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## BRIEF EXPLANATIONS OF THE TECHNICAL RESOURCES USED IN THIS OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARY SERIES

### I. Lexical

There are several excellent lexicons available for ancient Hebrew.

- A. *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* by Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. It is based on the German lexicon by William Gesenius. It is known by the abbreviation BDB.
- B. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* by Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, translated by M. E. J. Richardson. It is known by the abbreviation KB.
- C. *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* by William L. Holladay and is based on the above German lexicon.
- D. A new five volume theological word study entitled *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, edited by Willem A. Van Gemeren. It is known by the abbreviation NIDOTTE.

Where there is significant lexical variety, I have shown several English translations (NASB, NKJV, NRSV, TEV, NJB) from both “word-for-word” and “dynamic equivalent” translations (cf. Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth*, pp. 28-44).

### II. Grammatical

The grammatical identification is usually based on John Joseph Owens’ *Analytical Key to the Old Testament* in four volumes. This is cross checked with Benjamin Davidson’s *Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon of the Old Testament*.

Another helpful resource for grammatical and syntactical features which is used in most of the OT volumes of “You Can Understand the Bible” Series is “The Helps for Translators Series” from the United Bible Societies. They are entitled “A Handbook on \_\_\_\_\_.”

### III. Textual

I am committed to the inspiration of the consonantal Hebrew text (not the Masoretic vowel points and comments). As in all hand-copied, ancient texts, there are some questionable passages. This is usually because of the following:

- A. *hapax legomenon* (words used only once in the Hebrew OT)
- B. idiomatic terms (words and phrases whose literal meanings are not applicable)
- C. historical uncertainties (our lack of information about the ancient world)
- D. the poly-Semitic semantic field of Hebrew’s limited vocabulary
- E. problems associated with later scribes hand-copying ancient Hebrew texts
- F. Hebrew scribes trained in Egypt who felt free to update the texts they copied to make them complete and understandable to their day (NIDOTTE, pp. 52-54).

There are several sources of Hebrew words and texts outside the Masoretic textual tradition.

1. The Samaritan Pentateuch
2. The Dead Sea Scrolls
3. The Nash papyrus (Decalog)
4. The Severus scroll (Pentateuch)
5. Some later coins, letters, and ostraca (broken pieces of unfired pottery used for writing)

But for the most part, there are no manuscript families in the OT like those in the Greek NT manuscripts. For a good brief article on the textual reliability of the Masoretic

Text (A.D. 900's) see “The Reliability of the Old Testament Text” by Bruce K. Waltke in the NIDOTTE, vol. 1, pp. 51-67.

The Hebrew text used is *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS) from the German Bible Society, 1997, which is based on the Leningrad Codex (A.D. 1009). Occasionally, the ancient versions (Greek Septuagint, Aramaic Targums, Syriac Peshitta, and Latin Vulgate) are consulted if the Hebrew is ambiguous or obviously confused.

# BRIEF DEFINITIONS OF HEBREW VERBAL FORMS WHICH IMPACT EXEGESIS

## I. Brief Historical Development of Hebrew

Hebrew is part of the Shemitic (Semitic) family of southwest Asian language. The name (given by modern scholars) comes from Noah's son, Shem (cf. Gen. 5:32; 6:10). Shem's descendants are listed in Gen. 10:21-31 as Arabs, Hebrews, Syrians, Arameans, and Assyrians. In reality some Semitic languages are used by nations listed in Ham's line (cf. Gen. 10:6-14), Canaan, Phoenicia, and Ethiopia.

Hebrew is part of the northwest group of these Semitic languages. Modern scholars have samples of this ancient language group from

- A. Amorite (*Mari Tablets* from 18<sup>th</sup> century B.C. in Akkadian)
- B. Canaanite (*Ras Shamra Tablets* from 15<sup>th</sup> century in Ugaritic)
- C. Canaanite (*Amarna Letters* from 14<sup>th</sup> century in Canaanite Akkadian)
- D. Phoenician (Hebrew uses Phoenician alphabet)
- E. Moabite (Mesha stone, 840 B.C.)
- F. Aramaic (official language of the Persian Empire used in Gen. 31:47 [2 words]; Jer. 10:11; Dan. 2:4-6; 7:28; Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26 and spoken by Jews in the first century in Palestine)

The Hebrew language is called "the lip of Canaan" in Isa. 19:18. It was first called "Hebrew" in the prologue of Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Ben Sirach) about 180 B.C. (and some other early places, cf. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4, pp. 205ff). It is most closely related to Moabite and the language used at Ugarit. Examples of ancient Hebrew found outside the Bible are

1. the Gezer calendar, 925 B.C. (a school boy's writing)
2. the Siloam Inscription, 705 B.C. (tunnel writings)
3. Samaritan Ostraca, 770 B.C. (tax records on broken pottery)
4. Lachish letters, 587 B.C. (war communications)
5. Maccabean coins and seals
6. some Dead Sea Scroll texts
7. numerous inscriptions (cf. "Languages [Hebrew]," ABD 4:203ff)

It, like all Semitic languages, is characterized by words made up of three consonants (tri-consonantal root). It is an inflexed language. The three-root consonants carry the basic word meaning, while prefixed, suffixed, or internal additions show the syntactical function (later vowels, cf. Sue Green, *Linguistic Analysis of Biblical Hebrew*, pp. 46-49).

Hebrew vocabulary demonstrates a difference between prose and poetry. Word meanings are connected to folk etymologies (not linguistic origins). Word plays and sound plays are very common (*paronomasia*).

## II. Aspects of Predication

### A. VERBS

The normal expected word order is VERB, PRONOUN, SUBJECT (with modifiers), OBJECT (with modifiers). The basic non-flagged VERB is the *Qal*, PERFECT, MASCULINE, SINGULAR form. It is how Hebrew and Aramaic lexicons are arranged.

VERBS are inflected to show

1. number—singular, plural, dual
2. gender—masculine and feminine (no neuter)
3. mood—indicative, subjunctive, imperative (relation of the action to reality)
4. tense (aspect)
  - a. PERFECT, which denotes completion, in the sense of the beginning, continuing, and concluding of an action. Usually this form was used of past action, the thing has occurred. J. Wash Watts, *A Survey of Syntax in the Hebrew Old Testament*, says  
“The single whole described by a perfect is also considered as certain. An imperfect may picture a state as possible or desired or expected, but a perfect sees it as actual, real, and sure” (p. 36).  
S. R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew*, describes it this way:

“The perfect is employed to indicate actions the accomplishment of which lies indeed in the future, but is regarded as dependant upon such an unalterable determination of the will that it may be spoken of as having actually taken place: thus a resolution, promise, or decree, especially of Divine one, is frequently announced in the perfect tense” (p. 17, e.g., the prophetic perfect).

Robert B. Chisholm, Jr. *From Exegesis to Exposition*, defines this verbal form as one which

“views a situation from the outside, as a whole. As such it expresses a simple fact, whether it be an action or state (including state of being or mind). When used of actions, it often views the action as complete from the rhetorical standpoint of the speaker or narrator (whether it is or is not complete in fact or reality is not the point). The perfect can pertain to an action/state in the past, present or future. As noted above, time frame, which influences how one translates the perfect into a tense-oriented language like English, must be determined from the context” (p. 86).

- b. IMPERFECT, which denotes an action in progress (incomplete, repetitive, continual, or contingent), often movement toward a goal. Usually this form was used of Present and Future action.

J. Wash Watts, *A Survey of Syntax in the Hebrew Old Testament*, says

“All IMPERFECTS represent incomplete states. They are either repeated or developing or contingent. In other words, or partially developed, or partially assured. In all cases they are partial in some sense, i.e., incomplete” (p. 55).

Robert B. Chisholm, Jr. *From Exegesis to Exposition*, says

“It is difficult to reduce the essence of the imperfect to a single concept, for it encompasses both aspect and mood. Sometimes the imperfect is used in an indicative manner and makes an objective statement. At other

times it views an action more subjectively, as hypothetical, contingent, possible, and so on” (p. 89).

- c. The added *waw*, which links the VERB to the action of the previous VERB(s).
- d. IMPERATIVE, which is based on the volition of the speaker and potential action by the hearer.
- e. In ancient Hebrew only the larger context can determine the authorial-intended time orientations.

B. The seven major inflected forms and their basic meaning. In reality these forms work in conjunction with each other in a context and must not be isolated.

1. *Qal (Kal)*, the most common and basic of all the forms. It denotes simple action or a state of being. There is no causation or specification implied.
2. *Niphal*, the second most common form. It is usually PASSIVE, but this form also functions as reciprocal and reflexive. It also has no causation or specification implied.
3. *Piel*, this form is active and expresses the bringing about of an action into a state of being. The basic meaning of the *Qal* stem is developed or extended into a state of being.
4. *Pual*, this is the PASSIVE counterpart to the *Piel*. It is often expressed by a PARTICIPLE.
5. *Hithpael*, which is the reflexive or reciprocal stem. It expresses iterative or durative action to the *Piel* stem. The rare PASSIVE form is called *Hothpael*.
6. *Hiphil*, the active form of the causative stem in contrast to *Piel*. It can have a permissive aspect, but usually refers to the cause of an event. Ernst Jenni, a German Hebrew grammarian, believed that the *Piel* denoted something coming into a state of being, while *Hiphil* showed how it happened.
7. *Hophal*, the PASSIVE counterpart to the *Hiphil*. These last two stems are the least used of the seven stems.

Much of this information comes from *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, by Bruce K. Walke and M. O’Connor, pp. 343-452.

Agency and causation chart. One key in understanding the Hebrew VERB system is to see it as a pattern of VOICE relationships. Some stems are in contrast to other stems (i.e., *Qal - Niphal*; *Piel - Hiphil*)

The chart below tries to visualize the basic function of the VERB stems as to causation.

Voice or Subject	No Secondary Agency	An Active Secondary Agency	A Passive Secondary Agency
ACTIVE	<i>Qal</i>	<i>Hiphil</i>	<i>Piel</i>
MIDDLE PASSIVE	<i>Niphal</i>	<i>Hophal</i>	<i>Pual</i>
REFLEXIVE/ RECIPROCAL	<i>Niphal</i>	<i>Hiphil</i>	<i>Hithpael</i>

This chart is taken from the excellent discussion of the VERBAL system in light of new Akkadian research (cf. Bruce K. Waltke, M. O’Conner, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, pp. 354-359).

R. H. Kennett, *A Short Account of the Hebrew Tenses*, has provided a needed warning.

“I have commonly found in teaching, that a student’s chief difficulty in the Hebrew verbs is to grasp the meaning which they conveyed to the minds of the Hebrews themselves; that is to say, there is a tendency to assign as equivalents to each of the Hebrew Tenses a certain number of Latin or English forms by which

that particular Tense may commonly be translated. The result is a failure to perceive many of these fine shades of meaning, which give such life and vigor to the language of the Old Testament.

The difficulty in the use of the Hebrew verbs lies solely in the point of view, so absolutely different from our own, from which the Hebrews regarded an action; the *time*, which with us is the first consideration, as the very word, 'tense' shows, being to them a matter of secondary importance. It is, therefore, essential that a student should clearly grasp, not so much the Latin or English forms which may be used in translating each of the Hebrew Tenses, but rather the aspect of each action, as it presented itself to a Hebrew's mind.

The name 'tenses' as applied to Hebrew verbs is misleading. The so-called Hebrew 'tenses' do not express the *time* but merely the *state* of an action. Indeed were it not for the confusion that would arise through the application of the term 'state' to both nouns and verbs, 'states' would be a far better designation than 'tenses.' It must always be borne in mind that it is impossible to translate a Hebrew verb into English without employing a limitation (of time), which is entirely absent in the Hebrew. The ancient Hebrews never thought of an action as past, present, or future, but simply as *perfect*, i.e., complete, or *imperfect*, i.e., as in course of development. When we say that a certain Hebrew tense corresponds to a Perfect, Pluperfect, or Future in English, we do not mean that the Hebrews thought of it as Perfect, Pluperfect, or Future, but merely that it must be so translated in English. The *time* of an action the Hebrews did not attempt to express by any verbal form" (preface and p. 1).

For a second good warning, Sue Groom, *Linguistic Analysis of Biblical Hebrew*, reminds us,

"There is no way of knowing whether modern scholars' reconstruction of semantic fields and sense relations in an ancient dead language are merely a reflection of their own intuition, or their own native language, or whether those fields existed in Classical Hebrew" (p. 128).

### C. MOODS (Modes)

1. It happened, is happening (INDICATIVE), usually uses PERFECT tense or PARTICIPLES (all PARTICIPLES are INDICATIVE).
2. It will happen, could happen (SUBJUNCTIVE)
  - a. uses a marked IMPERFECT tense
    - (1) COHORTATIVE (added h), FIRST PERSON IMPERFECT form which normally expresses a wish, a request, or self-encouragement (i.e., actions willed by the speaker)
    - (2) JUSSIVE (internal changes), THIRD PERSON IMPERFECT (can be second person in negated sentences) which normally expresses a request, a permission, an admonition, or advice
  - b. uses a PERFECT tense with *lu* or *lule*  
These constructions are similar to SECOND CLASS CONDITIONAL sentences in Koine Greek. A false statement (protasis) results in a false conclusion (apodosis).
  - c. uses an IMPERFECT tense and *lu*  
Context and *lu*, as well as a future orientation, mark this SUBJUNCTIVE usage. Some examples from J. Wash Watts, *A Survey of Syntax in the Hebrew Old Testament* are Gen. 13:16; Deut. 1:12; I Kgs. 13:8; Ps. 24:3; Isa. 1:18 (cf. Pp. 76-77).



D. *Waw* - Conversive/consecutive/relative. This uniquely Hebrew (Canaanite) syntactical feature has caused great confusion through the years. It is used in a variety of ways often based on genre. The reason for the confusion is that early scholars were European and tried to interpret in light of their own native languages. When this proved difficult they blamed the problem on Hebrew being a “supposed” ancient, archaic language. European languages are TENSE (time) based VERBS. Some of the variety and grammatical implications were specified by the letter WAW being added to the PERFECT or IMPERFECT VERB stems. This altered the way the action was viewed.

1. In historical narrative the VERBS are linked together in a chain with a standard pattern.
2. The *waw* prefix showed a specific relationship with the previous VERB(s).
3. The larger context is always the key to understanding the VERB chain. Semitic VERBS cannot be analyzed in isolation.

J. Wash Watts, *A Survey of Syntax in the Hebrew Old Testament*, notes the distinctive of Hebrew in its use of the *waw* before PERFECTS and IMPERFECTS (pp. 52-53). As the basic idea of the PERFECT is past, the addition of *waw* often projects it into a future time aspect. This is also true of the IMPERFECT whose basic idea is present or future; the addition of *waw* places it into the past. It is this unusual time shift which explains the *waw*'s addition, not a change in the basic meaning of the tense itself. The *waw* PERFECTS work well with prophecy, while the *waw* IMPERFECTS work well with narratives (pp. 54, 68).

Watts continues his definition

“As a fundamental distinction between *waw* conjunctive and *waw* consecutive, the following interpretations are offered:

1. *Waw* conjunctive appears always to indicate a parallel.
2. *Waw* consecutive appears always to indicate a sequence. It is the only form of *waw* used with consecutive imperfects. The relation between the imperfects linked by it may be temporal sequence, logical consequence, logical cause, or logical contrast. In all cases there is a sequence” (p. 103).

E. INFINITIVE - There are two kinds of INFINITIVES

1. INFINITIVE ABSOLUTES, which are “strong, independent, striking expressions used for dramatic effect. . .as a subject, it often has no written verb, the verb ‘to be’ being understood, of course, but the word standing dramatically alone” J. Wash Watts, *A Survey of Syntax in the Hebrew Old Testament*” (p. 92).
2. INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT, which are “related grammatically to the sentence by prepositions, possessive pronouns, and the construct relationship” (p. 91).

J. Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew*, describes the construct state as:

“When two (or more) words are so closely united that together they constitute one compound idea, the dependent word (or words) is (are) said to be in the construct state” (p. 44).

F. INTERROGATIVES

1. They always appear first in the sentence.
2. Interpretive significance
  - a. *ha* - does not expect a response
  - b. *halo'* - the author expects a “yes” answer

NEGATIVES

1. They always appear before the words they negate.
2. Most common negation is *lo'*.

3. The term *'al* has a contingent connotation and is used with COHORTATIVES and JUSSIVES.
4. The term *lebhilit*, meaning “in order that. . .not,” is used with INFINITIVES.
5. The term *'en* is used with PARTICIPLES.

G. CONDITIONAL SENTENCES

1. There are four kinds of conditional sentences which basically are paralleled in Koine Greek.
  - a. something assumed to be happening or thought of as fulfilled (FIRST CLASS in Greek)
  - b. something contrary to fact whose fulfillment is impossible (SECOND CLASS)
  - c. something which is possible or even probable (THIRD CLASS)
  - d. something which is less probable; therefore, the fulfillment is dubious (FOURTH CLASS)
2. GRAMMATICAL MARKERS
  - a. the assumed to be true or real condition always uses an INDICATIVE PERFECT or PARTICIPLE and usually the protasis is introduced by
    - (1) *'im*
    - (2) *ki* (or *'asher*)
    - (3) *hin* or *hinneh*
  - b. the contrary to fact condition always uses a PERFECT aspect VERB or a PARTICIPLE with the introductory PARTICIPLE *lu* or *lule*
  - c. the more probable condition always used IMPERFECT VERB or PARTICIPLES in the protasis, usually *'im* or *ki* are used as introductory PARTICLES
  - d. the less probable condition uses IMPERFECT SUBJUNCTIVES in the protasis and always uses *'im* as an introductory PARTICLE

## ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS COMMENTARY

AB	Anchor Bible Commentaries, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman
ABD	Anchor Bible Dictionary (6 vols.), ed. David Noel Freedman
AKOT	Analytical Key to the Old Testament by John Joseph Owens
ANET	Ancient Near Eastern Texts by James B. Pritchard
BDB	A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament by F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs
BHS	Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, GBS, 1997
IDB	The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (4 vols.), ed. George A. Buttrick
ISBE	International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (5 vols.), ed. James Orr
JB	Jerusalem Bible
JPSOA	The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text: A New Translation (The Jewish Publication Society of America)
KB	The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament by Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner
LAM	The Holy Bible From Ancient Eastern Manuscripts (the Peshitta) by George M. Lamsa
LXX	Septuagint (Greek-English) by Zondervan, 1970
MOF	A New Translation of the Bible by James Moffatt
MT	Masoretic Hebrew Text
NAB	New American Bible Text
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NET	NET Bible: New English Translation, Second Beta Edition
NRSV	New Revised Standard Bible
NIDOTTE	New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis (5 vols.), ed. Willem A. VanGemeren

NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
OTPG	Old Testament Passing Guide by Todd S. Beall, William A. Banks, and Colin Smith
REB	Revised English Bible
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SEPT	The Septuagint (Greek-English) by Zondervan, 1970
TEV	Today's English Version from United Bible Societies
YLT	Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible by Robert Young
ZPBE	Zondervan Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia (5 vols.), ed. Merrill C. Tenney

## **A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR: HOW CAN THIS COMMENTARY HELP YOU?**

Biblical interpretation is a rational and spiritual process that attempts to understand an ancient inspired writer in such a way that the message from God may be understood and applied in our day.

The spiritual process is crucial but difficult to define. It does involve a yieldedness and openness to God. There must be a hunger (1) for Him, (2) to know Him, and (3) to serve Him. This process involves prayer, confession, and the willingness for lifestyle change. The Spirit is crucial in the interpretive process, but why sincere, godly Christians understand the Bible differently is a mystery.

The rational process is easier to describe. We must be consistent and fair to the text and not be influenced by our personal, cultural, or denominational biases. We are all historically conditioned. None of us are objective, neutral interpreters. This commentary offers a careful rational process containing three interpretive principles structured to help us attempt to overcome our biases.

### **First Principle**

The first principle is to note the historical setting in which a biblical book was written and the particular historical occasion for its authorship (or when it was edited). The original author had a purpose and a message to communicate. The text cannot mean something to us that it never meant to the original, ancient, inspired author. His intent—not our historical, emotional, cultural, personal, or denominational need—is the key. Application is an integral partner to interpretation, but proper interpretation must always precede application. It must be reiterated that every biblical text has one and only one meaning. This meaning is what the original biblical author intended through the Spirit's leadership to communicate to his day. This one meaning may have many possible applications to different cultures and situations. These applications must be linked to the central truth of the original author. For this reason, this study guide commentary is designed to provide a brief introduction to each book of the Bible.

### **Second Principle**

The second principle is to identify the literary units. Every biblical book is a unified document. Interpreters have no right to isolate one aspect of truth by excluding others. Therefore, we must strive to understand the purpose of the whole biblical book before we interpret the individual literary units. The individual parts—chapters, paragraphs, or verses—cannot mean what the whole unit does not mean. Interpretation must move from a deductive approach of the whole to an inductive approach to the parts. Therefore, this study guide commentary is designed to help the student analyze the structure of each literary unit by paragraphs. Paragraph and chapter divisions are not inspired, but they do aid us in identifying thought units.

Interpreting at a paragraph level—not sentence, clause, phrase, or word level—is the key in following the biblical author's intended meaning. Paragraphs are based on a unified topic, often called the theme or topical sentence. Every word, phrase, clause, and sentence in the paragraph relates somehow to this unified theme. They limit it, expand it, explain it, and/or question it. A real key to proper interpretation is to follow the original author's thought on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis through the individual literary units that make up the biblical book. This study guide commentary is designed to help the student do that by comparing the paragraphing of modern English translations. These translations have been selected because they employ different translation theories:

- A. The New King James Version (NKJV) is a word-for-word literal translation based on the Greek manuscript tradition known as the Textus Receptus. Its paragraph divisions are longer than the other translations. These longer units help the student to see the unified topics.
- B. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is a modified word-for-word translation. It forms a midpoint between the following two modern versions. Its paragraph divisions are quite helpful in identifying subjects.
- C. The Today's English Version (TEV) is a dynamic equivalent translation published by the United Bible Society. It attempts to translate the Bible in such a way that a modern English reader or speaker can understand the meaning of the original text.
- D. The Jerusalem Bible (JB) is a dynamic equivalent translation based on a French Catholic translation. It is very helpful in comparing the paragraphing from a European perspective.
- E. The printed text is the 1995 Updated New American Standard Bible (NASB), which is a word for word translation. The verse by verse comments follow this paragraphing.

### **Third Principle**

The third principle is to read the Bible in different translations in order to grasp the widest possible range of meaning (semantic field) that biblical words or phrases may have. Often a phrase or word can be understood in several ways. These different translations bring out these options and help to identify and explain the manuscript variations. These do not affect doctrine, but they do help us to try to get back to the original text penned by an inspired ancient writer.

### **Fourth Principle**

The fourth principle is to note the literary genre. Original inspired authors chose to record their messages in different forms (e.g., historical narrative, historical drama, poetry, prophecy, gospel [parable], letter, apocalyptic). These different forms have special keys to interpretation (see Gordon Fee and Doug Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, or Robert Stein, *Playing by the Rules*).

This commentary offers a quick way for the student to check his interpretations. It is not meant to be definitive, but rather informative and thought-provoking. Often, other possible interpretations help us not be so parochial, dogmatic, and denominational. Interpreters need to have a larger range of interpretive options to recognize how ambiguous the ancient text can be. It is shocking how little agreement there is among Christians who claim the Bible as their source of truth.

These principles have helped me to overcome much of my historical conditioning by forcing me to struggle with the ancient text. My hope is that it will be a blessing to you as well.

Bob Utley  
East Texas Baptist University  
June 27, 1996

## **A GUIDE TO GOOD BIBLE READING: A PERSONAL SEARCH FOR VERIFIABLE TRUTH**

Can we know truth? Where is it found? Can we logically verify it? Is there an ultimate authority? Are there absolutes which can guide our lives, our world? Is there meaning to life? Why are we here? Where are we going? These questions—questions that all rational people contemplate—have haunted the human intellect since the beginning of time (Eccl. 1:13-18; 3:9-11). I can remember my personal search for an integrating center for my life. I became a believer in Christ at a young age, based primarily on the witness of significant others in my family. As I grew to adulthood, questions about myself and my world also grew. Simple cultural and religious clichés did not bring meaning to the experiences I read about or encountered. It was a time of confusion, searching, longing, and often a feeling of hopelessness in the face of the insensitive, hard world in which I lived.

Many claimed to have answers to these ultimate questions, but after research and reflection I found that their answers were based upon (1) personal philosophies, (2) ancient myths, (3) personal experiences, or (4) psychological projections. I needed some degree of verification, some evidence, some rationality on which to base my world-view, my integrating center, my reason to live.

I found these in my study of the Bible. I began to search for evidence of its trustworthiness, which I found in (1) the historical reliability of the Bible as confirmed by archaeology, (2) the accuracy of the prophecies of the Old Testament, (3) the unity of the Bible message over the sixteen hundred years of its production, and (4) the personal testimonies of people whose lives had been permanently changed by contact with the Bible. Christianity, as a unified system of faith and belief, has the ability to deal with complex questions of human life. Not only did this provide a rational framework, but the experiential aspect of biblical faith brought me emotional joy and stability.

I thought that I had found the integrating center for my life—Christ, as understood through the Scriptures. It was a heady experience, an emotional release. However, I can still remember the shock and pain when it began to dawn on me how many different interpretations of this book were advocated, sometimes even within the same churches and schools of thought. Affirming the inspiration and trustworthiness of the Bible was not the end, but only the beginning. How do I verify or reject the varied and conflicting interpretations of the many difficult passages in Scripture by those who were claiming its authority and trustworthiness?

This task became my life's goal and pilgrimage of faith. I knew that my faith in Christ had (1) brought me great peace and joy. My mind longed for some absolutes in the midst of the relativity of my culture (post-modernity); (2) the dogmatism of conflicting religious systems (world religions); and (3) denominational arrogance. In my search for valid approaches to the interpretation of ancient literature, I was surprised to discover my own historical, cultural, denominational and experiential biases. I had often read the Bible simply to reinforce my own views. I used it as a source of dogma to attack others while reaffirming my own insecurities and inadequacies. How painful this realization was to me!

Although I can never be totally objective, I can become a better reader of the Bible. I can limit my biases by identifying them and acknowledging their presence. I am not yet free of them, but I have confronted my own weaknesses. The interpreter is often the worst enemy of good Bible reading!

Let me list some of the presuppositions I bring to my study of the Bible so that you, the reader, may examine them along with me:

### **I. Presuppositions**

- A. I believe the Bible is the sole inspired self-revelation of the one true God. Therefore, it must be interpreted in light of the intent of the original divine author (the Spirit) through a human writer in a specific historical setting.

- B. I believe the Bible was written for the common person—for all people! God accommodated Himself to speak to us clearly within a historical and cultural context. God does not hide truth—He wants us to understand! Therefore, it must be interpreted in light of its day, not ours. The Bible should not mean to us what it never meant to those who first read or heard it. It is understandable by the average human mind and uses normal human communication forms and techniques.
- C. I believe the Bible has a unified message and purpose. It does not contradict itself, though it does contain difficult and paradoxical passages. Thus, the best interpreter of the Bible is the Bible itself.
- D. I believe that every passage (excluding prophecies) has one and only one meaning based on the intent of the original, inspired author. Although we can never be absolutely certain we know the original author’s intent, many indicators point in its direction:
  1. the genre (literary type) chosen to express the message
  2. the historical setting and/or specific occasion that elicited the writing
  3. the literary context of the entire book as well as each literary unit
  4. the textual design (outline) of the literary units as they relate to the whole message
  5. the specific grammatical features employed to communicate the message
  6. the words chosen to present the message
  7. parallel passages

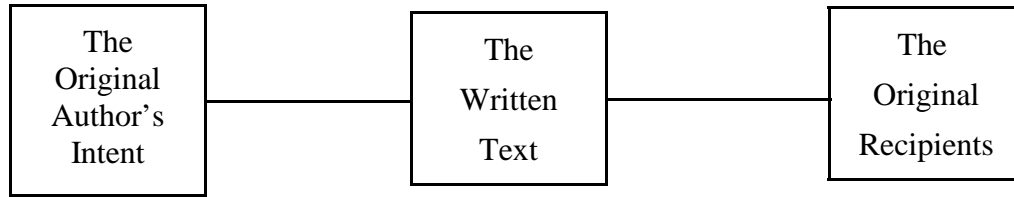
The study of each of these areas becomes the object of our study of a passage. Before I explain my methodology for good Bible reading, let me delineate some of the inappropriate methods being used today that have caused so much diversity of interpretation, and that consequently should be avoided:

## II. Inappropriate Methods

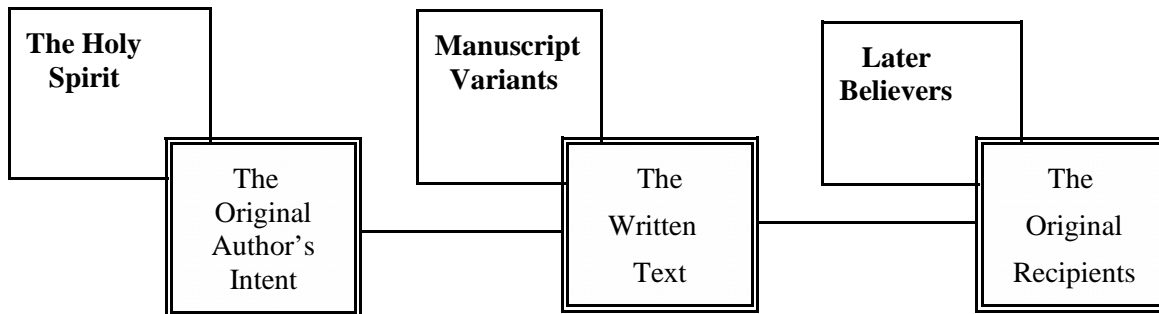
- A. Ignoring the literary context of the books of the Bible and using every sentence, clause, or even individual words as statements of truth unrelated to the author’s intent or the larger context. This is often called “proof-texting.”
- B. Ignoring the historical setting of the books by substituting a supposed historical setting that has little or no support from the text itself.
- C. Ignoring the historical setting of the books and reading it as the morning hometown newspaper written primarily to modern individual Christians.
- D. Ignoring the historical setting of the books by allegorizing the text into a philosophical/theological message totally unrelated to the first hearers and the original author’s intent.
- E. Ignoring the original message by substituting one’s own system of theology, pet doctrine, or contemporary issue unrelated to the original author’s purpose and stated message. This phenomenon often follows the initial reading of the Bible as a means of establishing a speaker’s authority. This is often referred to as “reader response” (“what-the-text-means-to-me” interpretation).



At least three related components may be found in all written human communication:



In the past, different reading techniques have focused on one of the three components, but to truly affirm the unique inspiration of the Bible, a modified diagram is more appropriate:



In truth all three components must be included in the interpretive process. For the purpose of verification, my interpretation focuses on the first two components: the original author and the text. I am probably reacting to the abuses I have observed (1) allegorizing or spiritualizing texts and (2) “reader response” interpretation (what-it-means-to-me). Abuse may occur at each stage. We must always check our motives, biases, techniques, and applications, but how do we check them if there are no boundaries to interpretations, no limits, no criteria? This is where authorial intent and textual structure provide me with some criteria for limiting the scope of possible valid interpretations.

In light of these inappropriate reading techniques, what are some possible approaches to good Bible reading and interpretation which offer a degree of verification and consistency?

### III. Possible Approaches to Good Bible Reading

At this point I am not discussing the unique techniques of interpreting specific genres but general hermeneutical principles valid for all types of biblical texts. A good book for genre-specific approaches is *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, published by Zondervan and *Cracking Old Testament Codes* by D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., published by Broadman and Holman.

My methodology focuses initially on the reader allowing the Holy Spirit to illumine the Bible through four personal reading cycles. This makes the Spirit, the text, and the reader primary, not secondary. This also protects the reader from being unduly influenced by commentators. I have heard it said: “The Bible throws a lot of light on commentaries.” This is not meant to be a depreciating comment about study aids, but rather a plea for an appropriate timing for their use.

We must be able to support our interpretations from the text itself. Five areas provide at least limited verification:

1. the original author's
  - a. historical setting
  - b. literary context

2. the original author's choice of
  - a. grammatical structures (syntax)
  - b. contemporary word usage
  - c. genre
3. our understanding of appropriate
  - a. relevant parallel passages

We need to be able to provide the reasons and logic behind our interpretations. The Bible is our only source for faith and practice. Sadly, Christians often disagree about what it teaches or affirms. It is self-defeating to claim inspiration for the Bible and then for believers not to be able to agree on what it teaches and requires!

The four reading cycles are designed to provide the following interpretive insights:

- A. The first reading cycle
  1. Read the book in a single sitting. Read it again in a different translation, hopefully from a different translation theory
    - a. word-for-word (NKJV, NASB, NRSV)
    - b. dynamic equivalent (TEV, JB)
    - c. paraphrase (Living Bible, Amplified Bible)
  2. Look for the central purpose of the entire writing. Identify its theme.
  3. Isolate (if possible) a literary unit, a chapter, a paragraph or a sentence which clearly expresses this central purpose or theme.
  4. Identify the predominant literary genre
    - a. Old Testament
      - (1) Hebrew narrative
      - (2) Hebrew poetry (wisdom literature, psalm)
      - (3) Hebrew prophecy (prose, poetry)
      - (4) Law codes
    - b. New Testament
      - (1) Narratives (Gospels, Acts)
      - (2) Parables (Gospels)
      - (3) Letters/epistles
      - (4) Apocalyptic literature
- B. The second reading cycle
  1. Read the entire book again, seeking to identify major topics or subjects.
  2. Outline the major topics and briefly state their contents in a simple statement.
  3. Check your purpose statement and broad outline with study aids.
- C. The third reading cycle
  1. Read the entire book again, seeking to identify the historical setting and specific occasion for the writing from the Bible book itself.
  2. List the historical items that are mentioned in the Bible book
    - a. the author
    - b. the date
    - c. the recipients
    - d. the specific reason for writing
    - e. aspects of the cultural setting that relate to the purpose of the writing
    - f. references to historical people and events

3. Expand your outline to paragraph level for that part of the biblical book you are interpreting. Always identify and outline the literary unit. This may be several chapters or paragraphs. This enables you to follow the original author's logic and textual design.
4. Check your historical setting by using study aids.

#### D. The fourth reading cycle

1. Read the specific literary unit again in several translations
  - a. word-for-word (NKJV, NASB, NRSV)
  - b. dynamic equivalent (TEV, JB)
  - c. paraphrase (Living Bible, Amplified Bible)
2. Look for literary or grammatical structures
  - a. repeated phrases, Eph. 1:6,12,13
  - b. repeated grammatical structures, Rom. 8:31
  - c. contrasting concepts
3. List the following items
  - a. significant terms
  - b. unusual terms
  - c. important grammatical structures
  - d. particularly difficult words, clauses, and sentences
4. Look for relevant parallel passages
  - a. look for the clearest teaching passage on your subject using
    - (1) "systematic theology" books
    - (2) reference Bibles
    - (3) concordances
  - b. Look for a possible paradoxical pair within your subject. Many biblical truths are presented in dialectical pairs; many denominational conflicts come from proof-texting half of a biblical tension. All of the Bible is inspired, and we must seek out its complete message in order to provide a Scriptural balance to our interpretation.
  - c. Look for parallels within the same book, same author or same genre; the Bible is its own best interpreter because it has one author, the Spirit.
5. Use study aids to check your observations of historical setting and occasion
  - a. study Bibles
  - b. Bible encyclopedias, handbooks and dictionaries
  - c. Bible introductions
  - d. Bible commentaries (at this point in your study, allow the believing community, past and present, to aid and correct your personal study.)

#### IV. Application of Bible interpretation

At this point we turn to application. You have taken the time to understand the text in its original setting; now you must apply it to your life, your culture. I define biblical authority as "understanding what the original biblical author was saying to his day and applying that truth to our day."

Application must follow interpretation of the original author's intent both in time and logic. We cannot apply a Bible passage to our own day until we know what it was saying to its day! A Bible passage should not mean what it never meant!

Your detailed outline, to paragraph level (reading cycle #3), will be your guide. Application should be made at paragraph level, not word level. Words have meaning only in context; clauses have meaning only in context; sentences have meaning only in context. The only inspired person involved in the interpretive process is the original author. We only follow his lead by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. But illumination is not inspiration. To say "thus saith the Lord," we must abide by the original

author's intent. Application must relate specifically to the general intent of the whole writing, the specific literary unit and paragraph level thought development.

Do not let the issues of our day interpret the Bible; let the Bible speak! This may require us to draw principles from the text. This is valid if the text supports a principle. Unfortunately, many times our principles are just that, "our" principles—not the text's principles.

In applying the Bible, it is important to remember that (except in prophecy) one and only one meaning is valid for a particular Bible text. That meaning is related to the intent of the original author as he addressed a crisis or need in his day. Many possible applications may be derived from this one meaning. The application will be based on the recipients' needs but must be related to the original author's meaning.

## V. The Spiritual Aspect of Interpretation

So far I have discussed the logical and textual process involved in interpretation and application. Now let me discuss briefly the spiritual aspect of interpretation. The following checklist has been helpful for me:

- A. Pray for the Spirit's help (cf. I Cor. 1:26-2:16).
- B. Pray for personal forgiveness and cleansing from known sin (cf. I John 1:9).
- C. Pray for a greater desire to know God (cf. Ps. 19:7-14; 42:1ff.; 119:1ff).
- D. Apply any new insight immediately to your own life.
- E. Remain humble and teachable.

It is so hard to keep the balance between the logical process and the spiritual leadership of the Holy Spirit. The following quotes have helped me balance the two:

- A. from James W. Sire, *Scripture Twisting*, pp. 17-18:

"The illumination comes to the minds of God's people—not just to the spiritual elite. There is no guru class in biblical Christianity, no illuminati, no people through whom all proper interpretation must come. And so, while the Holy Spirit gives special gifts of wisdom, knowledge and spiritual discernment, He does not assign these gifted Christians to be the only authoritative interpreters of His Word. It is up to each of His people to learn, to judge and to discern by reference to the Bible which stands as the authority even to those to whom God has given special abilities. To summarize, the assumption I am making throughout the entire book is that the Bible is God's true revelation to all humanity, that it is our ultimate authority on all matters about which it speaks, that it is not a total mystery but can be adequately understood by ordinary people in every culture."

- B. on Kierkegaard, found in Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 75:

According to Kierkegaard the grammatical, lexical, and historical study of the Bible was necessary but preliminary to the true reading of the Bible. "To read the Bible as *God's word* one must read it with his heart in his mouth, on tip-toe, with eager expectancy, in conversation with God. To read the Bible thoughtlessly or carelessly or academically or professionally is not to read the Bible as God's Word. As one reads it as a love letter is read, then one reads it as the Word of God."

- C. H. H. Rowley in *The Relevance of the Bible*, p. 19:

"No merely intellectual understanding of the Bible, however complete, can possess all its treasures. It does not despise such understanding, for it is essential to a complete understanding. But it must lead to a spiritual understanding of the spiritual treasures of this book if it is to be complete. And for that spiritual understanding something more than

intellectual alertness is necessary. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned, and the Bible student needs an attitude of spiritual receptivity, an eagerness to find God that he may yield himself to Him, if he is to pass beyond his scientific study unto the richer inheritance of this greatest of all books.”

## VI. This Commentary’s Method

The *Study Guide Commentary* is designed to aid your interpretive procedures in the following ways:

- A. A brief historical outline introduces each book. After you have done “reading cycle #3” check this information.
- B. Contextual insights are found at the beginning of each chapter. This will help you see how the literary unit is structured.
- C. At the beginning of each chapter or major literary unit the paragraph divisions and their descriptive captions are provided from several modern translations:
  1. The New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update (NASB)
  2. The New King James Version (NKJV)
  3. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)
  4. Today’s English Version (TEV)
  5. The New Jerusalem Bible (NJB)Paragraph divisions are not inspired. They must be ascertained from the context. By comparing several modern translations from differing translation theories and theological perspectives, we are able to analyze the supposed structure of the original author’s thought. Each paragraph has one major truth. This has been called “the topic sentence” or “the central idea of the text.” This unifying thought is the key to proper historical, grammatical interpretation. One should never interpret, preach or teach on less than a paragraph! Also remember that each paragraph is related to its surrounding paragraphs. This is why a paragraph level outline of the entire book is so important. We must be able to follow the logical flow of the subject being addressed by the original inspired author.
- D. Bob’s notes follow a verse-by-verse approach to interpretation. This forces us to follow the original author’s thought. The notes provide information from several areas:
  1. literary context
  2. historical, cultural insights
  3. grammatical information
  4. word studies
  5. relevant parallel passages
- E. At certain points in the commentary, the printed text of the New American Standard Version (1995 update) will be supplemented by the translations of several other modern versions:
  1. The New King James Version (NKJV), which follows the textual manuscripts of the “Textus Receptus.”
  2. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which is a word-for-word revision from the National Council of Churches of the Revised Standard Version.
  3. The Today’s English Version (TEV), which is a dynamic equivalent translation from the American Bible Society.

4. The New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), which is an English translation based on a French Catholic dynamic equivalent translation.
- F. For those who do not read the original languages, comparing English translations can help in identifying problems in the text:
1. manuscript variations
  2. alternate word meanings
  3. grammatically difficult texts and structure
  4. ambiguous texts
- Although the English translations cannot solve these problems, they do target them as places for deeper and more thorough study.
- G. At the close of each chapter relevant discussion questions are provided which attempt to target the major interpretive issues of that chapter.

# INTRODUCTION TO HEBREW POETRY

## I. INTRODUCTION

- A. This type of literature makes up 1/3 of the Old Testament. It is especially common in the “Prophets” (all but Haggai and Malachi contain poetry) and “Writings” sections of the Hebrew canon.
- B. It is very different from English poetry. English poetry is developed from Greek and Latin poetry, which is primarily sound-based. Hebrew poetry has much in common with Canaanite poetry. There are no accented lines or rhyme in Near East poetry (but there is a beat).
- C. The archaeological discovery north of Israel at Ugarit (Ras Shamra) has helped scholars understand OT poetry. This poetry from the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C. has obvious literary connections with biblical poetry.

## II. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF POETRY

- A. It is very compact.
- B. It tries to express truth, feelings or experiences in imagery.
- C. It is primarily written, not oral. It is highly structured. This structure is expressed in
  - 1. balanced lines (parallelism)
  - 2. word plays
  - 3. sound plays

## III. THE STRUCTURE ©. K. Harrison, *Introduction To The Old Testament*, pp. 965-975)

- A. Bishop Robert Lowth in his book, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1753) was the first to characterize biblical poetry as balanced lines of thought. Most modern English translations are formatted to show the lines of poetry.
  - 1. synonymous - the lines express the same thought in different words:
    - a. Psalm 3:1; 49:1; 83:14; 103:13
    - b. Proverbs 19:5; 20:1
    - c. Isaiah 1:3,10
    - d. Amos 5:24; 8:10
  - 2. antithetical - the lines express opposite thoughts by means of contrast or stating the positive and the negative:
    - a. Psalm 1:6; 90:6
    - b. Proverbs 1:29; 10:1,12; 15:1; 19:4
  - 3. synthetic - the next two or three lines develop the thought - Ps. 1:1-2; 19:7-9; 29:1-2
  - 4. chiasmic - a pattern of poetry expressing the message in a descending and ascending order. The main point is found in the middle of the pattern.
- B. A. Briggs in his book, *General Introduction to the Study of Holy Scripture* (1899) developed the next stage of analysis of Hebrew poetry:
  - 1. emblematic - one clause literal and the second metaphorical, Ps. 42:1; 103:3.

2. climacteric or stair-like - the clauses reveal truth in an ascending fashion, Ps. 19:7-14; 29:1-2; 103:20-22.
  3. introverted - a series of clauses, usually at least four, is related by the internal structure of line 1 to 4 and 2 to 3 - Ps. 30:8-10a
- C. G. B. Gray in his book, *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry* (1915) developed the concept of balanced clauses further by:
1. complete balance — where every word in line one is repeated or balanced by a word in line two — Ps. 83:14 and Isa. 1:3
  2. incomplete balance where the clauses are not the same length — Ps. 59:16; 75:6
- D. Today there is a growing recognition of literary structural pattern in Hebrew called a chiasm, which denotes an odd number of parallel lines forming an hourglass shape whereby the central line is emphasized.
- E. Type of sound patterns found in poetry in general, but not often in eastern poetry
1. play on alphabet (acrostic, cf. Ps. 9,34,37,119; Prov. 31:10ff; Lam. 1-4)
  2. play on consonants (alliteration, cf. Ps. 6:8; 27:7; 122:6; Isa. 1:18-26)
  3. play on vowels (assonance, cf. Gen. 49:17; Exod. 14:14; Ezek. 27:27)
  4. play on repetition of similar sounding words with different meanings (paronomasia)
  5. play on words which, when pronounced, sound like the thing they name (onomatopoeia)
  6. special opening and closing (inclusive)
- F. There are several types of poetry in the Old Testament. Some are topic related and some are form related:
1. dedication songs - Num. 21:17-18
  2. work songs - (alluded to but not recorded in Jdgs. 9:27); Isa. 16:10; Jer. 25:30; 48:33
  3. ballads - Num. 21:27-30; Isa. 23:16
  4. drinking songs - negative, Isa. 5:11-13; Amos 6:4-7 and positive, Isa. 22:13
  5. love poems - Song of Songs, wedding riddle - Jdgs. 14:10-18, wedding song - Ps. 45
  6. laments/dirges - (alluded to but not recorded in II Sam. 1:17 and II Chr. 35:25) II Sam. 3:33; Ps. 27, 28; Jer. 9:17-22; Lam.; Ezek. 19:1-14; 26:17-18; Nah. 3:15-19
  7. war songs - Gen. 4:23-24; Exod. 15:1-18,20; Num. 10:35-36; 21:14-15; Josh. 10:13; Jdgs. 5:1-31; 11:34; I Sam. 18:6; II Sam. 1:18; Isa. 47:1-15; 37:21
  8. special benedictions or blessing of leader - Gen. 49; Num. 6:24-26; Deut. 32; II Sam. 23:1-7
  9. magical texts - Balaam, Num. 24:3-9
  10. sacred poems - Psalms
  11. acrostic poems - Ps. 9,34,37,119; Prov. 31:10ff and Lamentations 1-4
  12. curses - Num. 21:22-30
  13. taunt poems - Isa. 14:1-22; 47:1-15; Ezek. 28:1-23
  14. a book of war poems (Jashar) - Num. 21:14-15; Josh. 10:12-13; II Sam. 1:18

#### IV. GUIDELINE TO INTERPRETING HEBREW POETRY

- A. Look for the central truth of the stanza or strophe (this is like a paragraph in prose.) The RSV was the first modern translation to identify poetry by stanzas. Compare modern translations for helpful insights.



- B. Identify the figurative language and express it in prose. Remember, this type of literature is very compact, much is left for the reader to fill in.
- C. Be sure to relate the longer issue-oriented poems to their literary context (often the whole book) and historical setting.
- D. Attempt to identify the type of parallelism involved, whether synonymous, antithetical, or synthetic. This is very important.

Judges 4 and 5 are very helpful in seeing how poetry expresses history. Judges 4 is prose and Judges 5 is poetry of the same event (also compare Exodus 14 & 15).

# INTRODUCTION TO WISDOM LITERATURE

## I. THE GENRE

- A. This is a common literary type in the ancient Near East R. J. Williams, “Wisdom in the Ancient Near East,” *Interpreter Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplement)
1. Mesopotamia (I Kgs. 4:30-31; Isa. 47:10; Dan. 1:20; 2:2)
    - a. Sumeria had a developed wisdom tradition both proverbial and epic (texts from Nippur).
    - b. Babylon's proverbial wisdom was connected with the priest/magician. It was not morally focused (W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*). It was not a developed genre like in Israel.
    - c. Assyria also had a wisdom tradition; one example would be the teachings of Ahiqar. He was an advisor to Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.).
  2. Egypt (I Kgs. 4:30; Gen. 41:8; Isa. 19:11-12)
    - a. “The Teaching for Vizier Ptah-hotep,” written about 2450 B.C. His teachings were in paragraph, not proverbial, form. They were structured as a father to his son, so too, “The Teachings for King Meri-ka-re,” about 2200 B.C. (LaSor, Hubbard, Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, p. 533).
    - b. The Wisdom of Amen-em-opet, written about 1200 B.C., is very similar to Prov. 22:17-24:12.
  3. Phoenicia (Ezek. 27:8-9; 28:3-5)
    - a. The discoveries at Ugarit have shown the close connection between Phoenician and Hebrew wisdom, especially the meter. Many of the unusual forms and rare words in biblical wisdom literature are now understandable from the archaeological discoveries at Ras Shamra (Ugarit).
    - b. Song of Songs is very much like Phoenician wedding songs called *wasfs*, written about 600 B.C.
  4. Canaan (i.e., Edom, cf. Jer. 49:7; Obad. 8) - Albright has revealed the similarity between Hebrew and Canaanite wisdom literature especially the Ras Shamra texts from Ugarit, written about the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C.
    - a. often the same words appear as pairs
    - b. presence of chiasmus
    - c. have superscriptions
    - d. have musical notations
  5. Biblical wisdom literature includes the writings of several non-Israelites:
    - a. Job from Edom
    - b. Agur from Massa (an Israelite kingdom in Saudi Arabia, cf. Genesis 25:14 and I Chronicles 1:30)
    - c. Lemuel from Massa
  6. There are two Jewish non-canonical books that share this genre form.
    - a. Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Ben Sirach)
    - b. Wisdom of Solomon (wisdom)
- B. Literary Characteristics
1. Primarily two distinct types
    - a. proverbial guidelines for a happy, successful life (originally oral, cf. Prov. 1:8; 4:1)
      - (1) short
      - (2) easily culturally understood (common experience)

- (3) thought provoking - arresting statements of truth
- (4) usually uses contrast
- (5) generally true but not always specifically applicable
- b. longer developed special topic, literary works (usually written) like Job, Ecclesiastes and Jonah.
  - (1) monologues
  - (2) dialogues
  - (3) essays
  - (4) they deal with life's major questions and mysteries
  - (5) the sages were willing to challenge the theological status quo!
- c. personification of wisdom (always female). The term wisdom was feminine.
  - (1) in Proverbs wisdom is often described as a woman (cf. 1:8-9:18)
    - (a) positively:
      - i 1:20-33
      - ii 4:6-9
      - iii 8:1-36
      - iv 9:1-6
    - (b) negatively:
      - i 7:1-27
      - ii 9:13-18
  - (2) in Proverbs 8:22-31 wisdom is personified as the firstborn of creation by which God created all else (3:19-20; Ps. 104:24; Jer. 10:12). This may be the background of John's use of *logos* in John 1:1 to refer to Jesus the Messiah.
  - (3) this can also be seen in Ecclesiasticus 24.
- 2. This literature is unique from the Law and the Prophets (cf. Jer. 18:18) in that it addresses the individual not the nation. There are no historical or cultic allusions. It primarily focuses on daily, successful, joyful, moral living.
- 3. Biblical wisdom literature is similar to that of its surrounding neighbors in its structure but not its content. The one true God is the foundation on which all biblical wisdom is based (e.g., Gen. 41:38-39; Job 12:13; 28:28; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; Ps.111:10). In Babylon it was Apsu, Ea, or Marduk. In Egypt it was Thoth.
- 4. Hebrew wisdom was very practical. It was based on experience, not special revelation. It focused on an individual being successful in life (all of life: sacred and secular). It is divine "horse-sense."
- 5. Because wisdom literature used human reason, experience and observation it was international, transcultural. It was the monotheistic religious worldview, which is often not stated, that made Israel's wisdom revelatory.

## II. POSSIBLE ORIGINS

- A. Wisdom literature developed in Israel as an alternative or balance to the other forms of revelation. (Jer. 18:18; Ezek. 7:26)
  - 1. priest - law - form (corporate)
  - 2. prophet - oracle - motive (corporate)
  - 3. sage - wisdom - practical, successful daily life (individual)
  - 4. As there were female prophets in Israel (Miriam, Huldah) so, too, there were female sages (cf. II Sam. 14:1-21; 20:14-22).

