by lowering your hands, the house will leak.*

*19 Bread and wine make for laugher, and money answers every­thing.*

*20 For what you know, do not disparage the king, and from your bedroom do not disparage the wealthy since birds in the sky carry the voice, and the one wings will tell the thing.*

**Chapter 11**

*1 Send your bread onto the water, for in many days you will find it.*

*2 Give a portion to seven and also to eight*[[46]](#footnote-46) *since you do not know what misfortune will be on the land.*

*3 If the clouds are filled with rain, they will be emptied on the land; and if a tree falls in the north or in the south, in the place where the tree falls, there will it be.*

*4 The one who waits for the wind will not sow, and the one who looks at the clouds will not harvest.*

*5 Just as you do not know the way of the wind nor the nature of the unborn child, you certainly do not know the deeds of God who will do everything.*

*6 In the morning sow your seed and in the evening do not rest your hands, since you do not know what is right, this or that, or if both are as good as one.*

*7 Sweet is the light, and it is good in your eyes to see the sun.*

*8 Even if a person lives many years, enjoys them all, and remem­bers the days of darkness, for they will be many, whatever comes will be a wisp of vapor.*

*9 Enjoy yourself in your childhood, young man, and improve your good sense in the days of your youth. Follow your good sense and the sight of your eyes, and know that for all this God will bring you into judgment.*

*10 Remove anger from your heart, and let wrong pass away from your flesh, for childhood and dawn are ephemeral.*

**Chapter 12**

*1 Remember your Creator in the days of your youth[[47]](#footnote-47), until the unfortunate days come and the years arrive when you say, "I have no desire for them."*

*2 Until sun, the light, the moon and the stars turn dark, and the clouds return after the rain;*

*3 In the days when the keepers of the house tremble and the soldiers are twisted, and the grindstones stop because they are few, and darkened are what sees in the skylight;*

*4 The doors are shut in the market, the sound of grinding is low, one starts up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song will be depressed;*

*5 They will be afraid of heights, terrified on the road, and the almonds will abuse, the grasshopper will drag along, and the caper break as the person goes to his eternal home and the mourners go about the market.*

*6 Until the silver cord will not stretch and the golden ball is shattered, the bellows will break and the wheel runs into the pit,*

*7 The dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*

*8 A wisp of vapor, said Kohelet, everything is evanescent.*

*9 More than merely wise, Kohelet taught knowledge to the people, and balanced, examined and repaired many analogies.*

*10 Kohelet searched to find desirable words, and correctly written words of truth.*

*11 The words of sages are like prods, like nails well planted by the masters of assemblies, given by one shepherd.*[[48]](#footnote-48)

1. The concept of hevel is central to the theme of the Book of Kohelet. Hevel is the vapor of breath on a cold day that quickly disappears. The author points to the essential quality of perception that it is not firmly attached to the underlying reality. As meaning floats above the shape of the letters on a page, so our perception points to but never exactly grasps reality. A change in our perspective can alter the meaning of a word or an event. Yet it is impossible to grasp reality more firmly than through perception and the meaning of things. This is not a condition which can be improved upon. It is the very nature of our situation -- we apprehend reality through our perceptions, and they are ephemeral like a mist that disappears.