- B. This type of literature seemed to have developed
  - 1. as folk stories around camp fires
  - 2. as family traditions passed on to the male children
  - 3. as ideas written and supported by the Royal Palace:
    - a. David is connected to the Psalms
    - b. Solomon is connected to Proverbs (I Kgs. 4:29-34; Ps. 72 & 127; Prov. 1:1; 10:1; 25:1)
    - c. Hezekiah is connected to editing wisdom literature (Prov. 25:1)

### III. PURPOSE

- A. It is basically a “how to” focus on happiness and success. It is primarily individual in its focus. It is based on:
  - 1. the experience of previous generations
  - 2. cause and effect relationships in life
  - 3. trusting in the knowledge that God has rewards (cf. Deut. 27-29)
- B. It was society’s way to pass on truth and train the next generation of leaders and citizens.
- C. OT wisdom, though not always expressing it, sees the Covenant God behind all of life. For the Hebrew there was no sharp division between the sacred and secular. All of life was sacred.
- D. It was a way to challenge and balance traditional theology. The sages were free thinkers not bound by textbook truths. They dared to ask, “Why,” “How,” “What if?”

### IV. KEYS TO INTERPRETATION

- A. Short proverbial statements
  - 1. look for common elements of life used to express the truth.
  - 2. express the central truth in a simple declarative sentence.
  - 3. since context will not help, look for parallel passages on the same subject.
- B. Longer literary pieces
  - 1. be sure to express the central truth of the whole.
  - 2. do not take verses out of context.
  - 3. check the historical occasion or reason of the writing.
- C. Some common misinterpretations (Fee & Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, p. 207)
  - 1. People do not read the whole Wisdom book (like Job and Ecclesiastes) and look for its central truth, but pull parts of the book out of its context and apply it literally to modern life.
  - 2. People do not understand the uniqueness of the literary genre. This is a highly compact and figurative Ancient Near Eastern literature.
  - 3. Proverbs are statements of general truth. They are broad sweeps of the pen not specifically true, in every case, every time, statements of truth.

## V. BIBLICAL EXAMPLES

### A. Old Testament

1. Job
2. Psalm 1, 19, 32, 34, 37 (acrostic), 49, 78, 104, 107, 110, 112-119 (acrostic), 127-128, 133, 147, 148
3. Proverbs
4. Ecclesiastes
5. Song of Songs
6. Lamentations (acrostic)
7. Jonah

### B. Extra canonical

1. Tobit
2. Wisdom of Ben Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)
3. Wisdom of Solomon (Book of Wisdom)
4. IV Maccabees

### C. New Testament

1. The proverbs and parables of Jesus
2. The book of James

# INTRODUCTION TO ECCLESIASTES

## I. THE NAME OF THE BOOK

- A. The Hebrew name was the phrase from 1:1, “the Words of Qoheleth, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” Its short designation was Qoheleth (BDB 875), the VERB used of Solomon in I Kgs. 8:1. It is a FEMININE PARTICIPLE from the Hebrew *Qahal*, “congregation” or “assembly” (cf. IV. F.). It seems to designate an office (i.e., used with ARTICLE in 12:8).
- B. The book was called “Ecclesiastes,” which is a Latinized form from the Septuagint. This is the Greek term for “one who assembles,” from the root “to call out.”
- C. The term Qoheleth can mean
  - 1. one who assembles an audience, therefore, a teacher, preacher, debater, etc.
  - 2. metaphorically for one who gathers truth, a philosopher or sage
  - 3. one who gathers different opinions and decides which is more accurate

## II. CANONIZATION

- A. Ecclesiastes is an example of a type of wisdom literature. It is an extended treatment of a subject and, like Job, often challenges traditional wisdom teachings.
- B. It is part of the third division of the Hebrew canon called “the Writings.”
- C. It is also part of a special grouping of five small books called the Megilloth or “five scrolls.” Each of these was read at an annual feast day. Ecclesiastes was read at the feast of Booths or Tabernacles.
- D. Because of the skeptical, negative nature of this book, it was rejected by the conservative rabbinical school of Shammai, but advocated by the liberal rabbinical school of Hillel. This discussion continued even until the time of Jamnia after the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70-90).
- E. Several of the canonical books of the OT had difficulty being accepted
  - 1. Ecclesiastes - bitter, negative, non-traditional spirit
  - 2. Song of Songs - affirmation of physical love
  - 3. Esther - no mention of God or Jewish Temple or sites
  - 4. Ezekiel - his Temple different from Moses’
  - 5. and to some extent, Daniel. - apocalyptic prophecies of chapters 7-12
- F. Ecclesiastes was finally accepted because
  - 1. it was attributed to Solomon
  - 2. it has a traditional conclusion (i.e., 12:13-14)
  - 3. it rings true to human experience and reveals the confusion of the Jewish community. As an aside, its scepticism truly addresses the age of post-modernity

## II. GENRE

- A. Ecclesiastes, like Job, must be interpreted as a whole. It is a sustained focus on the tensions of human existence (through chapter 12).
- B. It is a tongue-in-cheek sarcastic look at life without God. The key phrase is “under the sun,” 1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1, 5, 12; 7:11; 8:9, 15, 17; 9:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10:5; 11:7; 12:2 (31 times).
- C. The book is characterized by opposites (antithetical parallelism). Notice:
  - 1. wisdom vs. folly
  - 2. good vs. evil
  - 3. light vs. dark
  - 4. love vs. hate
  - 5. life vs. death
  - 6. this world vs. afterlifeThe mysteries of fallen human existence are admitted and documented, but there is more! There is God; there will be justice one day. Because humans do not know the answers does not mean there are no answers! This book is written in the style of OT Wisdom Literature (monotheistic, judgment day, future hope, goodness and fairness of God, revelation [Scripture] is true and secure).

## IV. AUTHORSHIP

- A. The book is anonymous.
- B. Jewish tradition said it was one of three books written by Solomon (Midrash Shir hashemem Rabbah I, 1, sect. 10)
  - 1. Song of Songs when he was young
  - 2. Proverbs when he was middle aged
  - 3. Ecclesiastes when he was old and bitter (Rashi)
- C. Solomon is surely the literary foil of chapters 1-2 because of his wisdom, wealth and position. But there are hints that he is not the true author:
  - 1. in 1:12, “I was king over Israel in Jerusalem” (NIV) - past tense
  - 2. in 1:16, “. . . more than all who were over Jerusalem before me” (NASB) - only David was king before Solomon
  - 3. in 4:1-3, 5:8 and 8:9 governmental abuse is discussed but as hopeless
  - 4. obviously the author is not King Solomon in 8:2-4, where advice on how to act in the King’s presence is given
  - 5. the name, Solomon, does not occur in the book
- D. For a scholarly argument for Solomon’s authorship see *Introduction to the OT*, by C. F. Keil, vol. 1, pp. 516-529.
- E. *Baba Bathra* 15a (a book of the Talmud) said the men of Hezekiah wrote Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs, but this obviously meant they edited or compiled the wisdom books.

- F. The term Qoheleth (BDB 875) can be a proper name or a title. It looks like a title because
  1. it has the DEFINITE ARTICLE in 7:27 and 12:8
  2. it is a FEMININE form which implies an office, but uses MASCULINE VERBS
  3. it is a rare term found seven times, only in this book
  
- G. The only section of the book that reveals a later editor(s) is 12:9-110,11-12,13-14. They are obviously sages who are familiar with Genesis, Deuteronomy, Psalms, and Proverbs.
  
- H. The apparent paradoxes or contradictions have been explained as
  1. sarcasm, life without God (“under the sun”)
  2. traditional Jewish wisdom and challenges to it (quoted to be refuted)
  3. a wisdom teacher and his enthusiastic young student and a narrator (dialogue)
  4. the conflict within fallen man (a life’s journal)
  5. later editors, example, 12:9-12 (positive toward Qoheleth) and 12:13-14 (negative toward Qoheleth)
  6. I think #1 is best (cf. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 228)

## V. DATE

- A. There are two issues related to the date of Ecclesiastes:
  1. when the book was composed
  2. when it was put in its final canonical form
  
- B. The historical setting must be after Solomon’s day. He is used as a literary foil in chapters 1-2.
  
- C. The final form of the book points to a later date:
  1. stylistic form of the Hebrew is post-exilic but before 400-300 B.C.
    - a. Aramaic words and expressions
    - b. the form of the Hebrew
  2. there are literary parallels in Phoenician wisdom literature of about 600-400 B.C.
  3. allusions to Ecclesiastes appear in the writing of Ben Sirach, Ecclesiasticus, which was written about 180 B.C.
  4. there have been several small parts of Ecclesiastes found in the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q). These have been dated as late as the second century B.C.

## VI. LITERARY UNITS

- A. This book is difficult to outline. It is more like a life’s journal than a structured literary work. It is similar to rabbinical teaching called “pearls on a string.” However, there are unifying words (i.e., “vanity,” but also “good”), phrases (i.e., “under the sun”), motifs (i.e., happenings), and a unifying theme (1:2; 12:8).
  
- B. It is possible that there have been editorial additions:
  1. the opening, 1:1
  2. inclusive 1:2 and 12:8 imply that 1:1 and 12:9-14 are additions
  3. two added epilogues:
    - a. 12:9-12 (in the third person)
    - b. 12:13-14 (traditional theology)



- C. It is obvious that chapters 1-2 use Solomon as a literary foil.
- D. Chapter 3 is a wonderful poem about the common experiences of human life.
- E. The remainder does not outline easily!

## VII. THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

- A. The very fact of this book's presence in the Canon seems to imply that God does not reject the sincere, doubtful seeker.
- B. The asking of ultimate questions is not discouraged.
- C. Ecclesiastes assumes the existence of God and is written within the stream of the OT faith.
- D. Evil is a result of mankind's fall, not God (cf. 7:29; 9:3). This is not the world God intended it to be!
- E. God's ways cannot be known. Mankind can struggle for meaning in life, but it cannot be found without God!
- F. It doubts the easy orthodox views on the afterlife and doubts mankind's ability to know God, but still God is gracious and present.
- G. The world, as it is, is unfair and cruel; there must be something more, if God's promises are true!
- H. Be content with life—it is from God. Enjoy it when and where you can (2:24-26; 3:12, 13, 22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-9).
- I. Simplistic answers that do not fit life experiences are “no” answers. We must face the reality of the meaninglessness of life if there is no God.

## VIII. MAIN TRUTHS

- A. Its main purpose was to show the futility of human existence apart from God. It is a tract to convert self-sufficient materialists or intellectuals. B. H. Carroll said that in the days of his infidelity, Ecclesiastes and Job exercised an unearthly power on him, expressing the emptiness of life and pointing toward God.  
 The dictionary section of NIDOTTE, vol. 4, pp. 552-554, lists a similar option as one of several: “if the vanity of all reality is truly Qoheleth's own conclusion, it is only because he limits his observations initially to a reality without the God of the OT; then when he does introduce God, this pessimistic view of life dissipates and is supplanted by a more orthodox attitude expressed in the epilogue (12:13-14).”
- B. Happiness and contentment are found in 2:24; 3:12-13,22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9; 12:13-14
  1. faith and obedience toward God
  2. pleasures of home and family
  3. one's work

- C. This book is agnostic about God and the afterlife. It does not answer the questions of ultimate reality, but it does ask the questions of current reality:
1. For Jews, it showed the error of simplistic overstatements made by traditional theologians (“the two ways”).
  2. For pagans, it shows the bankruptcy of earthly life without God.
  3. Easy answers to life’s questions are usually wrong. There is mystery even for faith!  
Revelation does not reveal all!
- D. This author is using natural revelation, not special revelation (although he is familiar with Genesis, Deuteronomy, Psalms, and Proverbs), to examine life. The covenant name for God, YHWH, does not appear in the book. As in all wisdom literature, the general name for God, *Elohim*, is used.
- E. This book forms a balance to the neat maxims of Proverbs that offer success in life (“the two ways,” e.g., Psalm 1). There is mystery in life, in nature, in humanity, and in God. The key is found in faith, not knowledge; in family, not possessions; and in God, not human wisdom or actions. The simple pleasures of life: family, work, friends, food provide happiness in this life. The next life is veiled, but God is there!

# ECCLESIASTES 1

## PARAGRAPH DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS\*

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
The Futility of All Endeavour	The Vanity of Life	Title and Thesis	Life is Useless	Prologue
1:1-2	1:1-11 (1) (2) (3-8)	1:1-11	1:1       1:2-11	1:1-8
1:3-11	(9-11)			1:9-11
The Futility of Wisdom	The Grief of Wisdom	The Search for Wisdom	The Philosopher's Experience (1:12-2:26)	Solomon (1:12-2:26)
1:12-18	1:12-15 (12-14)  (15) 1:16-18 (16-17) (18)	1:12-18	1:12-13a    1:13b-15   1:16-18	1:12-15      1:16-18

### **READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section) FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL**

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the five translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

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\*Although not inspired, paragraph divisions are the key to understanding and following the original author's intent. Each modern translation has divided and summarized the paragraph divisions as they understand them. Every paragraph has one central topic, truth or thought. Each version encapsulates that topic in its own way. As you read the text, which translation fits your understanding of the subject and verse divisions?

In every chapter you must read the Bible first and try to identify its subjects (paragraphs). Then compare your understanding with the modern versions. Only when we understand the original author's intent by following his logic and presentation at the paragraph level, can one truly understand the Bible. Only the original author was inspired—readers have no right to change or modify the message. Bible readers do have the responsibility to apply the inspired truth to their day and lives.

**Note that all technical terms and abbreviations are explained fully in Appendices One, Two and Three.**

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph
4. Etc.

## **BACKGROUND**

- A. Ecclesiastes is a part of the literary genre known as “Wisdom Literature” (see Introductory Articles).
- B. It is characterized by a practical orientation to daily life without reference to the historical acts of God or the cultus of Israel.
- C. I personally do not believe Solomon is the author (see Introduction, Authorship), although I think he is used in Chapter 1 and 2 as a literary foil (cf. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*, pp. 8-17), someone who had it all but was not happy!
- D. This is one book that must be taken as a whole. It is a sustained argument through chapter 12. It must not be prooftexted or great theological contradictions occur.
- E. The key to interpreting the book is the phrase “under the sun.” The author is going to analyze life with and without God. He is challenging traditional religious philosophy.
- F. The author uses natural revelation (i.e., Ps. 19:1-6), not special revelation (i.e., Ps. 19:7-14; 119), to examine life. The name YHWH does not appear at all in this book, but the general name for God, *Elohim* (see Special Topic: Names for God at 1:13). This is true of most Biblical wisdom books.
- G. This teacher does not provide answers so much as he asks the right questions, the tough questions about mankind’s existence. He is not afraid to challenge traditional thoughts and traditions.
- H. Chapters 1-2 can be seen as a list of things that humans seek which they think will give them joy and contentment, but without God life cannot be full!
  1. wisdom, 1:13-18
  2. pleasure, 2:1-3
  3. possessions, 2:4-8a
  4. sex, 2:8b
  5. summary, 2:9-11

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 1:1-2

<sup>1</sup>The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup>"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher,

"Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

**1:1 “the Preacher”** There is no Definite Article here, although it does appear in 7:27; 12:8. This is a function more than a title. The best translation would be “professor” or “teacher” (BDB 875). See Introduction, Name of the Book, C and Authorship, F.

▣ **“the son of David”** This verse and verse 12 imply that this is speaking of Solomon, but other references throughout the book do not fit Solomon. I believe that an unknown wisdom teacher(s) used Solomon’s wisdom, wealth, power, and position as a literary foil to critique life. See Introduction, Authorship, C.

**1:2 “vanity of vanities”** This is a Hebrew superlative (cf. 1:2 and 12:8). The word means “vapor,” “breath,” or “mist” (BDB 210 I, cf. James 4:14). Its emphasis is either (1) nothingness or (2) the transitoriness of human life. The context supports the latter (cf. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*, p. 41).

This is a key term and recurrent phrase in this book (cf. 1:2,14; 2:1,11,15,17,19,21,23,26; 3:19; 4:4,7,8,16; 5:7,10; 6:2,4,9,11,12; 7:6,15; 8:10,14; 9:9; 11:8,10; 12:8). The term is used sparingly in other wisdom books; Job, 5 times; Psalms, 9 times; and Proverbs, 3 times.

For different theories about how it views the strong statements in this book, see Introduction, Authorship, H. I prefer option #1. This theological presupposition will be the grid through which I interpret the book.

▣ **“all is vanity”** Notice the root, “vanity” (BDB 210 I), is used five times in this one verse! *The Handbook on Ecclesiastes* by UBS, says the term should be understood as

1. incomprehensible
2. enigmatic
3. mysterious
4. impossible to understand

Therefore, it communicates the reality that life is full of unanswerable questions (p. 4). The person knowledgeable in wisdom will know this, but will continue to trust God and keep His commandments.

This refers to the uncertain and unpredictable activities of life. These are a result of fallen humanity trying to live life in his own strength, independent from God. This is the condition left by the Fall (cf. Genesis 3)!

The Hebrew term “all” (BDB 481), often translated “everything,” is a common word, but is used unusually often in Ecclesiastes (cf. 9 times in chapter 1; 17 times in chapter 2; 13 times in chapter 3, etc.). Qoheleth uses this inclusive language to express his theological emphasis on

1. God’s control and sovereignty
2. human ineffectiveness and transitoriness

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT 1:3-11

<sup>3</sup>What advantage does man have in all his work

Which he does under the sun?

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

<sup>5</sup>Also, the sun rises and the sun sets;  
 And hastening to its place it rises there *again*.

<sup>6</sup>Blowing toward the south,  
 Then turning toward the north,  
 The wind continues swirling along;  
 And on its circular courses the wind returns.

<sup>7</sup>All the rivers flow into the sea,  
 Yet the sea is not full.  
 To the place where the rivers flow,  
 There they flow again.

<sup>8</sup>All things are wearisome;  
 Man is not able to tell *it*.  
 The eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
 Nor is the ear filled with hearing.

<sup>9</sup>That which has been is that which will be,  
 And that which has been done is that which will be done.  
 So there is nothing new under the sun.

<sup>10</sup>Is there anything of which one might say,  
 "See this, it is new"?  
 Already it has existed for ages  
 Which were before us.

<sup>11</sup>There is no remembrance of earlier things;  
 And also of the later things which will occur,  
 There will be for them no remembrance  
 Among those who will come later *still*.

**1:3 “what advantage does man have in all his works”** All human work and all other things are meaningless if there is no God (atheistic humanism). We are the chance result of physical forces. There is no purpose, no meaning, no afterlife, no god, just the physical universe (atheistic naturalism).

▣  
 NASB “advantage”  
 NKJV, NJB “profit”  
 NRSV “gain”  
 TEV “what do you have to show for it”

This root (BDB 451-452) has several meanings:

1. I - reminder, excess, pre-eminence
2. II - cord, rope, bowstring
3. III - abundance

The form here is found only in Ecclesiastes (cf. 1:3; 2:11,13[twice]; 3:9; 5:8,15; 7:12; 10:11,11; another form of the term is a substantive from the *Qal* PARTICIPLE, cf. 6:11; 7:11,16; 12:9,12). It is obviously a key term because it describes the goal of mankind’s search! *The Handbook on Ecclesiastes* by UBS, suggests it refers to eternity or the afterlife, possibly “a lasting benefit” (pp. 5-6).

The word “toil” (BDB 765), used twice, has several connotations. The root can mean

1. trouble, sorrow
2. trouble, mischief
3. toil, labor

In this context #3 fits best, but one feels the presence of the other connotations in the root (there are several verses where the root is used twice (1:3; 2:10,11,18,19,20,21,22; 4:8; 5:18; 9:9).

**1:3, 9, 13, 14 “under the sun”** This is the key phrase (Preposition, DBD 1065; Definite Article and Noun, DBD 1039) in interpreting the entire book. It is used twenty-five times. It reflects mankind’s efforts without God. Qoheleth examines physical life (by observation, i.e. natural revelation) and comes to the conclusion that it is vanity (cf. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 228).

**1:4ff** This begins a poetic stanza:

1. NASB - vv. 3-11
2. NKJV - vv. 3-11
3. NRSV - vv.1-11
4. TEV - prose
5. NJB - prose
6. JPSOA - vv. 2-9
7. NIV - vv. 3-11
8. REB - prose

It is obvious that the genre and structure are not easy to identify and outline.

**1:4** The phrase “remains forever” is used in a relative sense (cf. Exod. 21:6).

This verse is expressing the fleetingness of conscious life (cf. Job 14:2; Ps. 90:5-6; 103:15-16; Isa. 40:6-7) versus the stability of the spiritual creation (as an aspect of YHWH’s permanence, cf. Ps. 104:5; 119:90).

### **SPECIAL TOPIC: FOREVER (’OLAM)**

This is the very common (used over 400 times) term *’olam* (BDB 761, KB 798). It is used of duration of time in several senses, each of which must be linked to the nature of the thing to which it refers.

A. Time past (examples only)

1. “heroes of old,” Gen 6:4
2. “mountains and hills,” Gen. 49:21
3. “generations of old,” Deut. 32:7
4. “forefather,” Josh 24:2
5. “days of old,” Isa. 51:9

B. Continual for a lifetime (examples only)

1. “believe in you forever” (i.e., Moses), Exod. 19:9
2. “slave forever,” Deut. 15:17; I Sam. 27:12
3. “all your days,” Deut. 23:6
4. Samuel “stay there forever,” I Sam. 1:22
5. King “live forever,” I Kgs. 1:21; Neh. 2:3; Ps. 21:4
6. “bless the Lord forever,” Ps. 115:18; 145:1-2

7. “sing forever,” Ps. 89:1; 115:18; 145:1-2
  8. “pregnant forever” (metaphor), Jer. 20:17
  9. possibly Prov. 10:25
- C. Continual existence (but with obvious limitations)
1. humans live forever, Gen. 3:22
  2. the earth, Ps. 78:69; 104:5; 148:6; Eccl. 1:4 (cf. II Pet. 3:10)
  3. Aaronic priesthood, Exod. 29:9; 40:15 (cf. I Sam. 2:30)
  4. the Sabbath, Exod. 31:16-17
  5. the feast days, Exod. 12:14,17,24; Lev. 16:29,31,24; 23:14,21,41
  6. circumcision, Gen. 17:13 (cf. Rom. 2:28-29)
  7. the land of promise, Gen. 13:15; 17:18; 48:4; Exod. 32:13 (cf. Exiles)
  8. ruined cities, Isa. 25:2; 32:14; 34:10
- D. Conditional Covenants
1. Abraham, Gen. 17:7,8,13,19
  2. Israel, Deut. 5:29; 12:28
  3. David, II Sam. 7:13,16,25,29; Ps. 89:2,4
  4. Israel, Jdgs. 2:1 (cf. Galatians 3)
- E. Unconditional Covenants
1. Noah, Gen. 9:12,16
  2. New Covenant, Isa. 55:3; Jer. 32:40; 50:5 (i.e., Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:22-30)
- F. God Himself
1. His existence, Gen. 21:33; Deut. 32:40; Ps. 90:2; 93:2; Isa. 40:28; Dan. 12:7
  2. His name, Exod. 3:15; Ps. 135:13
  3. His reign, Exod. 15:18; Ps. 45:6; 66:7; Jer. 10:10; Micah 4:7
  4. His word, Ps. 119:89,160; Isa. 40:8; 59:21
  5. His lovingkindness, Ps. 25:6; 89:2; 103:17; 118:1-4,29; Jer. 33:1
- G. His Messiah
1. His name, Ps. 72:17,19
  2. Blessed forever, Ps. 45:2,17; 89:52
  3. reign, Ps. 89:36,37; Isa. 9:7
  4. priest, Ps. 110:4
  5. pre-existence, Micah 5:2
- H. New Age life
1. everlasting life, Dan. 12:2
  2. everlasting contempt, Dan. 12:2
  3. no more tears, Isa. 65:19 (Rev. 21:4)
  4. no sun, Isa. 60:19-20 (Rev. 21:23)

Note how many different English words are used to translate this Hebrew word in the NIV

1. forever
2. old, of old
3. everlasting



4. eternal
5. lasting
6. always
7. for life
8. continue
9. regular
10. permanent
11. any time
12. ancient, ancient times
13. endless
14. forevermore
15. to the very end
16. a long time
17. long ago

**1:5** Psalm 19:6 presents this same truth in great poetic majesty, but here the sun’s daily task is seen as vain, meaningless, wearisome repetition.

▣ **“hastening”** This can mean “panting” (BDB 983 I, *Qal* ACTIVE PARTICIPLE), as in weariness or desire (i.e., Ps. 119:131). This is the first in a series of eleven *Qal* ACTIVE PARTICIPLES reflecting nature (cf. vv. 5-7).

**1:6** The Septuagint and Vulgate relate the first part of this verse to the sun, but in context it refers to the wind (a word play with “vanity”) as another meaningless activity (as is the flowing of rivers to the sea).

**1:8 “All things are wearisome”** Physical creation is in a repetitive, mysterious routine (i.e., v. 9):

1. human life, v. 4
2. heavenly bodies, v. 5
3. wind, v. 6
4. rivers, v. 7

This premise is the author’s first and primary presupposition about earthly existence (i.e., “there is nothing new or significant in an endless cycle of physical creation”). The principle is begun in v. 8a and followed by three explanatory phrases:

1. man cannot tell it
2. eye is not satisfied in seeing it
3. ear is not filled with hearing it

These describe the generations that come and go (cf. v. 4a). They all experience

1. the cycles in nature
2. frustrations at the mysteries of fallen existence
3. seeking answers but not finding them (another cycle)



**NASB** “man is not able to tell *it*”  
**NKJV** “man cannot express *it*”  
**NRSV** “more than one can express”

**TEV** “a weariness too great for words”  
**REB** “no one can describe them all”  
**LXX** “a man will not be able to speak of them”

The author’s list of meaningless repetition in nature could be multiplied endlessly. The implication is not only fallen human’s inability to state clearly the meaninglessness and hopelessness brought about by the cycles of nature, but also the sense of purposelessness it brings to human existence!

Humans cannot tell because they do not know (apart from divine revelation).

**1:9 “That which has been is that which will be”** This refers to meaningless repetition with no apparent purpose or attainable goal (this is sarcasm of humanity without God. Compare Isa. 55:6-13!). This describes humanistic atheism and, for that matter, eastern religious philosophy (i.e., wheel of karma).

☐ **“there is nothing new under the sun”** This repeated theme is the key to interpreting the book. The author is showing the meaninglessness and hopelessness of life without God; without purpose; without eternity! The readers are forced to contemplate human existence, earthly life, if there is no God!

This is where the modern issue over origins takes on its sharpest focus. Is the universe, in all its size, power, and violence all there was, all there is, and all there will be? Is human life an accident, a passing purposeless evolution of constant change? Is change the only absolute? This is the ultimate question of human worth, dignity, and divine image!

**1:10 “See this, it is new”** “See” (BDB 906, KB 1157, *Qal* IMPERATIVE) is from a supposed objector. He is answered by his faulty remembrance of history (cf. vv. 10- 11). The only constant is the empty repetition (both physical and existential).

**1:11**

**NASB** “earlier things”  
**NKJV** “former *things*”  
**NRSV** “people of long ago”  
**TEV** “what happened in the past”  
**NJB** “of the past”

This MASCULINE PLURAL ADJECTIVE (BDB 911) refers to people, Lev. 26:45; Deut. 19; Ps. 79:8, while the FEMININE PLURAL refers to events, Isa. 41:22; 42:9; 43:9; 46:9; 48:3; and possibly 61:4. Therefore, the NRSV has the better translation.

This verse is characterized well by Robert Gordis, *Koheleth, the Man and His World, a Study of Ecclesiastes*, p. 208, as “This verse gives the reason for v. 10. Things appear new only because the past is forgotten (Levy) - an additional element in the vanity of human existence; not only can nothing be accomplished, but the memory of the effort is wiped out (Hertz).”

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT 1:12-15**

**<sup>12</sup>I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup>And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. *It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with.* <sup>14</sup>I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. <sup>15</sup>What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted.**

**1:12 “the preacher”** See note at 1:1.

▣ **“have been king”** This is the first of several reasons why Solomon was not the author, but a literary foil (see Introduction, IV. Authorship, C).

The VERB “was” (BDB 224, KB 243, *Qal* PERFECT) is used often in the previous paragraph (v. 9 [twice], v. 10 [six times]). Time implications in Hebrew VERBS must be determined from the context. The PERFECT TENSE implies a past condition, not a current one. Was there ever a time when Solomon was not king after once becoming king? The rabbis felt this problem and surmised that Solomon experienced a judgment similar to Nebuchadnezzar (cf. Daniel 4) and was removed from active leadership over Israel for a period of time (Targum on Eccl. 1:12; J. Sanhedrin 20c). This is just supposition and imagination trying to explain away the grammatical features of this text.

**1:13 “mind”** This is literally “heart.”

### **SPECIAL TOPIC: THE HEART**

The Greek term *kardia* is used in the Septuagint and NT to reflect the Hebrew term *lēb*. It is used in several ways (cf. Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, pp. 403-404).

1. the center of physical life, a metaphor for the person (cf. Acts 14:17; II Cor. 3:2-3; James 5:5)
2. the center of spiritual (moral) life
  - a. God knows the heart (cf. Luke 16:15; Rom. 8:27; I Cor. 14:25; I Thess. 2:4; Rev. 2:23)
  - b. used of mankind’s spiritual life (cf. Matt. 15:18-19; 18:35; Rom. 6:17; I Tim. 1:5; II Tim. 2:22; I Pet. 1:22)
3. the center of the thought life (i.e., intellect, cf. Matt. 13:15; 24:48; Acts 7:23; 16:14; 28:27; Rom. 1:21; 10:6; 16:18; II Cor. 4:6; Eph. 1:18; 4:18; James 1:26; II Pet. 1:19; Rev. 18:7; heart is synonymous with mind in II Cor. 3:14-15 and Phil. 4:7)
4. the center of the volition (i.e., will, cf. Acts 5:4; 11:23; I Cor. 4:5; 7:37; II Cor. 9:7)
5. the center of the emotions (cf. Matt. 5:28; Acts 2:26,37; 7:54; 21:13; Rom. 1:24; II Cor. 2:4; 7:3; Eph. 6:22; Phil. 1:7)
6. unique place of the Spirit’s activity (cf. Rom. 5:5; II Cor. 1:22; Gal. 4:6 [i.e., Christ in our hearts, Eph. 3:17])
7. the heart is a metaphorical way of referring to the entire person (cf. Matt. 22:37, quoting Deut. 6:5). The thoughts, motives, and actions attributed to the heart fully reveal the type of individual. The OT has some striking usages of the term:
  - a. Gen. 6:6; 8:21, “God was grieved to His heart” (also notice Hosea 11:8-9)
  - b. Deut. 4:29; 6:5, “with all your heart and all your soul”
  - c. Deut. 10:16, “uncircumcised heart” and Rom. 2:29
  - d. Ezek. 18:31-32, “a new heart”
  - e. Ezek. 36:26, “a new heart” vs. “a heart of stone”

▣ **“seek”** This word means “seek with application” (BDB 205, KB 233, *Qal* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT, cf. Ps. 111:2; 119:45).

▣ **“explore”** This word means “to investigate” or “to go to the root of a matter” (BDB 1064, KB 1707, *Qal* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT, cf. 7:25). It was used often of exploring the land of Canaan (cf. Numbers 13).

▣ **“wisdom”** There are two words used in Wisdom Literature related to knowing. A good example is Prov. 1:7:

1. knowledge (BDB 395)
2. wisdom (BDB 315)

They form a complementary pair. One focuses on practical living and the other on academic knowledge. They are both needed to live life well. They should not be contrasted, but sought (cf. Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10; 15:33).

▣ **“concerning all that has been done under heaven”** See note at 1:3. This is a key concept, crucial for a proper interpretation of the book. It is parallel to the phrase “under the sun.”

▣ **“God”** This is the Hebrew name *Elohim*. This is the only name used for deity in the book.

### SPECIAL TOPIC: THE NAMES FOR DEITY

#### A. *El*

1. The original meaning of the generic ancient term for deity is uncertain, though many scholars believe it comes from the Akkadian root “to be strong” or “to be powerful” (cf. Gen. 17:1; Num. 23:19; Deut. 7:21; Ps. 50:1).
2. In the Canaanite pantheon the high god is *El* (Ras Shamra texts)
3. In the Bible *El* is not usually compounded with other terms. These combinations became a way to characterize God.
  - a. *El-Elyon* (God Most High), Gen. 14:18-22; Deut. 32:8; Isa. 14:14
  - b. *El-Roi* (“God who sees” or “God who reveals Himself”), Gen. 16:13
  - c. *El-Shaddai* (“God Almighty” or “God the all Compassionate One” or “God of the mountain”), Gen. 17:1; 35:11; 43:14; 49:25; Exod. 6:3
  - d. *El-Olam* (the Everlasting God), Gen. 21:33. This term is theologically linked to God’s promise to David, II Sam. 7:13,16
  - e. *El-Berit* (“God of the Covenant”), Jdgs. 9:46
4. *El* is equated with
  - a. YHWH in Ps. 85:8; Isa. 42:5
  - b. *Elohim* in Gen. 46:3; Job 5:8, “I am *El*, the *Elohim* of your father”
  - c. *Shaddai* in Gen. 49:25
  - d. “jealousy” in Exod. 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15
  - e. “mercy” in Deut. 4:31; Neh. 9:31; “faithful” in Deut. 7:9; 32:4
  - f. “great and awesome” in Deut. 7:21; 10:17; Neh. 1:5; 9:32; Dan. 9:4
  - g. “knowledge” in I Sam. 2:3
  - h. “my strong refuge” in II Sam. 22:33
  - i. “my avenger” in II Sam. 22:48
  - j. “holy one” in Isa. 5:16
  - k. “might” in Isa. 10:21
  - l. “my salvation” in Isa. 12:2
  - m. “great and powerful” in Jer. 32:18
  - n. “retribution” in Jer. 51:56
5. A combination of all the major OT names for God is found in Josh. 22:22 (*El*, *Elohim*, YHWH, repeated)

#### B. *Elyon*

1. Its basic meaning is “high,” “exalted,” or “lifted up” (cf. Gen. 40:17; I Kgs. 9:8; II Kgs. 18:17; Neh. 3:25; Jer. 20:2; 36:10; Ps. 18:13).
  2. It is used in a parallel sense to several other names/titles of God.
    - a. *Elohim* - Ps. 47:1-2; 73:11; 107:11
    - b. *YHWH* - Gen. 14:22; II Sam. 22:14
    - c. *El-Shaddai* - Ps. 91:1,9
    - d. *El* - Num. 24:16
    - e. *Elah* - used often in Daniel 2-6 and Ezra 4-7, linked with *Illair* (Aramaic for “High God”) in Dan. 3:26; 4:2; 5:18,21
  3. It is often used by non Israelites.
    - a. Melchizedek, Gen. 14:18-22
    - b. Balaam, Num. 24:16
    - c. Moses, speaking of the nations in Deut. 32:8
    - d. Luke’s Gospel in the NT, written to Gentiles, also uses the Greek equivalent *Hupsistos* (cf. 1:32,35,76; 6:35; 8:28; Acts 7:48; 16:17)
- C. *Elohim* (plural), *Eloah* (singular), used primarily in poetry
1. This term is not found outside the Old Testament.
  2. This word can designate the God of Israel or the gods of the nations (cf. Exod. 12:12; 20:3). Abraham’s family was polytheistic (cf. Josh. 24:2).
  3. The term *elohim* is also used of other spiritual beings (angels, the demonic) as in Deut. 32:8 (LXX); Ps. 8:5; Job 1:6; 38:7. It can refer to human judges (cf. Exod. 21:6; Ps. 82:6).
  4. In the Bible it is the first title/name for deity (cf. Gen. 1:1). It is used exclusively until Gen. 2:4, where it is combined with YHWH. It basically (theologically) refers to God as creator, sustainer, and provider of all life on this planet (cf. Ps. 104).
 

It is synonymous with *El* (cf. Deut. 32:15-19). It can also parallel YHWH as Ps. 14 (*elohim*) is exactly like Ps. 53 (YHWH), except for the change in divine names.
  5. Although plural and used of other gods, this term often designates the God of Israel, but usually it has the singular verb to denote the monotheistic usage.
  6. This term is found in the mouths of non-Israelites as the name for deity.
    - a. Melchizedek, Gen. 14:18-22
    - b. Balaam, Num. 24:2
    - c. Moses, when speaking of the nations, Deut. 32:8
  7. It is strange that a common name for the monotheistic God of Israel is plural! Although there is no certainty, here are the theories.
    - a. Hebrew has many plurals, often used for emphasis. Closely related to this is the later Hebrew grammatical feature called “the plural of majesty,” where the plural is used to magnify a concept.
    - b. This may refer to the angelic council, with whom God meets in heaven and who does His bidding (cf. I Kgs. 22:19-23; Job 1:6; Ps. 82:1; 89:5,7).
    - c. It is even possible this reflects the NT revelation of the one God in three persons. In Gen. 1:1 God creates, in Gen. 1:2 the Spirit broods, and in the NT Jesus is God the Father’s agent in creation (cf. John 1:3,10; Rom. 11:36; I Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:2; 2:10).

#### D. YHWH

1. This is the name which reflects deity as the covenant making God; God as savior, redeemer! Humans break covenants, but God is loyal to His word, promise, covenant (cf. Ps. 103).

This name is first mentioned in combination with *Elohim* in Gen. 2:4. There are not two creation accounts in Gen. 1-2, but two emphases: (1) God as the creator of the universe (the physical) and (2) God as the special creator of humanity. Genesis 2:4 begins the special revelation about the privileged position and purpose of mankind, as well as the problem of sin and rebellion associated with the unique position.

2. In Gen. 4:26 it is said “*men* began to call upon the name of the Lord” (YHWH). However, Exod. 6:3 implies that early covenant people (the Patriarchs and their families) knew God only as *El-Shaddai*. The name YHWH is explained only one time in Exod. 3:13-16, esp. v. 14. However, the writings of Moses often interpret words by popular word plays, not etymologies (cf. Gen. 17:5; 27:36; 29:13-35). There have been several theories as to the meaning of this name (taken from IDB, vol. 2, pp. 409-11).

- a. from an Arabic root, “to show fervent love”
- b. from an Arabic root “to blow” (YHWH as storm God)
- c. from a Ugaritic (Canaanite) root “to speak”
- d. following a Phoenician inscription, a CAUSATIVE PARTICIPLE, meaning “the One who sustains,” or “the One who establishes”
- e. from the Hebrew *Qal* form “the One who is,” or “the One who is present” (in future sense, “the One who will be”)
- f. from the Hebrew *Hiphil* form “the One who causes to be”
- g. from the Hebrew root “to live” (e.g., Gen. 3:20), meaning “the ever-living, only-living One”
- h. from the context of Exod. 3:13-16 a play on the IMPERFECT form used in a PERFECT sense, “I shall continue to be what I used to be” or “I shall continue to be what I have always been” (cf. J. Wash Watts, *A Survey of Syntax in the Old Testament*, p. 67).

The full name YHWH is often expressed in abbreviation or possibly an original form

- (1) *Yah* (e.g., Hallelu - yah)
- (2) *Yahu* (names, e.g., Isaiah)
- (3) *Yo* (names, e.g., Joel)

3. In later Judaism this covenant name became so holy (the tetragrammaton) that Jews were afraid to say it lest they break the command of Exod. 20:7; Deut. 5:11; 6:13. So they substituted the Hebrew term for “owner,” “master,” “husband,” “lord”—*adon* or *adonai* (my lord). When they came to the word “YHWH” in their reading of OT texts they pronounced “lord.” This is why YHWH is written LORD in English translations.
4. As with *El*, YHWH is often combined with other terms to emphasize certain characteristics of the Covenant God of Israel. While there are many possible combinations of terms, here are some.
  - a. YHWH - *Yireh* (YHWH will provide), Gen. 22:14
  - b. YHWH - *Rophekha* (YHWH is your healer), Exod. 15:26
  - c. YHWH - *Nissi* (YHWH is my banner), Exod. 17:15

- d. YHWH - *Meqaddishkem* (YHWH the One who sanctifies you), Exod. 31:13
- e. YHWH - *Shalom* (YHWH is Peace), Jdgs. 6:24
- f. YHWH - *Sabbaoth* (YHWH of hosts), I Sam. 1:3,11; 4:4; 15:2; often in the Prophets
- g. YHWH - *Ro'I* (YHWH is my shepherd), Ps. 23:1
- h. YHWH - *Sidqenu* (YHWH is our righteousness), Jer. 23:6
- i. YHWH - *Shammah* (YHWH is there), Ezek. 48:35



**NASB**      *“It is a grievous task”*  
**NKJV**      *“this grievous task”*  
**NRSV**      *“it is an unhappy business”*  
**TEV**        *“a miserable fate”*  
**NJB**        *“what a wearisome task”*  
**LXX**        *“an evil trouble”*

The word “task” (BDB 775) is used several times in the book (cf. 2:26; 3:10; 5:3; 8:16). God has given humans, made in His image (i.e., Gen. 1:26-27), a desire to know and understand their place and purpose in creation, but sin has destroyed our ability to find the answer.

The ADJECTIVE (BDB 948) basically means “evil” or “bad.” It is used several times in the book (cf. 1:13; 2:17; 4:3,8; 5:1,14; 6:2; 8:3,5,9,11,12; 9:2,3[twice],12; 10:13; 12:14) to describe life!

God has given humans who are made in His image an insatiable desire to know, to understand, but it cannot be satisfied in this fallen world. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a disaster, not a blessing! We know evil and ignorance, but not God or ultimate questions. Life is a mystery!

**1:14 “under the sun”** See note at 1:3. Notice the number of times this phrase or a parallel phrase is used (cf. 1:3,9,13,14; 2:11,17,18,19,20,22; 3:16; 4:1,3,7,15; 5:13,18; 6:1,5,12; 7:11; 8:15[twice],17; 9:3,9[twice],11,13; 10:5). This is “the” key theological phrase to understanding the book!

▣ **“all is vanity and striving after wind”** This is another repeated phrase (and parallel) which characterizes this book (cf. 1:2,14; 2:1,11,15,17,19,21,23,26; 3:19; 4:4,6,8,16; 5:7,16; 6:2,4,9,11; 7:6,15; 8:10,14[twice]; 9:9; 11:8,10; 12:8). See word study at 1:17. It characterizes human’s search for meaning, happiness, and purpose without God. Life without God in a fallen world is frustrating and empty! Life with God in a fallen world is mysterious and unexplainable! Our hope is in the unseen God of revelation (Scripture). He has revealed Himself, but we still live in a fallen world and reap its chaos and evil!

**1:15 “crooked. . .straightened”** “Crooked” (BDB 736) and “straight” (BDB 1075, KB 1784, *Qal* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT) are often used in moral senses. They form the basis for the Hebrew concepts of righteousness and sin. This may be an oft quoted proverb (cf. NIV).

Not only can fallen mankind (even covenant humanity) not “know” or “find,” but they cannot “fix.” Life is a mystery and it cannot be understood or changed by those walking through it. In historical context, this may be a slap at divination or simply a realistic statement of mankind’s inability to correct the human condition (but God can, cf. 7:13; Job 12:14; Isa. 14:27). Wisdom knows some things cannot be changed and goes on with life, but it also knows some things can be changed by godly living, godly choices. The problem is knowing which is which!

## SPECIAL TOPIC: RIGHTEOUSNESS

“Righteousness” is such a crucial topic that a Bible student must make a personal extensive study of the concept.

In the OT God’s character is described as “just” or “righteous” (BDB 841). The Mesopotamian term itself comes from a river reed which was used as a construction tool to judge the horizontal straightness of walls and fences. God chose the term to be used metaphorically of His own nature. He is the straight edge (ruler) by which all things are evaluated. This concept asserts God’s righteousness as well as His right to judge.

Man was created in the image of God (cf. Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1,3; 9:6). Mankind was created for fellowship with God. All of creation is a stage or backdrop for God and mankind’s interaction. God wanted His highest creation, mankind, to know Him, love Him, serve Him, and be like Him! Mankind’s loyalty was tested (cf. Gen. 3) and the original couple failed the test. This resulted in a disruption of the relationship between God and humanity (cf. Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12-21).

God promised to repair and restore the fellowship (cf. Gen. 3:15). He does this through His own will and His own Son. Humans were incapable of restoring the breach (cf. Rom. 1:18-3:20).

After the Fall, God’s first step toward restoration was the concept of covenant based on His invitation and mankind’s repentant, faithful, obedient response. Because of the Fall, humans were incapable of appropriate action (cf. Rom. 3:21-31; Gal. 3). God Himself had to take the initiative to restore covenant-breaking humans. He did this by

1. declaring mankind righteous through the work of Christ (i.e., forensic righteousness).
2. freely giving mankind righteousness through the work of Christ (i.e., imputed righteousness).
3. providing the indwelling Spirit who produces righteousness (i.e., Christlikeness, the restoration of the image of God) in mankind.

However, God requires a covenantal response. God decrees (i.e., freely gives) and provides, but humans must respond and continue to respond in

1. repentance
2. faith
3. lifestyle obedience
4. perseverance

Righteousness, therefore, is a covenantal, reciprocal action between God and His highest creation. It is based on the character of God, the work of Christ, and the enabling of the Spirit, to which each individual must personally and continually respond appropriately. The concept is called “justification by faith.” The concept is revealed in the Gospels, but not in these terms. It is primarily defined by Paul, who uses the Greek term “righteousness” in its various forms over 100 times.

Paul, being a trained rabbi, uses the term *dikaioσunē* in its Hebrew sense of the term *sdq* used in the Septuagint, not from Greek literature. In Greek writings the term is connected to someone who conformed to the expectations of deity and society. In the Hebrew sense it is always structured in covenantal terms. YHWH is a just, ethical, moral God. He wants His people to reflect His character. Redeemed mankind becomes a new creature. This newness results in a new lifestyle of godliness (Roman Catholic focus of justification). Since Israel was a theocracy there was not clear delineation between the secular (society’s norms) and the sacred (God’s will). This distinction is expressed in the Hebrew and Greek terms being translated into English as “justice” (relating to society) and “righteousness” (relating to religion).

The gospel (good news) of Jesus is that fallen mankind has been restored to fellowship with God. This has been accomplished through the Father’s love, mercy, and grace; the Son’s life, death, and resurrection; and the Spirit’s wooing and drawing to the gospel. Justification is a free act of God, but it



must issue in godliness (Augustine's position, which reflects both the Reformation emphasis on the freeness of the gospel and the Roman Catholic emphasis on a changed life of love and faithfulness). For Reformers the term "the righteousness of God" is an OBJECTIVE GENITIVE (i.e., the act of making sinful mankind acceptable to God [positional sanctification]), while for the Catholic it is a SUBJECTIVE GENITIVE, which is the process of becoming more like God [experiential, progressive sanctification]. In reality it is surely both!!

In my view, all of the Bible, from Gen. 4 - Rev. 20, is a record of God's restoring the fellowship of Eden. The Bible starts with God and mankind in fellowship in an earthly setting (cf. Gen. 1-2) and the Bible ends with the same setting (cf. Rev. 21-22). God's image and purpose will be restored!

To document the above discussions note the following selected NT passages illustrating the Greek word group.

1. God is righteous (often connected to God as Judge)
  - a. Rom. 3:26
  - b. II Thess. 1:5-6
  - c. II Tim. 4:8
  - d. Rev. 16:5
2. Jesus is righteous
  - a. Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14 (title of Messiah)
  - b. Matt. 27:19
  - c. I John 2:1,29; 3:7
3. God's will for His creation is righteousness
  - a. Lev. 19:2
  - b. Matt. 5:48 (cf. 5:17-20)
4. God's means of providing and producing righteousness
  - a. Rom. 3:21-31
  - c. Romans 4
  - d. Rom. 5:6-11
  - e. Gal. 3:6-14
  - f. Given by God
    - 1) Rom. 3:24; 6:23
    - 2) I Cor. 1:30
    - 3) Eph. 2:8-9
  - g. Received by faith
    - 1) Rom. 1:17; 3:22,26; 4:3,5,13; 9:30; 10:4,6,10
    - 2) I Cor. 5:21
  - h. Through acts of the Son
    - 1) Rom. 5:21-31
    - 2) II Cor. 5:21
    - 3) Phil. 2:6-11
5. God's will is that His followers be righteous
  - a. Matt. 5:3-48; 7:24-27

- b. Rom. 2:13; 5:1-5; 6:1-23
  - c. I Tim. 6:11
  - d. II Tim. 2:22; 3:16
  - e. I John 3:7
  - f. I Pet. 2:24
6. God will judge the world by righteousness
- a. Acts 17:31
  - b. II Tim. 4:8

Righteousness is a characteristic of God, freely given to sinful mankind through Christ. It is:

1. a decree of God
2. a gift of God
3. an act of Christ

But it is also a process of becoming righteous that must be vigorously and steadfastly pursued, which will one day be consummated at the Second Coming. Fellowship with God is restored at salvation, but progresses throughout life to become a face-to-face encounter at death or the *Parousia*!

Here is a good quote to conclude this discussion. It is taken from *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* published by IVP:

“Calvin, more so than Luther, emphasizes the relational aspect of the righteousness of God. Luther’s view of the righteousness of God seems to contain the aspect of acquittal. Calvin emphasizes the marvelous nature of the communication or imparting of God’s righteousness to us” (p. 834).

For me the believer’s relationship to God has three aspects:

1. the gospel is a person (emphasis of the Eastern Church and Calvin)
2. the gospel is truth (emphasis of Augustine and Luther)
3. the gospel is a changed life (emphasis of the Roman Catholic church)

They are all true and must be held together for a healthy, sound, biblical Christianity. If any one is over emphasized or depreciated, problems occur.

We must welcome Jesus!

We must believe the gospel!

We must pursue Christlikeness!

#### **NASB (UPDATED) TEXT 1:16-18**

**<sup>16</sup>I said to myself, "Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge." <sup>17</sup>And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. <sup>18</sup>Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge *results in* increasing pain.**

**1:16 “I said to myself”** This statement reflects the ego problem in the human search for wisdom and happiness. The essence of the Fall (i.e. Gen. 3) was “self-centered independence from God.” This characterizes our fallen world. A life turned inward toward “me,” “mine” can never find God’s wisdom and God’s peace (even a Davidic king)!

**1:16; 2:7,12 “more than all who were over Jerusalem”** This is another example of how Solomon will not historically fit as author. Only David preceded him. See Introduction, Authorship, C.

**1:17**

**NASB, NRSV “I applied my mind”**

**NKJV “I set my heart”**

**TEV “I was determined”**

**NJB “I have applied myself”**

This theme of sincere, dedicated, aggressive human effort (cf. 1:13,17; 8:9,16) is not enough to find wisdom or purpose in an ever-changing, yet always the same, physical creation.

▣ **“to know”** This VERB (BDB 393, KB 390) is used three times in this context (two are *Qal* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCTS and one is a *Qal* PERFECT VERB).

**SPECIAL TOPIC: KNOW (using mostly Deuteronomy as a paradigm)**

The Hebrew word “know” (BDB 393) has several senses (semantic fields) in the *Qal*.

1. to understand good and evil - Gen. 3:22; Deut. 1:39; Isa. 7:14-15; Jonah 4:11
2. to know by understanding - Deut. 9:2,3,6; 18:21
3. to know by experience - Deut. 3:19; 4:35; 8:2,3,5; 11:2; 20:20; 31:13; Josh. 23:14
4. to consider - Deut. 4:39; 11:2; 29:16
5. to know personally
  - a. a person - Gen. 29:5; Exod. 1:8; Deut. 22:2; 28:35,36; 33:9
  - b. a god - Deut. 11:28; 13:2,6,13; 28:64; 29:26; 32:17  
YHWH - Deut. 4:35,39; 7:9; 29:6; Isa. 1:3; 56:10-11
  - c. sexual - Gen. 4:1,17,25; 24:16; 38:26
6. a learned skill or knowledge - Isa. 29:11,12; Amos 5:16
7. to be wise - Deut. 29:4; Pro. 1:2; 4:1; Isa. 29:24
8. God’s knowledge
  - a. of Moses - Deut. 34:10
  - b. of Israel - Deut. 31:21,27,29

▣ **“wisdom. . .madness and folly”** These contrasting pairs:

1. wisdom - BDB 315
2. madness - BDB 239 (cf. 9:3)
3. folly - BDB 698

show the futility of mankind’s search for ultimate answers about the mysteries of human existence (cf. 2:12). Biblical faith is not a human search, but a divine revelation. God wants His special creatures to know Him, but without faith and revelation, it is impossible (i.e., “striving after the wind”)!

▣

**NASB “striving after the wind”**

**NKJV “grasping for the wind”**

**NRSV, NJB “chasing after wind”**

**TEV “chasing the wind”**

This construct (BDB 946 [KB 1265 II] and 924) can mean:

1. search for pleasure

2. pasturing (i.e., controlling, cf. *A Handbook on Ecclesiastes*, p. 4), which is an impossible task. From 1:14 it is obvious that “vanity” (BDB 210 I) and “wind” (BDB 924) are synonymous/parallel.

**1:18 “in much wisdom there is much grief”** This, like v. 15, may be a well known proverb from the sages. The search for meaning and happiness cannot be accomplished without God (cf. 2:23; 12:12; I Cor. 13:2). As a matter of fact, it becomes maddening!

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

These discussion questions are provided to help you think through the major issues of this section of the book. They are meant to be thought provoking, not definitive.

1. Who is the author?
2. What was his purpose in writing this book?
3. Is he a pessimist or cynic?
4. What is the key phrase in interpreting this book? Why?

# ECCLESIASTES 2

## PARAGRAPH DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
The Futility of Pleasure and Possessions  2:1-11	The Vanity of Pleasure  2:1-8  2:9-11	The Experiment with Pleasure  2:1-8  2:9-11	The Philosopher's Experience (1:12-2:26)  2:1-8  2:9-12a	Life of Solomon (1:12-2:26)  2:1-11
Wisdom Excels Folly  2:12-17	The End of the Wise and the Fool  2:12-17  (12-14)  (15-16)	A Judgment on Wisdom  2:12-17	    2:12b-17	    2:12-23
The Futility of Labor  2:18-23	(17)  2:18-23	2:18-23  The First of Qoheleth's Resigned Conclusions About Joy	2:18-23	
2:24-26	2:24-26	2:24-26	2:24-26	2:24-26

**READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section)  
FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL**

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the five translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph
4. Etc.

**WORD AND PHRASE STUDY**

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 2:1-8**

**<sup>1</sup>I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility. <sup>2</sup>I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?"**

<sup>3</sup>I explored with my mind *how* to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding *me* wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives. <sup>4</sup>I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; <sup>5</sup>I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; <sup>6</sup>I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. <sup>7</sup>I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. <sup>8</sup>Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines.

**2:1 “I said to myself”** Chapters 1-2 form a literary unit. This is a recurrent refrain (cf. 1:16,17; 2:1,15). The author is verbalizing his unspoken thoughts.

▣ **“Come now”** There are three IMPERATIVES in this verse:

1. “come” - BDB 229, KB 246, *Qal* IMPERATIVE (a Hebrew way to introduce a new thought, e.g., Ps. 34:12; 46:8; 66:5,16)
2. “I will test” - BDB 650, KB 702, *Piel* IMPERFECT used in a COHORTATIVE sense
3. “enjoy yourself” - BDB 906, KB 1157, *Qal* IMPERATIVE (literally, “and look on goodness.” *The UBS Handbook for Translators* says this can be understood as “see what good there is in it?” or “see what pleasure can offer?” (p. 52)

▣ **“I will test you with pleasure”** The VERB “test” (BDB 650, KB 702, *Piel* COHORTATIVE) clarifies the experiment. Qoheleth is trying to ascertain if worldly, physical pleasure is the key to “gain,” but alas, it is not! All physical pleasure fades with the doing. It becomes routine and common (as do possessions).

Pleasure (BDB 970) is used in Ecclesiastes in two different senses:

1. gaiety, laughter (2:1,2,10; 7:4), where periods of pleasure briefly dull the mind and heart of humanity’s existential existence in a fallen world, but it does not last; it does not satisfy!
2. daily pleasure in life’s personal relationships and activities (8:15; 9:7). Here pleasure is not the goal, but the result of a regular attitude of trust in God (cf. 2:26; 5:19) and thankfulness about common life experiences (food, drink, family, friends, work, cf. 2:24; 3:12,13,22; 5:8; 8:15,19; 9:7-9).

It is these contrasts between the proper use and attitude toward things in this world versus a “me first,” “me at any cost,” emphasis of fallen humanity that characterize this book. All things have their proper place (cf. chapter 3).

▣  
**NASB** “futility”  
**NKJV, NRSV** “vanity”  
**TEV** “useless”  
**NJB** “futile”

See note at 1:2.

**2:2** Notice the two parallel comments about “laughter” and “pleasure.” They bring no lasting peace, joy, or hope!

**2:3 “stimulate my body with wine. . .while my mind was guiding me”** This may refer to drunkenness, but with limits, safeguards (i.e., the wisdom of the sages). This is similar to the use of “mind expanding” drugs today, which have temporary pleasurable results, but long term addiction and destruction! See Special Topic following.

## SPECIAL TOPIC: ALCOHOL (FERMENTATION) AND ALCOHOLISM (ADDICTION)

### I. Biblical Terms

#### A. Old Testament

1. *Yayin* - This is the general term for wine (BDB 406), which is used 141 times. The etymology is uncertain because it is not from a Hebrew root. It always means fermented fruit juice, usually grape. Some typical passages are Gen. 9:21; Exod. 29:40; Num. 15:5,10.
2. *Tirosh* - This is “new wine” (BDB 440). Because of climatic conditions of the Near East, fermentation started as soon as six hours after extracting the juice. This term refers to wine in the process of fermenting. For some typical passages, see Deut. 12:17; 18:4; Isa. 62:8-9; Hos. 4:11.
3. *Asis* - This is obviously alcoholic beverages (“sweet wine” BDB 779, e.g., Joel 1:5; Isa. 49:26).
4. *Sekar* - This is the term “strong drink” (BDB 1016). The Hebrew root is used in the term “drunk” or “drunkard.” It had something added to it to make it more intoxicating. It is parallel to *yayin* (cf. Prov. 20:1; 31:6; Isa. 28:7).

#### B. New Testament

1. *Oinos* - the Greek equivalent of *yayin*
2. *Neos oinos* (new wine) - the Greek equivalent of *tirosh* (cf. Mark 2:22).
3. *Gleuchos vinos* (sweet wine, *asis*) - wine in the early stages of fermentation (cf. Acts 2:13).

### II. Biblical Usage

#### A. Old Testament

1. Wine is a gift of God (Gen. 27:28; Ps. 104:14-15; Eccl. 9:7; Hos. 2:8-9; Joel 2:19,24; Amos 9:13; Zech. 10:7).
2. Wine is a part of a sacrificial offering (Exod. 29:40; Lev. 23:13; Num. 15:7,10; 28:14; Deut. 14:26; Judg. 9:13).
3. Wine is used as medicine (II Sam. 16:2; Prov. 31:6-7).
4. Wine can be a real problem (Noah - Gen. 9:21; Lot - Gen. 19:33,35; Samson - Jdgs. 16:19; Nabal - I Sam. 25:36; Uriah - II Sam. 11:13; Ammon - II Sam. 13:28; Elah - I Kgs. 16:9; Benhadad - I Kin. 20:12; Rulers - Amos 6:6; and Ladies - Amos 4).
5. Wine can be abused (Prov. 20:1; 23:29-35; 31:4-5; Isa. 5:11,22; 19:14; 28:7-8; Hosea 4:11).
6. Wine was prohibited to certain groups (Priests on duty, Lev. 10:9; Ezek. 44:21; Nazarites, Num. 6; and Rulers, Prov. 31:4-5; Isa. 56:11-12; Hosea 7:5).
7. Wine was used in an eschatological setting (Amos 9:13; Joel 3:18; Zech. 9:17).

#### B. Interbiblical

1. Wine in moderation is very helpful (Ecclesiasticus 31:27-30).
2. The rabbis say, “Wine is the greatest of all medicine, where wine is lacking, then drugs are needed.” (BDB 58b).

#### C. New Testament

1. Jesus changed a large quantity of water into wine (John 2:1-11).
2. Jesus drank wine (Matt. 11:18-19; Luke 7:33-34; 22:17ff).
3. Peter was accused of drunkenness on “new wine” at Pentecost (Acts 2:13).
4. Wine can be used as medicine (Mark 15:23; Luke 10:34; I Tim. 5:23).

5. Leaders are not to be abusers. This does not mean total abstainers (I Tim. 3:3,8; Titus 1:7; 2:3; I Pet. 4:3).
6. Wine was used in eschatological settings (Matt. 22:1ff; Rev. 19:9).
7. Drunkenness is deplored (Matt. 24:49; Luke 11:45; 21:34; I Cor. 5:11-13; 6:10; Gal. 5:21; I Pet. 4:3; Rom. 13:13-14).

### III. Theological Insight

#### A. Dialectical tension

1. Wine is the gift of God.
2. Drunkenness is a major problem.
3. Believers in some cultures must limit their freedoms for the sake of the gospel (Matt. 15:1-20; Mark 7:1-23; I Corinthians 8-10; Romans 14).

#### B. Tendency to go beyond given bounds

1. God is the source of all good things.
2. Fallen mankind has abused all of God's gifts by taking them beyond God-given bounds.

#### C. Abuse is in us, not in things. There is nothing evil in the physical creation (cf. Mark 7:18-23; Rom. 14:14,20; I Cor. 10:25-26; I Tim. 4:4; Titus 1:15).

### IV. First Century Jewish Culture and Fermentation

- A. Fermentation begins very soon, approximately 6 hours after the grape is crushed.
- B. Jewish tradition says that when a slight foam appeared on the surface (sign of fermentation), it is liable to the wine-tithe (*Ma aseroth* 1:7). It was called "new wine" or "sweet wine."
- C. The primary violent fermentation was complete after one week.
- D. The secondary fermentation took about 40 days. At this state it is considered "aged wine" and could be offered on the altar (*Edhuyyoth* 6:1).
- E. Wine that had rested on its lees (old wine) was considered good, but it had to be strained well before use.
- F. Wine was usually considered to be properly aged after one year of fermentation. Three years was the longest period of time that wine could be safely stored. It was called "old wine" and had to be diluted with water.
- G. Only in the last 100 years with a sterile environment and chemical additives has fermentation been postponed. The ancient world could not stop the natural process of fermentation.

### V. Closing Statements

- A. Be sure your experience, theology, and biblical interpretation do not depreciate Jesus and first century Jewish/Christian culture! They were obviously not total-abstainers.
- B. I am not advocating the social use of alcohol. However, many have overstated the Bible's position on this subject and now claim superior righteousness based on a cultural/denominational bias.
- C. For me, Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8-10 have provided insight and guidelines based on love and respect for fellow believers and the spread of the gospel in our cultures, not personal freedom or judgmental criticism. If the Bible is the only source for faith and practice, then maybe we must all rethink this issue.
- D. If we push total abstinence as God's will, what do we imply about Jesus, as well as those modern cultures that regularly use wine (e.g., Europe, Israel, Argentina)?



▣ **“folly”** The VERB form (BDB 698) in Aramaic means “to know,” “to be intelligent,” or “to cause to understand.” This connotation seems to fit the context best (cf. 1:17; 2:12,13; 7:25).

▣ **“under heaven”** This phrase (cf. 1:13; 2:3; 3:1) is a synonym for “under the sun,” used twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes. See note on the theological meaning at 1:3.

**2:4-11** These verses describe what the author attributes to King Solomon. These are things and accomplishments that he had done (a series of 23 Perfect tense verbs), but, there was no lasting peace, joy, hope, and happiness. St. Augustine said there is a God-shaped hole in every person. Nothing can fill that hole except God. Only when we know Him can physical things and life experiences have meaning (cf. chapter 3).

**2:4 “I enlarged my works”** BDB 152, KB 178, *Hiphil* PERFECT.

1. houses, v. 4
2. vineyards, v. 4
3. parks, v. 5
4. orchards, v. 5
5. ponds, b. 6
6. slaves, v. 7
7. flocks and herds, v. 7

Notice the number of times “myself” appears in vv. 4-8.

**2:5 “parks”** This is a Persian loan word (BDB 825) describing a wealthy person’s garden.

**2:7 “male and female slaves”** Slavery was common in the ancient world. It was not all bad! Many poor Hebrews sold themselves into slavery to another Hebrew to have a better life (cf. Deut. 15:12-18)! Of course, forced slavery (military, economic) was, and is, a tragedy! There was, and is, human exploitation in this area.

▣ **“larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem”** This clearly shows the egocentric nature of these pursuits (cf. v. 9; see note at 1:16).

**2:8 “I collected”** (BDB 888, KB 1111, *Qal* PERFECT):

1. silver and gold, v. 8
2. treasure, v. 8 (taxes or tribute)
3. singers, v. 8
4. concubines, v. 8

▣ **“male and female singers”** This (BDB 1010) possibly refers to (1) the artistic aspect of life or (2) regular festivals.

▣

NASB, NRSV	“concubines”
NKJV	“musical instruments of all kinds”
TEV	“all the women a man could want”
NJB, JPSOA	“every human luxury, chest upon chest of it”
NIV	“harem”
REB	“everything that affords delight”
LXX	“a butler and female cupbearers”

The Hebrew word (BDB 994, KB 950) is very uncertain. Obviously from the varied translations this Hebrew *hapax legomenon* is uncertain. The key is the Semitic root:

1. From the term for “woman’s breast” (BDB 994), NASB, NRSV, TEV, NIV (in apposition to “the delights of men”).
2. The NIV Study Bible’s footnote says that an early Egyptian letter uses a similar Canaanite term for concubines (p. 993).
3. In later Hebrew (Mishnah) it refers to a chest or coffer, NJB, JPSOA (in apposition to “the treasure of kings”)
4. KJV, ASV, NKJV see it as in apposition to “singers” (cf. NIDOTTE, vol. 4, p. 99).
5. The LXX took the meaning from the Aramaic root, “to pour out (wine)” (NET Bible, p. 116).
6. The REB seems to connect it to “delights of men,” but in the sense of luxuries (cf. Prov. 19:10).

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 2:9-11**

**<sup>9</sup>Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. <sup>10</sup>All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. <sup>11</sup>Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.**

**2:9-11** This is a summary statement. All of these “things” did provide a moment of joy and satisfaction, but it did not last! If the wisest, wealthiest, and most powerful person (i.e. Solomon) cannot find real lasting joy and satisfaction, how can anyone? This is the conclusion of v. 11 (cf. 1:14; 2:17,22-23)! This is the question of how to find purpose in life without God; without God, life becomes just physical existence! Where is lasting value or gain found?

The NKJV and NIV translations see vv. 10 and 11, as well as 12-16, as poetry, but other English translations have not followed this approach.

For the key phrase, “under the sun,” see note at 1:3.

**2:10 “all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure”** These are balanced lines. It is hard to know when Qoheleth moves from prose to poetry. Notice the VERBS:

1. “refuse” - BDB 69, KB 82, *Qal* PERFECT, meaning “withhold”
2. “withhold” - BDB 586, KB 602, *Qal* PERFECT. NIDOTTE, vol. 2, p. 991, says this implies that “the searcher for meaning has abandoned all restraint in search of pleasure.”

☐ **“my labor”** The author (here speaking as Solomon, i.e. a literary foil) rejoices in his works (cf. 2:10[twice],11), but in 2:18,20,22 he “hates” them! The question of 3:9, “What does the worker gain from his toil?” resounds! Earthly effort will fail, fade, and forever pass away!

**2:11 “there was no profit”** See note at 1:3.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 2:12-17**

**<sup>12</sup>So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly; for what will the man *do* who will come after the king *except* what has already been done? <sup>13</sup>And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. <sup>14</sup>The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I**

know that one fate befalls them both. <sup>15</sup>Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity." <sup>16</sup>For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man as with the fool, inasmuch as *in* the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die! <sup>17</sup>So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.

**2:12** Our author returns to wisdom to find lasting value, but he has tried that before also (cf. 1:16-18). There are advantages to wisdom as opposed to folly (cf. 7:11,12,19; 9:18; 10:10; Proverbs 8), but they are not ultimate advantages (cf. vv. 14-16).

1. one fate befalls them both (cf. 9:11; Ps. 49:10)
2. there will be no lasting remembrance of either (note the opposite in Ps. 112:6; Prov. 10:7)

**2:13** “wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness” There is value in wisdom, but it is not ultimate.

▣ The NASB translation has left out the significant term “profit” (BDB 452). See note at 1:3.

**2:14**

NASB, NKJV,

NRSV “eyes are in his head”

TEV “see where they are going”

NJB “have their eyes open”

The two dynamic equivalent translations (TEV, NJB) show the Hebraic metaphor.

▣ “one fate befalls them both” This fate (BDB 899) is a euphemism for death. Qoheleth feels the pain of the future common experience of all human beings (cf. 2:15; 3:19[twice]; 9:2,3).

**2:16** “lasting” This is literally “forever.” See Special Topic at 1:4.

▣ “all will be forgotten” This VERB (BDB 1013, KB 1489) is a *Niphal* PERFECT and denotes the completed action of a yet future event as if it were already complete.

**2:17** “hated life” This VERB (BDB 971, KB 1338, *Qal* PERFECT) means “hate,” but with the connotation of “disgusted” with life (cf. NJB) because of the futility that all he had worked for and built (cf. v. 18; 2:11) had no lasting value or gain.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 2:18-23**

<sup>18</sup>Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. <sup>19</sup>And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity. <sup>20</sup>Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun. <sup>21</sup>When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. <sup>22</sup>For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? <sup>23</sup>Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.

**2:18-21** There is an obvious poetic parallel between vv. 18-19 and vv. 20-21 (cf. NET Bible, p. 1119).

**2:18 “I must leave it to the man who will come after me”** Traditional wisdom teachers put great faith in one’s prosperity, not so Qoheleth. Everyone leaves everything (cf. Ps. 39:6).

**2:19,21 “he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them”** Often that which is passed on to us is not appreciated, even squandered away!

**2:20** What a lament! What a realization! In Hebrew there is a repetition (NOUN and VERB, BDB 765, KB 845) of the term “labor,” “toil,” which strengthens the lament.

The VERBAL (BDB 384, KB 382, *Piel* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT) means “despair,” “be hopeless,” “desperate.” Qoheleth uses strong language to describe the depth of his emotions about the utter futility of human effort!

**2:21 “there is”** This Hebrew phrase (BDB 441) introduces a hypothetical, but often occurring, human experience or example (cf. 2:21; 4:8; 5:13; 6:1,11; 7:15[twice]; 8:14[thrice]; 10:5). It is used many times in Wisdom Literature (e.g., Prov. 11:24; 12:8; 13:7; 14:12; 16:25; 18:24; 20:15).



NASB, NKJV,

NRSV “a great evil”

TEV “it isn’t right”

NJB “grossly evil”

JPSOA “a grave evil”

REB “a great wrong”

These translations reflect the Hebrew word “evil” (BDB 948-949). It is used in this context as “grievous injustice” (cf. v. 17; 5:13[twice],16; 6:1; 9:12; 10:5). The unfairness and randomness of this fallen world lies heavy on this author! See note at 5:13.

**2:22 “What does a man get in all his labor”** What are the ultimate results of physical labors? Is there anything beyond the grave?

**2:23 “even at night his mind does not rest”** Those who possess worldly things worry about them constantly (i.e. day, v. 23a and night, v. 23b; i.e., no rest). Those who seek wisdom realize “the more you know, the more you know you do not know”! There is a race no one can win (cf. 1:18).

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 2:24-26**

**<sup>24</sup>There is nothing better for a man *than* to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. <sup>25</sup>For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? <sup>26</sup>For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind.**

**2:24-26** The Jewish Study Bible (p. 1608) asserts that these verses offer a new perspective on the author’s previous comments about the futility of life (i.e., enjoy the immediate). However, they seem to answer the question of 1:3. It is true there is no lasting benefit (cf. 2:11) apart from God, but 2:24-26 finally brings “above the sun” into focus. There is more to life than birth, life, and inevitable death. There is God, judgment, and an afterlife. Things will be set straight (cf. 1:15), but not here, not now. Unfairness, injustice, and vanity seem to reign (because of the Fall, cf. Genesis 3), but wait, God reigns! He and His will spend eternity together. For now, the righteous must trust in His revelation, this world-view and enjoy the simple daily pleasures that this world offers (when and while one can).

Qoheleth being an OT sage, did not know the whole picture (i.e., the new Covenant, cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:22-38 and the complete, ultimate revelation in Jesus Christ).

There is an interesting list concerning Qoheleth's understanding of God's actions in this fallen, temporal world (i.e., NIDOTTE, vol. 4, p. 553):

1. creator, 11:5; 12:1,7 (like Psalms)
2. judge, 3:17,18; 11:9
3. benefactor, 2:24-26; 3:13; 5:18-20
4. one to be feared, 3:14; 5:1-7; 7:18 (like Proverbs)
5. one to be obeyed, 5:4; 7:26; 8:2; 13:13-14 (like Proverbs)
6. one causality in the universe, 3:11; 5:18-6:2; 7:13-14 (like Psalms)
7. unknowable, 3:11; 8:16-9:1 (like Job)
8. fair, 8:12,13

**2:24 “This also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God”** The simple pleasures of life are gifts from God (cf. 3:13; 5:19; 9:7; Prov. 13:22; Job 27:16-17). See note at 2:1. In many ways this is one of just a few great truths in this book.

1. enjoy the simple pleasures of daily life (2:1,24; 3:12,13,22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-9)
  - a. food (fellowship)
  - b. drink (although this can refer to revelry [cf. Exod. 32:6; I Sam. 30:16; I Kgs. 1:25] in this context it refers to daily family and social life)
  - c. sense of self-worth from life's work
  - d. rejoicing in life (9:8)
  - e. marriage and family (9:9)
2. fear God, keep the commandments (2:25; 12:13-14)

▣ **“from the hand of God”** See Special Topic below.

#### **SPECIAL TOPIC: GOD DESCRIBED AS A HUMAN (ANTHROPOMORPHIC LANGUAGE)**

- I. This type of language is very common in the OT.
  - A. Physical body parts
    1. eyes - Gen. 1:4,31; 6:8; Exod. 33:17; Num. 14:14; Deut. 11:12; Zech. 4:10
    2. hands - Exod. 15:17; Num. 11:23; Deut. 2:15
    3. arm - Exod. 6:6; 15:16; Num. 11:23; Deut. 4:34; 5:15
    4. ears - Num. 11:18; I Sam. 8:21; II Kgs. 19:16; Ps. 5:1; 10:17; 18:6
    5. face - Exod. 32:30; 33:11; Num. 6:25; Deut. 34:10; Ps. 114:7
    6. finger - Exod. 8:19; 31:18; Deut. 9:10; Ps. 8:3
    7. voice - Gen. 3:8,10; Exod. 15:26; 19:19; Deut. 26:17; 27:10
    8. feet - Exod. 24:10; Ezek. 43:7
    9. human form - Exod. 24:9-11; Ps. 47; Isa. 6:1; Ezek. 1:26
    10. the angel of the Lord - Gen. 16:7-13; 22:11-15; 31:11,13; 48:15-16; Exod. 3:4,13-21; 14:19; Jdgs. 2:1; 6:22-23; 13:3-22
  - B. Physical actions
    1. speaking as the mechanism of creation - Gen. 1:3,6,9,11,14,20,24,26
    2. walking (i.e., sound of) in Eden - Gen. 3:8; 18:33; Hab. 3:15
    3. closing the door of Noah's ark - Gen. 7:16
    4. smelling sacrifices - Gen. 8:21; Lev. 26:31; Amos 5:21

5. coming down - Gen. 11:5; 18:21; Exod. 3:8; 19:11,18,20
  6. burying Moses - Deut. 34:6
- C. Human emotions
1. regret/repent - Gen. 6:6,7; Exod. 32:14; Jdgs. 2:18; I Sam. 15:29,35; Amos 7:3,6
  2. anger - Exod. 4:14; 15:7; Num. 11:10; 12:9; 22:22; 25:3,4; 32:10,13,14; Deut. 6:5; 7:4; 29:20
  3. jealousy - Exod. 20:5; 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; 32:16,21; Josh. 24:19
  4. loath/abhor - Lev. 20:23; 26:30; Deut. 32:19
- D. Family terms
1. Father
    - a. of Israel - Exod. 4:22; Deut. 14:1; 39:5
    - b. of the king - II Sam. 7:11-16; Ps. 2:7
    - c. metaphors of fatherly action - Deut. 1:31; 8:5; 32:1; Ps. 27:10; Pro. 3:12; Jer. 3:4,22; 31:20; Hosea 11:1-4; Mal. 3:17
  2. Parent - Hosea 11:1-4
  3. Mother - Ps. 27:10 (analogy to nursing mother); Isa. 49:15; 66:9-13
  4. Young faithful lover - Hosea 1-3

II. Reasons for the use of this type of language

- A. It is a necessity for God to reveal Himself to human beings. The very pervasive concept of God as male is an anthropomorphism because God is spirit!
- B. God takes the most meaningful aspects of human life (father, mother, parent, lover) and uses them to reveal Himself to fallen humanity.
- C. Though necessary, God does not want to be limited to any physical form (cf. Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5).
- D. The ultimate anthropomorphism is the incarnation of Jesus! God became physical, touchable (cf. I John 1:1-3). The message of God became the Word of God (cf. John 1:1-18).

**2:25 “have enjoyment”** This is a rare Hebrew term used only here in the OT. Most English translations take the meaning from the Arabic “feel” or “perceive by the senses” (BDB 301 II). However, the NJB has “drink,” following the Septuagint, which tried to make vv. 24 and 25 parallel.



NASB	“without Him”
NKJV	“more than I”
NRSV (NIV)	“apart from him”
TEV	-----
NJB	“came from Him”
JPSOA	“but myself”

A Hebrew textual variation (“apart from Him”) in some manuscripts is preserved in the Septuagint, Peshitta, and Jerome. Does this phrase reflect Qoheleth’s thinking or has a major theological insight been reached (i.e. “gift from God”) beginning in v. 24? I think vv. 24-26 should be seen as a whole new thought.

**2:26** The question of this verse is how is a person “good in His sight?” This question must be related to 12:13-14. Notice the benefits:

1. wisdom (BDB 315)
2. knowledge (BDB 395)
3. joy (BDB 970)

All that fallen mankind seeks in self-effort will be a gift from God!

Notice the consequences for a selfish, godless life:

1. gathering and collecting
2. only to be given to another (“person who is good in His sight”)

Obviously vv. 24-26 are contrasting verses 12-23! Exactly how they relate is uncertain.

Qoheleth is also challenging traditional wisdom about prosperity (cf. Job). The wicked rich are gathering for the righteous!

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

These discussion questions are provided to help you think through the major issues of this section of the book. They are meant to be thought provoking, not definitive.

1. List the things in chapter 2 that Qoheleth says proclaim vanity.
2. Why does he use Solomon as a backdrop in these two chapters?
3. Why does he seem to contradict himself about the advantages or disadvantages of wisdom and pleasure?
4. What great insight do verses 24-26 convey?

# ECCLESIASTES 3

## PARAGRAPH DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
A Time for Everything	Everything Has Its Time	Everything Has Its Time, Determined by God	A Time for Everything	Death
3:1-8	3:1-8 (1) (2-8) The God-Given Task	3:1-8	3:1-8 (1) (2-8)	3:1-8 (1) (2-8)
3:9-11	3:9-11	3:9-15	3:9-13	3:9-11
God Set Eternity in the Heart of Man				
3:12-22	3:12-15 (12-13) (14-15)  Injustice Seems to Prevail	Human Injustice is Subject to Divine Judgment  3:16-22 (16) (17) (18-22)	Injustice in the World (3:16-4:16)  3:14-15  3:16-22	3:12-13  3:14 3:15  3:16  3:17 3:18-19 3:20 3:21 3:22

**READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section)**  
***FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL***

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the five translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph



3. Third paragraph

4. Etc.

## BACKGROUND

Although this chapter is usually interpreted as dealing with the timeliness or appropriateness of human actions, in context, it deals with God’s sovereignty (cf. 2:24-26; 3:14)..

- A. When interpreting the book of Ecclesiastes it is very important that we see it is satire based on two key phrases:
  - 1. “all is vanity” (i.e., transitoriness of human life and effort)
  - 2. “under the sun” (i.e., physical life, earthly life viewed apart from God, i.e., agnostically)
  
- B. The central answer to a meaningless and frustrated life is found in
  - 1. faith and obedience (cf. 12:13-14)
  - 2. the simple pleasures of life as provided by God (cf. 2:24; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18; 6:12; 8:15; 9:7)
  
- C. Ecclesiastes is one of the books of the Bible that must be interpreted in its totality. Proof-texting this book or missing its tongue-in-cheek world-view will prove to be a hermeneutical disaster.

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 3:1-8

- <sup>1</sup>There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven–
- <sup>2</sup>A time to give birth and a time to die; A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.
- <sup>3</sup>A time to kill and a time to heal; A time to tear down and a time to build up.
- <sup>4</sup>A time to weep and a time to laugh; A time to mourn and a time to dance.
- <sup>5</sup>A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones; A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.
- <sup>6</sup>A time to search and a time to give up as lost; A time to keep and a time to throw away.
- <sup>7</sup>A time to tear apart and a time to sew together; A time to be silent and a time to speak.
- <sup>8</sup>A time to love and a time to hate; A time for war and a time for peace.

**3:1 “There is an appointed time for everything”** The “appointed time” (lit. “for everything a season”) seems to refer to the common events of human life. The “appointed time” does not speak of the advantageous human time, but of the divinely appointed time. The emphasis of this chapter is on divine appointment. It speaks of the mystery of human effort (“under heaven”) as it is compared with the sovereignty of God. In Wisdom Literature “appointed time” is often “appropriate time.”



NASB	“event”
NKJV	“purpose”
NRSV, LXX	“matter”
TEV	“happens”

**NJB**                    “occupation”  
**REB**                    “activity”

The Hebrew word (BDB 343) means “delight” or “pleasure,” but here it has the added connotation of activity that brings joy (cf. 3:17; 8:6; Prov. 31:13). Enjoy life each day! Smell the roses along the path!

▣ “under heaven” See Special Topic below.

### **SPECIAL TOPIC: HEAVEN**

The Hebrew term (BDB 1029, translated “heaven,” “sky,” “firmament,” “air”) can refer to several things (i.e. a series of domes or spheres of creation):

1. In Gen.1:8-20 it refers to the atmosphere above the earth where clouds move and birds fly.
2. This dome (cf. Gen. 1:6,20; Isa. 40:22; 42:5) above the earth is where God sends the rain (i.e., “windows of heaven,” cf. Ps. 78:23-29; Mal. 3:10 or “the water jars of heaven,” cf. Job 38:37).
3. This dome is where the stars dwell and planets move (two dimensional). It could refer to all the created cosmos (tens of billions of galaxies).
4. Above this dome is the abode of God (i.e. the third or seventh heaven). It is the highest heaven (e.g., Deut. 10:14; I Kgs. 8:27,30,32; Ps. 2:4; 148:4; Isa. 66:1).
5. The theological emphases
  - a. God is the creator of everything.
  - b. He controls creation (i.e., light and dark, rain and drought).
  - c. He creates and places the night lights (sun, moon, stars, planets, comets).
  - d. There are spheres or realms of reality:
    - 1) earth
    - 2) above the earth
    - 3) invisible/angelic (cf. Col. 1:16)
    - 4) God’s presence and abode
  - e. they are all connected and controlled by His will

**3:2-8** Almost all English translations see vv. 2-8 in a poetic structure. Within each line there is a contrast, but the relationship between lines is not completely clear.

**3:2 “A time to give birth, and a time to die”** There is a series of events which refer to the cycle of human development.

**3:2 “A time to plant, and a time to uproot what is planted”** There is a grammatical connection between the efforts of the sinner (2:26, two *Qal* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCTS) and that of 3:2-9 (a series of 27 INFINITIVE CONSTRUCTS).

This speaks of the annual harvest.

**3:3 “A time to kill, and a time to heal”** Since war is mentioned in v. 8 the killing referred to here seems to have another focus. Some have assumed that it refers to capital punishment within the nation of Israel or to the defense of one’s home, or person, in the event of an attack.

**3:4 “A time to weep, and a time to laugh; A time to mourn, and a time to dance”** Some believe these lines refer to both funerals and weddings or to other regular social events.

**3:5 “A time to throw stones, and a time to gather stones”** Many have assumed that this is an agricultural metaphor of one removing stones from a field. However, this could be a construction metaphor of using stones for a rock fence or a home. It has been the consensus among Jewish commentators that this has sexual connotations (cf. TEV “making love”). This is stated specifically in the Mishrash. The context of v. 5b seems to reinforce this understanding. This would mean that there is time, Levitically speaking, when men could have sexual relations and a time when they could not because of a woman’s menstrual cycle or their military commitments.

▣ **“A time to embrace, and a time to shun embracing”** This could refer to (1) sexual love within marriage (cf. Song of Songs 2:6); (2) sexual love outside of marriage (cf. Prov. 5:20); (3) a family’s caring love for each other or (4) friends kissing one another on the cheek, which was common in the Near East.

**3:6 “A time to search, and a time to give up as lost”** The first term “search” (BDB 134, KB 152, *Piel* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT) means to seek after something. However, there comes a time in life where it becomes obvious that that something or someone cannot be obtained! One must get on with life!

**3:7 “A time to tear apart, and a time to sew together”** This may refer to one of the mourning practices of the Jews. They would rip the front of their robe at the neckline about five inches (e.g. I Sam. 4:12; II Sam. 1:2; 13:31; 15:32; II Kgs. 18:3;7; Jer. 41:5); when the mourning was over they would sew it up again.

▣ **“A time to be silent, and a time to speak”** This may also refer to the mourning rites.

**3:8 “A time for war, and a time for peace”** Most Jewish commentators understand vv. 1-8 as referring to national Israel (cf. “appointed time” in Ps. 75:2; 102:13). However, it seems that vv. 9-11 define these verses in light of a personal, rather than corporate, emphasis.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 3:9-11**

**9**What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils? **10**I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves. **11**He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.

**3:9-10** The term “profit” (BDB 452) is a key concept in Ecclesiastes. See note at 1:3. The key question is, “Is there any lasting gain or value in human life, human effort, human wisdom?”

It seems that humanity is driven to perform certain common tasks (cf. 1:13; 2:23), tasks even provided by God (cf. “1:13; 2:24; 3:11), but they are unable to understand the purpose or outcome of these tasks. The purpose of these tasks is to show them their dependence on God (cf. Gal. 3:24; Eccl. 3:14,18), which is the opposite of the common experience of the Fall (i.e., independence from God characterized by the recurrent phrase, “under the sun”).

**3:11**

NASB, FB, NEB	“He has made everything appropriate in its time”
NKJV	“He has made everything beautiful in its time”
NRSV	“He has made everything suitable for its time”
TEV	“He has set the right time for everything”
NJB	“all that he does is apt for its time”

The key term “appropriate” (BDB 421) means “fair” or “beautiful.” In context it describes God’s sovereign choices that control human circumstances. This is more corporate than individual (i.e., Jewish commentators see vv. 1-8 as referring to national Israel).

This again shows the sovereignty of God over human events as well as over time.



**NASB, NKJV**

**NIV**

**NRSV, REB**

**TEV**

**NJB**

**LXX**

**“He has also set eternity in their heart”**

**“moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds”**

**“He has given us a desire to know the future”**

**“but although he has given us an awareness of the passage of time”**

**“he has also set the whole world (age) in their heart”**

The term translated “eternity” (BDB 761) is uncertain. A related Semitic term using the same three consonants means “hidden” or “concealed” (BDB 761). In later Hebrew it referred to creation of the world (LXX).

Some scholars try to make this line balance with previous ones (“appropriate in its time”), meaning God controls human situations and destinies.

Some scholars try to take it with the following line about human’s inability to understand God’s work, which fits the meaning of the Hebrew trilateral root (cf. 12:14).

Qoheleth uses a similar root (BDB 761) several times (i.e., *’olam*, see Special Topic at 1:4, cf. 1:4,10; 2:16; 3:14; 9:6; 12:5) in the sense of time.

Poetry is always difficult to lock down. It is often destroyed by exegesis! Its terms are often rare and used in specialized senses. Its meaning is purposefully vague and thought-provoking. The larger context helps us get the general drift of Qoheleth’s thought.

The Jerusalem Bible has a good comment on this verse:

“This phrase, however, is not to be taken in the Christian sense; it means simply: God has given the human heart (mind) awareness of ‘duration,’ he has endowed him with the power of reflecting on the sequence of events and thus of controlling the present. But, the author adds, this awareness is deceptive; it does not reveal the meaning of life” (p. 983 “b”).

Humanity longs to understand life but cannot. It longs to fully understand God but cannot (a purposeful philosophical agnosticism).

▣ **“the work which God has done”** The NOUN (BDB 795) is from the same Semitic root as the VERB (BDB 793 I, KB 889, *Qal* PERFECT). This is often done as a creative writing style.

God’s work can be understood in two ways:

1. from eternity
2. throughout an individual’s life

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 3:12-15**

**<sup>12</sup>I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime; <sup>13</sup>moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor—it is the gift of God. <sup>14</sup>I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him. <sup>15</sup>That which is has been already and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by.**

**3:12-13** This seems to be a summary statement, like 2:24-26. It suggests that although we cannot understand all of the mysteries of God, we can know God’s love by faith and obedience and enjoy the simple pleasures of life provided by God (cf. 2:24; 3:22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-9). Since we cannot understand or change the events in our individual lives (i.e. 3:1-8) or in our world we must focus on thanksgiving

for those common, simple, daily, but really wonderful, things common to all human societies (but really a gift from God, cf. 2:24; 5:19). These are spelled out in v. 13: food, drink, and a sense of purpose in one's labor (I would add, from other verses in Ecclesiastes, one's family, cf. 9:7-9). All of these are gifts from God. It is possible that the gift is one's faith perspective which trusts in God although one cannot understand one's own existential circumstances. The Fall (cf. Genesis 3) has affected our ability to comprehend ultimate truth (cf. 1:18; 8:16-9:12). It must be revealed, not discovered.

**3:14 “I know that everything God does will remain forever”** Here again is the emphasis on the eternity and sovereignty of God and the transitoriness of human life (e.g., Ps. 103: 14,15; Isa. 40:6-8; 1 Peter 1:24,25).

Ecclesiastes is as much a book about God as it is about humanity. The theology of a fallen world is only hinted at in the phrase “under the sun,” but the reality of a mysterious painful, yet pleasurable, world is characterized in “vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Our mystery is God's clear, purposeful, knowledgeable and comprehensive plan. Knowledge is not as crucial as trust, faith, and obedience.

Some of the texts which characterize the unknowable but present God are

1. there is a divine plan at work, 1:13; 3:10,18; 7:29; 8:16-17
2. there is a sovereign Lord, 1:15 & 7:13; 3:11,14; 9:1; 12:1
3. there is a daily faith which enables and ennobles, 2:24-26; 3:12,13,22; 5:18-20 (negatively in 6:1-6); 9:7-9
4. there is an appropriate awe and respect due to God, 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12,13; 12:13
5. there is/will be a time of evaluation by God of every human being, 3:17; (5:1,4, implied); 11:9; 12:14

▣ **“for God has so worked that men should fear Him”** This reflects the truth of v. 10 that God has given us a task that we cannot perform so that we will continue to depend on Him (i.e., “fear Him,” cf. 5:7; 7:18; 8:12,13, which implies a faith worldview) and not on ourselves.

**3:15 “That which is has been already, and that which will be has already been”** There are several possibilities of this verse: (1) a reflection on 1:9; (2) it is used in a tongue-in-cheek (i.e., “under the sun,” cf. v. 16) sense; or (3) it could be related to God's revelation to Moses (cf. Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Jer. 26:2).

▣

<b>NASB</b>	<b>“for God seeks what is passed by”</b>
<b>NKJV</b>	<b>“God requires an account of what is past”</b>
<b>NRSV</b>	<b>“God seeks out what has gone by”</b>
<b>TEV</b>	<b>“God makes the same thing happen again and again”</b>
<b>NJB</b>	<b>“God seeks out anyone who is persecuted”</b>
<b>LXX</b>	<b>“God will seek out that which is past”</b>
<b>REB</b>	<b>“with God summoning each event back in its turn”</b>
<b>JPSOA</b>	<b>“God seeks the pursued”</b>

This is a very difficult Hebrew phrase. Some assume it means “the one who is persecuted” (cf. NJB, JPSOA), while others go with the traditional translation of “what has been driven away” (the VERB, BDB 134, KB 152, *Piel* IMPERFECT, has both meanings). It seems to refer to the general concept of the book of Ecclesiastes that although the experiences of all humans are in a repetitive cycle, there is a divine purpose in this cycle. One day God will judge individual human choices!

The UBS Handbook (p. 108) asserts that this VERB in later Hebrew meant “request” or “ask.” If so, then God wants His special creation to pursue:

1. action at the appropriate time (cf. 3:1-8)

2. daily pleasures (cf. 2:24-26; 3:22)
3. eternity (cf. 3:11)
4. His activities (cf. 3:14)
5. His Law (cf. 3:15, Deut. 4:2; 12:32)

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 3:16-22**

**<sup>16</sup>Furthermore, I have seen under the sun *that* in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness. <sup>17</sup>I said to myself, "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there. <sup>18</sup>I said to myself concerning the sons of men, "God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts." <sup>19</sup>For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. <sup>20</sup>All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust. <sup>21</sup>Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth? <sup>22</sup>I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?**

**3:16 “under the sun”** Again, I think that the book of Ecclesiastes (using this phrase) views life from one of two perspectives: (1) what is the meaning of life if there is no God? or (2) what is the meaning of life if there is a God? See note at 1:3.

▣ **“in the place of justice there is wickedness, and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness”** This seems to show that the two places where the character of God should have been manifested most clearly in human life are the law courts (“the place of justice,” BDB 1048) and the area of worship (“the place of righteousness,” BDB 841, see note at 1:15). It is possible that these two words are used in parallel and refer to characteristics of God. However, because of the fallenness of humanity and the unfairness of life in a fallen world, righteousness and justice are not found! Power corrupts (cf. 4:1; 5:8; 8:9)! Wickedness (BDB 957, cf. NOUN, 3:16[twice]; 7:25; 8:8; ADJECTIVE, 3:17; 7:15; 8:10, 13, 14[twice]; 9:2) results!

**3:17 “God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man”** There are two answers given to the questions found in v. 16 about wickedness in the place of justice and worship. The first answer is in this verse and states that God will ultimately judge all humans one day (i.e., an appointed time, cf. 11:9; 12:4).

Verse 17 has often been interpreted as an affirmation of an afterlife. Although this is rare in Ecclesiastes, it is not completely unique. If it is true that God is a fair God, the righteous will prosper and the wicked will be judged. If it does not happen in this life (sometimes it does, cf. Job 27:13-23), then the only conclusion is that there must be an afterlife (e.g., Matt. 25:31-46; II Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:11-15).

**3:18** This is the second answer to the apparent injustice of v. 16 and that is that God is surely testing everything. This is a general truth of the Bible (e.g., Gen. 22:1; Exod. 15:25; 16:4; 20:20; Deut. 8:2, 16; 13:3; Jdgs. 2:22; II Chr. 32:31; Matt. 4:1; Heb. 12:5-13).

▣ **“in order for them to see that they are but beasts”** Again, the purpose is to show humans that without God they are only a highly developed animal (i.e., *nephesh*, Gen. 1:30). God is seeking to put fallen mankind in such a position where they will recognize the futility of life without the spiritual component (God, judgment, eternity).

**3:19 “For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same”** There is a carryover from v. 18 to v. 19 in the term “beast” (BDB 96). If one pursues the concept that this physical realm is all that there is, the consequences are quite discouraging. The death of a human is no different from that of an animal (cf. 2:14; 6:6;; 7:2; 9:2,3). However, if there is a spiritual realm and if mankind is made in the image of God (cf. Gen. 1:26-27), then there is ultimate significance (cf. 12:7).

Verses 20-22 are an expansion of the question mentioned in v. 19. The term “breath” (BDB 924) is interesting because it goes back to Gen. 2:7. It is true that the breath of life, which made Adam a living soul, or *nephesh*, is used for both the animals and for Adam. However, although humans certainly do have animal characteristics (eat, breathe, reproduce) and are related uniquely to this planet, there is a uniquely spiritual element in mankind.

**3:20 “All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust”** This truth is initially stated in Gen. 3:19 and developed in Ps. 103:14 and 104:29.

The term “dust” (BDB 779) is also used in Gen. 2:7 in relation to the special creation of mankind. Qoheleth knew the Genesis account of creation and uses its key terms:

1. *nephesh*
2. dust

**3:21 “Who knows that”** Because of the use of this same phrase in 2:19 and 6:12 this is obviously a question. It seems though that the same truth is found in 12:7 as an affirmation.

The relationship between the questions in vv. 21 and 22 has been dealt with in a very creative way by the commentator H. C. Leupold in *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*, pp. 97-101. He asserts that the two questions are really an interrogative and a regular article, which makes an affirmation. This structure seems to be a better understanding of these two verses. When one consults English translations one finds a question in both vv. 21 and 22. However, if one compares 12:7 with the question of v. 22, they seem to be contradictory. I think that Leupold’s technical discussion on the use of the article versus the interrogative is helpful in making v. 22 an affirmation instead of a question.

▣ **“breath”** This term (BDB 924) has a wide semantic range:

1. wind
2. breath
3. spirit
  - a. God
  - b. mankind

▣ **“upward. . .downward”** This is a reflection of the ancient worldview that God’s abode was up and *Sheol* was underground. It is often called “the three storied universe” and is used to try and show that the Bible is an irrelevant ancient book. This is phenomenological language, language of the five human senses. Smoke of the sacrifices goes “up” to God! Dead bodies (in Jewish culture) are buried (i.e., in the earth). Before we criticize the ancient world for this kind of descriptive language, remember we moderns speak in the same way:

1. the sun “rises”
2. dew “falls”
3. “mother nature”

▣ **“what will occur after him”** This does not necessarily refer specifically to an afterlife in this context, but perhaps to future events in this life.

**3:22** This is another summary statement, like 2:24-26 and 3:12-13! This is a recurrent theme (cf. 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-9). See note at 2:24-26



**NASB, NRSV** “for that is his *lot*”  
**NKJV** “for that *is* his heritage”  
**TEV** -----  
**NJB** “such is the lot of a human being”  
**LXX** “for it is his portion”  
**REB** “since that is their lot”

This term (BDB 324) is used often in Ecclesiastes but is translated in several ways (from NASB 1995):

1. “reward” - 2:10; 5:18,19; 9:6
2. “legacy” - 2:21
3. “lot” - 3:22
4. “share” - 9:6
5. “portion” - 11:1

It refers to that which happens to an individual during his earthly life. Sometimes good, sometimes evil, sometimes fair, sometimes unfair—a divine but unknowable plan.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

These discussion questions are provided to help you think through the major issues of this section of the book. They are meant to be thought provoking, not definitive.

1. Is this chapter speaking of human actions or divine election?
2. Do verses 2-8 describe the life of all men or only some?
3. How do verses 9-11 relate to verses 2-8?
4. What has God put into man’s heart and why is this so frustrating?
5. What are the simple pleasures of life that God gives and why is this such an important truth in the book of Ecclesiastes?
6. How does the phrase “under the sun” affect one’s interpretation of this book?
7. Does God really test everyone?
8. Is the fate of men and animals different or are we simply dealing with a cynic?



# ECCLESIASTES 4

## PARAGRAPH DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
The Evils of Oppression 4:1-3	Injustice Seems to Prevail (3:16-4:3) 4:1-3	Life's Oppressions and Inequalities 4:1-3	Injustice in the World (3:16-4:16) 4:1-3	Society (4:1-5:8) 4:1-4
4:4-6	The Vanity of Selfish Toil 4:4-6 (4) (5-6)	4:4-6	4:4-6	4:5
4:7-8	4:7-8	The Value of A Friend 4:7-8	4:7-8	4:6 4:7-8
4:9-12	The Value of A Friend 4:9-12	4:9-12	4:9-12	4:9-12
4:13-16	Popularity Passes Away 4:13-16	The Impermanence of Fame 4:13-16	4:13-16	4:13-14 4:15-16 4:17 [5:1]

**READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section)**  
***FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL***

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the five translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph
4. Etc.

## OPENING STATEMENTS

- A. If it is true that the vanity of all life is balanced by Qoheleth's admonition to enjoy the simple pleasures of daily life, then chapters 4 and 5 form a literary unit.
- B. The recurrent theme of enjoying daily life is found in
1. 2:24-26
  2. 3:12,13,22
  3. 5:18-20
  4. 9:7-9
- C. The recurrent theme of "advantage" ("gain," BDB 452) is found in
1. 2:15
  2. 6:8,11
  3. 7:11,16
  4. 12:9,12
- There is no lasting advantage in this life without faith in God and His eternal plans.
- D. The issue of prose versus poetry returns again. It is so difficult to know how to structure wisdom literature.

Notice how the different modern translations handle chapters 4 and 5:

	PROSE	POETRY
NASB	4 & 5	
NKJV	4:4; 5:1,6-7,8-9,10-20	4:1-3; 4:5-16; 5:25; 6:10-19
NRSV	4 & 5	
TEV	4 & 5	
NJB	4:1-4,7-8, 9,12,15-17; 5:1,3-5,7-8,10-20	4:5-6,13-14; 5:2,6,9
REB	4 & 5	
JPSOA		4:5-6
NIV	4:1,4,13-16; 5:1,4-7,8-9,18-20	4:2-3,5-12; 5:2-3,10,11-17

This shows the uncertainty!

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 4:1-3

<sup>1</sup>Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them. <sup>2</sup>So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. <sup>3</sup>But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.

**4:1 "the acts of oppression"** This first verse of chapter 4 clearly shows that Solomon is not the author. He had the power to confront and correct injustice (cf. 3:16; 5:8), but our author sees it and is helpless.

☐ **"under the sun"** See note at 1:3. Life apart from God is "dog-eat-dog"; "me-at-any-cost"; "power-makes-right" humanity! If fallen humanity is left to itself, it will corrupt everything!

Notice the key terms

1. “oppress”
  - a. NOUN, BDB 799
  - b. VERB, BDB 798, KB 897
    - (1) *Qal* PASSIVE PARTICIPLE
    - (2) *Qal* ACTIVE PARTICIPLE
2. “no one to comfort,” BDB 636, KB 688, *Piel*, ACTIVE PARTICIPLE (twice)
3. “power,” BDB 470

▣ **“they had no one to comfort *them*”** This is speaking (cf. 3:16; 5:8) from the governmental perspective.

**4:2-3** This is

1. a hyperbole
2. a view of pre-existence (cf. Job 3:11-19; Ps. 139:13-16)

The pain and frustration of physical life without God, without hope, without help screams out! This is not the world that God intended it to be!!!

**4:3 “better”** This ADJECTIVE (BDB 373 II) is used in a comparative sense throughout the book, but translated (NASB) in different ways:

1. “enjoy yourself” (lit. “consider with goodness”), 2:1
2. “good,” 2:3,26 (twice); 3:12,13; 4:9; 5:18; 6:12; 7:1,11,18,20; 8:15; 9:2 (twice); 11:6,7; 12:14
3. “better,” 2:24; 3:12,22; 4:3,6,9,13; 5:5; 6:3,9; 7:1,2,3,5,8 (twice),10; 9:4,16,18
4. “be happy,” 7:14
5. “pleasing,” 7:26
6. “well,” 8:12,13
7. “cheerful,” 9:7

Qoheleth’s thought is a comparison on two levels:

1. life here on earth
2. the physical compared to the spiritual

Each occurrence of this ADJECTIVE must be interpreted in its context.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 4:4-6**

**<sup>4</sup>I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is *the result* of rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind. <sup>5</sup>The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. <sup>6</sup>One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.**

**4:4** Life is a competition for food, for shelter, for work, for possessions, for honor, for control! This is the philosophy of atheistic humanism. Power makes right! This is human ego run amuck! Without God the only motive is “me”! This is where laissez faire capitalism is a human curse! This is where communism failed! Every human is envious, every human takes advantage. Every human exploits his fellow human. Life without God is a “dog-eat-dog” life of competition and unsatisfied lust for more-and-more-for-me at any cost.

This is a recurrent phrase (cf. 1:6,14,17; 2:11,17,26; 4:4,6,16; 6:9).

▣ **“striving after the wind”** This is a recurrent phrase (cf. 1:6,14,17; 2:11,17,26; 4:4,6,16; 6:9). See note at 1:6. See Special Topic following.