   The notion of “hevel” is related to the observation that uncertainty is the most obdurate characteristic of human existence.  This has been a theme of many of the defining works of science, mathematics and philosophy of the twentieth century.  Compare: Russel’s Paradox; Einstein’s principles of Special and General Relativity; Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle; Bohr’s Argument for Complementarity; Godel’s incompleteness theorum; Mandelbrot’s Fractal Geometry, Von Neumann’s Game Theory, Frege’s Philosophy of Arithmetic; Claude Shannon’s Theory of Information and Entropy, Maurice Merleau Ponty’s Primacy of Perception; J.L. Austin’s Sense and Sensibilia, the Boyd or OODA Cycle in strategic studies, and the notion of agile development in both computer coding and entrepreneurial businesses. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The phrase "under the sun" indicates one of the two perspectives which are contrasted in the Book of Kohelet. "Under the sun" is the practical world of getting and spending, of looking out for our own interests. This is the perspective which we naturally assume. The other perspective which could be denoted as the "world beyond", or the "world to come" or simply "that world" is not separated from this world in time or space, but it derives from a different way of looking at things. In that world, what is right assumes more importance than what maximizes our individual benefit. The same events can be understood from the perspective of this world or from that world, from the perspective of what is under the sun or what is beyond the usual perspective of concern for our self-interest. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The sun yearns to return to the place where it shines. The word "sho'ef" indicates a persistent ambition which stands in contrast to the insubstantial nature of a person's perception. The matters of the physical world are constant and reliable; the perception of man is transitory and incapable of being firmly grasped. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Among the things which are missing for people who live only in the world which is under the sun is the quality of being remembered. Implicitly, Kohelet suggests that one way of scrutinizing an action from the perspective of that world (which is not under the sun) is whether it will be remembered -- or perhaps whether we would like it to be remembered. Alternatively, there may be some effect of merit in that world which elicits remembrance, as in "God remembered Sarah." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. "Befriending the wind" is ra'ut ruakh. Ra'ut can mean either "friend of" or "badness of". Ruakh can mean wind, spirit or even inspiration. The language of the Book of Kohelet frequently plays with these kind of ambiguities. "Befriending the wind" could also be translated "bad spirit". Ethan Dor Shav suggests another interpretation and etymology for “ra’ut”: The root “ra” as in “re’ut ruach” may suggest meandering rather than either “bad” or “friend”.  Compare, for example, Mishle 29:3 Ro’ah zonot, which could be translated as “one who is a companion of harlots”, or “one who wanders with harlots”.  The association of wandering with a shepherd connects with Hevel as the name of the original animal herder (Cain and Abel/Hevel); see sources in Ethan Dor-Shav (Azure • AUTUMN 5765 / 2004):     “. . . . the core meaning of this precise root verb [is], “to meander”; feeding, grazing, and herding are secondary transpositions. Critically, the Hebrew root ra’ah does not imply gathering, chasing, or herding-in; rather, it connotes the typical (outward-bound) movement of grazing over pasturelands. This is why the verb can easily apply to the roaming of a single animal, with no flock or shepherd about. Cf. Genesis 41:1-2; Song of Songs 4:5, 6:2. Similarly, it applies where no feeding is involved; cf. Numbers 14:33. Hence, even if we knew no more than this, re’ut is to be understood as a fleeting movement of wind, or air, such as a gust or a breeze. This is cognate to tir’eh-ruah in Jeremiah 22:22 (“a puff of wind,” or “scattered by the wind”). Thus, a close approximation of the phrase hevel u’re’ut ruach, would be “vapor and a stirring of air,” or “vapor and a puff of wind.” In this light, the entire idiom stresses transient phenomena, of no material value. However, the etymology of re’ut itself may give us a clue to uncovering its original connotation; for its Semitic root had an additional meaning, one with a close affinity to the word “vapor.” While the Hebrew language lost this variant, it survives to this day in Arabic: The Arabic root of r-gh-w, as in the noun ragha—froth or foam—and the verb ragha—to froth. Like vapor, it is a potent metaphor of fleeting, passing phenomena. Froth and foam, of course, are made of air, which in the biblical Hebrew is always ruah, bringing us back again to Ecclesiastes’ idiom, “hevel ure’ut ruah,” which we may now render: Vapor and froth (cf. Shakespeare, The Rape of Lucrece: “What win I if I gain the thing I seek? A dream, a breath, a froth of fleeting joy”). “ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Hebrew de'a is rendered as "judgment". In contemporary Hebrew, the word de'a could also mean, "opinion". Usually, the word is translated as "knowledge". Judgment is intended to indicate that there is a faculty of accurately applying one's perception, in addition to abstract knowledge. In contemporary moral discourse, this notion is also connected to the quality of prudence. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The word that means foolishness, sikhlut, could also mean cleverness, from sekhel. The fundamental importance of this double meaning is not lost on Kohelet. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Hebrew here is ra'ion ruakh, closely related to ra'ut ruakh (befriending the wind). Ra'ion means idea or notion, so the phrase could mean "notion of spirit", or "idea of wind". The concept is that perception has a quality of floating somewhat freely, even wandering, from the determined reality of the physical world. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The essence of wisdom and knowledge is the ability to predict and influence what will happen in various circumstances. However, if we focus merely on wisdom and knowledge, and not on uncertainty and the inherent limits to our power, then frustration, disappoint­ment and pain result. We deceive ourselves into thinking that we have more influence than we really do. The only alternative to the pain of recognizing that we are not entirely in touch with the underlying nature of things is to cultivate an appreciation of the uncertainty itself. We are finite, God is infinite: what more could be expected of us? [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kohelet looks inward, but still from the perspective of this world, the world under the sun. Even goodness and joy look unsatisfying from this perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. One can induce the physical into a preferred mood with the use of intoxicants such as alcohol, at least for a while. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Compare with verse 1.17. This line could mean, "What can someone do since he is not the king?" Alternatively, the phrase could mean, "What can a person do who supplants the king?" In either case, the essential consideration is the limitation on one's ability. Either one cannot carry out the policy of the king, or one cannot do anything else but what the king would have done. Neither knowledge nor wild behavior can overcome this limitation. Ultimately, everything is subject to certain limitations. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The acquisition of knowledge or even wisdom does not move us out of the world under the sun, and consequently the same frustration is the lot of the wise man and the fool. The transition to the perspective which is not under the sun involves a relationship with what is not subject to our control and not within our understanding or grasp. This is not merely a matter of intellect. Nevertheless, although wisdom is not adequate to cope with all of the eventualities which a person is subject to, still wisdom is preferable to foolishness since it tends to prevent unnecessary stumbling and bruises. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. One characteristic of a person who lives entirely in the world under the sun is the inability to form a gratifying relationship with his children and his successors. One who lives primarily in the world of getting and spending is unable to identify with future generations just as he is unable to appreciate that a person is not an isolated atom. The alternative perspective emphasizes that a person is inherently involved with the well being of family, friends, neighbors and society. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In contrast to the frustration of trying to find something worthwhile under the sun, the ultimate value appears in appreciating what comes from the "hand of God." Moreover, what is from the hand of God is the very ability to appreciate one's work without referring it to any outside standard or consequence. This is similar to the thought expressed in the Song of Songs where the feeling between lovers is expressed as God being present in His chamber. Our feelings of joy and satisfaction are themselves the gift of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This beautiful passage highlights the importance of circumstances as a fundamental element of human perception. A figure is only apprehended when it is distinguished from a background. Perception does not grasp anything without a context. Every rule must be applied in certain circumstances, and if the circumstances change, the rule itself takes on a different meaning. For example, I might say that it is better to heal than to kill. Yet in the case of a severely wounded animal, the appropriate thing may be to kill. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. God is the ultimate being; all space, time, objects, desires and perception are only reflections of God's existence. God's purpose controls all of existence, and everything is in accordance with God's will. Yet man is also free. The two facts can only co-exist if human perception and God's perception are fundamentally different. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. God does not seek novelty or change in behavior for its own sake. In general, the point is not for us to change what we are doing. The focus instead is on transforming the way in which we apprehend our world so that it enhances our capacity for wonder, reverence and awe for the magnificence of reality. God does not seek something which is not already attractive, rather we are asked to elevate our relationship with the desires and projects which already concern us so that we come close to God through them. Hence, "God seeks what is pursued." However, this is no doctrine of passivity. Our projects and our tasks constantly require us to make choices. The situations which require active intervention on our part are as much part of our condition as the more static elements of our nature. God encourages us in our pursuit, not merely in our being. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The power to influence things inherently attracts corruption. The arena for abuse or taking advantage is precisely the place where trust has been established. The place of fertility is particularly vulnerable to infection. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The distinction between what is worthwhile and what is destructive is often not apparent until long after the event. The outcome of our deeds is often not what we intend or anticipate; after all, the author of this book is the offspring of the union of David and Bat Sheva. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The Hebrew word behema refers to domesticated animals which serve man, not to wild beasts which would use the word chaya. The service of these beasts of nourishment and burden is an example for mankind, not an image of being dangerous to each other. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The distinction between what is worthwhile and what is destructive is often not apparent until long after the event. The outcome of our deeds is often not what we intend or anticipate; after all, the author of this book is the offspring of the union of David and Bat Sheva. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This is the challenge which distinguishes man, whether he can perceive his world in a way which apprehends the unique difference between our life of consciousness, of imagination, of fully developed language, and the life of the other species who are so much like us. The challenge of Kohelet is to overcome the tendency to see the world only from the perspective of what is under the sun. God does not seek novelty or change in behavior for its own sake. In general, the point is not for us to change what we are doing. The focus instead is on transforming the way in which we apprehend our world so that it enhances our capacity for wonder. God does not seek something which is not already attractive, rather we are asked to elevate our relationship with the desires and projects which already concern us so that we come close to God through them. Hence, "God seeks what is pursued." However, this is no doctrine of passivity. Our projects and our tasks constantly require us to make choices. The situations which require active intervention on our part are as much part of our condition as the more static elements of our nature. God encourages us in our pursuit, not merely in our being. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Two crucial insights are joined here: First that our greatest benefit is to appreciate the situation we find ourselves in, and second that our greatest opportunity derives from our relationship with what is beyond our grasp. We will never know whether, in the final analysis, the total effect of our actions is beneficial. Unintended consequences are usually more important than the results we plan for. Nevertheless, we can rejoice at the prospect of making choices on the limited information available to us, and savor the glimpses we are afforded of the world which extends beyond our comprehension. Since we are often unable to control the world under the sun, we can enjoy our human condition by moving to a perspective which is not limited to what is under the sun. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. One of the foundations of Torah morality is the duty to offer protection to the weak and helpless such as widows, orphans, the newcomers within the community, and the dead. These obligations are emphasized because they offer the one who protects the helpless a special opportunity to experience a relationship with God. No direct reward is anticipated from the powerless, for they lack the resources to repay the kindness. Therefore, the reward can only come from God, and such rewards can be expected to derive from the world which is not under the sun. In Biblical code, these duties are often marked by the phrase, "Remember that you were strangers in Egypt, I am the Lord your God." Compare the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berachot, p. 19a, and its discussion of the obligation to bury an unclaimed corpse. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. All of a person's actions, both good and bad, are motivated by instinctive urges which characterize the world of under the sun. Jealousy can be channeled into the development of great skill, into thievery, into scholarship and perhaps even into philanthropy. However, the perspective of what is done under the sun only sees that these instinctive urges (yetzer ha'rah) are the source of futile and destructive actions, that every good action is contaminated by its venal motivation. However, there is another perspective which recognizes that without jealousy, greed, ambition, or desire for fame, not very much would get done. The urgent pressure of hunger, cold, fear or desire for recognition can also motivate a person to accomplish worthwhile objectives. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The Talmud in the Chapter of Fundamentals (Pirke Avot, 4.1) makes the connection between wisdom and capacity for learning. "Ben Zoma says, 'Who is wise? He who learns from all men,' as it is said, 'From all my teachers I gained wisdom (Psalms 119.99).'" Wisdom is not the accumulation of learning, but the capacity for learning. In this sense, the wisdom of the child may exceed the wisdom of an old king. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The old and foolish king is not cautious because his power has blinded him to the underlying uncertainty of things. Even though he may have access to every pleasure under the sun, he is not so well off as the poor child who is full of potential and capable of learning. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Good derives from limitation, constraint and respecting guidelines. Wickedness is related to unfettered power, arrogance and licentiousness. The paradox of Kohelet is that the beneficial system of guidelines and constraint derives from our relationship with what is beyond our grasp, and not completely demonstrable or self-evident. Hence, the child who has no rigid perception eventually will grow into power, and the ruler who is rigid will eventually cause his kingdom to live in poverty. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The inability to identify with posterity is a defect which is characteristic of living only under the sun. The alienation from ancestors and from succeeding generations results from the narrow focus of getting and spending, for living only under the sun. The first mitzvah in the Torah is to be fruitful and multiply, that is to dedicate our efforts for succeeding generations. Like all of the mitzvot, having and rearing children is a pathway for moving beyond what is under the sun. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. This phrase could also mean, "Do not be worried about your mouth, but do not rush your intellect . . . ." Both meanings probably apply, and the sense of "worry about your mouth" emphasizes the required balance between caution and boldness. However, we have chosen the translation which emphasizes the importance of restraining impulses and limiting the number of our words. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Literally, "A dream comes with too much activity." This could refer to unrealistic ambition, fantasy which is encouraged by narrow-minded involvement with all the activity, or any other kind of loss of contact with hard reality. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. This phrase could mean, "God afflicts him in the rejoicing of his heart." “*Ma’aneh”* could mean either “answer” or “afflict”. In other words, what appears as success to a person may in fact be a superficial, temporal reward which is actually preparation for a harsher outcome in another world (that is, from another perspec­tive). Compare, for example Psalm 92 where it speaks about the fact that a fool cannot understand that when the wrong-doers blossom it is only so that they can be destroyed. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. The theme of this section is that the value of life lies in what is accomplished, so that it is more appropriate to celebrate the end of a person's journey than its beginning. However, external accomplishment is not emphasized -- building, acquiring or even planting -- but rather the transformation of one's character which can be accomplished using the challenges and opportunities which are afforded to us. Hence, by paying attention to what looks important in death, one can improve the heart. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. The sound of burning thorns is all crackle without much useful energy. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. This phrase seems to indicate the awe of God can come from either side of a dilemma. The phrase could also be translated, "Do not relax your grip, since awe of God can go out with all of these." In other words, the sentence simultaneously indicates that reverence for God could dissipate (go out) as well as it could flow from one or the other. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Here the word "Kohelet" is used with a feminine verb, so the meaning seems to be "a gathering of women" rather than Kohelet, "the gatherer". [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Wisdom may bring light either to his own face or to the face of another; brazen arrogance transforms his own face, as it may transform the face of another into hatred. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. The word which means "changed" could also be understood to mean "hated". Thus, the sentence could indicate that the one with an arrogant or inflexible countenance causes either himself or others to change their disposition or to incur opposition. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. "To be in a hurry" could also mean "to be afraid". Compare verse 5:1 where the same ambiguity is achieved with regard to whether to flee or dig in one's heels. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Note that the word “*yevuhar” is read as “yebuhar*“. The first would mean the one who chooses life entirely; the second means who is joined to life entirely. Both meanings work in this context. Some might suggest that the source of value in the world is life itself. However, Kohelet hints that if life is all that counts, then is this value superior to the value of nobility, beauty, integrity or self sacrifice? Surely the security which is afforded by the simple view that life is to be preferred above all is an illusion. Even people who believe this certainly die, and focusing on preserving life only, they are likely to forego their opportunity to be remembered for the noble traits which they could have cultivated. Alternatively, the translation could be rendered, “The dog has a good life because of the lion that died.” In other words, the lion is the dead lion provides opportunity for the living dog, and the wellbeing of the dog is due to the efforts and understanding of the dead lion rather than his own achievement. This interpretation is parallel to the sense of 2:18,19 where the one who rules over all of my achievements and accomplishments may well be a fool. Even if I am a great lion, my inheritor may be a living dog. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Perhaps the realm of reward and punishment is not only after life, but also a different side of our current perception. "Sheol", which is translated here as "the abyss", conveys the idea that after death is impenetrable darkness. In contemporary physics, we find the notion of “dark matter” and “dark energy”. They cannot be directly detected, but we assume they must exist if the rest of this paradigm is to hold together. Similarly, no one can report reliably from where you are going, yet we believe in the existence of a realm we cannot directly observe. We are advised not to look to what will happen after life runs its course, any more than we can expect to find simple justice under the sun. Fantastic eschatology is a distraction, yet focusing merely on the uncertain rewards of this world is inherently unsatisfactory. The uplifting theme of Kohelet sounds throughout: Accept the portion which has been allocated to you. Diligently undertake the tasks which present themselves. Be confident that the task which lies before you is appropriate. Fulfilling the assignment to the best of your ability is the source of real joy. The consequence of this perspective is that you will be able to enjoy your days. Moreover, your worthwhile deeds may even qualify to be remembered -- probably more than any monuments you may build or fortune you may acquire. This is the gift of God, the fulfillment of the human spirit is here and now, yet it is not under the sun. Compare *Pirke Avot*, 4:19-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. 1. Especially in the case of something that is of pure and consistent quality, a slight defect can contaminate the whole. However, an unexpected, foreign element may also provide an advantage. The notion of “brainstorming” endorses the idea that silly ideas may be the most valuable. Thinking of a silly example may expose a deeper underlying view. Einstein’s innovation that light travels at the same speed independent of the frame of reference appeared silly at first, as did Cantor’s idea that there are mathematical infinities of different sizes.  Being able to look ridiculous may be necessary to demonstrate a deeply important truth.  Compare King David dancing, and the critique of his wife Michal, daughter of Saul.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. The sentence turns on the homonym in Hebrew between the word "to leave" and "to be gentle". Hence the phrase could be understood as, "When the government arises against you, do not leave your place, for gentleness cures great wrongs." Alternatively, it could be, "Do not leave your place, since the cure makes even great wrongs depart." Perhaps what is essential is the ambiguity itself in this phrase, since we are often unable to discern surely whether gentleness and passivity is to be preferred or actively getting out of the situation. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. The phrase also turns on homonyms which can reverse the meaning entirely. The word "to carve" (ye-atzev) can also mean "to sadden". Thus the phrase could read, "The one who moves the stones will be saddened by them." Similarly, the word "to shelter" (sakan) could also come from the root which means "to endanger". This would yield a meaning, "The one who fells the tree will be endangered by them (falling)." One could align these phrases with the sense of the preceding lines which caution us about being quick to intervene in the natural course of things. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. The cycle of seven refers to the weekly, ordinary course of things. The cycle of eight refers to the miraculous which has a direct connection with God. Circumcision is performed on the eighth day, the Torah was received on the 50th day following Pesach which is the day following seven weeks of seven days, the miracle of Hanukah lasted eight days. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. In his commentary to Mishna 3:1 of Pirke Avot, Ethics from Sinai, Irving Bunim points to the three meanings of the word “bor’echa”, your Creator in Kohelet 12:1.  He says, “According to the Jerusalem Talmud, Akavya derived this threefold teaching most ingeniously from a verse in Kohelet (Ecclesiastes):  “Rembember too bor’echa , your Creator, in the days of your youth, before the evil days come” (12:1).  the Talmud observes that the word bor’echa (your Creator) suggests by association three different words, which sound quite alike:  b’er’cha, “your well,” i.e. your source, from where youcame; bor’cha, “your pit, your grave,” i.e. to where you are going; and bor’echa, “your Creator,” before whom you will have to give an accounting.  (Jerusalem Talmud, Sotah 2:2)  Irving Bunim, Ethics from Sinai (Feldheim, 2000) v. 1 p. 275 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Tractate Hagiga (5a) of the Babylonian Talmud elaborates about the meandering quality of this metaphor. A prod can be used to direct a plowing cow in either direction to cut a productive furrow; but if you think that the words of the sages are so flexible, remember that they are also like nails. However, if you think that the words are merely fixed like nails, which diminish in size as they are driven into a board, the verse continues that these nails are planted. Plants grow, like the words of the sages grow as future generations apply them to new situations. The growing words can be confusing as their various interpretations gradually unfold, so we are advised to rely on the assemblies where divergent opinions are expressed and debated. In keeping with the principal of Talmudic interpretation that generally all of the reported opinions -- even though they may be contradictory -- are true. On some matters, the current state consists of conflict without resolution. Hence the final dimension of the metaphor is that all the diverse and contradictory opinions are given by one shepherd. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)