## **SPECIAL TOPIC: WEALTH**

- I. Perspective of the Old Testament as a whole
  - A. God is the owner of all things
    - 1. Genesis 1-2
    - 2. I Chronicles 29:11
    - 3. Psalm 24:1; 50:12; 89:11
    - 4. Isaiah 66:2
  - B. Humans are stewards of wealth for God's purposes
    - 1. Deuteronomy 8:11-20
    - 2. Leviticus 19:9-18
    - 3. Job 31:16-33
    - 4. Isaiah 58:6-10
  - C. Wealth is a part of worship
    - 1. the two tithes
      - a. Numbers 18:21-29; Deut. 12:6-7; 14:22-27
      - b. Deut. 14:28-29; 26:12-15
    - 2. Proverbs 3:9
  - D. Wealth is seen as a gift from God for covenant fidelity
    - 1. Deuteronomy 27-28
    - 2. Proverbs 3:10; 8:20-21; 10:22; 15:6
  - E. Warning against wealth at the expense of others
    - 1. Proverbs 21:6
    - 2. Jeremiah 5:26-29
    - 3. Hosea 12:6-8
    - 4. Micah 6:9-12
  - F. Wealth is not sinful in itself unless it takes priority
    - 1. Psalm 52:7; 62:10; 73:3-9
    - 2. Proverbs 11:28; 23:4-5; 27:24; 28:20-22
    - 3. Job 31:24-28
- II. Unique perspective of Proverbs
  - A. Wealth placed in arena of personal effort
    - 1. slothfulness and laziness condemned—Proverbs 6:6-11; 10:4-5,26; 12:24,27; 13:4; 15:19; 18:9; 19:15,24; 20:4, 13; 21:25; 22:13; 24:30-34; 26:13-16
    - 2. hard work advocated—Proverbs 12:11,14; 13:11
  - B. Poverty versus riches used to illustrate righteousness versus wickedness—Proverbs 10:1ff; 11:27-28; 13:7; 15:16-17; 28:6,19-20
  - C. Wisdom (knowing God and His Word and living this knowledge) is better than riches—Proverbs 3:13-15; 8:9-11,18-21; 13:18
  - D. Warnings and admonitions
    - 1. warnings
      - a. beware of guaranteeing a neighbor's loan (surety)—Proverbs 6:1-5; 11:15; 17:18; 20:16; 22:26-27; 27:13

- b. beware of getting rich through evil means—Proverbs 1:19; 10:2,15; 11:1; 13:11; 16:11; 20:10,23; 21:6; 22:16,22; 28:8
  - c. beware of borrowing—Proverbs 22:7
  - d. beware of fleetingness of wealth—Proverbs 23:4-5
  - e. wealth will not help on judgment day—Proverbs 11:4
  - f. wealth has many “friends”—Proverbs 14:20; 19:4
2. admonitions
- a. generosity advocated—Proverbs 11:24-26; 14:31; 17:5; 19:17; 22:9,22-23; 23:10-11; 28:27
  - b. righteousness better than wealth—Proverbs 16:8; 28:6,8,20-22
  - c. prayer for need, not abundance—Proverbs 30:7-9
  - d. giving to the poor is giving to God—Proverbs 14:31

### III. Perspective of the New Testament

#### A. Jesus

1. Wealth forms a unique temptation to trust in ourselves and our resources instead of God and His resources
  - a. Matthew 6:24; 13:22; 19:23
  - b. Mark 10:23-31
  - c. Luke 12:15-21,33-34
  - d. Revelation 3:17-19
2. God will provide our physical needs
  - a. Matthew 6:19-34
  - b. Luke 12:29-32
3. Sowing is related to reaping (spiritual as well as physical)
  - a. Mark 4:24
  - b. Luke 6:36-38
  - c. Matthew 6:14; 18:35
4. Repentance affects wealth
  - a. Luke 19:2-10
  - b. Leviticus 5:16
5. Economic exploitation condemned
  - a. Matthew 23:25
  - b. Mark 12:38-40
6. End-time judgment is related to our use of wealth—Matthew 25:31-46

#### B. Paul

1. practical view, like Proverbs (work)
  - a. Ephesians 4:28
  - b. I Thessalonians 4:11-12
  - c. II Thessalonians 3:8,11-12
  - d. I Timothy 5:8

2. Spiritual view like Jesus (things are fleeting, be content)
  - a. I Timothy 6:6-10 (contentment)
  - b. Philippians 4:11-12 (contentment)
  - c. Hebrews 13:5 (contentment)
  - d. I Timothy 6:17-19 (generosity and trust in God, not riches)
  - e. I Corinthians 7:30-31 (transformation of things)

#### IV. Conclusions

- A. There is no systematic biblical theology concerning wealth.
- B. There is no definitive passage on this subject; therefore, insights much be gleaned from different passages. Take care not to read your views into these isolated texts.
- C. Proverbs, which was written by the wise men (sages), has a different perspective than other biblical genres. Proverbs is practical and individually focused. It balances and must be balanced by other Scripture (cf. Jer. 18:18).
- D. Our day needs to analyze its views and practices concerning wealth in light of the Bible. Our priorities are misplaced if capitalism or communism are our only guide. Why and how one succeeds are more important questions than how much one has accumulated.
- E. Accumulation of wealth must be balanced with true worship and responsible stewardship (cf. II Cor. 8-9).

**4:5 “fool”** This verse is possibly a proverb or a quote. This kind of mindless self destruction is also seen in Isa. 9:20. Lack of effort leads to destruction, but effort itself has no lasting benefit!

**4:6** This verse is possibly another proverb (e.g., Prov. 15:16,17; 16:8) or quote. It is meant to highlight the futility of human effort apart from God. It is possible that “rest” here represents 2:24-26; 3:12,13,22; 5:18; 9:7-9. It so, then the workaholic and the sluggard are contrasted.

#### **NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 4:7-8**

**<sup>7</sup>Then I looked again at vanity under the sun. <sup>8</sup>There was a certain man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches and he never asked, "And for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?" This too is vanity and it is a grievous task.**

**4:7** This is a recurrent and theologically significant theme. See note at 1:3.

#### **4:8**

<b>NASB</b>	<b>“dependent”</b>
<b>NKJV, JPSOA</b>	<b>“companion”</b>
<b>NRSV</b>	-----
<b>TEV</b>	-----
<b>NJB</b>	<b>“child”</b>
<b>LXX</b>	<b>“a second”</b>
<b>REV</b>	<b>“a friend”</b>

The Hebrew has “a second” (BDB 1041), which is simply the numeral. It can refer to almost anything. Context becomes crucial. You can see by the translations the different relationships possible.

This verse describes a “workaholic.” They work for the fun of the work. Work becomes their goal and purpose in life! Work becomes their god!

☐ **“his eyes were not satisfied with riches”** In many ways (without God) wealth is a curse. Before long it controls us! Those who are wealthy in earthly things never seem to have enough of them. Life is consumed with more and more; then every effort is made to protect what is accumulated! A good modern example of this strange truth is the disaster of winning a lot of money in the lottery. Statistics show that winning destroys the winners! We need more than wealth and possessions to find true happiness and lasting gain. We need God. We were created by Him and for Him. Apart from Him there is no purpose or lasting joy!

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 4:9-12**

**<sup>9</sup>Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. <sup>10</sup>For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. <sup>11</sup>Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm *alone*? <sup>12</sup>And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three *strands* is not quickly torn apart.**

**4:9-12** This paragraph speaks of the advantage of companionship. This is the same Hebrew term “a second” (BDB 1040) from v. 8 used in vv. 9,10,11,12. Two are always better than one (BDB 25) and three better than two (cf. v. 12b).

Another human being changes the equation. Now self is not the only issue. Now the focus and effect of the Fall are reduced. Companionship and community trump isolation and self.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 4:13-16**

**<sup>13</sup>A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows *how* to receive instruction. <sup>14</sup>For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. <sup>15</sup>I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him. <sup>16</sup>There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them, and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him, for this too is vanity and striving after wind.**

**4:13-16** This is so specific. It must refer to a historical incident (possibly [1] Joseph and Pharaoh] or [2] Saul and David). However, the point of the whole paragraph is the fickleness of the populace. No lasting help can come from politics. Fallen humanity cannot be governed into blessings and peace. Selfishness, corruption, and greed will permeate all!

**4:13 “poor”** This Hebrew term (BDB 587) is found only four times in Ecclesiastes (cf. 4:13; 9:15[twice],16) and means “a poor man.”

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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These discussion questions are provided to help you think through the major issues of this section of the book. They are meant to be thought provoking, not definitive.

1. List the areas of life the *Qoheleth* says is vanity.
2. What is the meaning of verses 2-3?
3. Are verses 5 and 6 contradictory?
4. What kind of man is described in verse 8?
5. Does the king in verse 13 represent all places of leadership or is he a real king?



# ECCLESIASTES 5

## PARAGRAPH DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
Your Attitude Toward God	Fear God, Keep Your Vows	Advice on Religious Observance	Don't Make Rash Promises	Society (4:1-5:8)
5:1-7	5:1-3	5:1-2	5:1-7	5:1 [5:2]
	(1)			
	(2-3)			5:2 [5:3]
		5:3		5:3-5 [5:4-6]
	5:4-7	5:4-6		
	(4-5)			
	(6-7)			5:6 [5:7]
		5:7		5:7-8 [5:8-9]
	The Vanity of Gain and Honor (5:8-6:12)	Oppression	Life is Useless (5:8-6:12)	
5:8-9	5:8-9	5:8	5:8	
The Folly of Riches		The Topic of Possessions (5:10-6:9)	5:9	
5:10-12	5:10-12 (10)	5:10	5:10-12	5:10 [5:11]
	(11)	5:11		5:11 [5:12]
	(12)	5:12		5:12-16 [13-17]
5:13-17	5:13-17	5:13-17	5:13-17	
				5:17-19 [18-20]
5:18-20	5:18-20	5:18-20	5:18-20	

**READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section)**  
***FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL***

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Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the five translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph

3. Third paragraph

4. Etc.

## OPENING STATEMENTS

A. Chapters 4-5 form a literary unit.

B. Chapter 5 begins with a number of commands (warnings) about worship:

1. “Guard your steps,” v. 1, BDB 1036, KB 1581, *Qal* IMPERATIVE
2. “Do not be hasty in word,” v. 2, BDB 96, KB 111, *Piel* IMPERFECT, but used in a JUSSIVE sense
3. “Impulsive in thought,” v. 2, BB 554, KB 553, *Piel* IMPERFECT, but used in a JUSSIVE sense
4. “Let your words be few,” v. 2, BDB 224, KB 243, *Qal* IMPERFECT, but used in a JUSSIVE sense
5. “Do not be late” (in paying a vow), v. 4, BDB 29, KB 34, *Piel* IMPERFECT, but used in a JUSSIVE sense
6. “Pay what you vow,” v. 4, BDB 1022, KB 1532, *Piel* IMPERATIVE
7. “Do not say. . .,” v. 6, BDB 56, KB 65, *Qal* IMPERFECT, but used in a JUSSIVE sense
8. “Fear God,” v. 7, BDB 431, KB 432, *Qal* IMPERATIVE

The paragraph, vv. 1-7, deals with proper worship attitudes and procedures. The summary command is in v. 7 (i.e., #8).

C. The recurrent conclusions of Qoheleth are

1. Enjoy each day and the simple God-given pleasures of life as they come (2:24-26; 3:12,13,22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-9).
2. Fear God (1:7; 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12; 12:13) and keep His commandments (cf. 12:13)!

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 5:1-3

<sup>1</sup>Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. <sup>2</sup>Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few. <sup>3</sup>For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words.

**5:1** This is an affirmation of the priority of attitude. Verses 1-7 deal with warnings associated with religious worship.

▣ **“the house of God”** This refers originally to the tabernacle, but later to the Temple in Jerusalem.

▣ **“to listen”** This is an important and common Hebrew term (BDB 1033, KB 1570, *Qal* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT). It means “to hear so as to do.” It focuses on actions, not just information (cf. 1:8; 5:1; 7:5 [twice],21; 9:16,17; 12:13; James 1:22-25).

▣ **“to offer”** This (BDB 678, KB 733, *Qal* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT, “give” or “set”) is not the usual word for offering a sacrifice. In context it may refer to sacrifices of the lips (vows).

▣ **“the sacrifice of fools”** Many do religious things thinking they are right with God because of their actions. God wants a faith relationship before ritual or liturgy. The ritual is not wrong, but only meaningful when done out of faith and commitment (cf. I Samuel 15:22; Proverbs 21:3,27; Isaiah 1:10-17; Jeremiah 7:22-23; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:22-24). To put it another way, “God looks at the heart before the hand.”

**5:2** The three VERBS in this verse are all IMPERFECTS used as JUSSIVES. Qoheleth warns of thoughtless verbosity in God’s presence (cf. Prov. 10:19). It is not the eloquence or length of the prayer that impresses God, but the devoted and faithful heart of the one praying!

This verse, in context, may be speaking of making rash vows (cf. v. 4; Prov. 20:25).

▣

**NASB, LXX** “do not be hasty”

**NKJV** “do not be rash”

**NRSV** “never be rash”

**TEV** -----

**NJB** “be in no hurry”

The term “hasty” (BDB 96, KB 111, *Piel* IMPERFECT) has a wide semantic range, but the *Piel* has only two options:

1. “dismay,” “terrify”
2. “hasten,” “make haste”

The second option (e.g., II Chr. 35:21; Esther 2:9) fits this context best.

▣ **“God is in heaven”** See Special topic at 3:1.

▣ **“therefore let your words be few”** This was proverbial in Israel’s literature (e.g., 6:11; Prov. 10:19; Matt. 6:7).

**5:3**

**NASB** “For the dream comes through much effort, and the voice of a fool through many words”

**NKJV** “For a dream comes through much activity, and a fool’s voice *is known by his many words*”

**NRSV** “For dreams come with many cares, and a fool’s voice with many words”

**TEV** “The more you worry, the more likely you are to have bad dreams, and the more you talk, the more likely you are to say something foolish”

**NJB** “From too much worrying comes illusion, from too much talking, the accents of folly”

This may have been a well known proverb. It is structured as a balanced double line. The interpretive problem is the word “dream” (cf. v. 7, BDB 321). It can refer to

1. simply sleep (cf. Job 7:14; 20:8; Ps. 73:20)
2. prophecies given during sleep (cf. Gen. 20:3; 28:12; 37:5,6,9,10; Num. 12:6; I Kgs. 3:5; Dan. 2:28)
3. false prophecies (cf. Deut. 13:2,4,6; Jer. 23:25 [twice],27,28 [twice],32; 27:9; 29:8; Zech. 10:2)

In context motive, not many words, is the focus of vv. 1-7. Be careful what you say to God. He takes it seriously! Fools say anything and often!

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 5:4-7**

**4**When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! **5**It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. **6**Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of God

**that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands? <sup>7</sup>For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God.**

**5:4 “When you make a vow to God”** This is literally, “when you vow a vow.” The VERB (BDB 623, KB 674, *Qal* IMPERFECT) is from the same root as the NOUN (BDB 623). Vows were like deals with God. You do this and I will do this! They were conditional promises based on certain outcomes. I personally do not believe this (foxhole religion) carries over into the New Covenant!

If you promise, do it (cf. Num. 30:2; Deut. 23:21-23; Ps. 22:25; 50:14; 56:12; 61:8; 65:1; 76:11; Prov. 20:25)! The laws concerning vows are found in Leviticus 27.

**5:6** This possibly refers to one trying to get out of their promise (vow).

▣ **“the messenger of God”** The KJV has “angel,” but the context seems to refer to a priest (i.e., worship setting). The Hebrew word (BDB 521) can mean “messenger” or “angel” (cf. Mal . 2:7-9).

**5:7** Human words, though eloquent and multiplied, are vain, empty, and meaningless, be they prayers, dreams (i.e., revelations), or vows. The key is not the sacrifice or the prayer, or the vower, but the object of their address (i.e., God). An attitude of awe and respect (i.e., fear, BDB 431, KB 432, *Qal* IMPERATIVE) is crucial (cf. 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12,13; 12:13).

▣ **“dreams”** See note at 5:3.

▣ **“fear God”** This (BDB 432, KB 432, *Qal* IMPERATIVE) is a recurrent admonition of Scripture:

1. Job, 1:1,8; 2:3; 6:14; 28:28
2. Psalms, 15:4; 25:12,14; 31:19; 34:7; 66:16; 103:11,13; 118:4
3. Proverbs, 1:7,29; 2:5; 9:10; 10:27; 14:27; 19:23; 31:30
4. Ecclesiastes, 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13;12:13

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 5:8-9**

**<sup>8</sup>If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight; for one official watches over another official, and there are higher officials over them. <sup>9</sup>After all, a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land.**

**5:8-9** These verses pick up on the problem of social injustice (cf. 3:16; 4:1; 8:9). The author feels helpless in the face of the pervasive corruption and injustice of government (a hint the author cannot be Solomon).

**5:9**

**NASB “a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land”**

**NKJV “the profit of the land is for all; the king *himself* is served from the field”**

**NRSV “this is an advantage for a land; a king for a plowed field”**

**TEV “even the king depends on the harvest”**

**NJB “the greatest advantage in all the land is his: he controls a field that is cultivated”**

How do verses 8 and 9 relate to each other? This is the problem. The focus is governmental injustice. Is the king the answer or is the King (God, cf. LXX, Leupold, p. 124) the answer! Also, the “lasting gain” (i.e., a recurrent theme, BDB 452, cf. 2:15; 6:8,11; 7:16; 12:9,12) is a common, shared gift from God (cf. 2:24-26).

The Anchor Bible Commentary asserts that “king” should go with the first line (i.e., “and over them all is the king”). This is a possible meaning because the remainder of the thought is “the real wealth of a country is in its cultivated land” (p. 228).

Notice the theories:

1. God, Himself is the answer.
2. “Lasting gain” is only from God.
3. God’s gift of the “land” (cf. Gen. 12:13) is the source of wealth in this life for an agricultural community.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 5:10-12**

**<sup>10</sup>He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance *with its* income. This too is vanity. <sup>11</sup>When good things increase, those who consume them increase. So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on? <sup>12</sup>The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much; but the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep.**

**5:10 “He who loves money will not be satisfied”** Money is not the problem but love (BDB 12, KB 17, *Qal* ACTIVE PARTICIPLE) of money (cf. II Tim. 6:10). Those who make wealth priority never have enough (i.e., “satisfied” negated BDB 959, KB 1302, *Qal* IMPERFECT, cf. 2:8-11).



**NASB, NKJV** “abundance”  
**NRSV** “wealth”  
**TEV** “rich”  
**NJB** “luxury”

The Hebrew word (BDB 242) has a wide semantic range:

1. sound, murmur, roar
2. sound of rain falling
3. tumult, confusion
4. abundance of numbers
5. abundance of wealth

It seems that “money” and this term are in a parallel relationship. So, does it refer to:

1. wealth
2. crowd applause (i.e., fame)?

**5:11 “When good things increase, those who consume them increase”** The phrase “good things” (BDB 375) is purposely ambiguous to cover a range of “good things.” When increase (BDB 915 I, KB 1176, *Qal* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT) comes, consumers increase (BDB 912, KB 1174, *Qal* PERFECT). More of a thing means more workers to help make, distribute, and protect “the thing.” More of something often causes the profit margin of the owner to decrease. Is more better?!

**5:12 “sleep of the working man is pleasant. . .but”** The wealthy are always afraid of losing what is theirs, while the poor man is content with what little he has. Where then is the lasting value?

Again Qoheleth returns to a familiar theme: “enjoy the moment,” “smell the roses along the way,” “happiness is found in the simple, free, daily life experiences of humans” (cf. 2:24-26; 3:12,13,22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-9).

Sleep (BDB 445) is a gift from God (cf. Ps. 4:8; 127:2; Prov. 3:24; 6:22). Those who do not trust God devise evil on their beds instead of sleeping (cf. Ps. 36:4; Prov. 4:16; Micah 2:1). Earthly

possessions rob the owners of sleep (e.g., Prov. 11:28; 18:10-12; 28:11; 30:8-9). The wealthy constantly worry about (1) losing their wealth or (2) getting more!

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 5:13-17**

<sup>13</sup>There is a grievous evil *which* I have seen under the sun: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt. <sup>14</sup>When those riches were lost through a bad investment and he had fathered a son, then there was nothing to support him. <sup>15</sup>As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand. <sup>16</sup>This also is a grievous evil—exactly as a man is born, thus will he die. So what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind? <sup>17</sup>Throughout his life *he* also eats in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger.

**5:13-16** Riches are transitory and temporal. Although one can accumulate much wealth, one can also lose it, and all will leave it behind because humans can take nothing physical into the next life (cf. vv. 15-17). Riches promise much, but often cannot fulfill the expectation.

**5:13**

**NASB, NIV** “a grievous evil”  
**NKJV** “a severe evil”  
**NRSV** “a grievous ill”  
**TEV** “a terrible thing”  
**NJB** “grossly unjust”

This phrase involves two Hebrew terms:

1. an ADJECTIVE, BDB 317, the NOUN which denotes an illness, but as an ADJECTIVE meaning “severe” or “sore” (cf. 5:13,16 and similar form in 6:2)
2. the NOUN, BDB 949, which denotes “evil” (the basic root), “misery,” or “distress”

This phrase occurs several times in Ecclesiastes (cf. 2:17; 5:12,15; 6:1; 10:5).

The term “evil” (BDB 949) is used in Ecclesiastes in several senses. Note NASB and NIV translations.

	<b>NASB</b>	<b>NIV</b>
1. 1:13	“grievous task”	“heavy burden”
2. 2:17	“grievous”	“grievous”
3. 4:3	“evil activity”	“evil that is done”
4. 4:8	“grievous task”	“miserable business”
5. 5:1	“doing evil”	“do wrong”
6. 5:14	“bad investment”	“some misfortune”
7. 6:2	“sore affliction”	“grievous task”
8. 8:3	“an evil matter”	“for a bad cause”
9. 8:5	“trouble”	“harm”
10. 8:9	“to his hurt”	“to his own hurt”
11. 8:11	“an evil deed”	“to do wrong”
12. 8:12	“does evil”	“crimes”
13. 9:2	“the wicked”	“the bad”
14. 9:3	“evil” (twice)	“evil” (twice)
15. 9:12	“treacherous net”	“cruel net”
16. 10:5	“an evil”	“an evil”
17. 10:13	“wicked”	“wicked”
18. 12:14	“evil”	“evil”

By this limited comparison you can quickly see the range of meanings for this common NOUN. Qoheleth uses it again and again. He saw this world as sick and unjust because of fallen humanity bent toward self and the terrible exploitation of each other.

#### **5:14**

<b>NASB</b>	<b>“a bad investment”</b>
<b>NKJV, NIV</b>	<b>“misfortune”</b>
<b>NRSV</b>	<b>“a bad venture”</b>
<b>TEV</b>	<b>“some bad evil”</b>
<b>NJB, JPSOA</b>	<b>“unlucky venture”</b>

This term (BDB 775) is used several times only in Ecclesiastes (cf. 1:13; 2:23,26; 3:10; 4:8; 5:3,14; 8:16). Its basic meaning is “task.” The NASB translates it as

1. “task,” 1:13; 2:23,26; 3:10; 4:8; 8:16
2. “effort,” 5:3
3. “investment,” 5:14

The NIV translates it as

1. “burden,” 1:13; 3:10
2. “work,” 2:23
3. “task,” 2:26
4. “business,” 4:8
5. “cares,” 5:3
6. “misfortune,” 5:14
7. “labor,” 8:16

BDB offers two suggestions on its meaning in 5:13

1. a bad business
2. a bad affair

**5:17 “eats in darkness”** This phrase refers to (1) a workaholic, (2) a stingy man, or (3) someone once wealthy, but now poor!

The term “darkness” (BDB 365) is used in several senses in Ecclesiastes and Wisdom Literature:

1. literal, Eccl. 2:13; Job 26:10
2. ignorance, Eccl. 2:14; Job 37:19
3. distress, Eccl. 5:17; 11:8; Job 15:22,23,30; 20:26; 22:11; 23:17; 29:3; Ps. 107:10,14; 112:4
4. obscurity, Eccl. 6:4 [twice]

#### **▣**

<b>NASB</b>	<b>“great vexation”</b>
<b>NKJV</b>	<b>“much sorrow”</b>
<b>NRSV, JPSOA</b>	<b>“much vexation”</b>
<b>TEV</b>	<b>“grief”</b>
<b>NJB</b>	<b>“mourning, many sorrows”</b>
<b>NIV</b>	<b>“great frustration”</b>

The term (BDB 494) denotes an anger or frustration (cf. Ps. 112:10). It is used twice in Ecclesiastes (5:17; 7:9). It is often used of YHWH in Deut. 4:25; 9:18; 31:29; 32:16,21(twice); Ps. 78:58; 106:29; Jer. 7:18,19; 8:19; 11:17; 25:6,7; 32:29,30,32; 44:3,8.

#### **NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 5:18-20**

**<sup>18</sup>Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun *during* the few years of his life which God has given him; for**

**this is his reward. <sup>19</sup>Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. <sup>20</sup>For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.**

**5:18-19 “to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one’s labor. . .which God has given him”** Notice the contrast between vv. 17 and 18! We need to be content with (1) knowing God and (2) enjoying what He has provided daily (cf. 2:24-26; 3:12,13,22; 8:15; 9:7-9).

**5:18**

**NASB, NKJV,**

**NRSV “good and fitting”**

**TEV “here is what I have found out”**

**NJB “so my conclusion is this”**

The literal phrase is, “what I have seen myself to be good which is beautiful.”

The term “good” (BDB 373 II) is used often in Ecclesiastes (45 times), but translated in several different ways (i.e., 2:1,3,24 [twice],26 [twice]).

The second term (BDB 421) is literally “beautiful.” It occurs eight times in Song of Songs. The NIDOTTE, vol. 3, p. 495 asserts that it is only in Ecclesiastes that this term means “proper” (cf. 3:11; 5:18), which makes it parallel to “good.” Remember words only have meaning in a given context. How and why Qoheleth changes the regular meanings (even in other Wisdom books) is uncertain.



**NASB “his reward” [margin “share”]**

**NKJV “his heritage”**

**NRSV, NIV “our lot”**

**TEV “our fate”**

**NJB “the lot of humanity”**

**JPSOA “his portion”**

This is a common Hebrew term (BDB 324) with a wide semantic range, but it is used in Ecclesiastes for temporal benefits for the labor of one who recognizes and respects God’s presence and His gifts (cf. 2:10,21; 3:22; 5:18,19; 9:6,9; 11:2).

**5:19** There are two Hebrew VERBS translated “give”:

1. BDB 678, KB 733, *Qal* PERFECT, very common VERB, cf. 2:26[twice]; 5:18,19; 6:2; 11:2; 12:11. God has given wealth and possessions.
2. BDB 1020, KB 1521, *Hiphil* PERFECT, much rarer VERB which denotes giving power or enabling, 2:19; 5:19; 6:2; 8:9

This second VERB is followed by three *Qal* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCTS that describe what God has given those who respect and obey Him. Verses 18-20 are similar to 2:24-26:

1. to eat, BDB 37, KB 46
2. to receive his reward (lit. “to lift”), BDB 669, KB 724
3. to rejoice in his labor, BDB 970, KB 1333

This series is parallel to v. 18:

1. to eat, BDB 37, KB 46, *Qal* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT
2. to drink, BDB 1059, KB 1667, *Qal* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT
3. to enjoy (lit. “to see”), BDB 906, KB 1157, *Qal* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT



▣ **“man”** This is the generic term for mankind from Adam (BDB 9). It is often used synonymously with *ish* (BDB 35, cf. 6:2; Isa. 2:9).

**5:20**

**NASB, NRSV,**

**NIV** “God keeps him occupied”

**NRSV, JPSOA** “God keeps *him* busy”

**TEV**

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**NJB** “God keeps his heart occupied”

**REB** “God fills his time”

The one VERBAL (BDB 772 I, KB 854 III, *Hiphil* PARTICIPLE means “to keep someone busy” [from KB]. This same root is used in 1:13; 3:10 and translated “task.” God gives both “the grievous task” and the relief from it! Again the worldview (i.e., “under the sun”) without God brings vanity and meaninglessness, but the worldview of awe, respect, truth, and obedience brings a God-given joy in one’s daily labors and family life (be the person wealthy, wise, or poor).

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

These discussion questions are provided to help you think through the major issues of this section of the book. They are meant to be thought provoking, not definitive.

1. Why is this book so hard to interpret?
2. Why does the Author seem so bitter and pessimistic?
3. What is his final answer to life in verses 18-20?

# ECCLESIASTES 6

## PARAGRAPH DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
The Futility of Life	The Vanity of Gain and Honor (5:8-6:12)	The Topic of Possessions (5:10-6:9)	Life Is Useless (5:8-6:12)	Money (5:9-6:12)
6:1-6	6:1-2  6:3-6	6:1-6	6:1-6	6:1-3  6:4 6:5-6
6:7-9	6:7-9	6:7-9	6:7-9	6:7 6:8
6:10-12	6:10-12  (10-11)  (12)	The Human Condition  6:10-12	6:10-12	6:9 6:10  6:11-12

**READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section)**  
***FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR’S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL***

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the five translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author’s intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph
4. Etc.

## OPENING STATEMENTS

- A. Ecclesiastes 6:1 through 8:15 may be a loosely structured literary unit.
- B. Chapter 6 begins with the folly of (hyperboles):
  - 1. riches, v. 2
  - 2. many children, v. 3
  - 3. long life, v. 6
- C. The reason for the folly is:
  - 1. the never-ending cycle of human existence
  - 2. the fact that fallen humanity is never satisfied with physical things (cf. chapters 1-2)
- D. The important question about the meaning of life is asked again in v. 12 (cf. 1:3; 3:9; 5:16). What does it all mean? Where is the lasting profit/advantage?

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 6:1-6

<sup>1</sup>There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men—<sup>2</sup>a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires; yet God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is vanity and a severe affliction. <sup>3</sup>If a man fathers a hundred *children* and lives many years, however many they be, but his soul is not satisfied with good things and he does not even have a *proper* burial, *then* I say, "Better the miscarriage than he, <sup>4</sup>for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity; and its name is covered in obscurity. <sup>5</sup>It never sees the sun and it never knows *anything*; it is better off than he. <sup>6</sup>Even if the *other* man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things—do not all go to one place?"

### 6:1

NASB, NKJV,

NRSV, LXX "an evil"

TEV "a serious injustice"

NJB, NIV "another evil"

This is the Hebrew term (BDB 949) that has been used so often by Qoheleth. It starts v. 1 (evil) and closes v. 2 (sore). See note at 2:21 and especially at 5:13.

▣ "under the sun" This is referring to human values and perspectives only. See note at 1:3.

### ▣

NASB "it is prevalent"

NKJV "it is common"

NRSV "it lies heavy"

NJB "which goes hard with people"

LXX "it is abundant"

REV, NIV "it weighs heavily"

This is an ADJECTIVE (BDB 912 I) and a DEMONSTRATIVE ADJECTIVE (BDB 214). As the translations show there are two ways to interpret this phrase:

1. The evil is common to all humans.
2. The evil weighs heavily on humans.

**6:2 “God has given”** This refers to the sovereignty of God in human life and daily affairs (cf. 5:19). However, His activity is exactly opposite to traditional wisdom (cf. Job’s three friends). Mosaic revelation promised abundance for covenant obedience (cf. Deut. 28), but Qoheleth had seen the prosperity of the wicked (cf. Psalm 73).

▣ **“riches. . .wealth. . .honor”** See II Chr. 1:11, which shows that these things are the desires of all humans. We think these things will make us happy so we pursue them with all our strength and mental focus, but they do not, cannot!

▣ **“God has given. . .God has not empowered”** Notice the active presence of God. In 5:19 this presence is a blessing (“given” and “empowered”), but here the blessing of material possessions is not balanced with the wisdom to enjoy them! Things, without inner peace, do not bring happiness, contentment, satisfaction, or lasting benefit!

We need to:

1. enjoy daily life, whatever it may bring (i.e., 2:24-26; 3:12,13,22; 5:18-20; 7:7-9)
2. trust in eternal life, whenever and however physical life ceases (i.e., 1:3; 3:9; 5:16; 6:11)
3. honor God (cf. 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12)!
4. obey God (cf. 12:13)!

▣ **“soul lacks nothing of all that he desires”** See Ps. 17:14; 73:7; Luke 12:19.

▣ **“to eat from”** This is a metaphor meaning “to enjoy.”

▣ **“foreigner”** This can refer to (1) war; (2) one who is not related by birth; or (3) metaphorically the frailty of wealth in this world. In Israel’s history it refers to Moses’ curses of covenant disobedience in Deuteronomy 27-29.

▣

<b>NASB</b>	<b>“sore affliction”</b>
<b>NKJV</b>	<b>“an evil affliction”</b>
<b>NRSV</b>	<b>“a grievous evil”</b>
<b>TEV</b>	<b>“just isn’t right”</b>
<b>NJB</b>	<b>“grievous suffering”</b>
<b>LXX</b>	<b>“an evil infirmity”</b>
<b>REB</b>	<b>“a dire affliction”</b>
<b>JPSOA</b>	<b>“a grievous ill”</b>

This is made up of a NOUN and an ADJECTIVE.

1. NOUN, BDB 318, meaning sickness, cf. 5:16; Deut. 28:59,61; Isa. 53:4
2. ADJECTIVE, BDB 948 I, meaning injury or wrong. See note at 5:13.

Life is unfair and unpredictable, yet God is actively present. In the Semitic proverb genre called “role reversal” the same occurs. The seeming prosperity of the wicked (so common in our world) will change (cf. Psalm 73). Lasting happiness and contentment sought after so diligently by godless humans will not bring lasting satisfaction. A righteous God will act, will judge, will right the wrongs of this life.

**6:3-6** The paragraph gives several specific examples which seem to go against traditional wisdom teachings. A man may have many children (i.e., sexual pleasure and descendants), or live a long time (i.e., health and many experiences), but he will find no satisfaction (i.e., no lasting advantage, cf. 1:3). His life has been vain, empty, meaningless.

Almost as an aside, Qoheleth mentions, “no proper burial,” which was very important to Jewish people. The word “proper” is not in the Hebrew text. Even if he had had a proper burial without lasting benefit, he would not be satisfied! Preparation for the afterlife is not made at death, but through life!

The NET Bible has an interesting take on this line (p. 1129). It sees it as related to the previous line and referring to an extended life. It mentions Ps. 49:9 and 89:48 as other examples of this poetic parallelism. I think this interpretation is surely possible and fits the immediate context well!

**6:3 “hundred children”** Children are a great blessing from God (cf. Ps. 127:3-5), but they cannot provide a lasting benefit (cf. 1:3; 2:18).

▣ **“lives many years”** Long life is also a great blessing from the Father (cf. Prov. 3:16), but it cannot provide a lasting benefit (cf. v. 6).

▣ **“he does not have proper burial”** In Hebrew this can refer to an elaborate funeral.

## **SPECIAL TOPIC: BURIAL PRACTICES**

### **I. Mesopotamia**

- A. Proper burial was very important to a happy afterlife.
- B. An example of a Mesopotamian curse is, “May the earth not receive your corpses.”

### **II. Old Testament**

- A. Proper burial was very important (cf. Eccl. 6:3).
- B. It was done very quickly (cf. Sarah in Gen. 23 and Rachel in Gen. 35:19 and notice Deut. 21:23).
- C. Improper burial was a sign of rejection and sin.
  - 1. Deuteronomy 28:26
  - 2. Isaiah 14:2
  - 3. Jeremiah 8:2; 22:19
- D. If possible burial was done in family vaults in the home area.
- E. There was no embalming, like Egypt. Mankind came from dust and must return to dust (ex. Gen. 3:19; Ps. 103:14; 104:29).
- F. In rabbinical Judaism it was difficult to balance a proper respect and handling of the body with the concept of ceremonial defilement connected to dead bodies.

### **III. New Testament**

- A. Burial quickly followed death, usually within twenty-four hours. The Jews often watched the grave for three days, believing that the soul could return to the body within that timeframe (cf. John 11:39).
- B. Burial involved the cleaning and wrapping of the body with spices (cf. John 11:44; 19:39-40).
- C. There were no distinctive Jewish or Christian burial procedures (or items placed in the grave) in first century Palestine.

▣ **“Better the miscarriage than he”** This is based on the life of a man mentioned in vv. 1-3. This world’s goods and honors (cf. chapters 1-2) do not, by themselves, bring happiness or lasting benefit (cf. 4:3). Life without God is not authentic life!

The term “miscarriage” (BDB 658) can mean

1. abortive birth, cf. Job 3:16; Ps. 58:8; NRSV
2. untimely (i.e., early or late) birth (RSV)

Number 1 fits this context best (cf. 4:3).

**6:4-5 “it”** This refers to the untimely birth of v. 3.

1. Its birth is in vain.
2. It goes into obscurity (darkness).
3. Its name is covered in obscurity (darkness).
4. It never sees the sun (i.e., light).
5. It never has wisdom.
6. It is better off!

What a pessimism that challenges OT Wisdom teaching! This author wants us to walk to the brink of existence and look straight into the empty nothingness of atheistic humanism!

**6:5**

**NASB** “it is better off than he”

**NKJV** “this has more rest than that man”

**NRSV** “yet it finds rest rather than he”

**TEV** “but at least it has found rest”

**NJB** “it will rest more easily than that person”

The “it” refers to the child of untimely birth, which is contrasted with the man who has wealth and honor, but no peace, vv. 1-3.

**6:6 “thousand years”** This is a symbol of fullness or completeness.

#### **SPECIAL TOPIC: THOUSAND (*ELEPH*)**

This is the Hebrew word for “thousand” (BDB 48). However, it is used in several senses.

1. a family unit, Josh. 22:14; Jdgs. 6:15; I Sam. 23:23; Zech. 9:7; 12:6
2. a military unit, Exod. 18:21,25; Deut. 1:15
3. a literal thousand, Gen. 20:16; Exod. 32:28
4. a symbolic number, Gen. 24:60; Exod. 20:6; 34:7; Deut. 7:9; Jer. 32:18
5. the Ugaritic cognate *alluph* means “chieftain,” Gen. 36:15

#### **SPECIAL TOPIC: SYMBOLIC NUMBERS IN SCRIPTURE**

A. Certain numbers functioned both as numerals and symbols:

1. One - God (e.g., Deut. 6:4; Eph. 4:4-6)
2. Six - human imperfection (one less than 7, e.g., Rev. 13:18)
3. Seven - divine perfection (the seven days of creation). Notice the symbolic usages in Revelation:
  - a. seven candlesticks, 1:13,20; 2:1
  - b. seven stars, 1:16,20; 2:1

- c. seven churches, 1:20
  - d. seven spirits of God, 3:1; 4:5; 5:6
  - e. seven lamps, 4:5
  - f. seven seals, 5:1,5
  - g. seven horns and seven eyes, 5:6
  - h. seven angels, 8:2,6; 15:1,6,7,8; 16:1; 17:1
  - i. seven trumpets, 8:2,6
  - j. seven thunders, 10:3,4
  - k. seven thousand, 11:13
  - l. seven heads, 13:1; 17:3,7,9
  - m. seven plagues, 15:1,6,8; 21:9
  - n. seven bowls, 15:7
  - o. seven kings, 17:10
  - p. seven vials, 21:9
4. Ten - completeness
- a. use in Gospels:
    - (1) Matt. 20:24; 25:1,28
    - (2) Mark 10:41
    - (3) Luke 14:31; 15:8; 17:12,17; 19:13,16,17,24,25
  - b. use in Revelation:
    - (1) 2:10, ten days of tribulation
    - (2) 12:3; 17:3,7,12,16, ten horns
    - (3) 13:1, ten crowns
  - c. multiples of 10 in Revelation:
    - (1) 144,000 = 12x12x1000, cf. 7:4; 14:1,3
    - (2) 1,000 = 10x10x10, cf. 20:2,3,6
5. Twelve - human organization
- a. twelve sons of Jacob (i.e., twelve tribes of Israel, Gen. 35:22; 49:28)
  - b. twelve pillars, Exod. 24:4
  - c. twelve stones on the breastplate of High Priest, Exod. 28:21; 39:14
  - d. twelve loaves, for the table in the Holy Place (symbolic of God's provision for the twelve tribes), Lev. 24:5; Exod. 25:30
  - e. twelve spies, Deut. 1:23; Josh. 3:22; 4:2,3,4,8,9,20
  - f. twelve apostles, Matt. 10:1
  - g. use in Revelation:
    - (1) twelve thousand sealed, 7:5-8
    - (2) twelve stars, 12:1
    - (3) twelve gates, twelve angels, twelve tribes, 21:12
    - (4) twelve foundation stones, names of the twelve apostles, 21:14
    - (5) New Jerusalem was twelve thousand stadia squared, 21:16
    - (6) twelve gates made of twelve pearls, 21:12
    - (7) tree of life with twelve kinds of fruit, 22:2

6. Forty - number for time:
    - a. sometimes literal (exodus and wilderness wanderings, e.g., Exod. 16:35); Deut. 2:7; 8:2
    - b. can be literal or symbolic
      - (1) flood, Gen. 7:4,17; 8:6
      - (2) Moses on Mt. Sinai, Exod. 24:18; 34:28; Deut. 9:9,11,18,25
      - (3) divisions of Moses life:
        - (a) forty years in Egypt
        - (b) forty years in the desert
        - © forty years leading Israel
      - (4) Jesus fasted forty days, Matt. 4:2; Mark 1:13; Luke 4:2
    - c. Note (by means of a concordance) the number of times this number appears in time designation in the Bible!
  7. Seventy - round number for people:
    - a. Israel, Exod. 1:5
    - b. seventy elders, Exod. 24:1,9
    - c. eschatological, Dan. 9:2,24
    - d. mission team, Luke 10:1,17
    - e. forgiveness (70x7), Matt. 18:22
- B. Good references
1. John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology*
  2. D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*

▣ “do not all go to one place” This refers to the common fate of all living things, *Sheol* (cf. 2:14).

### **SPECIAL TOPIC: WHERE ARE THE DEAD?**

#### I. Old Testament

- A. All humans go to *She'ol* (etymology uncertain, BDB 1066), which is a way of referring to death or the grave, mostly in Wisdom Literature and Isaiah. In the OT it was a shadowy, conscious, but joyless existence (cf. Job 10:21-22; 38:17; Ps. 107:10,14).
- B. *She'ol* characterized
  1. associated with God's judgment (fire), Deut. 32:22
  2. associated with punishment even before Judgment Day, Ps. 18:4-5
  3. associated with *Abaddon* (destruction), also open to God, Job 26:6; Ps. 139:8; Amos 9:2
  4. associated with “the Pit” (grave), Ps.16:10; Isa. 14:15; Ezek. 31:15-17
  5. wicked descend alive into *She'ol*, Num. 16:30,33; Ps. 55:15
  6. personified often as an animal with a large mouth, Num. 16:30; Isa. 5:14; 14:9; Hab. 2:5
  7. people there called *Repha'im*, Isa. 14:9-11

#### II. New Testament

- A. The Hebrew *She'ol* is translated by the Greek *Hades* (the unseen world)
- B. *Hades* characterized



1. refers to death, Matt. 16:18
2. linked to death, Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13-14
3. often analogous to the place of permanent punishment (*Gehenna*), Matt. 11:23 (OT quote); Luke 10:15; 16:23-24
4. often analogous to the grave, Luke 16:23

C. Possibly divided (rabbis)

1. righteous part called paradise (really another name for heaven, cf. II Cor. 12:4; Rev. 2:7), Luke 23:43
2. wicked part called *Tartarus*, II Pet. 2:4, where it is a holding place for evil angels (cf. Gen. 6; I Enoch)

D. *Gehenna*

1. Reflects the OT phrase, “the valley of the sons of Hinnom” (south of Jerusalem). It was the place where the Phoenician fire god *Molech* (BDB 574) was worshiped by child sacrifice (cf. II Kgs. 16:3; 21:6; II Chr. 28:3; 33:6), which was forbidden in Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5.
2. Jeremiah changed it from a place of pagan worship into a site of YHWH’s judgment (cf. Jer. 7:32; 19:6-7). It became the place of fiery, eternal judgment in I Enoch 90:26-27 and Sib. 1:103.
3. The Jews of Jesus’ day were so appalled by their ancestors’ participation in pagan worship by child sacrifice, that they turned this area into the garbage dump for Jerusalem. Many of Jesus’ metaphors for eternal judgment came from this landfill (fire, smoke, worms, stench, cf. Mark 9:44,46). The term *Gehenna* is used only by Jesus (except in James 3:6).
4. Jesus’ usage of *Gehenna*
  - a. fire, Matt. 5:22; 18:9; Mark 9:43
  - b. permanent, Mark 9:48 (Matt. 25:46)
  - c. place of destruction (both soul and body), Matt. 10:28
  - d. paralleled to *She’ol*, Matt. 5:29-30; 18:9
  - e. characterizes the wicked as “sons of hell,” Matt. 23:15
  - f. result of judicial sentence, Matt. 23:33; Luke 12:5
  - g. the concept of *Gehenna* is parallel to the second death (cf. Rev. 2:11; 20:6,14) or the lake of fire (cf. Matt. 13:42,50; Rev. 19:20; 20:10,14-15; 21:8). It is possible the lake of fire becomes the permanent dwelling place of humans (from *She’ol*) and evil angels (from *Tartarus*, II Pet. 2:4; Jude 6 or the abyss, cf. Luke 8:31; Rev. 9:1-10; 20:1,3).
  - h. it was not designed for humans, but for Satan and his angels, Matt. 25:41

E. It is possible, because of the overlap of *She’ol*, *Hades*, and *Gehenna* that

1. originally all humans went to *She’ol/Hades*
2. their experience there (good/ bad) is exacerbated after Judgment Day, but the place of the wicked remains the same (this is why the KJV translated *hades* [grave] as *gehenna* [hell]).
3. only NT text to mention torment before Judgment is the parable of Luke 16:19-31 (Lazarus and the Rich Man). *She’ol* is also described as a place of punishment now (cf. Deut. 32:22; Ps. 18:1-5). However, one cannot establish a doctrine on a parable.

III. Intermediate state between death and resurrection

- A. The NT does not teach the “immortality of the soul,” which is one of several ancient views of the afterlife.

1. human souls exist before their physical life
  2. human souls are eternal before and after physical death
  3. often the physical body is seen as a prison and death as release back to pre-existent state
- A. The NT hints at a disembodied state between death and resurrection
1. Jesus speaks of a division between body and soul, Matt. 10:28
  2. Abraham may have a body now, Mark 12:26-27; Luke 16:23
  3. Moses and Elijah have physical bodies at the transfiguration, Matt. 17
  4. Paul asserts that at the Second Coming the souls with Christ will get their new bodies first, II Thess. 4:13-18
  5. Paul asserts that believers get their new spiritual bodies on Resurrection Day, I Cor. 15:23,52
  6. Paul asserts that believers do not go to *Hades*, but at death are with Jesus, II Cor. 5:6,8; Phil. 1:23. Jesus overcame death and took the righteous to heaven with Him, I Pet. 3:18-22.

#### IV. Heaven

- A. This term is used in three senses in the Bible:
1. the atmosphere above the earth, Gen. 1:1,8; Isa. 42:5; 45:18
  2. the starry heavens, Gen. 1:14; Deut. 10:14; Ps. 148:4; Heb. 4:14; 7:26
  3. the place of God's throne, Deut. 10:14; I Kgs. 8:27; Ps. 148:4; Eph. 4:10; Heb. 9:24 (third heaven, II Cor. 12:2)
- B. The Bible does not reveal much about the afterlife. This is probably because fallen humans have no way or capacity to understand (cf. I Cor. 2:9).
- C. Heaven is both a place (cf. John 14:2-3) and a person (cf. II Cor. 5:6,8). Heaven may be a restored Garden of Eden (Gen. 1-2; Rev. 21-22). The earth will be cleansed and restored (cf. Acts 3:21; Rom. 8:21; II Pet. 3:10). The image of God (Gen. 1:26-27) is restored in Christ. Now the intimate fellowship of the Garden of Eden is possible again.

However, this may be metaphorical (heaven as a huge, cubed city of Rev. 21:9-27) and not literal. I Corinthians 15 describes the difference between the physical body and the spiritual body as the seed to the mature plant. Again, I Cor. 2:9 (a quote from Isa. 64:6 and 65:17) is a great promise and hope! I know that when we see Him we will be like Him (cf. I John 3:2).

#### V. Helpful resources

- A. William Hendriksen, *The Bible On the Life Hereafter*
- B. Maurice Rawlings, *Beyond Death's Door*

#### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 6:7-9

**<sup>7</sup>All a man's labor is for his mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied. <sup>8</sup>For what advantage does the wise man have over the fool? What *advantage* does the poor man have, knowing *how* to walk before the living? <sup>9</sup>What the eyes see is better than what the soul desires. This too is futility and a striving after wind.**

**6:7-9** This may be poetry (cf. NJB). The parallel lines would be:

1. all animals toil just to eat (cf. Gen. 3:17-19); yet they can never eat enough to give lasting satisfaction (i.e., they get hungry again), v. 7
2. both the wise and the foolish are caught up in the trials and problems of a fallen world.

The second line is uncertain; it seems to give an advantage (i.e., “street smarts”) to the poor man who has to perpetually cope with less, v. 8

3. all humans want more than they have, yet when they have much (i.e., chapters 1-2) it is still not enough (i.e., vanity, futility, see note at 1:14), v. 9

▣ **“advantage”** This term (BDB 452, cf. vv. 8,11) is a recurrent key word in Ecclesiastes. See note at 1:3.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 6:10-12**

**<sup>10</sup>Whatever exists has already been named, and it is known what man is; for he cannot dispute with him who is stronger than he is. <sup>11</sup>For there are many words which increase futility. What then is the advantage to a man? <sup>12</sup>For who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime, during the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?**

**6:10 “named”** This is either (1) a reference to the naming of the animals by Adam, showing his dominion or authority over them (cf. Gen. 2:19-20) or (2) a reference to man being named “Adam” from the Hebrew *Adamah* (cf. Gen. 2:18-25).

However, in this context it is not the naming of Adam or Adam naming the animals that is the focus, but the repetitive cycle (cf. 1:9; 3:15) of humans naming things. This naming was, in a sense, an act of power and authority. Adam had dominion (cf. Gen. 1:28-30), but lost it (i.e., Genesis 3).

▣ **“for he cannot dispute with him who is stronger than he is”** The “him who is stronger” can refer to:

1. another human (i.e., one person seeks justice from a physically or socially stronger person, cf. NJB)
2. metaphorically of the cycles of time, which have already named everything (over and over)
3. God (cf. Job 9:32; 40:2; Isa. 45:9)

**6:11-12** Human disputation, either with God or one another, cannot solve the problem of meaningless life without hope.

The famous question of Ecclesiastes is, “What then is the advantage to a man?” This is a repeat of 1:3; 2:11,22; 3:9; 5:16! Without a God of justice and mercy there is no joy, benefit, or lasting satisfaction! Life can be good or hard, but what is beyond? Is there a qualitative difference between the fate of a person of faith versus a self-seeking, wicked person?

Human life is fleeting (i.e., like a shadow, cf. 8:13; I Chr. 29:15; Job 9:9; 14:2; Ps. 102:11; 109:23; 144:4). Human life is a laborious toil. What does the future hold? This is the question (cf. 3:22; 7:14; 8:7; 10:14). Is there a fair, just, merciful, unchanging God whose promises can be depended on? This is the faith issue of human existence!

**6:11 “many words which increase futility”** The INFINITIVE “many” (BDB 915 I, *Hiphil* INFINITIVE ABSOLUTE) and the PARTICIPLE “increase” (BDB 915 I, KB 1176, *Hiphil* PARTICIPLE) are word plays on the same term, which means, “make much” or “make great.”

Israel’s Wisdom tradition counseled speaking few words (cf. Prov. 10:19), because words quickly reveal the person’s character and motives.

**6:12 “who”** Notice there are two questions introduced with “who.”

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

These discussion questions are provided to help you think through the major issues of this section of the book. They are meant to be thought provoking, not definitive.

1. Is this chapter an attack on riches and honor?
2. How can death or non-existence be preferred to life?
3. List the ways this chapter teaches the sovereignty of God.

# ECCLESIASTES 7

## PARAGRAPH DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
Wisdom and Folly Contrasted	The Value of Practical Wisdom (7:1-8:1)	Various Comments	Thoughts About Life (7:1-8:1)	Prologue to Part Two
7:1-14	7:1-12 (1-4)	7:1-13	7:1	7:1-7
			7:2	
			7:3	
			7:4	
	(5-7)		7:5	
			7:6	
			7:7	Warnings (7:8-8:17)
	(8-12)		7:8a	7:8-29
			7:8b	
			7:9	(9-10)
			7:10	
			7:11-12	(11)
				(12)
	7:13-14		7:13-14	(13)
		7:14		(14)
7:15-18	7:15-20 (15)	7:15-18	7:15-18	(15)
	(16-18)			(16)
				(17)
				(18)
7:19-22	(19)	7:19	7:19	(19)
	(20)	7:20	7:20	(20)
	7:21-22	7:21-22	7:21-22	(21)
				(22)
		The Meaning of Existence is Hidden (7:23-8:9)		
7:23-26	7:23-26	7:23-26	7:23-25	(23-24)
				(25)
			7:26-29	(26-29)
7:27-29	7:27-29	7:27-29		

**READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section)**  
***FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL***

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the five translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph
4. Etc.

**CONTEXTUAL INSIGHTS**

- A. Although this is a series of loosely related subjects, they are related and must be interpreted in context.
- B. This chapter, as much of Ecclesiastes, reflects “the two ways” of life (e.g., Deut. 30:1,15,19; Psalm 1).
- C. There are a number of commands found in chapter 7 and the beginning of chapter 8:
  1. 7:9, “be eager,” BDB 96, KB 111, *Piel* IMPERFECT used in a JUSSIVE sense
  2. 7:10, “say,” BDB 55, KB 65, *Qal* IMPERFECT used in a JUSSIVE sense
  3. 7:13, “consider,” BDB 906, KB 1157, *Qal* IMPERATIVE (lit. “see”)
  4. 7:14, “be happy,” BDB 224, KB 243, *Qal* IMPERATIVE (“happy” BDB 375 III)
  5. 7:14, “consider,” BDB 906, KB 1157, *Qal* IMPERATIVE (lit. “see”)
  6. 7:16, “do not be excessively righteous,” BDB 224, KB 243, *Qal* JUSSIVE
  7. 7:16, “do not be overly wise,” BDB 314, KB 314, *Hithpael* IMPERFECT used in a JUSSIVE sense
  8. 7:17, “do not be excessively wicked,” BDB 957, KB 1294, *Qal* IMPERFECT used in a JUSSIVE sense
  9. 7:17, “do not be a fool,” BDB 224, KB 243, *Qal* JUSSIVE
  10. 7:18, “let go,” BDB 628, KB 679, *Hithpael* JUSSIVE
  11. 7:21, “take seriously,” BDB 678, KB 733, *Qal* IMPERFECT used in a JUSSIVE sense (lit. “give your heart”)
  12. 7:23, “be wise,” BDB 314, KB 314, *Qal* COHORTATIVE
  13. 7:27, “behold,” BDB 906, KB 1157, *Qal* IMPERATIVE (lit. “see”)
  14. 7:29, “behold,” BDB 906, KB 1157, *Qal* IMPERATIVE (lit. “see”)
  15. 8:2, “keep,” BDB 1036, KB 1581, *Qal* IMPERATIVE
  16. 8:3, “do not be in a hurry,” BDB 96, KB 111, *Niphal* IMPERFECT used in a JUSSIVE sense

17. 8:3, “do not join in,” BDB 763, KB 840, *Qal* IMPERFECT used in a JUSSIVE sense (lit. “stand” or “stop”)
- D. The UBS Translator’s Handbook on Ecclesiastes (p. 214) asserts that the last two rhetorical questions of 6:12 are answered in 7:1-14 (6:12a is answered in 7:1-12 and 6:12b is linked to 7:13-14 by the phrase “after him” [BDB 29]). This gives a contextual relationship for interpretation that attempts to follow the intent of the original inspired author. Only the original author (and in some cases, editors) are inspired. No modern preacher, teacher or individual is inspired. They are illumined by the Holy Spirit to understand the major truths and especially gospel implications. Modern interpreters may disagree, but Scripture does not contradict itself. This last statement is tricky to make with a book like Ecclesiastes, where a tongue-in-cheek critique of human culture and life devoid of God is presented! Qoheleth is stating things purposefully in a way that challenges traditional wisdom teaching to help his readers think about the unfairness and injustice so prevalent in this fallen world. Theological, pithy statements do not cover all circumstances!
- E. Verses 1-14 are poetic (NAB, NKJV, NRSV, NJB).
- F. Remember this is a tongue-in-cheek (like, “under the sun”) sarcasm on life without God.

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 7:1-14

- <sup>1</sup>A good name is better than a good ointment,  
And the day of *one's* death is better than the day of one's birth.
- <sup>2</sup>It is better to go to a house of mourning  
Than to go to a house of feasting,  
Because that is the end of every man,  
And the living takes *it* to heart.
- <sup>3</sup>Sorrow is better than laughter,  
For when a face is sad a heart may be happy.
- <sup>4</sup>The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning,  
While the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure.
- <sup>5</sup>It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man  
Than for one to listen to the song of fools.
- <sup>6</sup>For as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot,  
So is the laughter of the fool; And this too is futility.
- <sup>7</sup>For oppression makes a wise man mad,  
And a bribe corrupts the heart.
- <sup>8</sup>The end of a matter is better than its beginning;  
Patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit.
- <sup>9</sup>Do not be eager in your heart to be angry,  
For anger resides in the bosom of fools.
- <sup>10</sup>Do not say, "Why is it that the former days were better than these?"  
For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this.
- <sup>11</sup>Wisdom along with an inheritance is good

**And an advantage to those who see the sun.**

<sup>12</sup>**For wisdom is protection *just* as money is protection,**

**But the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors.**

<sup>13</sup>**Consider the work of God,**

**For who is able to straighten what He has bent?**

<sup>14</sup>**In the day of prosperity be happy,**

**But in the day of adversity consider—**

**God has made the one as well as the other**

**So that man will not discover anything *that will be* after him.**

**7:1 “A good name is better than a good ointment”** It is the word “good” (BDB 373 II), often translated “better,” that links chapters 6 and 7 together (cf. 6:3,9,12 and 7:1[twice], 2,3,5, 8[twice], 10, 11,14,18,20,26; often translated as the comparison, “better”). Where is “the good” found?

▣ **“A good name”** This refers to a godly character and lifestyle through time (cf. Prov. 22:1). Who we are is more important than what we have or do not have!

▣ **“good ointment”** Good ointment (BDB 1032) is in a contrasting relationship to “good name.” Ointment can refer to:

1. an outward appearance (TEV, “expensive perfume”)
2. a need for healing and restoration
3. a time of festival

▣ **“the day of *one’s* death is better”** This must be linked with verse 1a in regard to the foolishness and destruction (temporal and eschatological) of inappropriate living. In 9:4 life is affirmed, so don’t jump to conclusions or proof-text this book!

**7:2 “house of mourning”** “House of. . .” is a Semitic idiom (cf. v. 4, i.e., Bethel, Bethlehem).

All of the contrasts (“better than. . .”) of this chapter are based on the conclusion summary of v. 8a. Since life is vanity, its end is preferred to its beginning.

The NOUN “end” (BDB 693) is used only five times in the OT and three of them are in Ecclesiastes:

1. 3:11
2. 7:2
3. 12:13

Qoheleth focuses on the mystery of knowing God and trying to understand His plans and purposes for mankind, but he knows well the inevitable end (i.e., every organic thing becomes inorganic again, i.e., dust-to-dust awaits us all).

▣ **“house of feasting”** Literally “house of drinking” (BDB 1059, cf. Esther 3:15; 7:1) refers to an event like the birth of a child to a friend. These two phrases are parallel in vv. 2-5.

▣ **“Because that is the end of every man”** Riotous living tends to cause us to live in unreality concerning the common, certain and sudden end of human life (TEV). Pleasure tends to be an opiate. Suffering can have a positive spiritual benefit (e.g. Heb. 5:8; Rom. 5:3-5)!

▣ **“the living takes *it* to heart”** This phrase can have several meanings:

1. Only the living can understand and have wisdom, not the dead.
2. The living should reflect on the reality of their own eventual mortality.



3. The wise ones think about these things (similar to “let him who has an ear hear” of the NT). If #2 or #3 is correct, then the VERB (BDB 678, KB 733, *Qal* IMPERFECT) may be functioning as a JUSSIVE.

**7:3 “Sorrow is better than laughter”** This parallels v. 2. Suffering often brings one to God, while pleasure seldom does (cf. Matt. 5:1; II Cor. 7:10).



**NASB “for when a face is sad a heart may be happy”**

**NKJV “for by a sad countenance the heart is made better”**

**NRSV “for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad”**

**TEV “it may sadden your face, but sharpen your understanding”**

**NJB “a joyful heart may be concealed behind sad looks”**

In context Qoheleth is (1) saying that life’s difficulties have the potential to awaken a spiritual dimension (TEV). This is the focus of Deuteronomy 27-28, as well as the plagues of Egypt that caused some Egyptians to believe in YHWH (cf. Exod. 12:38); similarly the “seals” and “trumpets” judgments of the book of Revelation. Or (2) contrasting the feelings of the immediate (daily life) with the world view of eternity. This life makes us sad; all of us have problems in this world, but if we have faith and obedience, even these sad times give us hope, peace, and strength.

The author is not condemning happiness. Just the opposite, he is advocating an appropriate peace and contentment that is not based on temporal circumstances alone. A book outside the Bible that has helped me in this area is Hannah Whithall Smith’s *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life*.

▣ **“sad”** This term (BDB 947) usually means “evil” or “bad,” but in a few places it refers to sadness (cf. Neh. 2:2; Prov. 25:20).

**7:4-5** Verses 4 and 5 parallel verses 2 and 3.

**7:5 “the rebuke of a wise man”** The term “rebuke” (BDB 172) is from the Aramaic VERB “cry out.” The Bible records two kinds of rebukes:

1. from God, Job 26:11; Ps. 18:15; 39:11; 76:6; 80:16; 104:7; 106:9; Isa. 50:2; 51:20; 66:5,15
2. from other humans, Prov. 13:1,8; 17:10; Eccl. 7:5; Isa. 30:17 (twice, NASB, “threat”). It is alluded to in Ps. 141:5; Prov. 6:23; 13:18; 15:31-33; 25:12; Eccl. 9:17.

Rebukes are unpleasant, but a wise person hears and heeds the words of rebuke from a biblically informed person rather than flattering words from an earthly person. This type of statement is common in Proverbs (e.g., 12:15; 13:14; 25:12).

▣ **“the song of fools”** This refers to a pleasure oriented life. It is parallel to “laughter of fools” in v. 6.

**7:6 “the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot”** Thorn bushes make poor cooking fires. They burn too hot and too fast (cf. Ps. 58:9; 118:12). As the fire promises and cannot deliver, so too the laughter of fools!

▣ The term “laughter” (BDB 966) is used often in Ecclesiastes (cf. 2:2; 3:4; 7:3,5,6). It is used metaphorically of the person who seeks instant gratification. It denotes life that focuses on the pleasure of this life in an existential moment, but does not ponder the “lasting benefit.”

**7:7 “oppression makes a wise man mad”** The injustice of life causes many people (even believers) problems (cf. 4:1; 5:8) if we don’t allow God time to set it straight; sometimes it is not until the afterlife.

▣ **“bribe”** This is not the normal word for “bribe” (BDB 1005, cf. Exod. 23:8; Deut. 16:19), but is the word “gift” (BDB 682), used in a specialized sense (cf. Prov. 15:27).

It must be recognized that v. 7 does not fit into the context easily. The NKJV and NJB see it as relating to the previous verses (i.e., 5-7). From v. 1 the text has been referring to how wise men think. However, fallen humanity (oppression and bribery) can affect even the wise. Wisdom is reflected in how one lives, not just how one thinks. The term *shema* (BDB 1033), which means “to hear so as to do” (cf. James 1:22-25), is used twice in v. 5!

**7:8 “The end of a matter is better than its beginning”** This may be (1) a summary statement or (2) related to v. 1 about a good name which is acquired with time and must be maintained. Often we judge something or someone too quickly and are disappointed.

▣ **“Patience of spirit is better”** Verse 8, second line, contrasts two kinds of people by the repeated use of “spirit” (BDB 924, cf. v. 9), often translated “breath,” “wind,” or “spirit.” It refers metaphorically to the life of a person. Here there are two kinds of people contrasted:

1. “Patient,” literally “long” (BDB 74). This is often used in Proverbs for a person slow to anger (cf. 14:29; 15:18; 16:32; 19:11). However, its most common usage describes YHWH’s merciful character (cf. Exod. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Nahum 1:3).
2. “Haughtiness,” literally “high” (BDB 147), used of a haughty spirit (*ruach*).

Notice the other anthropomorphic usages of “high”

1. literally, of tree, but tree as a haughty person, Isa. 10:33
2. metaphorically, of an arrogant mouth, I Sam. 2:3
3. haughty heart, Prov. 16:15
4. haughty eyes, Ps. 101:5; Isa. 5:15

People of faith are meant to emulate YHWH. People of faith are encouraged to take the long look, not only the immediate (cf. v. 10). The attitude with which people of faith face life is a powerful witness (cf. Prov. 16:32; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 4:2).

**7:9-10** See Contextual Insight C.

**7:9 “Do not be eager in your heart”** The VERB is “eager” (BDB 96, KB 111, *Piel* IMPERFECT used in a JUSSIVE sense, cf. 5:2, “do not be hasty in word”).

The phrase “heart” is literally “in your spirit.” Notice how *ruach* is used to describe several kinds of people:

1. “the patient in spirit,” v. 8
2. “the haughty in spirit,” v. 8
3. “the quick in spirit,” v. 9

▣ **“angry”** The term “angry” (BDB 495) is translated “sorrow” in v. 3 (also note 1:18; 2:23; 11:10). The “slow to anger” God of v. 8 can also be angry (e.g., I Kgs. 14:9,15; 16:33; 22:54; II Kgs. 17:11; 23:19). However, God is angry over human rebellion, but human anger is sparked by self-interest. This emotion quickly reveals the fallenness of humanity (cf. Prov. 14:17; 16:32; James 1:19).

**7:10** Humans without a sense of God’s presence and purpose in their daily lives often seek peace by reflecting on positive circumstances from the past! (i.e. the “good old days”)! However, they

1. cannot be reclaimed
2. were not that “good” to begin with
3. often reflect a fallen view of “good”

God is in the mysterious process of molding His covenant partners into the “people of God.” This takes time (patience) and faith! Focusing on human experiences long since past causes one to stumble in the present!

**7:11-14** There are several key terms in interpreting this verse:

1. “good” (BDB 373 II, see note at 2:26)
2. “advantage” (BDB 452, see note at 1:3)
3. “the sun” (BDB 1039, see note at 1:3)

“Good” and “advantage” point toward more than just a happy life here and now. Happiness and contentment have two foci:

1. now (“wisdom” and “inheritance,” both from previous generations)
2. afterlife (“under the sun,” “see the sun”)

However, they are tied together. Our afterlife is affected by physical life now! Verse 12 explains v. 11 and relates to this life, while vv. 13 and 14 relate to God’s active presence in this temporal realm, but also to the implication of His continuing presence and care. He is sovereign and He is with us and for us, even when circumstances seem to scream the opposite. If the believer’s joy and peace are based on physical blessings (traditional OT wisdom teaching) they can be removed or changed in a moment! No, the eyes of faith take the long look (cf. vv. 8,10) and trust in God.

I hope as a reader you recognize that my understanding of “under the sun” permeates all of my interpretations of this book. It is a basic presupposition, bias, a priori! Every commentator has these presuppositions (i.e., theological glasses). The first place to analyze an interpretation is the basic presuppositions of the interpreter. All of us have them, you know!

**7:12 “protection”** This is the Hebrew word for “shadow” (BDB 853), which offers protection in the desert (e.g., Ps. 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:1,4). The term “shadow” was used in the sense of brevity in 6:12, but here it is used in the sense of God’s personal presence and protection (like the Exodus).

▣ **“wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors”** Longevity is connected to (1) the will of a sovereign God and (2) the choices of human beings (cf. v. 17; Job 22:16; Ps. 55:23; Prov. 10:27).

**7:13-14** See Contextual Insights, C. God is in control (a recurrent theme, e.g., 1:15; possibly 6:10) even though we can’t always understand the why of our natural or individual circumstances! This inability to understand is purposeful (e.g., 3:11; 7:14; 8:17). Faith, not understanding, is crucial in life and death.

**7:13 “to straighten”** This VERBAL (BDB 1075, KB 1784) occurs in the OT only three times in Ecclesiastes. The first two have it contrasted with “crooked” (cf. 1:15, *Qal* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT; 7:13, *Piel* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT). It is used of human activity in contrast to God’s activity.

However, the third occurrence in 12:9 is used in connection with human proverbs being “arranged” or “set in order” (*Piel* PERFECT). This difference shows the possibility of similar Semitic roots and the uncertainty of the intended nuances and connotations. As the inspiration of Scripture is a faith presupposition, so too, is our ability to understand it. The Spirit is active in both, yet when it comes to translation and interpretation, godly, educated, prayerful believers disagree. It is crucial for all of us affected by sin to search for the main truths of:

1. literary units
2. paragraph/stanzas

and not fight or build systematic theologies on disputed words or contexts!

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 7:15-18**

**<sup>15</sup>I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs *his life* in his wickedness. <sup>16</sup>Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself? <sup>17</sup>Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? <sup>18</sup>It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them.**

**7:15** The opening phrase of this verse goes back to the literary foil of chapters 1-2 (i.e., Solomon). The author is claiming both extensive observational wisdom, yet he also recognizes its absolute folly and futility. Experience has caused him to become pessimistic about earthly life, but hopeful (though veiled) of God's activity both now and in the future (i.e. "advantage," cf. 1:3; 2:11; 3:9; 5:16).

This verse states the theological tension over the circumstances of the righteous vs. the wicked. The traditional theology (i.e., "the two ways") was that God materially blessed the righteous and destroyed the wicked (cf. Deuteronomy 27-28; Ps. 37:25; Prov. 2:21ff; 11:19). However, this did not always work out in life, therefore, Job, Psalm 73, and Ecclesiastes begin to question this traditional premise. This is not meant to depreciate obedience or covenant faith, but to place it in the context of a fallen world. This is not the world God intended it to be. A good Christian song at this point would be "This is the day the Lord has made, I will rejoice and be glad in it."



**NASB** "my lifetime of futility"

**NKJV** "my days of vanity"

**NRSV** "my vain life"

**TEV** "my life has been useless"

**NJB** "my futile life"

The term "futility" (BDB 210) means "vapor" or "breath," but in Ecclesiastes it is used metaphorically to describe the transitoriness and meaninglessness of human, earthly life. It is used five times in v. 12 and thirty three more times throughout the book (three in 12:8). It characterizes human pursuits and activities, including wisdom and righteousness!

**7:16-18** We are warned to be careful of (1) the extremes of legalism and antinomianism or (2) self estimation of one's goodness.

**7:16** This verse, which seems so strange to us as NT believers, has several unusual VERBS:

1. "do not be," BDB 224, KB 243, *Qal* JUSSIVE
2. "excessively," BDB 915 I, KB 1176, *Hiphil* INFINITIVE ABSOLUTE
3. "do not be overly wise," BDB 314, KB 314, *Hithpael* IMPERFECT
4. "why should you ruin yourself," BDB 1030, KB 1563, *Hithpolel* IMPERFECT

The last one denotes a self-deceiving spirit that trusts too much in its own efforts. These, like the self-deceiving wicked, die; sometimes unexpectedly!

The NET Bible (p. 1133) denotes that VERB #4 is translated elsewhere in this stem as "to be astonished" (e.g., Ps. 143:4; Isa. 59:16; 63:5; Dan. 8:27), meaning an OT person who had heard the Deuteronomic promises of health, blessing, and prosperity for the obedient covenant partners may be surprised when the unfairness and fallenness of this age takes the life of "righteous" covenant partners early. They are also surprised when an obviously wicked person lives a prosperous, long life (cf. Psalm 73).

**7:17** "Why should you die before your time" See note at 7:12.

**7:18** This is a summary statement going back to v. 15. From the context Qoheleth seems to encourage

1. a righteous life
2. a prolonged life

both of which are related to an appropriate fear and respect for God (cf. 3:14; 5:7; 8:12,13; 12:13; Prov. 1:7). There is evil in our world and in our hearts! God and His hidden will, goodness, and presence are fallen mankind's (cf. v. 23; 3:11; 8:17) only hope. We cannot fully understand Him or our circumstances, but we can trust Him, obey Him, and abide in faith amidst an unpredictable earthly life!



NASB	“comes forth with both of them
NKJV	“will escape them all”
NRSV	“shall succeed with both”
TEV	“will be successful anyway”
NJB	“will find both”
LXX	“all things shall come forth <i>well</i> ”
JPSOA	“will do his duty by both”
NIV	“will avoid all extremes”
NET	“will follow both warnings”

It is obvious from the translations that the phrase is uncertain. Here are the options:

1. somehow related to vv. 15-17
  - a. will fulfill (i.e., “our duty,” from later meaning in Mishnah, JPSOA)
  - b. will reject (NET)
  - c. will avoid the extremes (NIV)
2. will be successful (NRSV, TEV)
3. will accept the warnings (NKJV)

Numbers 2 and 3 are parallel. Life is unpredictable! God's work and will are hidden! Wisdom cannot find ultimate answers! In light of this, live in fear and faith, leave the outcome to God. Avoid thinking human efforts can ever fully answer or overcome the uncertainties of this age!

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 7:19-22**

**<sup>19</sup>Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. <sup>20</sup>Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who *continually* does good and who never sins. <sup>21</sup>Also, do not take seriously all words which are spoken, so that you will not hear your servant cursing you. <sup>22</sup>For you also have realized that you likewise have many times cursed others.**

**7:19** Wisdom is a strong ally in this fallen world (cf. 7:12; 9:13-18), but it cannot shield the believers from pain, injustice, and bad circumstances.

Please look at the beginning of this chapter where the paragraphing of different modern English translations are compared. Notice that the contextual relationship between vv. 19-22 is uncertain.

1. NASB, one paragraph (vv. 19-22)
2. NKJV, NRSV, TEV, v. 19, v. 20, vv. 21-22
3. NJB, v. 19, v. 20, v. 21, v. 22

These charts at the beginning of each chapter help us decide how many truths are being addressed in each literary unit. Paragraphs are crucial in discerning related contexts. Every paragraph, or stanza in poetry, has one main truth or thought. All lines or sentences must relate to this truth. Be careful of being sidetracked on illustrations or minor points!

**7:20 “who never sins”** This is an affirmation of the fallenness of all humanity (cf. I Kgs. 8:46; II Chr. 6:36; Job 15:14-16; 25:4; Ps. 130:3-4; 143:2; Prov. 20:9; Rom. 3:9-18,23; I John 1:8-2:1). This shows the foolishness of perfectionism and/or human effort (cf. vv. 16-18).

**7:21-22** The writer encourages us not to take ourselves or the words of others too seriously. We often say what we do not really mean!

Another possibility is that all humans are incapable of complete righteousness (all sin, in some ways, at some times). Be careful of judging one another or reacting to insults since you, too, insult people.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 7:23-26**

**<sup>23</sup>I tested all this with wisdom, and I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. <sup>24</sup>What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it? <sup>25</sup>I directed my mind to know, to investigate and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness. <sup>26</sup>And I discovered more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains. One who is pleasing to God will escape from her, but the sinner will be captured by her.**

**7:23-25** Where does the paragraph or stanza start and stop? Is the major point in v. 26 (i.e., NASB, NKJV) the evil woman? Or does this context run through v. 29 (cf. NRSV)? These kinds of questions are crucial, but often there are not textual markers, just the interpreter’s common sense and context!

**7:23 “all this”** How far back does this phrase refer (i.e., vv. 19-22; 15-22; 1-22; or earlier chapters)? Wisdom is hard to find (3:11; 8:17), but must be sought (i.e., Proverbs 1-8).

▣ **“I will be wise”** This VERB (BDB 314, KB 314, *Qal* COHORTATIVE) denotes a self determination. However, human effort cannot discover the mysteries of God or the mysteries of a fallen world (cf. 1:13-18)!

**7:24** Notice the parallel concepts about the difficulty in fallen humanity’s (women singled out in v. 28) search for wisdom:

1. “remote,” v. 23, BDB 935, “far off”
2. “exceedingly mysterious,” v. 24, BDB 771, “deep, very deep” (i.e., Job 5:9; 11:7; 15:8; Rom. 11:33 (twice))
3. “who can discover it,” v. 24, BDB 592, KD 619, *Qal* IMPERFECT (cf. Job 11:7)
4. from v. 28, “I am still seeking, but have not found” (same verb as #3)

▣ **“discover”** This VERB (BDB 592, KB 619) is used nine times in chapter 7:

- 1.-2. “discover,” vv. 14,24, *Qal* IMPERFECT
3. “discovered,” v. 26 *Qal* ACTIVE PARTICIPLE
4. “discovered,” v. 27, *Qal* PERFECT
5. “to find,” v. 27, *Qal* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT
- 6.-8. “have not found,” v. 28 (thrice), *Qal* PERFECT
9. “found,” v. 29, *Qal* PERFECT

Qoheleth discovered he could not discover! The search was sincere, thorough, intensive. God has put in our hearts the desire “to know,” “to understand,” but it is beyond our current fallen ability. The “desire” probably comes from our being made in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen. 1:26-27), but sin has damaged our ability (cf. Genesis 3). Yet we still seek, search, yearn, and strive (cf. I Cor. 13:9-13)!

7:25

NASB "I directed my mind"  
NKJV "I applied my heart"  
NRSV "I turned my mind"  
TEV "I devoted myself"  
LXX "I and my heart went round about"  
REB "I went on to reflect"

Literally this is, "I myself turned my heart." This same VERB (BDB 685, KB 738, *Qal* PERFECT) is used in 2:20. It denotes a point in Qoheleth's thinking where he comes to a decision. Maybe we would say "he got his mind around an issue."

The ancients thought "the heart" was the center of thinking, reasoning, feeling. See Special Topic at 1:13.

▣ Notice the series of INFINITIVE CONSTRUCTS:

1. "to know," BDB 393, KB 390, *Qal*
2. "to investigate," BDB 1064, KB 1707, *Qal*
3. "to seek," BDB 134, KB 152, *Piel*
4. "to know," BDB 393, KB 390, *Qal*

He wanted to understand or possess:

1. "wisdom," BDB 315
2. "an explanation," BDB 363 I, lit. "the sum of things," cf. v. 27; 9:10 (#1 and #2 are possibly a hendiadys)

The search from chapter 1 continues by means of

1. "the evil of folly"
2. "the foolishness of madness"

Alternately, since Qoheleth has just informed his readers of the impossibility of attaining wisdom (cf. vv. 23-24,27), this may mean he turned from the search.

**7:26 "the woman"** This verse seems to be out of context, therefore, some have said "the woman" refers to (1) "godless philosophy" (i.e., wisdom personified, cf. 7:4; 9:10); (2) the "foolishness" (i.e., the word is FEMININE) of v. 25; or (3) the sin of Eve (cf. Genesis 3). Proverbs personifies both evil and wisdom in a woman (cf. Prov. 1-8).

▣ This verse has several metaphorical allusions to hunting animals or violence:

1. "snares," BDB 844 II, cf. Job 19:6
2. "nets," BDB 357 II
  - a. hunter, Micah 7:2
  - b. fisherman, Ezek. 26:5,14; 32:3; 47:10; Hab. 1:15,16,17
3. "chains," BDB 64 (usually referring to human bonds)
4. "escape," BDB 572, KB 589, *Niphal* IMPERFECT (usually referring to human deliverance)
5. "captured," BDB 539, KB 530, *Niphal* IMPERFECT (military metaphor)

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 7:27-29**

**<sup>27</sup>"Behold, I have discovered this," says the Preacher, "adding one thing to another to find an explanation, <sup>28</sup>which I am still seeking but have not found. I have found one man among a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these. <sup>29</sup>Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices."**

**7:27-28** These verses seem chauvinistic, but males are not much better, only 1/10 of 1% (one man among a thousand). The contextual emphasis is on the rarity of wisdom.

**7:27**

**NASB, NKJV,**

**LXX**

**“the Preacher”**

**NRSV, NIV**

**“the Teacher”**

**TEV**

**“the Philosopher”**

**NJB, JPSOA**

**“Qoheleth”**

**REB**

**“the Speaker”**

This term (BDB 875) is found only in Ecclesiastes (cf. 1:1,2,12; 7:27; 12:8,9,10). It may be a *Qal* ACTIVE PARTICIPLE (cf. NIDOTTE, vol. 3, p. 890). In 12:8 it has the DEFINITE ARTICLE (twice) denoting not a proper name, but a title (i.e., the who who gathers or assembles, which could denote wisdom or students). See Introduction, Authorship.

**7:29** This verse asserts two truths from Genesis:

1. Initially all of God’s creation was good (cf. Gen. 1:31). Humans can understand and implement God’s will.
2. Fallen humans are creative and energetic in the area of evil and rebellion (cf. Genesis 3-4; 6:5,11-12,13; 11). Though morally capable, humans turn from God’s will to self-will at every opportunity!

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

These discussion questions are provided to help you think through the major issues of this section of the book. They are meant to be thought provoking, not definitive.

1. Why are verses 1-14 so hard to interpret?
2. What are verses 16-17 referring to?
3. Why is wisdom so hard to find?



# ECCLESIASTES 8

## PARAGRAPH DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
Obey the Rules	The Value of Practical Wisdom (7:1-8:1)	The Meaning of Existence is Hidden (7:23-8:9)	Thoughts About Life (7:1-8:1)	Warnings (7:8-8:17)
8:1	8:1	8:1		8:1-9 (1-8)
8:2-4	Obey Authorities for God's Sake 8:2-9 (2-3) (4-8)	8:2-9	Obey the King 8:2-8	
8:5-9			The Wicked and the Righteous (8:10-9:12) 8:9-10	(9)
8:10-15	Death Comes to All (8:10-9:12) 8:10-13 8:14-15	Retribution 8:10-13 8:14-15	8:11-14 8:15	8:10 8:11-14 8:15
8:16-17	8:16-17	8:16-17	8:16-17	8:16-17

**READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section)**  
***FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL***

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the five translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph
4. Etc.

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 8:1

**<sup>1</sup>Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter? A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam.**

**8:1 “the interpretation of a matter”** This (BDB 833 CONSTRUCT 182) later came to be associated with the interpretation of dreams, especially in Daniel, but here it has no such connotation. It is another way of referring to human reason or wisdom.



NASB	“illumines”
NKJV, NRSV	“makes his face shine”
TEV	“makes them smile”
NJB	“lights up the face”
LXX	“lighten”

It is possible that 8:1 should go with chapter 7 and conclude that discussion. Rhetorical questions often close units (i.e., 6:12). It seems unrelated to what follows unless it deals with how a wise person should act in the presence of a king. However, I personally think the “king” refers to God.

This VERB (BDB 21; KB 24; *Hiphil* IMPERFECT) is often used of God’s face (e.g., Num. 6:25; Ps. 4:6; 31:16; 44:3; 67:1; 80:3,7,19; 89:15; 119:135; Dan. 9:17), but only here of a human face.

▣ **“causes his stern face to beam”** “Beam” literally means “change” (BDB 1039 I, cf. NKJV). This verse means either (1) wisdom gives peace and contentment or (2) wisdom helps courtiers keep their true feelings to themselves (cf. v. 3; 10:4).

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 8:2-4

**<sup>2</sup>I say, “Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God. <sup>3</sup>Do not be in a hurry to leave him. Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases.” <sup>4</sup>Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, “What are you doing?”**

**8:2-3** These two verses have a series of commands:

1. “keep the command of the king,” BDB 1036, KB 1581, *Qal* IMPERATIVE
2. “do not be in a hurry to leave him,” first VERB, BDB 96, KB 111, *Niphal* IMPERFECT used in a JUSSIVE sense
3. “do not join in an evil matter,” BDB 763, KB 840, *Qal* IMPERFECT used in a JUSSIVE sense

**8:2 “Keep the command of the king”** “King” (BDB 572 I) is either a reference to God (i.e., the Targums) or to an earthly monarch (i.e., LXX, cf. Rom. 13:1-7).

It seems to me that the real subject of vv. 2-8 is God, not just an earthly king because

1. the sovereignty of the king, vv. 3-4 (God in v. 11)
2. there is a proper time, vv. 5-6 (cf. chapter 3)
3. humans have trouble, v. 6
4. there is mystery in human affairs, v. 7 (only God knows)
5. God’s authority is emphasized in v. 8 (humans do not/should not have it, v. 9)
6. the phrase “he will do whatever he pleases” is always used of God (cf. Ps. 115:3; 135:6; Jonah 1:14)
7. the vast majority of the uses of “command” (BDB 846) refer to God

Again look at the paragraphing comparison at the beginning of the chapter. This opening section obviously deals with life at court. But how many separate truths are being communicated? Notice how the modern translations answer this question:

1. NASB, NKJV - two
2. NRSV, NJB, TEV - one

▣ **“oath before God”** This refers to an oath of allegiance (1) to God or (2) to the king in God’s name (BDB 990).

**8:3 “to leave him”** This phrase can refer to (1) a rebellion (i.e., Akkadian and Ugaritic usages) against God or (2) leaving the king’s service.

▣ **“an evil matter”** The word has a wide semantic field as its usage in Job and Ecclesiastes (NIV) shows (Kohlenberger III, Swanson, *The Hebrew English Concordance*, pp. 1480-1481).

1. “evil,” Job 1:1,8; 2:3; 21:30; 28:28; 30:26; Eccl. 4:3; 9:3(twice)
2. “painful,” Job 2:7
3. “trouble,” Job 2:10; 31:29
4. “harm,” Job 5:19; Eccl. 8:5
5. “wicked,” Job 35:12; Eccl. 12:14
6. “heavy,” Eccl. 1:13
7. “grievous,” Eccl. 2:17; 6:2
8. “miserable,” Eccl. 4:8
9. “wrong,” Eccl. 5:1; 8:11
10. “misfortune,” Eccl. 5:14
11. “bad,” Eccl. 8:3; 9:2
12. “hurt,” Eccl. 8:9
13. “crimes,” Eccl. 8:12
14. “cruel,” Eccl. 9:12

Remember, context determines meaning (not Lexicons).

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 8:5-9**

<sup>5</sup>He who keeps a *royal* command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure. <sup>6</sup>For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight, though a man's trouble is heavy upon him. <sup>7</sup>If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen? <sup>8</sup>No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind, or authority over the day of death; and there is no discharge in the time of war, and evil will not deliver those who practice it. <sup>9</sup>All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done under the sun wherein a man has exercised authority over *another* man to his hurt.

**8:5 “royal command”** This is a Persian word (BDB 846) used in reference to an order of the king (or of God, cf. 12:13).

▣	
NASB	“experiences no trouble”
NKJV	“will experience nothing harmful”
NRSV	“will meet no harm”
TEV	“you are safe”
NJB	“will come to no harm”

For the word's wide semantic range, see 8:3, where it is translated "evil matter." Could this refer to the righteous obeying God's laws? Notice the term "procedure" (in vv. 5 and 6), means "judgment" (BDB 1048).

**8:6 "proper time"** This is reminiscent of chapter 3 (i.e., God's timing).

▣ **"procedure"** This literally means "judgment" (BDB 1048).

▣ **"when a man's trouble is heavy upon him"** "Trouble" here literally means "evil" (see note at 8:3). The LXX has "knowledge" instead of "trouble." Life is hard and unpredictable, even for the wise, god-fearing person.

**8:7** This mystery of life (humans do not know why, when, or how problems/joys come) is a recurrent theme (cf. 3:22; 6:12; 9:12; 10:14). Human wisdom cannot find the answer to this mystery, so:

1. enjoy life when you can (cf. 9:11)
2. trust (i.e., fear) in God (cf. 9:12,13)
3. obey God (cf. 8:5; 12:13)

This is all we can do (from the sage's OT perspective [cf. 6:12]). Thank God there is a New Testament!

**8:8 "the wind"** The LXX, KJV, NRSV, and REV have "spirit," which is an attempt to balance the next phrase ("authority over the day of death"). Humans often cannot affect or change the events of their lives! Surely evil will not help (cf. v. 13)!

The term "given to it" reflects a direct object from the word *Ba'al* (BDB 127), which means "lord it over" or "rule." Wickedness is personified as an ineffective taskmaster!

**8:9 "under the sun"** This recurrent phrase is the key to my interpretation of the book. See note at 1:3.

▣ **"a man has exercised authority over another man to his hurt"** This is a general summation of the human situation. The dominance (cf. Gen. 1:28) given to humanity in creation has been abused! In Ecclesiastes this usually refers to governmental oppression (cf. 4:1; 5:8; 7:7).

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 8:10-13**

**<sup>10</sup>So then, I have seen the wicked buried, those who used to go in and out from the holy place, and they are soon forgotten in the city where they did thus. This too is futility. <sup>11</sup>Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil. <sup>12</sup>Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly. <sup>13</sup>But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God.**

**8:10** This verse has several textual problems. The question is, how many people are being referred to and how are they characterized?

1. the wicked (NASB, NKJV, NRSV, TEV, NJB, NIV)
  - a. were given a proper burial (implication elaborately)
  - b. attended worship often
  - c. were temporarily praised (there is a textual problem involving "forgotten" [BDB 1013] or "praised" [BDB 986 II]) in the city where they lived and everyone knew they were evil
2. the wicked and the righteous (JPSOA, JAMES MOFFATT Translation)
  - a. wicked were buried with praise

- b. righteous were not praised
  - c. both were forgotten
3. the wicked attend worship and boast of it (NEB, REB, this involves a textual change)

**8:11 “the sentence”** This is a Persian word for “royal judgment” (BDB 834). In this context it must refer to God. His mercy and slowness to anger is taken as a license instead of a call to repentance (cf. Rom. 2:4; II Pet. 3:9)! Time and opportunity reveal the human heart!

**8:12 “may lengthen his life”** This was/is the problem of evil in a fallen world. It is in its own environment! It flourishes here. It seems to prevail over the good. Evil persons may “live” longer, but they will face God one day! It is this seeming unfairness to God’s Word (i.e. Deut. 27-29), unfairness to traditional Wisdom teaching (cf. Prov. 3:2; 9:10-11; 10:27; 14:23; 19:23) that rubbed Job, the author of Psalm 73, and Qoheleth wrong! Where is the God of promises and justice?!

▣ **“still I know it will be well for those who fear God”** This is a faith statement for Qoheleth (i.e., 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13; 12:13; Prov. 1:7,29; 2:5; 9:10). His experience says differently (i.e. vv. 14-15). Yet, he trusts God for a future vindication (as did Job, cf. 14:14-15; 19:25-27).

**8:13 “will not lengthen his days”** This seems in direct contrast to v. 12.

▣ **“like a shadow”** See note at 7:12.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 8:14-15**

**<sup>14</sup>There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility. <sup>15</sup>So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry, and this will stand by him in his toils *throughout* the days of his life which God has given him under the sun.**

**8:14** This verse screams out at the apparent injustice in life (i.e., vv. 10-11). Qoheleth affirms God’s justice (cf. vv. 12-13), but yet there is obvious injustice in this life. This verse begins and ends with “futility”! It is in light of this kind of unfairness that the promises of God (i.e., we reap what we sow, e.g., Job 34:11; Ps. 28:4; 62:12; Prov. 24:12; Eccl. 12:14; Jer. 17:10; 32:19; Matt. 16:27; 25:31-36; Rom. 2:6; 14:12; I Cor. 3:8; II Cor. 5:10; Gal. 6:7-10; II Tim. 4:14; I Pet. 1:17; Rev. 2:23; 20:12; 22:12) are questioned. If the wicked do not reap what they sow in this life, but the righteous often do, then there must be an afterlife to verify God’s promises and implement God’s justice!

**8:15** This is a recurrent theme (cf. 2:24-26; 3:12,13,22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9). Trust God; enjoy the moment! This is the conclusion based on the failure of wisdom to understand or affect the unfairness and injustices of this seemingly random earthly life!

▣ **“there is nothing good”** See notes at 1:1 and 2:24.

▣ **“under the sun”** See note at 1:3.

▣  
**NASB**        **“stand by him”**  
**NKJV**        **“will remain with him”**

## **NRSV “will go with them”**

The VERB (BDB 530 I, KB 522, *Qal* IMPERFECT) basically means “to be joined to.” Enjoyment of the daily gifts of life is to be a companion to daily labor. A contented and merry mood (worldview) makes life successful, not the other physical things (cf. chapter 1-2). I am so glad I have this perspective and a New Testament!

▣ **“the days of his life which God has given him”** (cf. 2:26; 5:18; 6:2; 9:9; 12:7,11).

### **NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 8:16-17**

**<sup>16</sup>When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should never sleep day or night), <sup>17</sup>and I saw every work of God, I *concluded* that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, "I know," he cannot discover.**

**8:16-17** This is either (1) a summary statement which parallels chapters 1-2 or (2) the introduction to a new section (8:16-9:10, cf. UBS *Handbook for Translators*, p. 309 or TEV (8:9-9:12).

1. Wisdom is laborious (i.e., grievous task [cf. 1:13,18; 2:23,26; 3:10], lit., “even though one should never sleep day or night”), v. 16.
2. Qoheleth gave himself to it (cf. 1:13,14)
3. Human wisdom cannot discover God’s purpose (cf. 3:11; 7:23).

This is why v. 15 and later 12:13-14 are advocated!

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

These discussion questions are provided to help you think through the major issues of this section of the book. They are meant to be thought provoking, not definitive.

1. Are verses 1-9 speaking of God or an Eastern Monarch?
2. Why is verse 10 so difficult?
3. Is there a seeming contradiction between v. 12 and v. 13?
4. Why do the wicked prosper and the righteous die early?
5. Can we know God and His will for man?
6. Why are there such varied paragraph divisions in this chapter?

# ECCLESIASTES 9

## PARAGRAPH DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
Men Are in the Hand of God	Death Comes to All (8:10-9:12)	A Judgment About Life	The Wicked and Righteous (8:9-9:12)	Destiny
9:1	9:1-6 (1-2)	9:1-6	9:1-6	9:1-2
9:2-6	(3-4)			9:3 9:4
	(5-6)	Qoheleth Offers Another of His Own Conclusions		9:5-6
9:7-9	9:7-8	9:7-10	9:7-10	9:7-12
Whatever Your Hands Find to Do	9:9-12 (9-11a)			
9:10-12		9:11-12	9:11-12	
	(11b-12)			
	Wisdom Superior to Folly (9:13-10:20)	Wisdom and Might	Thoughts on Wisdom and Foolishness (9:13-10:20)	Wisdom and Folly (9:13-11:6)
9:13-18	9:13-18 (13-16a)	9:13-18	9:13-18	9:13
	(16b-18)			9:14-16 9:17-10:3

**READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section)  
 FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL**

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Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the five translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph
4. Etc.

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 9:1

**<sup>1</sup>For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God. Man does not know whether *it will be* love or hatred; anything awaits him.**

**9:1** Notice the parallelism:

1. righteous men
2. wise men

Wise persons are righteous persons (cf. Prov. 1:13; 9:9; 23:24). The righteous and the wicked are contrasted in v. 2:

1. the righteous vs. the wicked
2. the good vs. the bad (LXX)
3. the clean vs. the unclean
4. the man who offers a sacrifice vs. the one who does not
5. the man who does not swear vs. the one who takes oaths lightly

The “wicked” and “righteous” both refer to covenant people (not people of the world). This follows the theology of Deut. 31:29 and Jdgs. 2:19.



NASB	“explain”
NKJV	“declare”
NRSV	“examine”
NJB	“experienced”
LXX	“has seen”
REB	“understood”

This word (BDB 101, KB 116, *Qal* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT) is found only here and means “to make clear” or “explain” (from the Arabic root, “to examine”). There is some question about the text at this point and some scholars

1. assume that the VERB is a misprint for “seek out” (BDB 1064, KB 1707), found at 1:13; 2:3; 7:25, where the initial *t* and *b* are confused
2. believe that the INFINITIVE comes from *brr* (BDB 140, KB 162), meaning “to be clear” or “to select.” It is used in 3:18 in the sense of “test” or “purify” (cf. Ps. 18:26)
3. divide the Hebrew consonants differently (cf. LXX, “seen”)

▣ **“deeds”** This is the only place in the OT where this word (BDB 714), which normally is used of “service to God,” is used as a NOUN.

▣ **“their deeds are in the hand of God”** This is the continuing theme of God’s sovereignty (“hand” equals “power,” cf. 2:24; Job 19:21; 27:11; Ps. 10:12; 17:7) and humanity’s ignorance of the cause or reason of present events and future events! Fallen humans do not control their!

Scripture assures believers that their lives are in the hand (i.e., control) of God (e.g., Deut. 33:3; Job 12:10; Ps. 119:109; Matt. 6:25-34). However, experience teaches that bad things happen to good people. Life is uncertain at best, yet God is sure and faithful. Faith sees through life’s uncertainties and beholds God!

Life is uncertain and undependable, but God is certain and dependable!



▣ **“Man does not know whether *it will be* love or hatred, anything awaits him”** Life is unpredictable and uncontrollable (contra idolatry, cf. Deuteronomy 18), even for those who serve God (cf. vv. 2,11; 3:22; 6:12; 7:14; 8:7; 10:14).

Since there is not a textual marker as to whom these refer, it is possible to make them refer to

1. the wise men (cf. v. 6)
2. God
  - a. human actions are in God’s hand
  - b. God’s reaction to human deeds

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 9:2-6**

**<sup>2</sup>It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear. <sup>3</sup>This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards they go to the dead. <sup>4</sup>For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion. <sup>5</sup>For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. <sup>6</sup>Indeed their love, their hate and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun.**

**9:2 “It is the same for all”** The same events (i.e., death) occur in the life of the wicked and the righteous (cf. vv. 3,11; 2:14-15; 3:19-20). If the promises of God are sure, how can this be true? This is the mystery of this fallen age (i.e., the uncertainty of life, but the certainty of death [cf. Rom. 5:12,17,18-19])! True life is more than a physical, earthly experience!

**9:3 “in all that is done under the sun”** This is a major interpretive theme (see note at 1:3). It is used six times in this chapter.

▣ **“one fate for all men”** This is a reaction to the traditional OT theology that asserts that if you love and obey God, He will prosper you physically and spiritually (i.e., Deuteronomy 27-29). It is often called “the two ways” (cf. Ps. 1). The book of Job and Psalm 73 also react against the imbalance of this statement when compared to experience (cf. 3:19-20).

▣ **“the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil”** This is the result of the Fall of mankind recorded in Genesis 3, illustrated in Genesis 4, and stated in Gen. 6:5,11-12,13; 8:21; Ps. 14:3; 58:3.

▣  
NASB “insanity”  
NKJV, NRSV,  
TEV “madness”  
NJB “folly”

This word (BDB 239) is used only in Ecclesiastes (cf. 1:17; 2:12; 7:25; 9:3; and a related form in 10:13). It seems to be related to the word for “praise” (possibly similar to Saul’s experience in I Sam. 10:6,10-11 or David’s in I Sam. 21:14 (BDB 237 II).

In 1:17 and 2:12 the meaning is parallel to a search for wisdom and does not have a negative connotation. However, in 7:25 and 9:3 it is parallel with “evil” and is obviously negative. The first pair describes the author’s search for meaning and a lasting advantage, but the last pair describes fallen humanity (cf. Gen. 6:5,11-12,13; 8:21; Rom. 3:9-18). The real question is “Does Qoheleth’s thought

focus on Genesis 3 (i.e., sin, cf. Romans) or on covenant obedience (i.e., Deuteronomy, cf. covenant disciple)?

**9:4** Life is better than death because there still remains the chance to know God (i.e., “there is hope,” BDB 105, lit. “trust,” cf. II Kgs. 18:19). It is difficult to know when Qoheleth is using sarcasm versus tongue-in-cheek wisdom sayings. At points he seems to contradict himself. At these points several exact opposite interpretations are possible! Is he (1) totally pessimistic (i.e., “there is no hope); (2) pessimistic with glimpses of hope here and there (i.e., there is hope possible); or (3) always speaking sarcastically about the fallen world (i.e., there is always hope with God)?

It seems best to me to choose #2. This interpretive stance allows for “under the sun” (see notes at 1:3) sarcasm, but also allows hope texts (i.e., 2:2-26; 3:12,13,22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-9).

The MT has the VERB “chosen” (BDB 103, *Pual* IMPERFECT), but the rabbis recognized this should read “joined” (BDB 288), which reverses the first two consonants.

▣ “dog” This represents street scavengers (BDB 476).

**9:5-6** The “under the sun” logic (sarcasm) of Qoheleth drives him to search for a lasting advantage. If there is no God, there is no lasting advantage:

1. the living struggle with the fear of death (“know,” BDB 393, KB 562, *Qal* ACTIVE PARTICIPLE)
2. the living seek happiness (“reward,” BDB 969 I)
3. the living seek memorials (“no memory,” BDB 271), but in the end the life experience of all humans is the same—death (cf. vv. 2,3,6,11; 3:20)! There is no lasting advantage! No share (i.e., reward, cf. v. 6 [BDB 324]) in life!

He comes to this conclusion based on life observances. This is an unfair, unjust, and surprisingly evil world. Often the promises of God seem not to be fulfilled in this life! The wicked prosper and have longevity! What can a person do? The book as a whole gives two answers:

1. enjoy life when and where you can (cf. 2:24-26; 3:12,13,22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-9)
2. trust God and keep the commandments (even if the lasting advantage is not apparent, cf. 12:13-14)

**9:6** This verse describes the fleeting, transitory life of humans. The term “share” (BDB 324) is translated (1) “reward” in 2:10; 5:18,19; 9:9; (2) “lot” in 3:22; and (3) “portion” in 11:2. It is the term used for God’s allotment of land to the tribes in Deuteronomy and Joshua.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 9:7-9**

**<sup>7</sup>Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. <sup>8</sup>Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. <sup>9</sup>Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun.**

**9:7-9** This is Qoheleth’s answer to the futility and uncertainty of human existence! Notice all the commands:

1. “go,” v. 7, BDB 229, KB 246, *Qal* IMPERATIVE
2. “eat,” v. 7, BDB 37, KB 46, *Qal* IMPERATIVE, cf. 2:24; 3:13; 5:18; 8:15
3. “drink,” v. 7, BDB 1059, KB 1667, *Qal* IMPERATIVE, cf. 2:24; 3:13; 5:18; 8:15; see Special Topic at 2:3
4. “let your clothes be white all the time,” v. 8, BDB 224, KB 243, *Qal* IMPERFECT used in a JUSSIVE sense

5. “let not oil be lacking on your head,” v. 8, BDB 341, KB 338, *Qal* IMPERFECT used in a JUSSIVE sense
6. “enjoy life with the woman. . .,” v. 9, BDB 906, KB 1157, *Qal* IMPERATIVE, lit. “see”
7. “do it with all your might,” v. 10, BDB 793, KB 889, *Qal* imperative, cf. 2:24; 3:13,22; 5:18; 8:15

### 9:7

**NASB, NJB** “for God has already approved your works”  
**NKJV** “for God has already accepted your works”  
**NRSV** “for God has long ago approved what you do”  
**TEV** “It’s all right with God”  
**JPSOA** “for your action was long ago approved by God”

This cannot refer to sin and rebellion, so it must refer to God’s activity within this fallen world (see 2:24; 3:13; 5:19; 8:15)! Life is hard, but we are not alone! God has gifted those who trust Him. In this context it refers to “eating” and “drinking,” which could refer to a daily activity or a religious or social festival (cf. v. 8; 8:15).

**9:8 “Let your clothes be white”** We cannot control circumstances, but we can control our reaction to them. Those who trust God have a positive mind set, which is not affected by circumstances (see Hannah Whithall Smith’s *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life*).

▣ **“oil”** Putting oil on the face and arms was a sign of gladness (cf. Ps. 23:5; 45:7; 104:15; Isa. 61:3).

**9:9 “Enjoy life with the woman you love all the days of your fleeting life”** This command (“enjoy” *Qal* IMPERATIVE) implies monogamy (“love,” BDB 12, KB 17, *Qal* PERFECT, cf. Prov. 5:18-19). Marital contentment is a great blessing from God. The question remains, does “woman” (BDB 61), without the ARTICLE, refer to “wife” or “woman?” The problem is Qoheleth’s seemingly negative view of women found in 7:26 and 28. Does this verse encourage monogamous marriage (if so the author cannot be Solomon!)? The *Qal* PERFECT VERB “love” implies a complete union, not brief encounters! Wisdom Literature used “woman” in two ways:

1. wife to be loved, protected, and kept
2. woman as temptress and symbol of false wisdom or momentary pleasure

As Wisdom Literature used both senses, so too, does Qoheleth!

### **NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 9:10**

**<sup>10</sup>Whatever your hand finds to do, verily do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.**

**9:10 “Whatever your hand finds to do, verily do it with all your might”** See note at 9:7-9, #7. Physical labor originally was not a consequence of sin, but part of Adam’s God-given task in the Garden of Eden (cf. Gen. 2:15). After the Fall labor became a curse (cf. Gen. 3:19). In this context labor refers to making a daily living (i.e., food, shelter, home, family, etc). This aspect of life is a gift from God. It takes our minds off the task of trying to discover God and His purposes, which we cannot do. Work is good! From the NT perspective it can glorify God (cf. 11:6; John 9:4; Col. 3:17,23; Eph. 6:5-7). Do all you do as unto the Lord!

Notice the things that humans do not do in *Sheol*:

1. activity (“work,” BDB 795, cf. 2:4,11; 3:17,22; 8:9; 9:7,10)
2. planning (or “reckoning schemes,” BDB 363 I, cf. 7:25,27)
3. pursue knowledge (BDB 395, cf. 1:16,18; 2:21,26; 7:12)

4. gain wisdom (BDB 315, cf. 1:13,16 [twice], 18; 2:3,9,13,21; 7:10,11,12 [twice], 19,23; 8:1; 9:10, 15,16 [twice], 18; 10:1,10)

▣ **“there is no activity or planning or wisdom in Sheol where you are going”** The OT (except for Job 14:14-15; 19:25-27; Ps. 16:9-10; 49:15; 86:13) depicts death as a conscious but shadowy existence. The faithful are with their families, but there is no fellowship, joy, or activity. Death is a place or abode, but nothing more (e.g., 1:11; 9:5; Job 3:13-19; 10:21-22). Thank God for the progressive revelation of the New Testament!

▣ **“Sheol”** See Special Topic at 6:6.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 9:11-12**

**<sup>11</sup>I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all. <sup>12</sup>Moreover, man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them.**

**9:11-12** These verses highlight the ineffectualness and helplessness of human effort! They again magnify the sovereignty of God. This conclusion is based on the unfairness and injustice that Qoheleth had seen and experienced. Life is unpredictable and uncontrollable (i.e., “for time and chance overtake them all,” cf. v. 12; 8:7).

His conclusions to this situations are

1. enjoy life when and where you can; death is coming
2. trust God even if He is unknown and invisible
3. there is an afterlife and humans will give an account of the gifts and stewardship of life

As I sit here writing this, I am so glad I live in a post-resurrection era. Progressive revelation, the life of Jesus, the gospel, the empty tomb are ours! New Testament believers understand so much more of the eternal plans and purposes of God than any OT person. The real question for us is, “What are we doing with this information?”!

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 9:13-18**

**<sup>13</sup>Also this I came to see as wisdom under the sun, and it impressed me. <sup>14</sup>There was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it and constructed large siegeworks against it. <sup>15</sup>But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man. <sup>16</sup>So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded. <sup>17</sup>The words of the wise heard in quietness are *better* than the shouting of a ruler among fools. <sup>18</sup>Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.**

**9:13-18** This sounds like a specific historical event that Qoheleth had observed (i.e., a series of eight *Qal* PERFECT VERBS; LXX makes them SUBJUNCTIVES, implying a hypothetical situation). These verses magnify “wisdom,” but in the end it is ignored and forgotten! The wise man can affect things, but so can the sinner (cf. v. 18).

# ECCLESIASTES 10

## PARAGRAPH DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
A Little Foolishness	Wisdom Superior to Folly (9:13-10:20)	A Series of Observations	Thought on Wisdom and Foolishness (9:13-10:20)	Wisdom and Folly (9:13-11:6)
				9:17-10:3
10:1-4	10:1-4	10:1-4	10:1	
			10:2-3	
			10:4	10:4
10:5-7	10:5-7	10:5-20 (5-7)	10:5-7	10:5-7
10:8-20	10:8-10	(8-11)	10:8-14a	10:8-9
				10:10
	10:11-15			10:11
		(12-15)		10:12-14
			10:15	10:15
	10:16-20 (16-19)	(16-20)	10:16-17	10:16-17
			10:18	10:18
			10:19	10:19
	(20)		10:20	10:20

**READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section)**  
***FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL***

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the five translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph
4. Etc.

## CONTEXTUAL INSIGHTS

- A. It is obvious that a new context starts in 9:13 (cf. NKJV, TEV, NJB) and runs through 10:20 (NJB takes it to 11:6).
- B. Much of it is poetry (NKJV, NRSV).
- C. The theme is the contrast between the wise person and the foolish person (cf. 9:2).

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 10:1-4

<sup>1</sup>Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom *and* honor. <sup>2</sup>A wise man's heart *directs him* toward the right, but the foolish man's heart *directs him* toward the left. <sup>3</sup>Even when the fool walks along the road, his sense is lacking and he demonstrates to everyone *that he is a fool*. <sup>4</sup>If the ruler's temper rises against you, do not abandon your position, because composure allays great offenses.

**10:1** This verse and 9:18 are related by contrast. One something can ruin everything! We might say:

1. one bad apple spoils the bushel
2. one bad egg spoils the omelet

Foolishness, like leaven, can permeate and affect the whole!

▣ **“stink”** This translates two Hebrew parallel phrases:

1. “cause to stink,” BDB 92, KB 107, *Hiphil* IMPERFECT, cf. Prov. 13:5; Exod. 5:21; 16:24; I Sam. 27:12
2. “cause to bubble” (i.e., ferment), BDB 615, KB 665, *Hiphil* IMPERFECT, cf. Ps. 59:7; 94:4; Prov. 15:2,28

▣ **“weightier”** This term (BDB 429) is from the same root as “precious,” “prized.” It is a play on the Hebrew (i.e., Aramaic) concept of that which is heavier (i.e., metals) is more valuable.

▣ **“wisdom *and* honor”** These are parallel:

1. “wisdom,” BDB 315, so common in Ecclesiastes
2. “honor,” BDB 458 II, also a word play on “heavy” (BDB 458, e.g., 6:2; Ps. 62:7; 84:11; Prov. 3:16,35; 22:4; 25:2). This term is often translated “glory,” e.g., Ps. 3:3; 4:2; 19:1; 24:7, 8,9,10 (twice)

**10:2 “the right”** This term (BDB 411) originally referred to the right hand, which is normally the stronger (i.e., right handed people are more common). This hand is also the one raised in an oath (religious and civil) or the one that held the shield in battle.

Since directions were noted by facing east, it refers to the south.

▣ **“the left”** This term (BDB 969) in Arabic means “unlucky” (cf. JPSOA). It denotes the north.

These two terms are often used in the metaphorical sense of deviating from the standard of God (i.e., “righteousness,” see Special Topic at 1:15). God’s truth or Torah was seen as a well-worn, clearly marked path (e.g., Ps. 119:105). Deviation from the path (in any direction) meant sin and rebellion (e.g., Deut. 9:12,16; 31:29). It became a cultural idiom (cf. II Sam. 2:21).

**10:3** One’s actions reveal one’s character (cf. Prov. 12:23; 13:16; 18:2). We would say, “give a person enough rope and he will hang himself.”

It is interesting that the phrase “his sense is lacking” is literally, “the fool has no heart” (i.e., he cannot think clearly, he lacks judgment, cf. Prov. 6:32; 7:7; 9:4,16; 10:13,21; 11:12; 24:30).

**10:4** This is advice for those who serve the king (or other leaders). It links up with 8:1-4 and 10:16-17,20.



NASB, NJB “composure”  
NKJV “conciliation”  
NRSV “calmness”  
TEV “keep calm”

This term (BDB 951) means “healing,” “cure,” or “health” (cf. 12:18; 13:17; 16:24). Here it refers metaphorically to a sound mind, a calm spirit (cf. Prov. 14:30), which denotes a person not guilty of the charges or anger of the ruler.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 10:5-7**

<sup>5</sup>There is an evil I have seen under the sun, like an error which goes forth from the ruler—<sup>6</sup>folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places. <sup>7</sup>I have seen slaves riding on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land.

**10:5-7** This literary unit also speaks to rulers and the wealthy. As so often in Wisdom Literature, a role reversal occurs (cf. 9:13-18; Prov. 29:2).

**10:5 “I have seen”** This is a recurrent VERB (BDB 906, KB 1157, used 47 times), which highlights Qoheheth’s method of personal observation. He focuses on wisdom as practical and observable in daily life. He primarily (not exclusively) uses natural revelation instead of special revelation (i.e., Scripture) to make his points.

▣ **“error”** This term (BDB 993) implies an inadvertent action or word (e.g., Lev. 4:2,22,27).

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 10:8-20**

<sup>8</sup>He who digs a pit may fall into it, and a serpent may bite him who breaks through a wall. <sup>9</sup>He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits logs may be endangered by them. <sup>10</sup>If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen its edge, then he must exert more strength. Wisdom has the advantage of giving success. <sup>11</sup>If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the charmer. <sup>12</sup>Words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious, while the lips of a fool consume him; <sup>13</sup>the beginning of his talking is folly and the end of it is wicked madness. <sup>14</sup>Yet the fool multiplies words. No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him? <sup>15</sup>The toil of a fool so wearies him that he does not even know how to go to a city. <sup>16</sup>Woe to you, O land, whose king is a lad and whose princes feast in the morning. <sup>17</sup>Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time—for strength and not for drunkenness. <sup>18</sup>Through indolence the rafters sag, and through slackness the house leaks. <sup>19</sup>Men prepare a meal for enjoyment, and wine makes life merry, and money is the answer to everything. <sup>20</sup>Furthermore, in your bedchamber do not curse a king, and in your sleeping rooms do not curse a rich man, for a bird of the heavens will carry the sound and the winged creature will make the matter known.

**10:8** This relates two “unexpected consequences” to one’s actions:

1. A person who digs a pit to capture an animal (or person) will be captured by it (cf. Prov. 26:27).
2. A person breaks through a wall to escape, but in doing so is bitten by a snake hiding there (cf. Amos 5:19).

It must be admitted that the above interpretation assumes a negative attitude on the part of the worker, which is not easily demonstrated from the text itself. It is possible, however, that the results described are merely accidental and unexpected (cf. v. 9).

**10:9** Human actions and words have unexpected consequences (cf. Prov. 26:27).

**10:10-11** Humans can take actions (i.e. gain wisdom) that will help them live their lives easier and better!

The term “advantage” (BDB 452) carries significant theological weight, often referring to a lasting or eternal advantage (cf. 1:3; 2:11; 3:9; 5:16). Here the focus is on this life.

**10:12** There is a play on the term “mouth,” “lips,” and “swallow” (i.e., “consume”). What we say does make a difference (e.g., vv. 13,14; Prov. 10:32; 13:3; 18:21; Matt. 12:37).

## **SPECIAL TOPIC: HUMAN SPEECH**

### **I. OPENING THOUGHTS FROM PROVERBS**

- A. Language is part of the image of God in mankind (i.e., creation is spoken into existence and God talks to His human creation). It is a vital part of our personhood.
- B. Human speech enables us to communicate to others how we feel about life. Therefore, it reveals who we really are (Prov. 18:2; 4:23 [20-27]). Speech is the acid test of the person (Prov. 23:7).
- C. We are social creatures. We are concerned with acceptance and affirmation. We need it from God and from our fellow humans. Words have the power to meet these needs in both positive (Prov. 17:10) and negative (Prov. 12:18) ways.
- D. There is tremendous power in human speech (Prov. 18:20-21)—power to bless and heal (Prov. 10:11,21) and power to curse and destroy (Prov. 11:9).
- E. We reap what we sow (Prov. 12:14).

### **II. PRINCIPLES FROM PROVERBS**

- A. The negative and destructive potential of human speech
  1. the words of evil men (1:11-19; 10:6; 11:9,11; 12:2-6)
  2. the words of the adulteress (5:2-5; 6:24-35; 7:5ff; 9:13-18; 22:14)
  3. the words of the liar (6:12-15,19; 10:18; 12:17-19,22; 14:5,25; 17:4; 19:5,9,28; 21:28; 24:28; 25:18; 26:23-28)
  4. the words of the fool (10:10,14; 14:3; 15:14; 18:6-8)
  5. the words of false witnesses (6:19; 12:17; 19:5,9,28; 21:28; 24:28; 25:18)
  6. the words of a gossip (6:14,19; 11:13; 16:27-28; 20:19; 25:23; 26:20)
  7. the words too quickly spoken (6:1-5; 12:18; 20:25; 29:20)
  8. the words of flattery (29:5)
  9. too many words (10:14,19,23; 11:13; 13:3,16; 14:23; 15:2; 17:27-28; 18:2; 21:23; 29:20)
  10. perverted words (17:20; 19:1)



- B. the positive, healing and edifying potential of human speech
  - 1. the words of the righteous (10:11,20-21,31-32; 12:14; 13:2; 15:23; 16:13; 18:20)
  - 2. the words of the discerning (10:13; 11:12)
  - 3. the words of knowledge (15:1,4,7,8; 20:15)
  - 4. the words of healing (15:4)
  - 5. the words of a gentle answer (15:1,4,18,23; 16:1; 25:15)
  - 6. the words of a pleasant answer (12:25; 15:26,30; 16:24)
  - 7. the words of the law (22:17-21)

### III. THE OT PATTERN CONTINUES IN THE NT

- A. Human speech enables us to communicate to others how we feel about life; therefore, it reveals who we really are (Matt. 12:33-37; 15:1-20; Mark 7:2-23).
- B. We are social creatures. We are concerned with acceptance and affirmation. We need it from God and from our fellow man. Words have the power to meet these needs in both positive (II Tim. 3:15-17) and negative (James 3:2-12) ways.
- C. There is tremendous power in human speech; power to bless (Eph. 4:29) and power to curse (James 3:9). We are responsible for what we say (Matt. 12:36-37; James 3:2-12).
- D. We will be judged by our words (Matt. 12:33-37; Luke 6:39-45) as well as our deeds (Matt. 25:31-46). We reap what we sow (Gal. 6:7).

**10:13 “the end of it is wicked madness”** The NIDOTTE, vol. 1, p. 1040, asserts that this refers to an attitude of life that recognizes no moral law operating in the world. Therefore, this would be taking the metaphor “under the sun” as a life’s motto. In our culture it is the idiom, “you only go around once in life, so get all the gusto you can.” Ecclesiastes addresses this very attitude (cf. 3:17; 9:11; 12:14).

**10:14 “No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him”** This is a recurrent theme (cf. 3:22; 6:12; 7:14; 8:7; 10:14). The future is hidden, even from wisdom! Wisdom is far better than foolishness (cf. v. 15), but it is limited by this fallen period of human history!

**10:15** There are several ways to view this verse:

- 1. work makes a fool tired (i.e., instead of happy)
- 2. fools do not like work (i.e., they are lazy)
- 3. fools cannot find the path to the city (i.e., God’s wisdom, cf. vv. 2-3)

**10:16-17 “Woe”** This INTERJECTION (BDB 33 III), often translated “alas,” is found only twice in the OT, both in Ecclesiastes (cf. 4:10; 10:16), but often in rabbinical literature.

There are two reasons for the woe:

- 1. a young, inexperienced ruler
- 2. drunken, worldly-minded leadership

It is surprising that “young” (BDB 654, lit. “child”) is contrasted with “noble” (BDB 359). Possibly this is related to v. 7 (i.e., slave acting like a prince) or to 4:13-16, a seeming historical example.

### 10:17

NASB, NKJV “blessed”  
 NRSV, NJB “happy”  
 TEV “fortunate”

This term (BDB 80, e.g., Ps. 32:2; 84:5,12; 119:1; Prov. 3:13; 8:34; 28:14) is the literary opposite of “woe,” (v. 16). In Psalms it denotes the blessing of being the covenant people of YHWH.

▣ **“At the appropriate time”** This concept of a divinely appropriate time was first introduced in 3:1-11,17; 7:17; 8:5,6,9; 9:8,11,12(twice); 10:17 (esp. 3:11).

▣ **“for strength”** Food is for activity, not for inactivity (drunkenness, see Special Topic at 2:3). We eat to live; we do not live to eat!! One who controls the base appetite to eat probably can control other areas where self takes control. Self discipline is crucial in a leader!

**10:18** This seems to be an unrelated saying (cf. TEV, NJB), which chastises inactivity (cf. Prov. 24:30-34). It may be related to characteristics of leaders (cf. NKJV, NRSV). The words are rare (i.e., “rafters,” BDB 900) and point toward a cultural proverb.

**10:19** This verse, like v. 20, seems to relate to vv. 16-17 (cf. NRSV).

▣

**NASB** “money is the answer to everything”

**NKJV** “money answers every thing”

**NRSV** “money melts every need”

**TEV** “you can’t have either without money”

**NJB** “money has an answer for everything”

This phrase is not meant to be a negative attack on money. Food (i.e., “bread”) and drink (i.e., “wine”) are seen as gifts from God, so too, the means to buy them. It is possible that the VERB (BDB 772 I, KB 851, *Qal* IMPERFECT) is meant to be understood as in 5:20 (“the other use of this VERB in Ecclesiastes), “keep him occupied.” In this sense money allows “feasts,” “parties,” “social occasions” for all to keep their minds off (1) the vanity of all things and (2) the mysteries of God’s activities.

**10:20** The VERB “curse” (BDB 886, KB 1103, used twice) is a *Piel* IMPERFECT used in a JUSSIVE sense.

It is hard to keep reckless words a secret (cf. Luke 12:3)! Those who hear these outbursts often use them for self interest (i.e., tell the king in order to gain favor).

# ECCLESIASTES 11

## PARAGRAPH DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
Cast Your Bread on the Waters	The Value of Diligence	Sayings About the Future and Its Uncertainty	What A Wise Person Does	Wisdom and Folly (9:13-11:6)
11:1-6	11:1-8 (1-2)  (3-4)  (5-6)	11:1-6 (1-4)   (5)  (6)  Conclusion (11:7-12:8)	11:1-2    11:3-6	11:1-6
11:7-10	(7-8)  Seek God in Early Life (11:9-12:8)  11:9-10	11:7  11:8  11:9  11:10	11:7-8  Advice to Young People (11:9-12:9)  11:9  11:10	11:7-8    Old Age (11:7-12:8)  11:7-8   11:9-10

**READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section)**

***FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL***

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the five translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph
4. Etc.

**CONTEXTUAL INSIGHTS**

- A. Notice that several translations think the last literary unit (i.e., before several brief concluding statements) begins in chapter 11.
  1. 11:9-12:8 (NKJV, TEV)
  2. 11:7-12:8-9 (NRSV, NJB)

- B. There are several commands in this chapter:
1. “cast,” v. 1, BDB 1018; KB 1511, *Piel* IMPERATIVE
  2. “divide,” v. 2, BDB 678, KB 733, *Qal* IMPERATIVE
  3. “sow,” v. 6, BDB 281, KB 282, *Qal* IMPERATIVE
  4. “be idle” (lit. “rest”), v. 6, BDB 628, KB 679, *Hiphil* JUSSIVE
  5. “let him rejoice,” v. 8, BDB 970, KB 1333, *Qal* IMPERFECT but used in a JUSSIVE sense
  6. “let him remember,” v. 8, BDB 269, KB 269, *Qal* IMPERFECT but used in a JUSSIVE sense
  7. “rejoice,” v. 9, BDB 970, KB 1333, *Qal* IMPERATIVE
  8. “let your heart be pleasant” (lit. “do good”), v. 9, BDB 405, KB 408, *Hiphil* IMPERFECT used in a JUSSIVE sense
  9. “follow” (lit. “walk”), v. 9, BDB 229, KB 246, *Piel* IMPERATIVE
  10. “know,” v. 9, BDB 393, KB 390, *Qal* IMPERATIVE
  11. “remove,” v. 10, BDB 693, KB 747, *Hiphil* IMPERATIVE
  12. “put away,” v. 10, BDB 716, KB 778, *Hiphil* IMPERATIVE
  13. “remember,” 12:1, BDB 269, KB 269, *Qal* IMPERATIVE
- C. This paragraph (or stanza depending on the genre, cf. NKJV, NJB), vv. 1-6, uses agriculture and rural imagery to communicate wisdom teachings.

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 11:1-5

**<sup>1</sup>Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days. <sup>2</sup>Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth. <sup>3</sup>If the clouds are full, they pour out rain upon the earth; and whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies. <sup>4</sup>He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap. <sup>5</sup>Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones *are formed* in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things.**

**11:1** This is a recurrent proverb in the Bible relating to one’s generosity (rabbinical sources) and God’s gracious response (cf. Deut. 15:10; Prov. 11:24; 19:17; 22:9; Matt. 10:42; II Cor. 9:8; Gal. 6:9; Heb. 6:10).

**11:2 “Divide your portion to seven”** This either refers to (1) diversifying your wealth (NET Bible #5, p. 1143) or (2) more probably in context, helping many people (cf. Matt. 5:42; Luke 6:30).

### 11:2

NASB	“misfortune”
NKJV	“evil”
NRSV, NJB	“disaster”
TEV	“bad luck”

This is the term “evil” (BDB 949). See note at 2:17 (“grievous”). It is coming! Act while you can (vv. 4,6). Give while you can (vv. 1-2). Enjoy while you can (vv. 7-8).

**11:3** Humans experience, but cannot predict or control, the events of their lives (a recurrent theme in Ecclesiastes), but we can share our wealth in good times and when the dark days come, others will share with us.

**11:4** At first, this verse of two parallel statements implies a warning against inactivity (i.e., referring to giving from vv. 1-2). However, I prefer the interpretation of the UBS *Handbook For Translators*, p. 398, which asserts that it is not inactivity (cf. TEV, REB), but timely activity, that is being advocated.

1. Farmers do not sow in a strong wind.
2. Farmers wait until the wind direction denotes rain, not hot desert winds.
3. Farmers sow during rainy periods, but reap during rainless periods.

When one is happy and successful, then give to others. If you wait the dark days may come when you cannot give.

### 11:5

NASB, NKJV, NJB, LXX	“wind”
REB, VULGATE	“spirit”
NRSV, JPSOA	“breath”
TEV	“life”

Some translations take “wind” (BDB 924) as “spirit” or “breath,” thereby connecting the two lines and relating them both to prenatal activity (cf. KJV, NRSV, TEV, REB, JPSOA, NAB). The interpretive question is, “Is there one illustration of mankind’s inability to know, or are there two illustrations in v. 5?”

The big issue is that in some areas (i.e., planting and harvesting times) humans can learn by observation and tradition, but in other areas (mysteries of nature and mysteries of God’s activities) humans cannot know. Wisdom, though good, helpful, and desirable, cannot solve all of life’s unknowns!

▣ **“how bones are formed in the womb”** See one view expressed in Ps. 139:13-16.

▣ **“so you do not know the activity of God”** This has been a common theme (cf. 1:13; 3:10,11; 8:17). God and His works and ways cannot be completely known by fallen mankind, but we can trust Him because of what we do know!

▣

NASB	“all things”
NKJV	“all <i>things</i> ”
NRSV, TEV	“everything”
NJB	“all”

This is an idiom for the entire creation (cf. Ps. 103:19; 119:91; Jer. 10:16).

NIDOTTE, vol. 1, p. 730, lists several other phrases that are used to designate the entire creation:

1. heaven and earth (e.g., Gen. 1:1; Ps. 115:15; 121:2; Prov. 3:19-20)
2. “the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them” (e.g., Ps. 24:1-2; 50:12; 89:11; Jer. 51:48; I Cor. 10:26)
3. in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth (e.g., Exod. 20:4; Ps. 135:6)

**11:6 “sow”** Sow (used metaphorically of giving) with confidence and leave the results to God (cf. II Cor. 9:6). Verses 5 and 6 are connected by the word “know” (BDB 393, KB 390, *Qal* ACTIVE PARTICIPLE).

▣ **“succeed”** This Hebrew VERB (BDB 506, KB 503, *Qal* IMPERFECT) is found only here and in 10:10 (*Hiphil* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT). The NOUN is found only in Ecclesiastes as well (cf. 2:21; 4:4; 5:10), meaning “skill,” “success,” or “profit.” Success is uncertain. It may come (i.e., vv. 7-8) and it may not (i.e., v. 8b). When it does, act (i.e., share).

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 11:6**

**“Sow your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good.”**

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 11:7-8**

**<sup>7</sup>The light is pleasant, and *it is* good for the eyes to see the sun. <sup>8</sup>Indeed, if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all, and let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything that is to come *will be* futility.**

**11:7 “light is pleasant”** This is metaphorical for the enjoyment of life (cf. 2:24-26; 3:12,13,22; 5:18; 8:15).

**11:8** This verse seems to relate to vv. 1-6. Share your wealth and influence while you can because dark days come into every life, and in those days others will share with you.

Live life fully every day. One does not know how many of them will be good and bright!

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 11:9-10**

**<sup>9</sup>Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things. <sup>10</sup>So, remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting.**

**11:9** At this point in the context, Qoheleth begins to talk about the different opportunities and problems that regularly occur during the different stages of life (11:9-12:7).

1. childhood
2. youth
3. young adult
4. old age

▣ **“follow the impulses of your heart”** This advice does not refer to evil, but to the natural human instincts of young people:

1. be with friends
2. enjoy life at social events
3. desire a family and children
4. find one’s vocation

▣ **“Yet know that God will bring you to judgment”** We are responsible for our acts (cf. 3:17; 12:1; 14; Matthew 25-26; Rom. 2:16; 14:10; II Cor. 5:10; Gal. 6:7; Revelation 20)!

**11:10**

**NASB** “vexation”

**NKJV** “sorrow”

**NRSV** “anxiety”

**TEV** “worry”

**NJB** “indignation”

This term (NOUN, BDB 495, VERB, BDB 494) has several possible connotations:

1. anger of men, 7:9
2. anger of God
3. grief, 1:18; 2:23; 5:16
4. sorrow, 7:3

This verse could fit with #3 or #4. Life is hard; enjoy it when, where and while you can!

▣ **“the prime of life”** This is possibly related to the concept, “days of black hair” (BDB 1007), which is the same basic root as “dawn” (BDB 1007). Youth, as all things, will pass away (lit. “vanity,” BDB 210 I, in the sense of fleeting or meaningless).

▣

**NASB** “fleeting”

**NKJV, NRSV** “vanity”

**NJB** “futile”

This is the term “breath” (BDB 210 I), used in the sense of “fleeting” (cf. 6:12; 7:15; 9:9; Job 7:16; Ps. 39:5,11; 62:9; 78:33; 144:4).

# ECCLESIASTES 12

## PARAGRAPH DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
Remember God in Your Youth	Seek God in Early Life (11:9-12:8)	Conclusion (11:7-12:8)	Advice to Young People (11:9-12:14)	Old Age (11:7-12:8)
12:1-8	12:1-8 (1-5)	12:1-8	12:1-5a 12:5b-7	12:1-8 (1-7)
	(6-7)			
	(8)		12:8	(8)
The Purpose of the Preacher	The Whole Duty of Man		Summing Up	Epilogue
12:9-10	12:9-10	12:9-10	12:9-11	12:9-10
12:11-12	12:11-12	12:11-12		12:11
			12:12	12:12
12:13-14	12:13a 12:13b-14	12:13-14	12:13-14	12:13-14

### **READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section) FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL**

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the five translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph
4. Etc.

### **CONTEXTUAL INSIGHTS**

- A. Chapter 12 addresses the normal target audience of Wisdom Literature—wealthy young men (cf. vv. 1, 12).



- B. This chapter describes old age in colorful metaphors. Every part of the body is used to show the deterioration of age.
- C. Many have asserted that the original book concluded at vv. 9-12 and that vv. 13-14 were later added to make the book seem more traditional and theologically acceptable. However, this is only speculation. Verses 13-14 are like a postscript.

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 12:1-8

**<sup>1</sup>Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no delight in them"; <sup>2</sup>before the sun and the light, the moon and the stars are darkened, and clouds return after the rain; <sup>3</sup>in the day that the watchmen of the house tremble, and mighty men stoop, the grinding ones stand idle because they are few, and those who look through windows grow dim; <sup>4</sup>and the doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low, and one will arise at the sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song will sing softly. <sup>5</sup>Furthermore, men are afraid of a high place and of terrors on the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags himself along, and the caperberry is ineffective. For man goes to his eternal home while mourners go about in the street. <sup>6</sup>Remember Him before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed; <sup>7</sup>then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. <sup>8</sup>"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "all is vanity!"**

**12:1 “Remember”** This is a *Qal* IMPERATIVE (BDB 269, KB 269), similar to 11:9-10. We must live as stewards who will give an account to our Creator (cf. 3:17; 12:14; Matt. 10:26; Rom. 2:16; I Cor. 4:5).

▣ **“Creator”** This is a form of the Hebrew word *bara* (BDB 135, KB 153, *Qal* ACTIVE PARTICIPLE, Gen. 1:1). It is exclusively used to describe God as the One who creates! It is interesting that the PARTICIPLE is PLURAL (cf. Job 35:10; Ps. 149:2; Isa. 54:5), which relates to (1) the “us” passages in Genesis (cf. 1:26,27; 3:22; 11:7) or (2) the general name for God as creator, *Elohim* (see Special Topic: Names for Deity at 1:13), found throughout Genesis 1-2:3.

▣ **“in the days of your youth”** This is a chronological beginning point (i.e., young person still at home, pre-marriage). In Judaism a person is not responsible to the law until a period of training and personal commitment (i.e., *bar mitzvah*, *bat mitzvah*). From this time forward covenant believers are responsible to God for their actions.

Notice that Wisdom Literature informs all stages of life, but starts with young people (cf. 11:9). Chapter 12 moves from the opening days of spiritual responsibility throughout life until old age and death. In every state (before evil days, v. 1; before old age, v. 2; and before time of death, v. 6) believers must remember God!

▣ **“evil days”** In Hebrew this means sickness, sorrow, or here, senility (cf. II Sam. 19:35). This term (BDB 949) basically means “evil,” “misery,” “distress,” or “injury” (cf. 2:21; 5:12,15; 8:11; 11:8,10).

▣ **“I have no delight in them”** The deterioration of the physical body robs life of joy. Remember Qohleth’s repeated admonition of “enjoy daily life now” (i.e., 2:24-26; 3:12,13,22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-9).

**12:2** This verse symbolically refers to the use of one’s sight or vision (cf. v. 3). Even the beauty of seeing God’s creation grows dim as one ages. Verses 2-5 describe old age by a series of metaphors taken from a weather-beaten house.

Although I think a cryptic description of the advance of old age best fits the imagery of vv. 2-5, there have been other views (cf. Robert Gordis, *Koheleth, The Man and His World, A Study of Ecclesiastes*, p. 341):

1. each phrase refers to a different organ of the body
2. they refer to a storm
3. they refer to the gradual decay of an estate
4. each phrase must be taken separately, some literally, some figuratively

▣ **“and clouds return after the rain”** This implies that there is never a clear day, never a sunlit morning. It is always gray and gloomy.

**12:3 “watchman. . .tremble”** This refers to the body’s arms shaking (from age or fear).

▣ **“mighty men stoop”** This refers to the legs.

▣ **“grinding ones are few”** This refers to the teeth.

▣ **“windows grow dim”** This refers to the eyes, as does verse 2.

**12:4 “doors on the street shut”** This refers to the lack of hearing.

▣ **“sounding of grinding mill is low”** This refers to the ears.

▣ **“one will arise at the sound of”** The reference here is to sleeplessness.

▣ **“daughters of song will sing softly”** This may be (1) another reference to bad hearing or (2) a parallel to the aphrodisiac of v. 5d (i.e., sexual interest).

**12:5 “afraid of high places** This may refer to standing or a fear of falling.

▣ **“terror on the road”** This refers to the difficulty of walking.

▣ **“almond tree blossoms”** Here this refers to white (i.e., gray) hair. The blossoms of the almond tree are white (cf. UBS, *Helps for Translators, “Fauna and Flora of the Bible,”* p. 89).

▣ **“grasshopper. . .drags himself”** This refers to (1) the elderly walking bent over; (2) the elderly being overweight (LXX) or full of years; or (3) impotence (Talmud, NIDOTTE, vol. 3, p. 221).

▣ **“casperberry is ineffective”** Normal sexual desire is gone. Casperberries (BDB 2, cf. NASB, NJB, JPSOA, REB) were used to stimulate one’s appetite and sexual desire. Some scholars translate (BDB 2) as “desire” (i.e., NKJV, NRSV, TEV, NIV).

▣ **“eternal home”** The term “eternal” (BDB 761) translates the Hebrew word *’olam*. See Special Topic at 1:4. The reference is to *Sheol* (cf. Job 17:13; 30:23; see Special Topic at 6:6). The old man thinks that the hired funeral mourners (i.e., BDB 704, KB 763, *Qal* ACTIVE PARTICIPLE) are (1) waiting (BDB 685, KB 738, *Qal* PERFECT) outside for him to die or (2) in a procession around the bier (NIDOTTE, vol. 2, p. 46).

**12:6** The NASB asserts that the IMPERATIVE from v. 1 is assumed and that God (“Him”) is the OBJECT.

The first VERB (BDB 934, KB 1221, *Niphal* IMPERFECT) basically means “be removed” (only here in the OT). The Septuagint (LXX), Peshitta, and Vulgate have “broken” or “snapped.” The *Niphal* stem denotes no agency in the action.

Notice how all the VERBS of v. 6 imply a destruction (i.e., death, cf. v. 7):

1. silver cord is broken, BDB 934, KB 1221, *Niphal* IMPERFECT
2. golden bowl is crushed, BDB 954, KB 1285, *Qal* IMPERFECT
3. pitcher is shattered, BDB 990, KB 1402, *Niphal* IMPERFECT
4. wheel is crushed, BDB 954, KB 1285, *Niphal* PERFECT

Do all of these VERBS refer to (1) one event of destruction, one mechanism for obtaining water (Ibn Ezra) or (2) two events of destruction, one for light and one for water? Most modern translations assume two events.

▣ **“silver cord. . .golden bowl”** This speaks of the value and, yet, the frailty of human life.

▣ **“pitcher. . .wheel”** These metaphors are from household items or daily chores.

**12:7** In light of Qoheleth’s questioning of all things, this is a strong affirmation.

▣ **“the dust will return to the earth”** Humans were made from dust (e.g., 3:20; Gen. 2:7; 3:19; Job 4:19; 8:19; 10:9; 34:15; Ps. 90:3; 103:14; 104:29; 146:4).

▣ **“the spirit will return to God who gave it”** The Hebrew term (BDB 924) can mean “spirit,” “wind” (cf. 11:5), or “the breath” (cf. 3:2 1; Gen. 2:7; Num. 16:22; 27:16; Isa. 57:16; Zech. 12:1).

**12:8** This looks like a concluding summary statement, matching 1:2. One wonders how many conclusions were originally a part of Ecclesiastes and how many were added later.

Before I try to answer this question, let me affirm that this is a hermeneutic question, not an inspiration question. When dealing with OT texts as they now stand (A.D. 900s, i.e., the Masoretic Text) that we are dealing with edited texts. The date and number of edits is uncertain. It is a faith presupposition that the bible as it now exists is inspired. The exact mechanism of this inspiration is unknown. The Spirit was active in the original authors and also in the later editors or compilers of the OT. To add to this uncertainty is the issue of textual problems. The text we have now was not the original text (as the different Hebrew manuscripts of the Dead Sea Scrolls clearly show). Even though we do not have the exact words of the original authors, we believe the Spirit was active in preserving the essential truths!

Therefore, to ask how many conclusions are there to Ecclesiastes is not an attack on inspiration, but an attempt to deal with what looks like two, three, or four conclusions:

1. v. 8 (Qoheleth’s conclusion matching 1:2)
2. vv. 9-10 (a positive postscript)
3. vv. 11-12 (a negative postscript)
4. vv. 13-14 (a traditional postscript)

(The Jewish Study Bible has two divisions: vv. 9-11; vv. 12-14 [1621])

The UBS *Handbook For Translators* assumes that 1:1 and 12:9-14 were later editions (p. 434), made up of two postscripts, 9-11, 12-14.

These last verses are an editorial on Qoheleth. He is referred to in the third person (i.e., describes his activities), which never occurs in the rest of the book, except the very beginning (1:1) and the very end (12:9-14).



NASB, NKJV “the Preacher”  
 NRSV “the teacher”  
 TEV “the Philosopher”  
 NJB “Qoheleth”

The term (see introduction) is used only here with the DEFINITE ARTICLE, which implies a title, not a name.

▣ **“vanity of vanities”** This book is characterized by two phrases. This is one of them (see note at 1:2). The second is “under the sun” (see note at 1:3). The author is using satire, irony, and tongue-in-cheek statements as a way to force fallen humanity to come to grips with the fleeting frailty and hopelessness of life without God.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 12:9-10**

**<sup>9</sup>In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. <sup>10</sup>The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly.**

**12:9-10** Notice the activities of a sage:

1. “taught the people knowledge,” v. 9, BDB 540, KB 531, *Piel* PERFECT
2. “pondered,” v. 9, BDB 24 II, KB 27, *Piel* PERFECT, only here in the OT (same root common as “to give ear to”)
3. “searched out,” v. 9, BDB 350, KB 347, *Piel* PERFECT, only here in OT
4. “arranged,” v. 9, BDB 1075, KB 1784, *Piel* PERFECT, the word’s basic meaning is “to be straight” (cf. 1:15; 7:13). *Piel* only here. This activity is part of the editing/compiling process, which took place over many years.
5. “sought to find delightful words,” v. 10, BDB 134, KB 152, *Piel* PERFECT, BDB 592, KB 619, *Qal* INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT. This refers to powerful literary impact.
6. “to write words of truth correctly,” v. 10, BDB 507, KB 503, *Qal* PASSIVE PARTICIPLE, these men had a sense of God’s presence and power, using them to communicate His will to others. Qoheleth did not see himself as a rebel against the truth, but against some wisdom concepts.

This is similar to a description of a scribe’s work in Ezra 7:10 (study, practice, teach).

**12:9** The UBS, *Handbook For Translators* makes an interesting observation about the initial word of vv. 9 and 12 (BDB 452), translated several ways in Ecclesiastes:

1. “extremely” (i.e., excess), 2:15; 7:16
2. “advantage,” 6:8,11; 7:11
3. “anything” (untranslated by NASV)
4. “In addition,” 12:9

BDB 452 gives the basic meaning as “superiority,” “advantage,” or “excess.” The theologically interesting aspect is that a closely related term (BDB 452) is used in Qoheleth’s introductory question, “What advantage does man have in all his work?” (i.e. 1:3). This key term is repeated several times (cf. 1:3; 2:11,13; 3:9; 5:8,13; 10:10,11). It denotes the futility of any lasting advantage in human performance or human knowledge apart from God (i.e., “under the sun,” cf. 1:3).

It is surely possibly that this key term (and its derivatives) begin and close the book. There is no lasting benefit or hope apart from God!

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 12:11-12**

**<sup>11</sup>The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of *these* collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. <sup>12</sup>But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion *to books* is wearying to the body.**

**12:11** There is a reverse parallelism (chiasm):

1. the words of wise men  
the masters of *these* collections
2. like goads (BDB 201)  
like well-driven nails (BDB 702)

As #1 refers to the same group (there is some variety possible: [1] “the words of scholars,” NKJV; [2] “collected sayings,” NRSV; [3] “they guide the assembled people,” REB; [4] “their collected sayings,” NIV; [5] “these wise words left us by many masters,” Knox), so #2 refers to the same thing (i.e., an animal prod, a long staff with a metal point firmly attached).

Wisdom Literature was to be a guide and discipline from God (i.e., One Shepherd, cf. NAB, NKJV, TEV, NIV) to challenge and encourage humans in this life and point them to the next.

▣ **“goads”** This form is found only here. These long, pointed (from the same root, “to sharpen,” cf. I Sam. 13:21) sticks (BDB 201) were used to prod animals into activity. These truths should motivate humans into godly action.

▣ **“given”** This VERB (BDB 678, KB 733) is a *Niphal* PERFECT. This VERB is often used in Ecclesiastes to refer to God’s activity (cf. 1:13; 2:26; 3:10; 5:18,19; 6:2; 8:15; 9:9; 12:7,11).

▣ **“by one Shepherd”** This title was often used of God (cf. Gen. 48:15; 49:24; Ps. 23:1; 80:1; 95:7; Isa. 40:11; Jer. 31:10; Ezek. 34:11). This verse emphasizes the fact that God inspires these truths (i.e., recognition of inspiration and later canonicity).

Jewish tradition identifies “the one shepherd” with Moses (i.e., Targums, Rashi). However, Moses is never called shepherd, but he does carry the “rod of God” (shepherd’s staff). Moses also warned against adding to or taking away from God’s revealed truths (cf. Deut. 4:2; 12:32).

**12:12 “my son”** In Israel’s Wisdom Tradition the teacher was called “father” and his male students “sons” (cf. Prov. 1:8; 4:1).

▣ **“be warned”** This VERB (BDB 264, KB 265) is a *Niphal* IMPERATIVE found in Wisdom Literature only three times (once in Ps. 19:11 and twice in Eccl. 4:13; 12:12). This at first seems to contradict the author’s plea to search for wisdom, but apparently as v. 11 asserts God’s authorship of some literature (i.e., canonical texts), v. 12 must refer to other non-canonical wisdom literature. It is similar to 1:18.

▣

**NASB “excessive devotion”**

**NKJV, NRSV,**

**TEV, NJB,**

**JPSOA, NIV,**

**REB “much study”**

The VERBAL “excessive” (BDB 915 I, KB 1176, *Hiphil* INFINITIVE ABSOLUTE) is used twice in this verse:

1. making of many books
2. excessive devotion

The NOUN (BDB 529) is found only here in the OT. In Arabic it means “to be devoted,” “to be attached,” or “to apply oneself assiduously to something.”

It is uncertain whether (1) the writing; (2) the compiling; or (3) the study of books is the focus of the warning. The problem is that human wisdom is helpful, but not ultimate!

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 12:13-14**

<sup>13</sup>**The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.** <sup>14</sup>**For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.**

**12:13 “The conclusion”** This term (BDB 693) means “end” (cf. 3:11; 7:2; 12:13), used in the sense of “summary,” “conclusion,” or “result of investigation.”

▣ **“fear God”** This is the first of two *Qal* IMPERATIVES. This admonition is a repeated theme (cf. 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13; Job 1:1; 28:28; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; 15:33). Respect Him and recognize His presence, power, and provision (hidden though it may be) in our daily lives.

▣ **“keep His commandments”** This is the second *Qal* IMPERATIVE (cf. 8:5). The terms “fear” and “commandments” appear together in Ps. 112:1. Like the book of James in the NT, this book asserts the need for faith in action!

▣ **“this applies to every person”** No one is excluded from the demand of respect and obedience to God.

**12:14 “Because God will bring every act to judgment”** God is going to set things straight, if not in this life, then in the next (cf. 3:17; 11:9).

▣ **“everything which is hidden”** The VERB “hidden” (BDB 761 I, KB 834, *Niphal* PARTICIPLE) refers to intentional and unintentional sins (cf. Ps. 19:12; 90:8; 139:23-24). Fallen humans will give an account to God for the stewardship of the gift of life (cf. Matt. 10:26; 25:31-46; Rom. 2:16; I Cor. 4:5; Rev. 20:11-15).

▣ **“whether it is good or evil”** Everyone will give an account of his actions (cf. I Cor. 3:10-15; II Cor. 5: 10).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

These discussion questions are provided to help you think through the major issues of this section of the book. They are meant to be thought provoking, not definitive.

1. Why is this book seemingly so self-contradictory?
2. What is the purpose of Ecclesiastes in the Canon?
3. What is the final word from the author?
4. Why is this book so relevant today?

# INTRODUCTION TO SONG OF SONGS

## I. THE NAME OF THE BOOK

- A. This book, like all the books of the OT, was originally named after the first few words of the book. In Hebrew the first words are “song of songs which is Solomon’s,” which is a superlative. This would imply that it is the best of the royal love songs.
- B. This book is also known as “Canticles” in the Vulgate (*canticum canticorum*).

## II. CANONIZATION

- A. Because of the unusual content of this book, it experienced difficulty in achieving canonical status
  - 1. The rabbinical school of Shammai (conservative school) opposed the book.
  - 2. The rabbinical school of Hillel (liberal school) affirmed the book.
  - 3. At the rabbinical councils of Jamnia (A.D. 90) the book was still being discussed and questioned as canonical.
  - 4. Under the leadership of Rabbi Akiba (at one of the councils of Jamnia, A.D. 90), it was finally accepted as canonical. He said of this book, “For all the world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the writings are holy, but Song of Songs is the holy of holies” (Mish. Ya daim, III, 5).
- B. It is the first of a specialized list of books from the Writings section of the Hebrew canon called the Megilloth (five scrolls). Each one was read at an annual feast day. Song of Songs was read at the Feast of Passover (on the eighth day).
  - 1. Song of Songs - Passover
  - 2. Ruth - Pentecost
  - 3. Ecclesiastes - Booths or Tabernacles
  - 4. Esther - Purim
  - 5. Lamentations - fall of Jerusalem

## III. GENRE

- A. This is the main issue of the interpretation of the book. Genre is crucial in identifying the intent of the original author’s purpose. The book is written entirely in poetry.
- B. The theories are
  - 1. Jewish allegory - The Mishnah (*Ta’anith*, IV, 8), Talmud, and Targum all affirm that this book describes Jewish history in terms of YHWH’s love for Israel (see Jerusalem Bible footnotes). Israel is the bride of YHWH (cf. Exod. 34:15-16; Lev. 17:7; 20:5-6, Num. 14:33, and Hosea).
  - 2. Christian allegory - Origen, Hippolytus, Jerome, Athanasius, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Luther all affirm that this book describes the church in terms of Christ’s love. Often Eph. 5:21-31 is given as a parallel.
  - 3. Traditional Marriage Songs - There is considerable similarity between this book and the Arab love poems from Syria from about 600 B.C., known as “wasfs,” and also Egyptian love poetry. The bride and groom exchange compliments, calling each other “king” and



“queen.” There are also some parallels to Egyptian love poems in which the lover is called “sister” (4:9-10,12; 5:1-2). This type of literature praising faithful, timely, human love was well known in the ancient Near East.

4. Drama (Origen, Ibn Ezra)
    - a. The book is a drama to be acted out among several actors (Ewald, Driver)
      - (1) the King
      - (2) a northern country girl
      - (3) a northern local lover
      - (4) the chorus (NJB) or harem (“daughters of Jerusalem,” NKJV)
    - b. An example of this staging can be illustrated from chapter 1:
      - (1) vv. 2-4b, the bride
      - (2) v. 4c-e, the chorus, (cf 2:7; 3:6-11; 5:9; 6:1,13; 8:5,8)
      - (3) vv. 5-7, bride
      - (4) v. 8, chorus
      - (5) vv. 9-10, bridegroom
      - (6) v. 11, chorus
      - (7) vv. 12-14, bride
      - (8) v. 15, bridegroom
      - (9) vv. 16-17, bride
    - c. The theory of a northern boy friend is based on
      - (1) the lover being called a shepherd, who follows the sheep
      - (2) the book ending in the north, not Jerusalem
      - (3) the harem being criticized, 6:8-9
    - d. The Greek manuscript *Sinaiticus* was the first known manuscript to have headings for each section that relate to the bride and groom.
    - e. However, there is no evidence of the genre of drama in ancient Israel or the ancient Near East.
  5. Parable - This theory attempts to combine the literal and the allegorical. It takes seriously the joy of human sexuality and the implication of monogamy. Yet it sees a typological purpose relating to Israel (Gleason Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, pp. 261-263).
  6. The literal - A series of love poems; this theory affirms the God-given aspects of human sexuality. It takes the book at face value. This view was espoused by some rabbis and Theodore of Mosuestia, one of the bright lights of the Antiochan school of interpretation ®. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 1049-1058).
- C. This book is not typical wisdom literature, yet it may have functioned in the same way, to train young men. It seems to have a moral aspect related to monogamy and the purity and beauty of human sexuality at the appropriate time.

#### IV. AUTHORSHIP

- A. *Baba Bathra* 15a says Hezekiah and his men wrote the book. Obviously “wrote” means collected or edited, not authored, cf. Pro. 25:1.
- B. Jewish tradition has always affirmed that Solomon wrote this book:
  1. his name occurs in 1:1,5; 3:7,9,11; 8:11,12
  2. the term “the king” occurs in 1:4,12; 7:5
  3. Egyptian horses are mentioned in 1:9, which fits Solomon’s reign, cf. I Kgs. 10:28

4. the author mentions geographical locations throughout Palestine, Syria, and the transJordan area even down to the Arabah. This reflects the geographical limits of Solomon's kingdom.
5. the rabbis say that when Solomon was young he wrote love songs (Song of Songs), when he was an adult he wrote proverbs (Proverbs), and when he was old he wrote of the vanity of all things (Ecclesiastes).

C. Some reasons against Solomon's authorship:

1. the title in Hebrew, "Solomon's Song of Songs," can mean
  - a. by Solomon
  - b. for Solomon (i.e., dedicated to)
  - c. about Solomon
  - d. in the day of Solomon
  - e. in the manner of Solomon
2. the term "King" may be a term of endearment (Syrian wasfs)
3. the book ends in northern Israel (7:10-13), not in the harem in Jerusalem.
4. the book seems to affirm the goodness, wholesomeness, and joy of monogamous sex. (i.e., 2:16; 6:3; 7:10). This does not fit Solomon's life.
5. Solomon may be the literary foil to Song of Songs, as he is to Ecclesiastes 1-2 (E. J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 268).
6. The Jewish Study Bible says, "Internal evidence suggests that this v. 1 is secondary and does not represent an ancient tradition of authorship" (p. 1566).
7. The NET Bible has "the superscription appears to be a late addition" (p. 1148).

D. It has been suggested that this book is a compilation of different love songs/poems which were read at weddings. They have parallels in other ancient Near Eastern countries. It is possible that Solomon wrote some of these or that they were written for Solomon's many weddings. Yet other people also wrote some of them. In a sense this is the same situation as

1. David writing many, but not all, of the Psalms.
2. Solomon writing some, but not all, of the Proverbs.

E. Authorship remains uncertain:

1. It could be Solomon.
2. Part of it could be Solomon.
3. Solomon was used as a literary foil.

V. DATE

A. Like many of the wisdom books of the OT there are two aspects to date:

1. the original historical setting
2. the date and form of the book as it appears in the canon

B. The historical setting:

1. Solomon's day:
  - a. power of the king to take numerous wives
  - b. the presence of a harem as chorus
  - c. knowledge of widely divergent geographical sites (as well as animals and plants)
  - d. Jerusalem paralleled to *Tirzah*, which was the capital of Israel before Samaria (Omri), 6:4

2. final form of the book:
  - a. the form of the feminine relative particle is late, cf 1:12; 2:7
  - b. the use of Aramaic and Greek loan words
    - (1) paradise
    - (2) orchard
    - (3) bed
    - (4) couch

- C. Modern scholarship disagrees:
1. E. J. Young — Solomon's day
  2. W. F. Albright — fifth-fourth century B.C.
  3. R. K. Harrison — final form immediately before the exile

## VI. LITERARY UNITS

- A. There are several difficult aspects to the book. One wonders if there is a unified theme or purpose or just a series of love poems.
- B. The following verses are difficult to interpret in light of a unified theme:
1. 2:15
  2. 5:7
  3. 8:5b-e
  4. 8:8-9
- C. One way to interpret the book with a unified theme is to postulate a dramatic scenario of three persons and a chorus:
1. the king
  2. a northern country girl
  3. a northern country lover
  4. the harem as chorus
- D. Notice how TEV and NJB outline the book:
- | TEV                     | NJB                     |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1:1 title               | title and prologue      |
| 1:2-2:7 the first song  | the first poem          |
| 2:8-3:5 the second song | the second poem         |
| 3:6-5:1 the third song  | the third poem          |
| 5:2-6:3 the fourth song | the fourth poem         |
| 6:4-8:4 the fifth song  | the fifth poem          |
| 8:5-14 the sixth song   | 8:5-7 epilogue          |
|                         | 8:8-12 two epigrams     |
|                         | 8:13,14 final additions |
- E. This book, like Esther, does not contain any name of God (even 8:6 is translated "a blazing flame" in the JPSOA translation).

## VII. MAIN TRUTHS

- A. This is obviously an affirmation of the purity and beauty of human sexuality, 8:6-7 (see Special Topic at 2:13). This may seem to be an obvious affirmation, but in light of (1) David's sexual sin and its consequences and (2) Solomon's idolatry in his old age because of his foreign wives and their pagan religions, this was a needed statement.

In light of Greek religious dualism this truth is surely needed today. Spirituality is not conditioned on asceticism! The physical is not evil in essence.

- B. Many have seen this book in light of the OT analogy of God as husband and Israel as wife.
- C. The difficulty in identifying both the genre and the central purpose causes one to be cautious of dogmatic interpretations.
- D. The book has no hints of a religious or national theme. This is so unusual for a canonical book.

# SONG OF SONGS 1

## STANZA DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS\*

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
		Title		Title and Prologue
1:1	1:1	1:1	1:1	1:1
The Young Shulammitte Bride and Jerusalem's Daughters	The Banquet (1:2-2:7) (The Shulammitte)	The Woman's Song	The First Song (The Woman)	(Beloved)
1:2-4	1:2-4a	1:2-4	1:2-7	1:2-3
	(The Daughters of Jerusalem) 1:4b			First Poem (1:4-2:7) 1:4
	(The Shulammitte) 1:4c			
	(The Daughters of Jerusalem) 1:4d			
	(The Shulammitte) 1:4e-6			
1:5-7		1:5-7		Dialogue of the Lovers (Beloved) 1:5-7
	(To Her Beloved) 1:7			
Solomon, The Lover Speaks 1:8	(The Beloved) 1:8-10	The Man's Song (1:8-2:7) 1:8	(The Man) 1:8	(Chorus) 1:8
1:9-10		1:9-11	1:9-11	(Lover) 1:9-11
1:11	(The Daughters of Jerusalem) 1:11			
1:12-14	(The Shulammitte) 1:12-14	The Woman 1:12-14	(The Woman) 1:12-14	(Duo) 1:12-14
1:15	(The Beloved) 1:15	Exchange of Compliments 1:15-2:3	(The Man) 1:15	1:15
1:16-17	(The Shulammitte) 1:16-2:1		(The Woman) 1:16-2:1	1:16
				1:17

\*Although not inspired, paragraph divisions are the key to understanding and following the original author's intent. Each modern translation has divided and summarized the paragraph divisions as they understand them. Every paragraph has one central topic, truth or thought. Each version encapsulates that topic in its own way. As you read the text, which translation fits your understanding of the subject and verse divisions?

In every chapter you must read the Bible first and try to identify its subjects (paragraphs). Then compare your understanding with the modern versions. Only when we understand the original author's intent by following his logic and presentation at the paragraph level, can one truly understand the Bible. Only the original author was inspired—readers have no right to change or modify the message. Bible readers do have the responsibility to apply the inspired truth to their day and lives.

**Note that all technical terms and abbreviations are explained fully in Appendices One, Two and Three.**

**READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section)**  
***FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL***

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the four translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

2. First paragraph
3. Second paragraph
4. Third paragraph
5. Etc.

**CONTEXTUAL INSIGHTS**

- A. This chapter has several commands and exhortations:
  1. "Kiss me," v. 1, BDB 676, KB 730, *Qal* IMPERFECT, used in a JUSSIVE SENSE
  2. "Draw me after you," v. 4, BDB 604, KB 645, *Qal* IMPERATIVE
  3. "Let us run together," v. 4, BDB 930, KB 1207, *Qal* COHORTATIVE
  4. "We will rejoice," v. 4, BDB 162, KB 189, *Qal* COHORTATIVE
  5. "Be glad," v. 4, BDB 970, KB 1333, *Qal* COHORTATIVE
  6. "We will extol your love," v. 4, BDB 269, KB 269, *Hiphil* COHORTATIVE
  7. "Do not stare at me," v. 6, BDB 906, KB 1157, *Qal* IMPERFECT used in a JUSSIVE sense
  8. "Tell me," v. 7, BDB 616, KB 665, *Hiphil* IMPERATIVE
  9. "Go forth," v. 8, BDB 422, KB 425, *Qal* IMPERATIVE
  10. "pasture" (i.e. feed), v. 8, BDB 944, KB 1258, *Qal* IMPERATIVEThere are several more, particularly in chapters 2, 4, and 7.
- B. Many of the words in this poem carry extended connotations (double entendre) of love-making:
  1. oils, v. 3
  2. his chambers, v. 4
  3. my own vineyard, v. 6
  4. lie down at noon, v. 7
  5. veil, v. 7
  6. table, couch, v. 12
  7. nard, v. 12
  8. myrrh, v. 13
  9. "lies all night between my breasts," v. 13
  10. "henna blossoms in the vineyards of Engedi," v. 14
  11. "couch is luxuriant," v. 16

Physical love is a gift from God (cf. Gen. 1:27-28). Families and children are His idea (cf. Gen. 1:28). Sexual love is the gift of God to be cherished and honored (one man, one woman for life). Rejoice in the wife of your youth (cf. Eccl. 9:7-9). Love is powerful and valuable (cf. 8:6-7)!

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 1:1

<sup>1</sup>The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

**1:1 “Song of Songs”** This is a superlative form in Hebrew (BDB 1010). It could be translated “the best of the Songs” (cf. Exod. 29:37; Deut. 10:17; and Dan. 2:37 for other examples). It often referred to love songs (cf. Isa. 5:1; Ezek. 33:32).

▣ **“which is”** This Hebrew form (BDB 81) can mean “to,” “for,” or “concerning.” Hebrew linguists note that the form of v. 1 is different from this same Hebrew PARTICLE in the rest of the book. This has led many to believe that v. 1 is a later addition by a general editor.

▣ **“Solomon's”** The inclusion of the name of Solomon several times in the text (i.e., 1:1,5; 3:7,9,11; 8:11,12) leads to the conclusion that this song is written about Solomon, to Solomon, or by Solomon. It is uncertain exactly which is the case. See Introduction, Authorship.

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 1:2-4

<sup>2</sup>“May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!

For your love is better than wine.

<sup>3</sup>“Your oils have a pleasing fragrance,

Your name is *like* purified oil;

Therefore the maidens love you.

<sup>4a</sup>“Draw me after you and let us run *together*!

The king has brought me into his chambers.”

**1:2** A common feature of the Hebrew language which surprises and confuses modern readers is the constant switch between SECOND PERSON and THIRD PERSON. This verse illustrates this common feature well:

1. line 1 is THIRD PERSON (may he kiss me)

2. line 2 is SECOND PERSON (your love is better than wine)

As moderns we (even Jewish scholars) do not know the inferences and common textual features (sometimes unconsciously learned) of ancient Hebrew (i.e., before vowels, before Aramaic).

▣ **“kiss”** In ancient Near Eastern cultures kissing was done in private (cf. v. 4). See Contextual Insights, A. Notice the term's repetition for emphasis.

▣ **“love”** There are several different words for “love” in Hebrew. They are all used in this book. This particular word (BDB 187) comes from the same root as the proper name “David” (BDB 187). This term alludes positively to a human lover and love making. It is recurrent in the book (cf. 1:2,4; 4:10; 5:1; 7:13).

▣ **“better than wine”** This could refer to (1) daily use of wine or (2) festival use of wine. The same phrase is repeated in vv. 4 and 10. For the concept of social consumption of alcoholic beverages see Special Topic at Eccl. 2:3.

**1:3 “oils”** The basic meaning of this term (BDB 1032) is “fat” or “rich” (i.e., land, e.g., 5:1). It refers to olive oil, which was a daily food item and when put on the face, a sign of prosperity and festival (e.g., Isa. 25:6). Here it is used of perfumed oil (cf. 4:10; Ps. 27:9; Eccl. 7:1; 10:1; Amos 6:6).

▣ **“your name”** This (BDB 1027) refers to the person. Just the thought of this person brought the scent of perfume. A name used as sweet scent is also found in Eccl. 7:1.

There is an obvious word play between “oils” (BDB 1032) and “name” (BDB 1027). This is common in Hebrew prose and especially in Hebrew poetry.

▣

**NASB** “purified oil”

**NKJV** “ointment poured forth”

**NRSV** “perfume poured out”

**NJB** “oil poured out”

This VERB’S (BDB 937, KB 1227, *Hophal* IMPERFECT) basic meaning is to empty something. The NASB, in the margin, defines it as “which is emptied (from one vessel to another).” The question remains, what does this VERB imply:

1. a purifying procedure
2. a wide-spread reputation (i.e., among the harem)

In context #2 fits best.

▣ **“maidens”** This is the Hebrew word *almah* (BDB 761, cf. Isa. 7:14). This Hebrew word refers to a young woman of reproductive years, married or unmarried. The exact identity of these young women is uncertain (see note at 1:5). There seem to be two major possibilities: (1) Solomon’s harem or (2) the ladies of Jerusalem or Solomon’s court (cf. v. 5; 2:7; 3:5,10; 5:8,16; 8:4).

▣ **“love”** This is the general term for love (BDB 12) in the Hebrew language. The uniqueness of this word usage in Song of Songs is that it is predominately used for the maiden’s affection for her lover. The OT was written in a male-centered society. A woman’s feelings or concerns are usually not recorded. This book is not only an affirmation of the beauty and wholesomeness of physical love, but of reciprocal love!

**1:4** This verse has several commands. See Contextual Insights, A.

▣ **“the king has brought me into his chambers”** This is literally “bed chamber” (BDB 293, cf. 3:4; Eccl. 10:20; Joel 2:16). This refers to Solomon’s harem (cf. 6:9). Some commentators (and I am one of them) who see Song of Songs related to the Syrian love songs (i.e., *wasfs*), note that in these love poems the bride and groom are called “king” and “queen.”

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 1:4b**

<sup>4b</sup>“We will rejoice in you and be glad;

We will extol your love more than wine.

Rightly do they love you.”



▣ **“we. . .they”** It is very difficult to identify this group(s). It may be a chorus (NJB) or possibly the maidens of v. 3, who might be identified with the daughters of Jerusalem (NKJV).

▣ **“rejoice”** This term (BDB 162, KB 189, *Qal* COHORTATIVE) is very common in Psalms, but used only here in Song of Songs. It often denotes Israel’s rejoicing over God and His covenant faithfulness. So it is a powerful affirmation! Here it refers to sexual love (cf. Ps. 45:13-15). Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations*, thinks 3:6-11 is a wedding song similar to Psalm 45.

▣ **“extol”** This term (BDB 269, KB 269, *Hiphil* COHORTATIVE) basically denotes “remembering,” but in certain texts it takes on the concept of “mentioning a word of praise.” Here it takes on the connotation of praise (cf. Ps. 45:17). It almost seems as if the author of Song of Songs knew Psalm 45, which refers to the king of Israel’s marriage.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 1:5-7**

<sup>5</sup>**“I am black but lovely,  
O daughters of Jerusalem,  
Like the tents of Kedar,  
Like the curtains of Solomon.  
<sup>6</sup>Do not stare at me because I am swarthy,  
For the sun has burned me.  
My mother’s sons were angry with me;  
They made me caretaker of the vineyards,  
But I have not taken care of my own vineyard.  
<sup>7</sup>Tell me, O you whom my soul loves,  
Where do you pasture *your flock*,  
Where do you make *it* lie down at noon?  
For why should I be like one who veils herself  
Beside the flocks of your companions?”**

**1:5-6** It is difficult to follow who is speaking and to whom they are speaking. The transitions are not clearly (textually) marked. In vv. 5-6 the northern woman is addressing apparent concerns of the Jerusalem harem or the women of the court.

▣ **“I am black”** Verse 6 describes this as a deep tan (“blackish,” BDB 1007), which she received from the sun while tending the family vineyards and flocks. Usually harem women strived to be as white as possible.

▣ **“daughters of Jerusalem”** The identity of this group is crucial, but difficult. Here are some of the interpretive theories:

1. Solomon’s harem
2. city girls (versus country girls)
3. the woman’s friends
4. a mental image
5. a literary way of moving the scene along
6. a type of narrator (chorus)
7. women of the royal court (i.e. wives of leaders or royal servants)

They are a literary foil to help the maiden examine and express her thoughts and feelings.

▣ **“Kedar”** The Kedarites (BDB 871, literally “swarthy” or “black-tinted”) are related to the Ishmaelites, which means they were Arabs (cf. Gen. 25:12-18; I Chr. 1:29; Isa. 42:1, 60:7; Jer. 49:29-32). These desert nomads are known for their black tents which were woven from goat’s hair. The “tents” (BDB 13) were made from goat skin, while the “curtains” (BDB 438) were woven from goat hair.

▣ **“Like the curtains of Solomon”** This is obviously parallel to “tents of Kedar.” The question is, what curtain does it refer to:

1. Solomon’s palace (TEV)
2. Solomon’s travelling tent (NJB)
3. the temple in Jerusalem

There is just not enough information in the text to make a determination.

Also, it is possible that the color is not the parallel, but “dark. . . beautiful,” whereby the “curtains of Solomon” are not dark, but beautiful (cf. TEV).

Notice that the NJB has “Salmah,” NAB has “Salma,” and REB has “Shalmah.” This comes from a supposed tribe in the area of Edom, possibly close to Kedar. However, there is no textual support or ancient version support for this textual change.

### 1:6

**NASB, NAB**

**JPSOA, NIV** “do not stare at me”

**NKJV** “do not look upon me”

**NRSV** “do not gaze at me”

**TEV, REB** “do not look down on me”

**NJB** “take no notice”

This can be understood in one of two ways:

1. Her dark tan was seen by the daughters of Jerusalem as reflecting her poor, rural background, and lack of light skin (TEV, NIDOTTE, vol. 3, p. 1009).
2. Her dark tan and beauty caused them to stare at her in awe and envy.

▣ **“My mother’s sons were angry with me”** The VERB can be from one of two roots that mean “to burn” (“with anger”):

1. חרר, BDB 354, *Niphal* PERFECT, cf. Isa. 41:11; 45:24
2. חרה, BDB 359, *Niphal* PERFECT, cf. Ps. 69:4; Ezek. 15:4,5

Number 1 is more probably the correct root. It is interesting that the root נחר literally means “to snort” and developed metaphorically to denote anger.

The interpretation of this verse is crucial to the understanding of the book (cf. 6:9). As in all other passages there are several theories:

1. the brothers are jealous of the king’s favour
2. this reflects a family feud over the young girl’s chastity (line 5)
3. the young girl did not take enough time for herself (TEV)
4. she has given her heart to another (i.e., a northern local lover)

**1:7 “you who my soul loves”** To whom does this refer? It depends on one’s understanding of how many characters are involved in this poetic/musical drama. The two theories are: (1) the girl’s hometown shepherd boyfriend from the North or (2) Solomon himself from Jerusalem (i.e., shepherd of Israel).

▣ **“Where do you make *it* lie down at noon”** This may refer to:

1. Solomon’s travelling pavilion, thereby:
  - a. “tents” of v. 6
  - b. “companions” of v. 7, line 5 and 8:13
2. to a local shepherd whom she loves

There is the added sexual imagery of “lying down,” implying, “I want to come lie down with you.” Poetry carries connotations and implications with its choice of words and their various connotations.

▣ **“veils”** “Veils” (BDB 741, “wrap oneself”) is found in the MT, Septuagint, and NRSV. Other ancient versions read “wanders” (BDB 380 or 1073, cf. the Peshitta, Vulgate, and RSV). This refers to either (1) her modesty (i.e., veil); (2) her premarital desires; or (3) her asking her lover not to associate with travelling prostitutes (cf. Gen. 38:14-19).

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 1:8**

**<sup>8</sup>“If you yourself do not know,  
Most beautiful among women,  
Go forth on the trail of the flock  
And pasture your young goats  
By the tents of the shepherds.”**

**1:8 “If you yourself do not know”** This seems to be playful sarcasm. It refers to the chorus (NJB) or the bridegroom (NKJV) addressing the bride. This passage is one of many where the shepherd motif is used. This either refers to this Northern hometown boyfriend or it is a reference to King Solomon. This response answers her question of v. 7.

This verse has three IMPERATIVES. See Contextual Insights, A.

▣ **“Most beautiful among women”** This affirmation of love is repeated in 5:9; 6:1. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. She calls him “O you whom my soul loves” in v. 7 and he responds!

▣ **“Go forth on the trail of the flock”** This is interpreted in radically different ways depending on who is referred to in v. 8.

▣ **“tents”** This (BDB 1015) is a different Hebrew word than the “tents” (BDB 438), which could denote “curtains” or “tapestries” in v. 5. This one denotes a temporary dwelling place (i.e., the tabernacle in the wilderness, i.e., Exod. 25:9).

Verse 5 could refer to Solomon’s travelling tents (large and elaborate) and this to a local shepherd’s tent. It all depends on how many lovers are depicted in the book (one, the king, or two, the king and a local shepherd boyfriend).

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 1:9-10**

**<sup>9</sup>“To me, my darling, you are like  
My mare among the chariots of Pharaoh.  
<sup>10</sup>Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments,  
Your neck with strings of beads.”**

**1:9 “darling”** This comes from the Hebrew phrase “to pasture” (BDB 944, cf. v. 15) and means friend or companion (BDB 946).

▣ **“like”** This Aramaic VERB (BDB 197, KB 225), in the *Piel* stem, denotes a comparison. It is used several times in this sense in Song of Songs (cf. 1:9; 2:9,17; 7:7; 8:14).

▣ **“My mare among the chariots of Pharaoh”** Solomon was the first to import Arabian horses from Egypt (cf. I Kgs. 10:28; II Chr. 1:16,17; 9:28) for military purposes. This metaphor refers either to the ornamental beauty of the royal horses (possibly embroidered on the royal tent) or to the graceful movement and beauty of the animals themselves. These horses were prized animals!

▣ **“with ornaments”** This term (BDB 1064) can refer to:

1. a type of hairdo or braid (TEV)
2. a necklace of precious metal (cf. V. 11)

The basic Akkadian root seems to mean “to encircle” or “go around again” (KB 1708). The reference could be to the horses’ ornaments of v. 9 or the woman’s necklace of v. 10, line 2. If the second line of v. 10 is synonymous parallelism, “ornaments” refers to a “string of beads” (BDB 354, this term appears only here in the OT and a similar root means “string of beads” or “string of shells,” or “string of pearls”) or NKJV, “chains of gold” (to parallel v. 11, line 1).

Both of these words are rare and disputed. This ambiguity is characteristic of poetry!

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 1:11**

**<sup>11</sup>“We will make for you ornaments of gold  
With beads of silver.”**

**1:11** Again the problem is the identity of the speaker. Note the use of the PLURAL “we.” The NKJV identifies the speaker as “the Daughters of Jerusalem. The NASB makes v. 11 a separate paragraph, denoting a possible change of speaker. However, its outline makes vv. 8-17 come from Solomon. TEV and NJB see it as a continuation of the male speaker.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 1:12-14**

**<sup>12</sup>“While the king was at his table,  
My perfume gave forth its fragrance.  
<sup>13</sup>My beloved is to me a pouch of myrrh  
Which lies all night between my breasts.  
<sup>14</sup>My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms  
In the vineyards of Engedi.”**

**1: 12 “While the king was at his table”** Again, the interpretation depends on, “who is the king?”

The term (BDB 687) translated by NASB and NKJV as “table,” can also mean “couch” (cf. NRSV, JPSOA, TEV, REB) or “room” (NJB). Its basic meaning is “that which surrounds.”

It could surely be the elaborate sleeping tent and couch of Solomon or a simple bed mat of a shepherd expressed in hyperbole.

▣

**NASB, TEV** “perfume”  
**NKJV** “spikenard”  
**NRSV, NJB** “nard”

This (BDB 669) was an oily extract from a sweet smelling plant from the Himalayas region of India (Sanskrit root). It was used as an aromatic aphrodisiac in the ancient Near East.

**1:13** This refers to the ancient method of perfuming. In symbolism it refers to one of the lovers dreaming/thinking of the other all night!

☐ **“myrrh”** This (BDB 600) was a plant resin from Arabia and the northeast coast of Africa. It was bitter to the taste, but sweet smelling and long lasting. In Ps. 45:8 it is also connected to a wedding (i.e., physical love). It has connotations of erotic love (cf. 1:13; 3:6; 4:6,14; 5:5,13; Pro. 7:17).

☐ **“breast”** This term (BDB 994) is used several times in the book (1:13; 4:5; 7:3,7-8; 8:8,10). This same phrase, “between breasts,” is used by Hosea to denote pagan fertility worship (cf. Hosea 2:2).

**1:14 “a cluster of henna blossoms”** These are small fragrant white flowers (BDB 499) that comes from a bush that grow abundantly in the Middle East. They are still used by Arab women today who use these flowers to dye parts of their bodies either orange or yellow.

☐ **“Engedi”** This (BDB 745) is a famous oasis midway down the western shore of the Dead Sea known for its beauty and fertility. It is mentioned several times in the OT.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 1:15**

<sup>15</sup>**How beautiful you are, my darling,  
How beautiful you are!  
Your eyes are *like* doves.”**

**1:15 “How beautiful you are”** This phrase is repeated for emphasis. This term (BDB 421) is used often:

1. in the phrase, “most beautiful of women,” 1:8; 5:9; 6:1
2. in the phrase, “How beautiful you are,” 1:15(twice); 4:1(twice),7; 6:4
3. in the phrase, “beautiful one,” 2:10,13
4. in the term, “handsome,” 1:16 (used only here in the OT to describe the man)
5. in 6:10 it describes the moon

☐ **“Your eyes are *like* doves”** The allusion here is possibly to (1) mate loyalty; (2) gentleness; (3) a sweet melodious song; (4) a symbol of peace, love or innocence; or (5) color. This phrase is used again in 4:1 and 5:12. It is repeated by the woman in v. 16. “Dove” (BDB 401 I) is used several times in comparisons (cf. 1:15; 2:14; 4:1; 5:2,12; 6:9).

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 1:16-17**

<sup>16</sup>**How handsome you are, my beloved,  
And so pleasant!  
Indeed, our couch is luxuriant!**  
<sup>17</sup>**The beams of our houses are cedars,  
Our rafters, cypresses.**

**1:16-17** This refers to either (1) the grandeur of the royal travelling pavilion or (2) the secret meeting place in the woods of the two hometown lovers.

☐ **“couch”** This is a different term (BDB 793) from “table” or “couch” in v. 12 (BDB 687).

**1:17** The UBS' Helps for Translators, *Fauna and Flora of the Bible*, says, "there is great confusion in all versions, ancient and modern, over the identity of evergreens in the Bible" (p. 116).

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

These discussion questions are provided to help you think through the major issues of this section of the book. They are meant to be thought provoking, not definitive.

1. Why are there so many interpretations of this book of the Bible?
2. How many persons or groups are referred to in these music/poetic passages?
3. Give possible theories of verse 6 and why this verse is so important.

# SONG OF SONGS 2

## STANZA DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
The Bride's Admirer	The Banquet (1:2-2:7)		The First Song (1:2-2:7)	First Poem (1:4-2:7)
	(The Shulammitte) (1:16-2:1)	The Man's Song (1:9-2:7)		Dialogue of the Lovers (1:5-2:7)
2:1		2:1		(Duo) (1:12-2:7)
2:2	(The Beloved) 2:2	2:2	(The Man) 2:2	2:2
2:3-6	(The Shulammitte) 2:3	2:3-7	(The Woman) 2:3-7	2:3-5
	(The Shulammitte to the Daughters of Jerusalem) 2:4-5			
	2:6-7			2:6
2:7				2:7
	The Beloved's Request (2:8-17)	The Lover's Spring Visit 2:8-15	The Second Song (2:8-3:5)	Second Poem (2:8-3:5)
2:8-9	(The Shulammitte) 2:8-9		(The Woman) 2:8-10a	(Beloved) 2:8-9a
				2:9b-c
2:10-13	2:10-13		(The Man) 2:10b-14	2:10-11
				2:12-13
2:14	2:14			2:14-15
2:15	(Her Brothers) 2:15		2:15	
2:16-17	(The Shulammitte) 2:16	2:16-17	(The Woman) (2:16-3:5) 2:16-3:4	2:16
	(To Her Beloved) 2:17			2:17

### **READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section)** ***FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL***

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the four translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to

following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph
4. Etc.

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 2:1

**<sup>1</sup>“I am the rose of Sharon,  
The lily of the valleys.”**

**2:1-2** There are no VERBS in vv. 1-2; all are NOUN phrases.

These verses (and v. 4) are often used as metaphors for the Messiah. However, this assumes that Song of Songs is an allegory (see Introduction). There is nothing grammatically or lexically that would make one think this book is about God's love for Israel or the church! Be careful of presuppositions and/or traditional interpretations that do not firmly hold to authorial intent.

**2:1 “rose”** This (BDB 287) can mean “crocus.” It refers to a common wild flower (cf. Isa. 35:1, see Helps for Translators, *Fauna and Flora of the Bible* pp. 150-151).

▣ **“Sharon”** This refers to the low, flat coastal plains (about ten miles wide) beside the Mediterranean in northern Palestine. It was known for its lush plants (i.e., Isa. 35:2) and, therefore, a renowned pasture land (i.e., I Chr. 5:16; 27:29; Isa. 65:10).

▣ **“lily”** This term (BDB 1004) is used several times in the book:

1. 2:1,2; 7:3 - a flower describing the bride
2. 2:16 - a flower describing the groom
3. 4:5; 6:3 - flowers of the field  
Hos. 14:5
4. 6:4 - an allusion to sexual activity (i.e., gardens, beds)
5. in I Kgs. 7:19,  
22,26 - it refers to the carved top of pillars in Solomon's temple
6. in II Chr. 4:5 - it refers to the brim of the laver in Solomon's temple
7. in Psalm 45, - it refers to a tune or musical term of some kind  
60, 69, 80

In this context she is describing herself as pretty and fragrant, but not unusual, just one of many. This may be another way (like 1:5-7) to describe herself as a country girl (see UBS, *Handbook for Translators*, p. 52).



**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 2:2**

**<sup>2</sup>“Like a lily among the thorns,  
So is my darling among the maidens.”**

**2:2** He tells her that she is much more than a common wild flower (i.e., the other maidens).



**NASB, TEV,  
JPSOA, NIV      “my darling”  
NKJV, NRSV      “my love”  
NJB                “my beloved”**

This Hebrew word (BDB 946) means “companion” or “associate.” It is used often to describe the maiden (cf. 1:9,15; 2:2,10,13; 4:1,7; 6:4) and once for the man (cf. 5:2). This is obviously a term of endearment.



**NASB, NRSV      “the maidens”  
NKJV              “the daughters”  
TEV                “women”  
NJB                “girls”**

The question remains, to which group of women (BDB 123 I) is he referring:

1. harem in Jerusalem
2. chorus
3. local girls (cf. Gen. 24:13; 30:13) in the north
4. women at court

The more I try to read this as a unified document the more I am committed to:

1. a collection of unrelated love songs (cf. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 806)
2. a northern lover in competition for the maiden of northern Israel

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 2:3-6**

**<sup>3</sup>“Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest,  
So is my beloved among the young men.**

**In his shade I took great delight and sat down,  
And his fruit was sweet to my taste.**

**<sup>4</sup>He has brought me to *his* banquet hall,  
And his banner over me is love.**

**<sup>5</sup>Sustain me with raisin cakes,  
Refresh me with apples,  
Because I am lovesick**

**<sup>6</sup>Let his left hand be under my head  
And his right hand embrace me.**

**2:3 “apple”** Wild apples do not grow well in Palestine, therefore, many have supposed this to be an apricot (NASB margin at Joel 2:12) or citrus tree (cf. Rotherhams, *Emphasized Bible*, p. 643). The term seems to mean “apples” (BDB 656, cf. Pro. 25:11). The identification of this fruit does not affect the overall understanding of the text. He compliments her; she compliments him!

The metaphorical meaning suggests lovemaking, intimacy (cf. 4:11, NIDOTTE, vol. 2, p. 1151). Fruit is used literally in the process of reproduction in Genesis (e.g., 1:11,12) and metaphorically (e.g., 1:22,28,29; 8:17; 9:1,7), children are described as “the fruit of the womb.” Smelling, eating, and commenting on someone using “fruit” obviously has sexual overtones and connotations.

▣ **“In his shade, I took great delight and sat down”** The rabbis say that vv. 3 and 4 refer to the study of the Torah, but in context they seem to be an allusion to sexual intimacy (i.e., v. 6).

**2:4 “banquet hall”** This is a construct relationship between “house” (BDB 108) and “wine” (BDB 406). Again, to what does this refer:

1. Solomon’s palace in Jerusalem (cf. 5:2-7,8)
2. Solomon’s travelling pavilion (cf. 3:6-11)
3. a beautiful outdoor setting for a picnic in the northern countryside (cf. 1:16-17)
4. a love nest hidden from everyone’s eyes (cf. v. 14)

▣ **“his banner over me is love”** This probably (BDB 186) refers to the concept of (1) a tribal flag (cf. Num. 1:52; 2:17,18,25) or (2) a military banner used as a signal (cf. 6:4,10). He publicly acknowledges (opposite of 1:7) his love for her in this manner (NIDOTTE, vol. 1, p. 919). Others believe it referred to the practice of placing a brightly colored canopy over the honored guest at an outdoor banquet (i.e., Arab tradition, possibly 5:10). The NRSV translates the term as an Akkadian root, “wish” or “intend” (cf. NIDOTTE, vol. 1, p. 920).

**2:5 “Sustain. . .refresh”** These are both *Piel* IMPERATIVES (BDB 701, KB 759 and BDB 951 and 1276). The imagery is (1) of food providing the energy for sexual activity (cf. v. 6) or (2) distracting one from the mental distress of being separated from a loved person.

▣ **“with raisin cakes”** These are often associated with fertility worship (i.e., Hosea 3:1; Jer. 7:18). Here it is not pagan worship, but the connotation of an aphrodisiac (this is possibly the implication of II Sam. 6:19 and I Chr. 16:3). Often in the OT sexual activity is linked to metaphors for eating:

1. negative - Prov. 7:18; 30:20
2. positive - Song of Songs 2:3-5; 4:11-16

Eating is a recurrent need and often an occasion for fellowship, friendship, family, and worship. Eating is a joyous and fulfilling experience.

▣ **“Because I am love sick”** This phrasing is very similar to Egyptian love songs of the same period. This phrase is repeated in 5:8. She wants more intimacy!

**2:6** This is a reference to an intimate sexual embrace while lying down (cf. 8:3).

▣ **“Let”** This is in italics, which shows it is not in the MT, but the translators of NASB (1995 Update) are assuming that the *Piel* IMPERFECT VERB (BDB 287, KB 287), “embrace,” is being used in a JUSSIVE sense, following the *Piel* IMPERATIVES of v. 5.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 2:7**

**<sup>7</sup>“I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,  
By the gazelles or by the hinds of the field,  
That you do not arouse or awaken *my* love  
Until she pleases.”**

**2:7** This is either from the bridegroom (margin of NASB) or the bride (NKJV). This phrase is repeated throughout the book (cf. 3:5; 5:8,9; 8:4).

In context it seems to be a suggestion to (1) wait until the lover is ready; (2) wait until the appropriate time; or (3) do not interrupt their lovemaking.

The VERB “pleases” (BDB 342, KB 339, *Qal* IMPERFECT) is used several times in this book (cf. 2:7; 3:5; 8:4). It denotes a thoughtfulness about the feelings of the other person.

▣ **“O, daughters of Jerusalem”** See note at 1:5. This closes out poem number one, while 2:8-3:5 will be poem number two.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 2:8-9**

**<sup>8</sup>“Listen! My beloved!**

**Behold, he is coming,**

**Climbing on the mountains,**

**Leaping on the hills!**

**<sup>9</sup>My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.**

**Behold, he is standing behind our wall,**

**He is looking through the windows,**

**He is peering through the lattice.**

**2:8** The rabbis say that this refers to God giving the law at Mt. Sinai. However, this is an attempt at a “typological” interpretation based on climbing mountains. But again, if you let this type of interpretation be valid, there is no way to verify any interpretation. Context, context, context; authorial intent, authorial intent, authorial intent; genre, genre, genre!!!

This verse (vv. 8-9) speaks of the young man’s virility and physical strength. Nothing, no barrier, can stop him from coming to his beloved. He is coming to her in her northern rural setting!

Grammatically, vv. 8-9 are a series of seven PARTICIPLES, which denotes it is a unified literary unit.

**2:9** This is so typical of a young man’s enthusiasm in visiting his girl who does not answer the door quickly.

This verse is hard to interpret because the words are rare:

1. “lattice” - BDB 355, referring to some kind of opening in the wall (cf. Josh. 2:15; Jdgs. 5:28)
2. “looking” - BDB 993, KB 1414, *Hiphil* PARTICIPLE, a rarely used VERB from an Aramaic root
3. “peering” - BDB 847 II, KB 1013, *Hiphil* PARTICIPLE, used only here in the OT, also from an Aramaic root
4. “wall” - BDB 508, used only here in the OT

It is possible that v. 9 should extend through v. 17.

1. The maiden wants her lover to wait until evening so no one will see.
2. The maiden wants her lover to leave before dawn after staying with her all night.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 2:10-13**

**<sup>10</sup>“My beloved responded and said to me,**

**'Arise, my darling, my beautiful one,**

**And come along.**

**<sup>11</sup>For behold, the winter is past,**

**The rain is over *and* gone.**

**<sup>12</sup>The flowers have *already* appeared in the land;**

**The time has arrived for pruning *the vines*,**

**And the voice of the turtledove has been heard in our land.**

**<sup>13</sup>The fig tree has ripened its figs,**

**And the vines in blossom have given forth *their* fragrance.**

**Arise, my darling, my beautiful one,**

**And come along!"**

**2:10-14** This seems to be an invitation to (1) come out and enjoy the spring weather and (2) find a secret place so they can fully view each other (v. 14).

**2:10 “Arise. . .come”** These are both *Qal* IMPERATIVES (BDB 877, KB 1086 and BDB 229, KB 246). They are spoken by a young man to his female lover. These commands are repeated in v. 13.

The question still remains in all of these verses, “who is the male?”:

1. Solomon
2. a northern young lover

**2:11-13** Six characteristics of spring are listed here.

**2:11 “the winter is past”** The term “winter” (BDB 711) is an Aramaic loan word found only here in the Bible. Christian allegorists use this to refer to Christ’s suffering. As Gordon Fee says, “a book that can mean anything, means nothing” (*How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth*).

☐ **“the rain”** The rains end in March. The lovers cannot go out into the fields and find a hiding place.

**2:12 “The time has arrived for the pruning *the vines*”** It seems better because of the time of year mentioned (i.e., Spring) that we should follow the Septuagint, the Vulgate, and the Targums in translating “pruning” (BDB 274 II, cf. Isa. 18:5, “pruning hooks”) as “singing” (BDB 274 I, NKJV, NRSV, TEV, NJB, NIV, JPSOA).

☐ **“the turtledove”** These migratory birds reappear in Palestine in the Spring. Christian allegorists have used this to refer to Paul’s preaching.

**2:13** The poetic imagery using the flora and fauna of Palestine continues. Many of these terms had double meanings, most euphemisms for sexual activity:

1. to put forth new figs - young woman just old enough for sexual activity (this VERB form, BDB 334, KB 333, *Qal* PERFECT, is found only here in the OT. It normally is translated “embalm” [cf. Gen. 50:2,26]. Here it implies change color [i.e., “reddened,” Oxford Gesenius, p. 334])
2. vines - gardens and vineyards as places of fragrance, fertility, and privacy (possibly an allusion to Eden)
3. fragrance released - used often in Song of Songs to denote exotic senses (cf. 2:13; 4:10,11,16; 7:8,13)

See Special Topic following.

## SPECIAL TOPIC: HUMAN SEXUALITY

### I. Introductory Remarks

- A. Christians have been unduly influenced by Greek asceticism, which makes both the human body and its normal activities evil.

The Bible affirms the goodness of physical creation (cf. Gen. 1:26-27,31), but acknowledges the results of human rebellion (cf. Genesis 3). One day this curse shall be removed (cf. Rom. 8:18-22).

- B. Maleness and femaleness are God's idea! Human sexuality is part of God's creation and plan for human beings made in His image.

Sex is not something we do. It is something we are. Every area of our thoughts and lives is affected by sexual orientation, as interpreted by our cultures.

### II. Biblical Insights (selected examples)

#### A. From Genesis

1. There was an original mutuality (cf. 1:26-27; 2:18).
2. Sexual activity was a mandate from God (i.e., 1:28)
3. All creation (including human sexual activity) is affirmed as "very good" in Gen. 1:31
4. Women are not opposites of, but complements, to men (i.e., 2:18).
5. Eve and Adam's open-eyed rebellion has affected all of us and our world, including sexuality (cf. 3:7,16; 6:5,11,12).

#### B. Physical love is affirmed in Scripture, even after the Fall.

1. Proverbs 5:15-23, life-long monogamy and regular sexual activity.
2. Ecclesiastes 9:7-9, enjoy life in all its aspects while you can.
3. Song of Songs, an affirmation of sexual activity (assumed monogamy)
4. I Corinthians 7:3-5, sex is more than procreation
  - a. the body belongs to God, I Cor. 6:19-20
  - b. the body belongs to one's spouse, I Cor. 7:4

#### C. Human sexuality used to illustrate God and His love.

1. Galatians 3:28 describes the new age in which the gospel and spirit-filled leadership is available to all (cf. Joel 2:28-29)
2. Ephesians 5:21-31, the Christian home becomes an example of the relationship between Christ and His church (as Hosea 1-3 used Hosea's marriage as a way to explain God's love for Israel)

#### D. God Himself is described as both male and female

1. male, so common
  - a. Father, Deut. 1:31; 32:5; Ps. 103:13; Isa. 63:16; 64:8; Jer. 3:4,19; 31:9; Hos. 11:1; Mal. 3:17
  - b. husband, Hos. 11:3-4
2. female
  - a. Gen. 1:2, Spirit of God brooded over the waters
  - b. Gen 17:1, *El Shaddai* may have feminine connotations (i.e., Arabic root)
  - c. Deut. 32:18, God as mother bird
  - d. Exod. 19:4, God as mother eagle
  - e. Isa. 49:14-15; 66:9-13, God compared to a nursing mother

3. God is an eternal spirit without a body, yet “He” uses human sexual metaphors to describe Himself (i.e. Hosea 1-3).

### III. God-given boundaries for expressing human sexuality

#### A. Marriage

1. the norm in the OT and NT
2. used as an example of the “spirit-filled life,” Eph. 5:15-6:9
3. outline
  - a. command for “Spirit-filled life,” Eph. 5:18 (PRESENT PASSIVE IMPERATIVE [also note Col. 3:18-25])
  - b. followed by five PRESENT PARTICIPLES (Eph. 5:19-24)
    - (1) singing
    - (2) psalming
    - (3) making melody
    - (4) giving thanks always
    - (5) submit to one another
  - c. one example (the Christian home)
    - (1) husband and wife (Eph. 5:22-33)
    - (2) parents and children (Eph. 6:1-4)
    - (3) domestic slave owners and domestic slaves (Eph. 6:5-9)
4. Sexuality was given for more than procreation
  - a. pleasure
  - b. mutual self-giving
  - c. emotional well being
  - d. physical needs

#### B. Singleness

1. A spiritual gift and calling, Matt. 19:12; I Cor. 7:7-8,32,34
2. Voluntary, not compulsive and not more spiritual, I Tim. 4:1-5
3. Some notable examples:
  - a. Jeremiah
  - b. John the Baptist
  - c. Jesus
  - d. Paul
  - e. Barnabas
  - f. Philip’s four daughters (Acts 21:8-9)

### IV. Mankind’s perversions of God-given human sexuality

#### A. Pre-marital (fornication), and extra-marital (adultery)

#### B. Many, many texts; here are just a sample

1. I Cor. 6:15-20
2. Gal. 5:19-21
3. Heb. 13:4

#### C. Sex (in both thought and act) can become a license to use people as things for personal gratification.

D. Divorce

1. always second best
2. allowed in the OT, Deut. 24:1-4, but restricted by Jesus, Matt. 5:27-32; 19:3-12

E. Homosexuality

1. never the will of God
  - a. Lev. 20:13
  - b. Rom. 1:26-27
  - c. I Cor. 6:9-11
2. It is serious because it is a lifestyle sin, but no worse than other lifestyle sexual sins (fornication or adultery or lust). It is not the “unpardonable sin” (which is unbelief).
3. All fallen humans struggle with human sexuality. This powerful, persistent, pervasive desire, instinct, and appetite must be dealt with daily by all of us!
4. Many believers were homosexual and were associated with the pagan temples, but after salvation they were not slaves to it any more, I Cor. 6:9,11

V. Concluding remarks

- A. Sexuality is God’s plan for a full earth.
- B. Sexuality is only for time, not eternity, Matt. 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:34-36
- C. Sexuality has been affected by the Fall. Everyone of us is naturally a self-centered, selfish person.
- D. Sexuality is meant to help us as redeemed people become more self-controlled (the capstone of the fruit of the Spirit in Gal. 5:23). Sex is a good teacher to selfish humans.
- E. Christian parents bear a primary role in helping families, communities, and nations deal with this powerful and pervasive issue. It can be a drag or a ladder. We are models of divine grace. The best sex education is two parents who love each other selflessly!
- F. Sex can be wonderful or awful. It was meant to
  1. fill the earth
  2. bond two people together
  3. form the family
  4. be enjoyed!

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 2:14**

**<sup>14</sup>“O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,  
In the secret place of the steep pathway,  
Let me see your form,  
Let me hear your voice;  
For your voice is sweet,  
And your form is lovely.”**

**2:14** There are two commands in v. 14, both *Hiphil* IMPERATIVES (BDB 906, KB 1157 and BDB 1033, KB 1570).

The interpretive question is about the first one:

NASB

“your form”

NKJV

“your countenance”

NRSV, NJB, JPSOA “your face”

TEV “your lovely face”

The Hebrew term “sight,” “appearance,” “vision” (BDB 909), in context, implies looking at the physical body (implication of being unclothed).

▣ **“dove”** This bird has several connotations in Hebrew usage:

1. a “clean” bird that eats no carrion, Gen. 8:8-12
2. the sacrifice of poor people, Lev. 5:7,11
3. gentleness and beauty, Psalms and Song of Songs (1:15; 2:14; 4:1; 5:2,12; 6:9)
4. the Hebrew root for lament (BDB 58), cf. Isa. 3:26; 9:11; 19:8; 38:14; 59:11
5. national Israel (cf. Hos. 7:11; 11:11)
6. Jonah’s name

The rabbis believe that the “dove” refers to Israel and those who are hidden among the rocks refer to the students of the Torah.

▣ **“lovely”** This root (BDB 610) means “comely” or “desirable.” It is used several times in Song of Songs (cf. 1:5,10; 2:14; 4:3; 6:4). These two young people desire each other and freely tell one another!

1. voice is sweet (BDB 787, “pleasant,” cf. v. 8)
2. form is lovely

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 2:15**

<sup>15</sup>“Catch the foxes for us,  
The little foxes that are ruining the vineyards,  
While our vineyards are in blossom.”

**2:15 “Catch the foxes for us”** The VERB (BDB 28, KB 31) is a *Qal* IMPERATIVE. It is difficult to understand how this phrase fits the context. Some theories are: (1) her brothers want her to continue her work in the vineyard or (2) the couple wants to remove possible additional suitors. The UBS *Handbook for Translators* mentions that “foxes” is used in Egyptian love poems for “lusty young men” (p. 80). This may be accurate because of v. 16a (cf. 6:3; 7:10). The maiden is the speaker in vv. 15-17.

▣ **“While our vineyards are in blossom”** This seems to refer to the couples’ sexual maturity and eagerness for intimacy!

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 2:16-17**

<sup>16</sup>“My beloved is mine, and I am his;  
He pastures *his flock* among the lilies.  
<sup>17</sup>Until the cool of the day when the shadows flee away,  
Turn, my beloved, and be like a gazelle  
Or a young stag on the mountains of Bether.”

**2:16 “He pastures *his flock* among the lilies”** This is suggestive of their sexual activity.

**2:17** This refers to the cool of the evening. It may be a (1) a request to stay all night together or (2) a late evening rendezvous.





**NASB**            “Until the cool of the day”  
**NKJV**            “Until the day breaks”  
**NRSV**            “Until the day breathes”  
**TEV**              “Until the morning breezes blow”  
**NJB**              “Before the day-breeze rises”

This personification (“day breathes”) denotes the wind that blows at both daybreak and evening (cf. 4:6). If v. 17 is related to v. 16 it refers to evening, but the phrase “the shadows fell away” points toward the sunrise.

▣ There are two more *Qal* IMPERATIVES:

1. BDB 685, KB 738 - “turn about,” “go around,” “surround”  
    In this context it might mean show off your body by walking around.
2. BDB 197, KB 225 - “be like,” “resemble”  
    Here, be like a virile male gazelle or stag.



**NASB, NKJV,**  
**TEV, NJB**            “mountains of Bether”  
**NRSV**                “cleft mountains”  
**JPSOA, REB**        “spices” (from similar word in 8:14)  
**NIV**                 “rugged hills”  
**LXX**                 “mountains of the ravines”

Literally this means “rugged” or better “cleft” (i.e., sharply cut, BDB 144). The translation “spice,” comes from the Peshitta (Syriac).

# SONG OF SONGS 3

## STANZA DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
The Bride's Troubled Dream	A Troubled Night (The Shulammitte)	The Woman's Dream	The Second Song (2:8-3:5)  (The Woman) 2:16-3:4	Second Poem (2:8-3:5)
3:1-4	3:1-3	3:1-5		3:1-2  3:3  3:4
3:5	3:5		3:5	(Lover) 3:5
Solomon's Wedding Day	The Coming of Solomon (The Shulammitte)	A Wedding Procession	The Third Song (3:6-5:1)  (The Woman) 3:6-11	Third Poem (3:6-5:1)  (Poet) 3:6  3:7-8  3:9-10  3:11
3:6-11	3:6-8  3:9-11	3:6-11		

**READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section)**  
***FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL***

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the four translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph
4. Etc.

## OUTLINE BY POSSIBLE SPEAKERS (notice the lack of agreement)

<u>NASB</u>	<u>NKJV</u>	<u>TEV</u>	<u>NJB</u>
3:1-4, Bride	3:1-5, Shulammitte	2:16-5:5, the Woman	2:8-3:4, Beloved
3:5, Bridegroom			3:5, Lover
3:6-11, Chorus	3:6-8, Shulammitte	3:6-11, the Woman	3:6-11, Poet
	3:9-11, Shulammitte		
4:1-6, Bridegroom	4:1-5, the Beloved	4:1-15, the Man	4:1-15, Lover
4:7-15, Bridegroom	4:6-15, the Beloved		
4:16, Bride	4:16, the Shulammitte	4:16, the Woman	4:16, Beloved

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 3:1-4

<sup>1</sup>"On my bed night after night I sought him

Whom my soul loves;

I sought him but did not find him.

<sup>2</sup>I must arise now and go about the city;

In the streets and in the squares

I must seek him whom my soul loves.'

I sought him but did not find him.

<sup>3</sup>The watchmen who make the rounds in the city found me,

And I said, 'Have you seen him whom my soul loves?'

<sup>4</sup>Scarcely had I left them

When I found him whom my soul loves;

I held on to him and would not let him go

Until I had brought him to my mother's house,

And into the room of her who conceived me."

**3:1 “night after night”** This is PLURAL in the Hebrew, which refers to recurrent dreams. One theory is that 3:1-4 and 5:2-8 are dreams which the Shulammitte had. It is quite normal to have fearful dreams the night before an important event. The other theory is that she is dreaming of a local lover back home in the north of Israel. I personally like the second option.

**3:2** There are three COHORTATIVE VERBS:

1. “arise” - BDB 877, KB 1086, *Qal* COHORTATIVE
2. “go about” - BDB 685, KB 738, *Poel* COHORTATIVE
3. “seek” - BDB 134, KB 152, *Piel* COHORTATIVE

Whoever it was she was looking for (“whom my soul loves,” vv. 1,2,3,4), she finds him in v. 4. These three VERBS speak of:

1. potential action (i.e., dream)
2. actual action (she actually went into the streets looking)

Since I think that there is a northern, local lover involved in the “story line,” this could refer to her actually searching in her northern village for her lover. It is not until v. 6 (i.e., the third poem, a totally separate unit) that Solomon’s entourage approaches.

▣ **“the city”** This can refer either to Jerusalem (i.e., the harem) or to the girl’s hometown in northern Israel (cf. v. 4).

**3:3 “the watchman”** Watchmen (BDB 1036, KB 1581, *Qal* PARTICIPLE) were placed as sentinels on the walls of ancient cities as well as keepers of the gate.

**3:4** This verse describes her joy (i.e., “I held on to him,” BDB 28, KB 31, *Qal* PERFECT) in finding her lover! The problem comes in the last two lines. Are they synonymous parallelism or step parallelism? Also, how do we explain a secret, local lover being brought publically to the maiden’s home?

If there is a plot line (and I am not convinced there is), then the words must be reinterpreted:

1. as a future longing
2. as a euphemism of intimacy

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 3:5**

<sup>5</sup>**I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,  
By the gazelles or by the hinds of the field,  
That you will not arouse or awaken *my* love  
Until she pleases."**

**3:5** Notice that this same refrain is repeated over and over throughout the book. However, in 2:7 it is possible that the bridegroom is speaking but more probable that the bride is speaking. In 3:5 it is the bridegroom.

▣ **“Until she pleases”** The Masoretic Text has “it” and, therefore, it speaks of his passion.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 3:6-11**

<sup>6</sup>**What is this coming up from the wilderness  
Like columns of smoke,  
Perfumed with myrrh and frankincense,  
With all scented powders of the merchant?  
<sup>7</sup>Behold, it is the *traveling* couch of Solomon;  
Sixty mighty men around it,  
Of the mighty men of Israel.  
<sup>8</sup>All of them are wielders of the sword,  
Expert in war;  
Each man has his sword at his side,  
*Guarding* against the terrors of the night.  
<sup>9</sup>King Solomon has made for himself a sedan chair  
From the timber of Lebanon.  
<sup>10</sup>He made its posts of silver,  
Its back of gold  
And its seat of purple fabric,  
*With* its interior lovingly fitted out  
By the daughters of Jerusalem.  
<sup>11</sup>Go forth, O daughters of Zion,**

**And gaze on King Solomon with the crown  
 With which his mother has crowned him  
 On the day of his wedding,  
 And on the day of his gladness of heart."**

**3:6-11** Who is the speaker?

1. NASB - the chorus
2. NKJV, TEV, NJB - the maiden
3. REB - companions (NIV Study Bible footnote)

It is obvious that the poetic form of Song of Songs has various speakers. The problem is that there are no obvious textual markers to

1. tell us who is speaking
2. tell us the limits of their speaking
3. tell us the relationship between the different sections

The best option is to compare them to Egyptian and Syrian (i.e. Arabs living in Syria) wedding songs (*wasfs*).

**3:6**

**NASB, NRSV,**

**TEV, NJB** "What"

**NKJV, REB,**

**LXX, JPSOA,**

**NIV** "Who"

In Hebrew this is an INTERROGATIVE (BDB 566) followed by a DEMONSTRATIVE ADJECTIVE (FEMININE SINGULAR). It refers to a royal caravan of Solomon.

Now the question is:

1. is this a reference to Solomon (cf. v. 7)
2. is this an allusion to his fame and wealth
3. is this historical or literary
4. is this a bride being brought to Jerusalem, as some see because it is feminine
5. does the feminine form refer to the royal aspect (BDB 641, cf. v. 7).

I wish I knew! Many commentators assume this is an account of King Solomon's love affair with an Egyptian princess early in his reign. This interpretation must remain a valid option, but not the only option. When one compares the wedding songs of Egypt and Syria there are striking similarities in words and phrases. Solomon is a poor example of a mutual, monogamous (assumed, never stated) marriage (forecast, but not recorded until later in the book). The literary setting of Song of Songs may parallel Ecclesiastes (i.e. chapters 1-2), where Solomon is a literary foil. However, in Ecclesiastes he is never specifically named (though strongly alluded to). These are interpretive questions, not meant to deny the Bible's

1. inspiration
2. historicity

but to recognize its full range of literary genres and techniques.

▣ **"the wilderness"** This refers to the uninhabited pastureland, not the desert. However, the question is, where is it referring to? Usually the wilderness is south of Jerusalem, but if so, why is the caravan coming to the city of the king?

▣ **“Like columns of smoke”** This refers to a large royal caravan stirring up dust as it passes through dry terrain. This is either a reference to Solomon’s coming to get his bride in the North or the bride entering Jerusalem for the wedding feast. It was the custom of the day for a large festival procession to bring the bride to the groom’s home.

▣ **“Perfumed with myrrh and frankincense”** Solomon really smelled good! Myrrh (BDB 600) is the excretion from certain plants in the desert and was used for numerous activities:

1. holy anointing oil, Exod. 30:23
2. perfume for people and clothes (cf. 1:13; 4:6,14)
3. one of the gifts for the Christ child, Matt. 2:11
4. mixed with wine for a drink during crucifixion, Mark 15:23
5. spice for burial, John 19:39

▣ **“frankincense”** Like myrrh, this was made from sweet-smelling tree sap from Arabia (cf. Jer. 6:20). It was used for several purposes:

1. cereal sacrifice, Lev. 2:1; 6:14-18
2. sin sacrifice, Lev. 5:11
3. holy incense, Exod. 30:34-38; I Chr. 9:29
4. put on the table of Showbread along with the twelve loaves, Lev. 24:7
5. personal perfume, Song of Songs 3:6; 4:6,14

**3:7 “Sixty”** This number does not usually carry a symbolic significance in the OT. Therefore, it probably relates here to an elite royal guard.

### 3:8

**NASB** “All of them are wielders of the sword”  
**NKJV** “they all hold swords”  
**NRSV** “all equipped with swords”  
**TEV** “all of them skilful with the sword”  
**NJB** “All of them skilled swordsmen”

Just a note to show how the VERB of 3:4 (“held on,” BDB 28, KB 31, *Qal* PERFECT) is now used of the swords of the elite guards (*Qal* PASSIVE PARTICIPLE). She held on to her lover, they held on to their weapons! Human vocabulary must be flexible and figurative. This is the beauty and power of poetry and imagery!

▣ **“the terrors of the night”** This ambiguous phrase (BDB 808 and 538) has several connotations, here are two: (1) bandits or (2) evil spirits (Ps. 91:5).

### 3:9

**NASB** “sedan chair”  
**NKJV, NRSV,**  
**NJB** “palanquin”  
**TEV** “throne”

This (BDB 68, KB 80) term is difficult to define because there is no Semitic root to link it to. In later Aramaic (Targums) it refers to a litter for the bride at the wedding service (KB). Here it refers to some type of enclosed, wooden ride (cf. vv. 9-10) for a royal person (or a bride-to-be)!

**3:10 “And its seat of purple fabric”** Royalty is often associated with the color purple. It is made from the dye of crushed sea shells found off the coast of Phoenicia.



<b>NASB</b>	<b>“lovingly fitted out”</b>
<b>NKJV</b>	<b>“paved <i>with</i> love”</b>
<b>NRSV</b>	<b>“inlaid with love”</b>
<b>TEV</b>	<b>“lovingly woven”</b>
<b>NJB</b>	<b>“inlaid with ebony”</b>
<b>JPSOA</b>	<b>“decked with love”</b>

The FEMININE NOUN (BDB 13) is used several times in Song of Songs:

1. love between a man and a woman, 2:4,5; 5:8; 8:6,7(twice)
2. personified, 2:7; 3:5; 7:7; 8:4
3. figuratively, 3:10

The NEB and REB follow S. R. Driver and translate the term as being from an Arabic root meaning “leather” (cf. Hosea 11:4a). The Jerusalem Bible and the New Jerusalem Bible change the word to “ebony,” while the New American Bible (both of these translations are from Catholic scholars) change it to “ivory.” There has been one other suggestion based on Egyptian wall art (Othmar Keel), that it refers to love-making scenes painted or carved on the inner walls.

▣ **“the daughters of Jerusalem”** See note at 1:5.

**3:11 “daughters of Zion”** This phrase is parallel to “daughters of Jerusalem” (cf. v. 10). Jerusalem was built on seven hills (like Rome). Mt. Zion was where the old Canaanite city (i.e. Jebus) which David conquered was located (cf. I Kgs. 8:1-2; II Chr. 5:2) and became a way of referring to the whole city (e.g., Isa. 40:9; Micah 3:12).

It seems that the geographical setting would be Jerusalem if these women (whoever they were) are called on to come and watch. If so this may be the northern maiden being brought to Jerusalem in Solomon’s royal litter.

These women are implored (commanded) to:

1. “go forth,” BDB 422, KB 425, *Qal* IMPERATIVE
2. “gaze,” BDB 906, KB 1157, *Qal* IMPERATIVE

▣ **“the crown”** This is the word “wreath” (BDB 742 I). It was the custom in ancient Near Eastern weddings for the bride and groom to wear wreaths and for the bride to be veiled (cf. 4:1, 3).

▣ **“his mother crowned him”** If this is literally Solomon getting married, then this refers to Bathsheba, although this incident is not specifically recorded in Scripture.

▣ **“on the day of his wedding”** This specifically denotes the occasion for the processional, the wealth and the veil (cf. 4:1,3). The poetry and imagery is of a wedding. This is the only place in this book where a wedding feast is specifically mentioned.

# SONG OF SONGS 4

## STANZA DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
Solomon's Love Expressed	(The Beloved)	The Man's Praise and Invitation (4:1-5:1)	The Third Song (3:6-5:1)	Third Poem (3:6-5:1)
4:1-6	4:1-5  4:6-8	(4:1-5:1) 4:1-8	(The Man) 4:1-7  4:8-11	(Lover) 4:1-5  4:6  4:7  4:8
4:7-15	4:9-11  4:12-15	4:9-15	4:12-15	4:9-11  4:12-15
4:16	(The Shulammite) 4:16	4:16	(The Woman) 4:16	(Beloved) 4:16

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2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph
4. Etc.

### WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

#### **NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 4:1-6**

**1'' How beautiful you are, my darling,  
How beautiful you are!  
Your eyes are *like* doves behind your veil;  
Your hair is like a flock of goats**



**That have descended from Mount Gilead.**

**<sup>2</sup>Your teeth are like a flock of *newly* shorn ewes**

**Which have come up from *their* washing,**

**All of which bear twins,**

**And not one among them has lost her young.**

**<sup>3</sup>Your lips are like a scarlet thread,**

**And your mouth is lovely.**

**Your temples are like a slice of a pomegranate**

**Behind your veil.**

**<sup>4</sup>Your neck is like the tower of David,**

**Built with rows of stones**

**On which are hung a thousand shields,**

**All the round shields of the mighty men.**

**<sup>5</sup>Your two breasts are like two fawns,**

**Twins of a gazelle**

**Which feed among the lilies.**

**<sup>6</sup>Until the cool of the day**

**When the shadows flee away,**

**I will go my way to the mountain of myrrh**

**And to the hill of frankincense."**

**4:1 “How beautiful you are my darling”** This is a recurrent phrase (cf. 1:15,16; 2:10,13; 4:1,7; 6:4,10). Notice the parallelism.

Here this phrase begins a series of analogies describing the maiden’s physical beauty:

1. eyes, v. 1 - doves (gentle)
2. hair, v. 1 - goats (black, cf. 5:11)
3. teeth, v. 2 - shorn ewes (white, cf. 6:16)
4. lips, v. 3 - scarlet thread (red)
5. temples, v. 3 - slice of pomegranate (reddish)
6. neck, v. 4 - towers of David (decorated)
7. breasts, v. 5 - balanced and accentuated

▣ **“eyes are *like* doves”** The eyes would have been the only part of the face clearly visible behind the veil. The man compliments them often (1:15; 4:1; 5:12; 7:4). Apparently he is referring to their softness or gentleness (not their color, shape, or size). In the ancient Near East eyes were very important. They could denote character (i.e., Gen. 3:5,6,7; 20:16; 39:7; Num. 5:13; 15:39; Deut. 16:19) or evil (i.e., “the evil eye,” cf. Deut. 15:9; 28:54,56; Pro. 23:6; 28:22) or possibly allurements (cf. 4:9; 6:5). They were often used as idioms for phrases of endearment:

1. “favour in your eyes” - Gen. 30:27; 34:11; 50:4; Deut. 24:1
2. “the apple of his eye” - Deut. 30:10; Ps. 17:8; Zech. 2:8

▣ **“hair is like a flock of goats”** This refers to black goats against a lush, green hillside (i.e., Gilead, cf. Mic. 7:14).

The term “flock” (BDB 727) may have been a way of drawing attention to separate pieces of hair (i.e., ringlets or braids).



<b>NASB</b>	<b>“That have descended”</b>
<b>NKJV</b>	<b>“going down”</b>
<b>NRSV</b>	<b>“moving down”</b>
<b>TEV</b>	<b>“bounding down”</b>
<b>NJB</b>	<b>“surging down”</b>
<b>LXX</b>	<b>“have appeared from”</b>
<b>JPSOA, REB</b>	<b>“streaming down”</b>

The meaning of this VERB (BDB 167, KB 195) is uncertain. It is found only here and in 6:5. Here are the possibilities:

1. to sit or recline, BDB 167, from Arabic root
2. to boil, KB 195
3. to hop or jump, KB 195; a possible parallel in Egyptian love poems is “skipping goats.”

The maiden’s hair is bouncing as she walks or flowing over her shoulders in large amounts. Whatever it is, it is a compliment (cf. 7:5)!

**4:2 “Your teeth are like a flock of newly shorn ewes”** This refers to her teeth all being in place, well shaped, balanced, and very white.

**4:3 “Your lips are like a scarlet thread”** This refers to the redness and shapeliness of her lips.



<b>NASB, NKJV,</b>	
<b>NRSV</b>	<b>“your mouth is lovely”</b>
<b>TEV</b>	<b>“how lovely they are when you speak”</b>
<b>NJB</b>	<b>“your words are enchanting”</b>

This term (BDB 184 I) is found only here in the OT. The rare Hebrew root from which it is formed means “mouth,” “word” or “speech.” The dynamic equivalent translations (i.e. TEV, NJB) prefer the two connotations, but the context of Song of Songs often uses body parts, so “mouth” seems the appropriate parallelism.

**“Your temples are like a slice of pomegranate”** This maiden apparently did not need lipstick or rouge. The facial highlights could be seen behind her thin veil.

**4:4 “Your neck is like the tower of David”** In the Masoretic text and the Septuagint the “tower of David” is a proper name. The ancient Orientals considered large necks and noses to be very attractive (cf. 7:4).



<b>NASB</b>	<b>“Built with rows of stones”</b>
<b>NKJV, LXX</b>	<b>“built for an armory”</b>
<b>NRSV</b>	<b>“built in courses”</b>
<b>TEV</b>	<b>“round and smooth”</b>
<b>NJB</b>	<b>“built on layers”</b>
<b>REB</b>	<b>“built with encircling courses”</b>
<b>JPSOA</b>	<b>“built to hold weaponry”</b>

The VERBAL is a *Qal* PASSIVE PARTICIPLE of “to build” (BDB 124, KB 139). The footnote of JPSOA states that it refers to her jewelry (i.e., necklace, cf. v. 9; 1:10-11):

The NOUN (BDB 1069) is more difficult.

1. In Arabic the root means “to perish.”
2. BDB says it is poetic for weapons (JPSOA).
3. KB 1741 also refers to an Arabic root, “to arrange in order,” thereby to construct a tower in layers (cf. NASB, NRSV, NJB, REB).

▣ **“On which are hung a thousand shields,**

**All the round shields of the mighty men”** This may refer to a beautiful necklace around the Shulammitte maiden (cf. v. 9).

**SPECIAL TOPIC: *ELEPH* (THOUSAND)**

This is the Hebrew word for “thousand” (BDB 48). However, it is used in several senses.

1. a family unit, Josh. 22:14; Jdgs. 6:15; I Sam. 23:23; Zech. 9:7; 12:6
2. a military unit, Exod. 18:21,25; Deut. 1:15
3. a literal thousand, Gen. 20:16; Exod. 32:28
4. a symbolic number, Gen. 24:60; Exod. 20:6; 34:7; Deut. 7:9; Jer. 32:18

The Ugaritic cognate *alluph* means “chieftain,” Gen. 36:15

**4:5 “Your two breasts are like two fawns”** This may refer to well proportioned and mature breasts (i.e. she is of the age of child bearing).

**4:6 “Until the cool of the day”** This can refer to dawn or evening (cf. 2:17).

▣ **“I will go my way to the mountain of myrrh”** The man urges himself to act! He calls her to himself in v. 8 and by metaphorical imperatives in v. 16. He cannot wait! This is a euphemism for intimacy. The mountain refers to the woman’s perfumed breasts (cf. 1:13).

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 4:7-15**

<sup>7</sup>**You are altogether beautiful, my darling,  
And there is no blemish in you.**

<sup>8</sup>**Come with me from Lebanon, my bride,  
May you come with me from Lebanon.  
Journey down from the summit of Amana,  
From the summit of Senir and Hermon,  
From the dens of lions,  
From the mountains of leopards.**

<sup>9</sup>**You have made my heart beat faster, my sister, my bride;  
You have made my heart beat faster with a single *glance* of your eyes,  
With a single strand of your necklace.**

<sup>10</sup>**How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride!  
How much better is your love than wine,  
And the fragrance of your oils  
Than all *kinds* of spices!**

<sup>11</sup>**Your lips, my bride, drip honey;  
Honey and milk are under your tongue,**

**And the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.**

<sup>12</sup>**A garden locked is my sister, *my* bride,**

**A rock garden locked, a spring sealed up.**

<sup>13</sup>**Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates**

**With choice fruits, henna with nard plants,**

<sup>14</sup>**Nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon,**

**With all the trees of frankincense,**

**Myrrh and aloes, along with all the finest spices.**

<sup>15</sup>***You are* a garden spring,**

**A well of fresh water,**

**And streams *flowing* from Lebanon."**

**4:7** One wonders if this is a delayed reaction to her unexpectedly dark skin (cf. 1:5-6) or if this was a way for the man to affirm that he liked everything about the maiden (cf. v. 9).

**4:8** This refers to the bride being from northern Israel. It may be a metaphor for her being far away, separated or secluded from him (i.e., in Jerusalem).

**4:9 “sister”** In Song of Songs the maiden is greeted by several phrases or terms of endearment:

1. “most beautiful among women,” 1:8; 5:9; 6:1
2. “my darling,” 1:9,15; 2:2,10,13; 4:1,7; 6:4
3. “my beloved,” 1:13,14
4. “my beautiful one,” 2:10,13
5. “O my dove,” 2:14; 5:2; 6:9
6. “my sister,” 1:9,10,12; 5:1,2 (one of several idioms common to Egyptian love songs)
7. “my bride,” 5:1
8. “my perfect one,” 5:2
9. “O Shulammite,” 6:13
10. “O princess daughter,” 7:1
11. “My love,” 7:6

Notice how 5:2 has several of these one after another #6 (BDB 27); #2 (BDB 946; #5 (BDB 401 I); and #8 (BDB 1070). She isn't ever listed as “queen” which is surprising if these are Syrian (*wasfs*) wedding songs.

So too the man is greeted by the woman:

1. “O you whom my soul loves,” 1:7; 3:1-4
2. “my beloved,” 1:16; 2:8,9,10,16,17; 4:16; 5:2,4,5,6,10; 6:2,3; 7:10,13; 8:14

Notice that she never addresses him as “brother” or “king.”

▣ **“You have made my heart beat faster with a single *glance* of your eyes”** The VERB, NASB, “beat faster”; NKJV, NRSV, NJB, “ravished”; TEV, “stolen” (BDB 525, KB 515, *Piel* PERFECT) is a rare VERB from the same root as “heart.” It occurs only three times in the OT (two here in *Piel* and Job 11:12 in *Niphal*).

Just looking at her made his adrenalin flow (cf. v. 10)!

▣ **“with a single *glance* of your eyes**

**With a single strand of your necklace”** Now the interpretive question is, “Is this synonymous or step parallelism?”

“Eyes” can refer to a kind of stone in a necklace (i.e., Akkadian). If so, it is synonymous parallelism. The man has mentioned her necklace before (cf. 1:10; 7:4).

**4:10-15** He described the maiden’s body in 4:1-6; now he describes her smell and taste:

1. her love is better than wine, 1:2,4
2. she smells better than oils and spices, 1:3
3. her lips drip honey and milk, 1:2; 5:1
4. she smells like the forest of Lebanon
5. she is like a private (i.e., “locked”) and secluded garden (cf. v. 15; 5:1; Pro. 5:15-23) with a water feature
  - a. a sealed fountain
  - b. a well of living water
  - c. flowing streams
6. she is like wonderful plants
  - a. an orchard of pomegranates
  - b. henna and nard plants
  - c. saffron, calamus, and cinnamon
  - d. fragrant trees of frankincense
  - e. myrrh, aloes, and the finest spices

**4:12 “a garden locked”** This is a beautiful metaphor for the chastity and moral purity of the maiden. This is the first phrase of the first line. Many Hebrew MSS, as well as the ancient versions

1. Septuagint - Greek
2. Peshitta - Syriac
3. Vulgate - Latin

repeat it in the second line, which demands a slight textual change (i.e., *gan* for *gal*).

**4:13**

**NASB, NJB,**

**LXX** “shoots”

**NKJV, TEV** “plants

**NRSV** “channel”

**REB** “cheeks”

**JPSOA** “limbs”

This term (BDB 1019, KB 1517 II) seems to develop its meaning from the VERB “to send out” (KB 1511) and developed metaphorically into “offshoot.” The maiden is sending out fragrances like plants send out shoots and branches.

▣ **“henna”** This is a blossom from which perfume and an orange dye is made (BDB 499 III). Women in the Near East still use this today to adorn fingernails, toenails; it is also used for other cosmetic purposes (cf. 1:14).

**4:14 “saffron”** This flower (BDB 501) is mentioned only here in the OT. It is uncertain as to exactly which ancient plant it refers:

1. blue-flowered saffron crocus used for dyeing food, clothing, and walls yellow (cf. *Helps for Translators*, “Fauna and Flora of the Bible,” p. 124)
2. a thistle native to the Middle East, which has a red flower and is also used for dyeing food and clothing (cf. *Helps for Translators*, p. 175)

In 4:4 it seems to be listed along with other imported spices. Apparently in Song of Songs the flower mentioned was used for perfume, not dying.

▣ **“calamus”** This refers to fragrant river cane (BDB 889). It is also used in the holy anointing oil (cf. Exod. 30:23).

▣ **“cinnamon”** This comes from India and Sri Lanka and is made from the bark of an evergreen tree (BDB 890). It was very popular and expensive (cf. Exod. 30:23; Pro. 7:17).

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 4:16**

**<sup>16</sup>Awake, O north wind,  
And come, wind of the south;  
Make my garden breathe out fragrance,  
Let its spices be wafted abroad.  
May my beloved come into his garden  
And eat its choice fruits!"**

**4:16** This verse has a series of commands from the maiden to the man (REB has both v.15 and v. 16 spoken by her) in metaphors from nature:

1. “awake,” BDB 734, KB 802, *Qal* IMPERATIVE
2. “come,” BDB 97, KB 112, *Qal* IMPERATIVE
3. “breathe,” BDB 806, KB 916, *Hiphil* IMPERATIVE
4. “be wafted,” BDB 633, KB 683, *Qal* IMPERFECT used as a JUSSIVE
5. “eat,” BDB 37, KB 46, *Qal* IMPERFECT used as a JUSSIVE

This verse is an extension of v. 8, “come with me from Lebanon.” She is calling to him to come to her in the north. Her fragrances are spreading on the southerly winds! Calling herself a garden is typical Near Eastern sexual imagery (cf. 5:1).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

These discussion questions are provided to help you think through the major issues of this section of the book. They are meant to be thought provoking, not definitive.

1. Is it certain that chapter 3:1-4 and chapter 5:2-8 are dreams?
2. Why has this become a common interpretation?
3. What is the recurrent theme of verse 5?
4. Why are there so many allusions to geographical locations and specific flora and fauna of the Holy Land in this book?

# SONG OF SONGS 5

## STANZA DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
The Torment of Separation	A Troubled Night (3:1-5:1)	The Man's Praise and Invitation (4:1-5:1)	The Third Song (3:6-5:1)	Third Poem (3:6-5:1)
5:1	(The Beloved) 5:1a-b	5:1	5:1	(Lover) 5:1a-c
	(To His Friends) 5:1c-d			(Poet) 5:1d
5:2-8	The Shulammitte's Troubled Evening (The Shulammitte) 5:2	The Woman's Search (5:2-6:3) 5:2-8	The Fourth Song (5:2-6:3) (The Woman) 5:2a-b	Fourth Poem (5:2-6:3) (Beloved) 5:2
			(The man) 5:2c-d	
	5:3-5		(The Woman) 5:3	5:3-5
	5:6-8		5:4-6	5:6
			5:7	5:7
			5:8	5:8
5:9	(The Daughters of Jerusalem) 5:9	5:9	(The Woman) 5:9	(Chorus) 5:9
Admiration by the Bride 5:10-16	(The Shulammitte) 5:10-13  5:14-16	5:10-16	(The Woman) 5:10-16	(Beloved) 5:10-16

### **READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section)**

#### ***FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL***

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the four translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 5:1

**"I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride;  
I have gathered my myrrh along with my balsam.  
I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey;  
I have drunk my wine and my milk.  
Eat, friends;  
Drink and imbibe deeply, O lovers."**

**5:1 "I have come into my garden"** The VERB (BDB 97, KB 112, *Qal* PERFECT) is used to denote that the man has come to and remained with his lover. "Garden" is often used in this book as a reference to a sexual encounter with the maiden (cf. 4:12,15,16[twice]; 5:1; 6:2; 8:13). It is a euphemism for her sexual delights.

It should be noted that the garden metaphor is begun in 4:12-15. The man is bidden to come into the garden (this act also has sexual connotations, cf. Gen. 6:4; Deut. 22:13; Ezek. 23:44). In 4:16 and 5:1 is his arrival and enjoyment of the garden (i.e., the maiden)

1. I have come, BDB 97, KB 112, *Qal* PERFECT
2. I have gathered, BDB 71, KB 85, *Qal* PERFECT
3. I have eaten, BDB 37, KB 46, *Qal* PERFECT
4. I have drunk, BDB 1059, KB 1667, *Qal* PERFECT

There is a surprising repetition of the personal PRONOUN, "my" (eight times).

▣ **"my sister"** This is an idiom used in Egyptian love songs to refer to one's lover and new family member. It is parallel to "bride" (cf. 4:9).

▣ **"balsam"** This (BDB 141) is a fragrant resin taken from the roots of certain plants. It is also translated "spice" and was an ingredient of the holy anointing oil (cf. Exod. 25:4; 35:8). It is used several times in Song of Songs (cf. 4:10,14; 5:1,13; 6:2; 8:14).

▣ **"Eat, friends;**

**Drink and imbibe deeply, O lovers"** This is a series of three *Qal* IMPERATIVES:

1. "eat," BDB 37, KB 46
2. "drink," BDB 1059, KB 1667
3. "imbibe deeply" (lit. "be drunk") BDB 1016, KB 1500

Both "eat" and "drink" can be literal (i.e., wedding feast) or euphemistic of physical love (i.e., Pro. 7:18). Many of the words used in this context have double meanings related to physical intimacy.

The first relates to the wedding guests and the second and third to their response to the newly married. Weddings were long-lasting community events.

▣ **"friends"** This (BDB 945) refers to special wedding guests (cf. Jdgs. 14:11,20), neighbors, or other family members.



**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 5:2-8**

<sup>2</sup>"I was asleep but my heart was awake.

A voice! My beloved was knocking:  
'Open to me, my sister, my darling,  
My dove, my perfect one!  
For my head is drenched with dew,  
My locks with the damp of the night.'

<sup>3</sup>I have taken off my dress,

How can I put it on *again*?  
I have washed my feet,  
How can I dirty them *again*?

<sup>4</sup>My beloved extended his hand through the opening,

And my feelings were aroused for him.

<sup>5</sup>I arose to open to my beloved;

And my hands dripped with myrrh,  
And my fingers with liquid myrrh,  
On the handles of the bolt.

<sup>6</sup>I opened to my beloved,

But my beloved had turned away *and* had gone!  
My heart went out *to him* as he spoke.  
I searched for him but I did not find him;  
I called him but he did not answer me.

<sup>7</sup>The watchmen who make the rounds in the city found me,

They struck me *and* wounded me;  
The guardsmen of the walls took away my shawl from me.

<sup>8</sup>I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,

If you find my beloved,  
As to what you will tell him:  
For I am lovesick."

**5:2 "I was asleep, but my heart was awake"** This starts a new poem (5:2-6:3). This seems to be another dream like chapter 3:1-4.

▣ **"Open to me, my sister, my darling,**

**My dove, my perfect one"** This is a memory of the voice of bridegroom from the dream of the bride, vv. 2-7. The verb "open" (BDB 834, KB 986, *Qal* IMPERATIVE), like so many terms in this context has sexual connotations and may be a euphemism for sexual intimacy (cf. 7:13). Notice it is repeated in vv. 5 and 6.

As one reads this ambiguous passage, one wonders if this is reality or dream imagination. Is this one of many attempts of the man to make love to the maiden at night in secret? Is it an event during the week-long wedding in a city? Is it a dream of rejection and immediate grief over that rejection?

Again, could this be an approach of Solomon to a new member of his harem? It seems strange to me:

1. that Solomon would leave and accept a sexual rejection from a new member of his harem (the VERB "open" [BDB 834, KB 986] is a *Qal* IMPERATIVE)

2. that a new member of the royal harem could escape into the city
3. that night watchmen would not recognize or ask who the woman was before they beat her (and why)

Could this rejection be because the maiden truly loved a northern shepherd and not Solomon?

▣ **“For my head is drenched with dew,**

**My locks with the damp of the night”** The second line has one rare word (i.e., locks, BDB 881) and a rare phrase, “the damp of the night” (BDB 944 CONSTRUCT BDB 538). Heavy dew often falls in Palestine in the early morning hours. Obviously this is a reference to a late visit from her newly married lover or a night visit before they were married.

**5:3** These are the two excuses the maiden uses for not opening the door to her lover:

1. she is undressed
2. she has washed her feet before getting into bed

These seem trivial if this referred to a newlywed or to her true lover (unless it was a nightmare).

As with several of the words in this literary unit, “feet” is a euphemism for genitalia (e.g., Jdgs. 3:24; Ruth 3:4; I Sam. 24:3; II Sam. 11:8,11).

**5:4 “My beloved extended his hand through the opening”** Literally this would refer to the small hole above the latch in ancient doors. It is possible to latch them in such a way that no one from the outside could open it and that is apparently what happened here. Because of the use of the term “hand” (BDB 388), in Isa. 57:8 and as the term describing a raised pillar or monument, which may have originally referred to the phallic symbol of Canaanite shrines (cf. I Sam. 15:12; II Sam. 18:18; I Chr. 18:3; Isa. 56:5, BDB 390, #4,a), some see this as a reference to male genitalia (BDB 390, #4,g and KB 387, #1, “penis”).

Even the term “opening” may refer to the maiden’s vagina (cf. NIDOTTE, vol. 2, p. 1032).

▣ **“my feelings”** This is the word for “bowels” (BDB 588). The ancients believed that the lower viscera (liver, kidneys, bowels) was the seat of the emotions:

1. negative, Isa. 16:11 (used of God); Jer. 4:19 (used of Jeremiah)
2. positive, Isa. 63:15; Jer. 31:20 (used of God); also Ps. 40:8 (used of David)

However, in this context it might refer to a sexual intensity (cf. Ps. 71:6; Isa. 49:1, “womb”).

**5:5 “I arose to open the door to my beloved”** Obviously he had already left because she had taken too much time (1) to decide to open the door or (2) in preparing herself to receive him.

**5:7 “They struck me and wounded me”** This is a very strange verse. Two theories have been postulated: (1) they struck (BDB 645, KB 697, *Hiphil* PERFECT and BDB 822, KB 954, *Qal* PERFECT, “bruise” [these are strong, violent terms, e.g., Ps. 38:5; Isa. 1:6]) her for disturbing the peace (i.e., v. 6 line 5) or (2) she was trying to invade Solomon’s private quarters (the king’s sleeping room was separate from the harem).

▣ **“The guardsmen of the walls took away my shawl from me”** They either (1) tried to stop her and she fled, leaving her shawl (BDB 921 or “veil”) in their grasp or (2) after they had wounded her and removed her shawl they recognized her as a new member of the king’s harem.

**5:8 “I adjure you, O daughter of Jerusalem”** This group responds in v. 9 and in 6:1. There are several possibilities for these “daughters of Jerusalem”: (1) virgins of Jerusalem; (2) members of the harem; (3) married women of the royal court; or (4) narrators (chorus as in dramas).

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 5:9**

**9**"What kind of beloved is your beloved,  
O most beautiful among women?  
What kind of beloved is your beloved,  
That thus you adjure us?"

**5:9** "most beautiful among women" This phrase occurs in 1:8; 6:1; and here. It appears to be a compliment. However, if the "daughters of Jerusalem" are the other members of the neglected harem, one could see how it could be sarcastic.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 5:10-16**

**10**"My beloved is dazzling and ruddy,  
Outstanding among ten thousand.  
**11**His head is *like* gold, pure gold;  
His locks are *like* clusters of dates  
And black as a raven.  
**12**His eyes are like doves  
Beside streams of water,  
Bathed in milk,  
And reposed in *their* setting.  
**13**His cheeks are like a bed of balsam,  
Banks of sweet-scented herbs;  
His lips are lilies  
Dripping with liquid myrrh.  
**14**His hands are rods of gold  
Set with beryl;  
His abdomen is carved ivory  
Inlaid with sapphires.  
**15**His legs are pillars of alabaster  
Set on pedestals of pure gold;  
His appearance is like Lebanon  
Choice as the cedars.  
**16**His mouth is *full of* sweetness.  
And he is wholly desirable.  
This is my beloved and this is my friend,  
O daughters of Jerusalem."

**5:10-16** This is a prolonged poetic description of the man, apparently directed at "the daughters of Jerusalem" (cf. 1:5; 2:7; 3:5,10; 5:8,16; 8:4). In 5:9 and 6:1 they ask the maiden questions.

This love song of physical comparisons is parallel to the man's description of the maiden in 4:1-7. These love poems use all physical senses (touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing) to heighten the desire, anticipation, and fulfillment of physical love. Human sexuality is a God-given desire for the expansion and preservation of humankind. It is a beautiful and godly experience until it is damaged by the self-seeking, me-first consequences of Genesis 3. See Special Topic at 2:13.

**5:10 “dazzling”** This (BDB 850, KB 1018) refers either to physical health (“shining,” “glowing,” or “white” [cf. Lam. 4:7]) or character.

▣ **“ruddy”** This comes from the same root as “Adam” (BDB 9). It meant a reddish tint to the skin (BDB 10) and can be used for horses (cf. Zech. 1:8), cattle (cf. Num. 19:2), or humans (i.e., David, I Sam. 16:12).

▣ **“Outstanding among ten thousand”** He stood out in a crowd, at least for her. For Special Topic: Thousand (*Eleph*) see 4:4.

**5:11 “His head is like gold”** This could refer to:

1. a tan (cf. v. 14)
2. his golden crown or other ornaments

▣ **“His locks”** His hair is described in parallels:

1. cluster of dates (a lot of wavy hair)
2. black as a raven (very dark)

This would characterize a young man of the Near East.

**5:12 “His eyes”** His eyes are described in parallels:

1. like doves (see note at 1:15)
2. beside streams of water
3. bathed in milk (i.e., white eyes)
4. in their proper place (cf. BDB 443, #4) or “perching” (KB 444, *Qal* #2)

As the UBS, *Handbook for Translators* points out (pp. 160-161), it is uncertain which of these items listed above refer to the man’s eyes or to the pair of doves. Poetry is powerful, but slippery!

It is interesting that in two of the descriptions of King David (cf. I Sam. 16:12) his “ruddiness” and “beautiful eyes” are used in this love poem about the man’s handsomeness. Many scholars think that the imagery used in Song of Songs is royal imagery (i.e., David, Solomon) used as a literary foil for local weddings and they are characteristic love poems written and read during the wedding period. Even the titles “King” and “Queen” are found in Arabic love poems from Syria (cf. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 807).

**5:13 “His cheeks”** These two lines of poetry refer to his fragrance.

▣ **“His lips”** His lips are described as

1. lilies, which refers to their beautiful shape or color (reddish)
2. dripping with liquid myrrh, which refers to his sweet tasting kisses (cf. v. 16)

**5:14** This may refer to:

1. jewelry worn on the arm or hand
2. tanned skin (cf. vv. 11,15)
3. as so often in this passage, these words have a euphemistic sense (“hands” can refer to penis, see note at v. 4 and “abdomen” can also depict male arousal, cf. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 778).

**5:15 “alabaster”** This is a soft white stone which was imported from Egypt. It was usually used in the making of perfume containers.

# SONG OF SONGS 6

## STANZA DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
Mutual Delight in Each Other	The Shulammites Troubled (5:2-6:3)	The Woman's Search (5:2-6:3)	The Fourth Song (5:2-6:3)	Fourth Poem (5:2-6:3)
6:1	(The Daughters of Jerusalem) 6:1	6:1	(The Woman) 6:1	(Chorus) 6:1
6:2-3	(The Shulammite) 6:2-3	6:2-3	(The Woman) 6:2-3	(Beloved) 6:2  6:3
6:4-9	Praise of the Shulammite's Beauty (The Beloved) 6:4-7  6:8-9	The Man's Song of Praise 6:4-10	The Fifth Song (The Man) (6:4-8:4)	Fifth Poem (6:4-8:4) (Lover) 6:4-7  6:8-10
6:10-12	6:10  (The Shulammite) 6:11-12	The Woman Visits the Garden 6:11-12	6:10-12	6:11-12
6:13a-b	(The Beloved and His Friend) 6:13a-b	Praise of the Woman and Her Promise of Love (6:13-8:4)	(The Women) 6:13a-b	(Chorus) 6:13a-b
6:13c-d	(The Shulammite) 6:13c-d	6:13	(The Woman) 6:13c-d	(Lover) 6:13c-d [7:1]

**READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section)**  
***FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL***

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Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the four translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph
4. Etc.

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 6:1

**<sup>1</sup>"Where has your beloved gone,  
O most beautiful among women?  
Where has your beloved turned,  
That we may seek him with you?"**

**6:1** This is a continuation of the two questions made to the maiden by “the daughters of Jerusalem”:

1. 5:9, answered in 5:10-16
2. 6:1, answered in 6:2-3

The fourth love poem runs from 5:2 through 6:3. It must be remembered that the chapter and verse divisions of modern Bibles are not inspired. Although some ancient Greek Uncial manuscripts have some textual markers for context divisions in the Gospels, most of the modern markers are from the Middle Ages! Compare modern translations to see the options.

▣ **“That we may seek him with you”** This (BDB 134, KB 152) is a *Piel* IMPERFECT used in a COHORTATIVE sense. Again the identification of the group is uncertain. If it is the harem the reunion will be crowded!

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 6:2-3

**<sup>2</sup>"My beloved has gone down to his garden,  
To the beds of balsam,  
To pasture *his flock* in the gardens  
And gather lilies.  
<sup>3</sup>I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine,  
He who pastures *his flock* among the lilies."**

**6:2 “to his garden”** This seems to refer to the Shulammitte maiden herself (cf. 4:12-15,16; 5:2). This is a euphemism for lovemaking.

**6:3 “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine”** She asserts her trust in him and his faithfulness (cf. 2:16; 7:10). This surely does not fit Solomon.

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 6:4-9

**<sup>4</sup>"You are as beautiful as Tirzah, my darling,  
As lovely as Jerusalem,  
As awesome as an army with banners.  
<sup>5</sup>Turn your eyes away from me,  
For they have confused me;  
Your hair is like a flock of goats  
That have descended from Gilead.  
<sup>6</sup>Your teeth are like a flock of ewes  
Which have come up from *their* washing,  
All of which bear twins,**

**And not one among them has lost her young.**

**<sup>7</sup>Your temples are like a slice of a pomegranate  
Behind your veil.**

**<sup>8</sup>There are sixty queens and eighty concubines,  
And maidens without number;**

**<sup>9</sup>But my dove, my perfect one, is unique:  
She is her mother's only daughter;  
She is the pure *child* of the one who bore her.**

**The maidens saw her and called her blessed,  
The queens and the concubines *also*, and they praised her, *saying*,**

**6:4-8:4** The fifth love poem runs from 6:4 through 8:4. As you can see from the first page of this chapter, there are several ways to divide the man's poems regarding the maiden's beauty:

1. NASB, TEV, 6:4-9, 10-12
2. NKJV, 6:4-7, 8-9, 10, 11-12
3. NRSV, 6:4-10, 11-12
4. NJB, 6:4-7, 8-10, 11-12

The repetition of v. 4, line 3 at v. 10, line 4 seems to mark off a literary unit (cf. NRSV).

**6:4 "Tirzah"** This is the capital of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) before the reign of Omri (cf. I Kgs. 14:17). The word in Hebrew (BDB 953) means "delight" or "pleasant." It may be a metaphor, a geographical location, or both! She is distinctive, like a royal city.

▣ **"As awesome as an army with banners"** This is a very unusual and doubtful phrase that is repeated in verse 10. The term translated "awesome" is literally "terrible" (BDB 33, Exod. 15:16; 23:27, e.g., Job 33:7; Pro. 20:2), but is used here in the sense of awesome or awe-inspiring.

The second term is a VERBAL (BDB 186, KB 213, *Niphal* PARTICIPLE), found only here and in Ps. 20:6. It denotes the setting up or carrying of military banners as a show of strength. It seems to denote security or majesty. The TEV follows an Akkadian root meaning "look" (cf. UBS, *Handbook for Translators*, p. 177).

This root used in 5:10 (KB 213 I and KB 213 II) is found here and Ps. 20:6.

The NET Bible has an interesting interpretation based on the parallelism of v. 10. It translates the phrase "as an army with banners" as "as the stars in procession," thus making a fourfold allusion to objects in the sky. It is surely true that stars are often personified (cf. NIDOTTE, vol. 2, p. 613). The problem comes when this first use of the phrase (v. 4) does not fit this parallelism.

**6:5**

**NASB "Turn your eyes away from me,  
They have confused me"**

**NKJV "Turn your eyes away from me,  
For they have overcome me"**

**NRSV "Turn away your eyes from me"  
For they overwhelm me"**

**TEV "Turn your eyes away from me;  
They are holding me captive"**

**NJB "Turn your eyes away from me,  
They take me by assault"**

The VERB in the first line is *Hiphil* IMPERATIVE (BDB 685, KB 738). It denotes urgency! This is surprising because it is addressed to the maiden. It must be used metaphorically and not at all related to the concept of “the evil eye.”

The VERB of the second line is also a *Hiphil* (BDB 923, KB 1192, *Hiphil* PERFECT), which normally means “act like a storm” or “be boisterous” (cf. Isa. 3:5), but again that does not fit this context (words only have meaning in contexts). There have been several theories:

1. alarm me
2. awe me
3. disturb me
4. confuse me
5. embolden me (Ps. 138:3)
6. harry me
7. arouse me
8. tremble (Akkadian root)

Apparently when she looks at him it causes a tremendous emotional reaction in him (cf. 4:9). He cannot keep his mind on anything else. She totally distracts him from his duties and responsibilities! He is helpless (love sick, cf. 5:8, line 4) while in her gaze!

**6:5-7** This is very similar to 4:1-6.

**6:8 “There are sixty queens and eighty concubines,**

**And maidens without number”** This seems to refer to a harem. It may be another allusion to Solomon. Is it meant to refer to him directly? I would say no (cf. UBS, *Handbook for Translators*, p. 180). I think it is an aspect of Hebrew wedding poems which are related to both Egyptian love poems and Arab love poems from Syria. This may be “the daughters of Jerusalem” of 5:9 and 6:1. It is difficult to be certain who is speaking:

1. the chorus, harem, or court women
  - a. are the same group, 6:1 and 6:8
  - b. speak again in 6:13, lines 1 and 2
2. the maiden answers them in 6:2-3 and possibly 6:11-12
3. the man’s love poem begins in 6:4 and runs through v. 9 or v. 12. He then responds to the group’s comments (6:13, lines 1-2) in 6:13, lines 3 and 4

This is all conjecture. There are no textual markers except:

1. gender change
2. subject change
3. the flow of context

The “queens” (BDB 573) refers to political marriages, while the “concubines” (BDB 811) are legal sexual partners with limited rights and limited inheritance rights for their children. The “maidens” (BDB 761, “young women of marriageable age”) are attendants to the queens.

**6:9 “my dove, my perfect one”** This affectionate phrase is first used in 5:2. There may be large harems, but for this man there is but one special lover (the maiden from the north). She is special to him as she was to her mother (v. 9, lines 2 and 3). This specialness is even acknowledged by other women (v. 9, lines 4 and 5).



NASB            “is unique”  
NKJV, NRSV    “is the only one”



## **NJB “my only one”**

This is first in the sentence. It (BDB 25) is used of the uniqueness and oneness of YHWH in Deut. 6:4.

▣ **“She is the pure *child*”** A better translation would be “she is the favorite child.” The term (BDB 141 II, KB 153 II) means “pure,” “clean” (i.e., Ps. 19:9; 24:4; 73:1), but it takes on an added connotation of “chosen” (i.e., I Chr. 7:40; 9:22; 16:41; Neh. 5:18). She is not the only daughter, but the special daughter (cf. “the choice,” LXX).

▣ **“the maidens”** Literally this is “daughters” (BDB 123 I). This seems to refer to “the daughters of Jerusalem” (cf. 5:8,9; 6:1,13). The word in v. 8 translated “maidens” (BDB 761) is different from the one in v. 9 (BDB 123 I).

▣ **“The queens and the concubines *also*”** The NASB implies that vv. 10-12 are a response from the harem, but this is not at all certain from the Hebrew text.

▣ **“they praised her”** This VERB (BDB 237, KB 248, *Piel* IMPERFECT) was also used to praise the physical beauty of

1. Sarai, Gen. 12:15
2. Absalom, II Sam. 14:25

### **NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 6:10-12**

**<sup>10</sup>Who is this that grows like the dawn,  
As beautiful as the full moon,  
As pure as the sun,  
As awesome as an army with banners?  
<sup>11</sup>I went down to the orchard of nut trees  
To see the blossoms of the valley,  
To see whether the vine had budded  
Or the pomegranates had bloomed.  
<sup>12</sup>Before I was aware, my soul set me  
Over the chariots of my noble people.”**

**6:10-13** These verses are extremely difficult to interpret and no satisfactory interpretation has been proposed.

▣ It is uncertain who is speaking in these verses:

1. the man
2. the women of vv. 8-9
3. the chorus (NASB)
4. the man’s friends (NKJV)

The NASB has

1. vv. 1-12, the man
2. v. 13, lines 1-2, the chorus
3. v. 13, lines 3-4, the man

The NKJV has

1. v. 10, the man

2. vv. 11-12, the maiden
3. v. 13, lines 1-2, the man and his friends
4. v. 13, lines 3-4, the maiden

**6:10** This verse uses celestial objects and events to describe the woman's beauty:

1. looks down like the dawn
2. beautiful as the full moon
3. pure as the sun

She caught everyone's attention! She radiated light!

**6:11** The metaphors from the garden appear again:

1. orchard of nut trees (rare term, the UBS *Helps for Translators*, "Fauna and Flora of the Bible," asserts that "nut" refers to a walnut, pp. 163, 193)
2. blossoms of the valley
3. budded vine
4. bloomed pomegranates

These all imply a readiness for love (i.e. Spring, cf. 7:12-13)

**6:12** This is a strange verse, especially the last line!

- NASB "over the chariots of my noble people"  
 NKJV "as the chariots of my noble people"  
 NRSV "in a chariot beside my prince"  
 TEV "as a chariot drive is for battle"  
 NJB "onto the chariots of Amminadib"  
 JPSOA "Mid the chariots of Ammi-nadib"

No one knows what this means! There are many theories, but none fits well.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 6:13a-b**

<sup>13</sup>"Come back, come back, O Shulammitte;  
 Come back, come back, that we may gaze at you!"

**6:13** At this verse the MT changes to 7:1.

▣ **"Come back"** This *Qal* IMPERATIVE (BDB 996, KB 1427) is repeated four times! The question is who or what does it refer to:

1. she has left (possibly the garden of 6:2-3) and gone somewhere
2. she is dancing a wedding dance, but has stopped for some reason (cf. 6:13, lines 3-4)

▣ **"that we may gaze at you"** This is a *Qal* IMPERFECT (BDB 302, KB 301) used in a COHORTATIVE sense. This may relate to 1:6, line 1. However, I am not convinced that there is a united plot. Song of Songs seems more like a series of love poems. There are too many "strange stanzas" (i.e., 5:7; 6:10-12; 8:8-9).

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 6:13c-d**

<sup>13c-d</sup>"Why should you gaze at the Shulammitte,  
 As at the dance of the two companies?"

### 6:13c

NASB, NRSV “the Shulammitte”  
NKJV “the Shulamite”  
TEV, NJB “girl of Shulam”  
JPSOA “maid of Shulem”

There have been several theories about the meaning of this NOUN with the DEFINITE ARTICLE:

1. a description of the maiden, coming from the Hebrew root (view of the rabbis)
  - a. “to be perfect”
  - b. “to be peaceful”
2. Possibly “Solomon’s girl” (FEMININE ending on a MASCULINE name)
3. Possibly from a place:
  - a. Shulam or Shunem (cf. BDB 1002, LXX, I Kgs. 1:15)
  - b. place unknown
4. KB 1442 suggests as an option: “she who has been substituted”
5. Cultic origin from ancient Near East (most unlikely):
  - a. Canaanite moon goddess
  - b. Mesopotamian war/love goddess

The first or third option fits the context best.

▣ **“the dance of the two companies”** This is a very uncertain phrase! Several theories have been postulated:

1. it is a proper name, “Mahanaim,” RSV (cf. Gen. 32:2)
2. “as bands of armies,” Septuagint
3. “dancers of the camps,” Vulgate
4. “between two rows of dancers,” NJB and NEB
5. “the scene of two armies fighting,” NIDOTTE, vol. 2, p. 919

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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These discussion questions are provided to help you think through the major issues of this section of the book. They are meant to be thought provoking, not definitive.

1. Is the affair between Solomon and this maiden extra-marital, or are there flashbacks throughout this book?
2. What is so unusual about chapter 5:7?
3. Why is chapter 5:3 so unusual in the context of this book?
4. Does chapter 6:8 refer to Solomon’s harem?

# SONG OF SONGS 7

## STANZA DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
Admiration by the Bridegroom	Expressions of Praise (7:1-8:4) (The Beloved)	The Praise of the Woman and Her Promise of Love	The Fifth Song (6:4-8:4) (The Man)	Fifth Poem (6:4-8:4)
7:1-9a	7:1-5	7:1-5	7:1-5	7:1-5 [7:2-6]
	7:6-9a	7:6-9	7:6-9a	7:6-9a [7:7-10a]
7:9b	(The Shulammite) 7:9b-10		(The Woman) 7:9b-13	(Beloved) 7:9b-10
The Union of Love				
7:10-13		7:10-13		
	7:11-13			7:11-13 [7:10b-14]

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1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph
4. Etc.

### **WORD AND PHRASE STUDY**

#### **NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 7:1-9a**

**<sup>1</sup>"How beautiful are your feet in sandals,  
O prince's daughter!  
The curves of your hips are like jewels,  
The work of the hands of an artist.**

<sup>2</sup>Your navel is *like* a round goblet  
Which never lacks mixed wine;  
Your belly is like a heap of wheat  
Fenced about with lilies.

<sup>3</sup>Your two breasts are like two fawns,  
Twins of a gazelle.

<sup>4</sup>Your neck is *like* a tower of ivory,  
Your eyes *like* the pools in Heshbon  
By the gate of Bath-rabbim;  
Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon,  
Which faces toward Damascus.

<sup>5</sup>Your head crowns you like Carmel,  
And the flowing locks of your head are like purple threads;  
*The king is captivated by your tresses.*

<sup>6</sup>How beautiful and how delightful you are,  
*My love, with all your charms!*

<sup>7</sup>Your stature is like a palm tree,  
And your breasts are *like its* clusters.

<sup>8</sup>I said, 'I will climb the palm tree,  
I will take hold of its fruit stalks.'  
Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,  
And the fragrance of your breath like apples,

<sup>9</sup>And your mouth like the best wine!"

**7:1** Remember that the NJB follows the MT and begins chapter 7 at NASB's 6:13.

As usual the speaker is uncertain:

1. the man
2. the daughters of Jerusalem

There are many geographical references in the love poem:

1. Heshbon, v. 4
2. Bath-rabbim, v. 4
3. Lebanon, v. 4
4. Damascus, v. 4
5. Carmel, v. 5
6. the villages, v. 11
7. the Jezreel valley not specifically mentioned here (i.e., 7:11-12), but alluded to in 6:11.

Interestingly this love poem starts at her feet, not her head, as the other love poems.

▣ **“How beautiful”** This and v. 7 are the same VERB as 4:10 (BDB 421, KB 421, *Qal* PERFECT). This is now the third description (*wasf*, love poems) of the beauty of the Shulammitte maiden (cf. 4:10).

This same root, used as an ADJECTIVE, is found many times in Song of Songs (cf. 1:8,15 [twice]; 2:10,13; 4:1 [twice],7; 5:9; 6:1,4).

▣ **“your feet in sandals”** In this verse, her “beauty” is the way she walks. Her walk displays her feet and accentuates her hips.



NASB, NKJV,

NJB

“O prince’s daughter”

NRSV

“O queenly maiden”

JPSOA

“O daughter of nobles”

The phrase is a CONSTRUCT of “daughter” (BDB 123 I) and “noble” or “prince” (BDB 622). The same term (BDB 622) is found in 6:12 and often in Wisdom Literature (17 times) and three times in Isaiah.

The question is, “What does it imply?”

1. She is from a noble or wealthy family.
2. This is typical language of love poetry of the ancient Near East (i.e., standard hyperbole).
3. It is a metaphor of her beauty and the grace with which she carries herself.

▣ **“curves”** This term is found only here (BDB 330, KB 327), but it is related to the root, “turn away” (BDB 330, KB 330) used in 5:6, implying “a turn,” or “a curve” in motion. She had shapely hips or thighs!

▣ **“like jewels”** This term is found only here. A related form is in Prov. 25:12, where it is parallel to a gold nose or earring. Here it refers to some kind of ornament, possibly a necklace (as a necklace is rounded, so too, are the maiden’s thighs).

**7:2 “navel”** This term (BDB 1057) appears only here in the OT and seems to refer to the scar left by the umbilical cord. The navel (related root, cf. Ezek. 16:4) is exposed in all Egyptian art, which shows it was seen as beautiful.

▣ **“Which never lacks mixed wine”** This seems to refer to the wide variety of potential lovemaking practices. Song of Songs uses all the senses to describe lovemaking—sight, taste, smell, and touch. Westerners easily blush at this genre of poetry!

▣ **“wine”** Literally this is the word for “mixture” (BDB 561), found only here in the OT, which was used to denote wine mixed with

1. water
2. spices
3. other fermented juices
4. older strong wine with new wine

See Special Topic about fermented drink in the ancient Near East at Eccl. 2:3. Here the term is used metaphorically for the intoxication of love (cf. Pro. 5:18-19).

▣ **“belly”** This (BDB 105 #6) is probably in reference to the womb (i.e., Job 31:15; Ps. 139:13; Eccl. 11:5).

▣ **“Fenced about with lilies”** This is metaphorical language about the shape and smell of the woman’s womb. Lilies are a recurrent theme (cf. 2:2; 4:5; 5:13; 6:2,3; 7:2,12). This is love poetry! It is affirming the goodness and God-giveness of human sexuality. Procreation by sexual intercourse is God’s will and command (cf. Gen. 1:28)! I am so surprised that western culture, with its graphic movies, is shocked by ancient Semitic love poetry! Get over it! Physical creation is as beautiful and part of God’s plan as is spirituality. We must embrace our sexuality, but realize for our own good in a fallen, me-first world, God has placed guidelines (sex within marriage). Song of Songs is a joyful

fulfilment of a God-given desire. Love and sex can be, should be, fully affirmed and enjoyed within Scriptural guidelines! Remember, drinking wine from your wife's navel is a Scriptural admonition!

**7:3** This is a repeat of 4:5, but v. 7 is a new item!

▣ **“breasts”** This aspect of the maiden's developing womanhood is mentioned several times (4:5; 7:3; 8:10). Breasts function as a metaphor for sexual attraction and fulfilment (cf. Pro. 5:19).

**7:4** These descriptions seem so strange to us. Remember, beauty is a cultural thing. What is attractive to one culture is shocking to another. Cities were often seen as feminine. Prominent physical features (i.e., long neck, large nose, etc.) were positives!

The beauty of the eyes (the only part of the face clearly seen from behind the veil) is a recurrent theme (cf. 1:15; 4:1,9; 5:12; 7:4). However, sometimes the eyes can be dangerous (cf. 6:5) as can a necklace (cf. 4:9) and the hair (cf. 7:5). Weak eyes would denote a less attractive woman (i.e., Leah, Gen. 29:17).

▣ **“Heshbon”** This is a city in the transJordan area (i.e., Moab, cf. Num. 21:26).

▣ **“Bath-rabbin”** Literally this is “daughter of multitudes.” It was possibly the name of an actual gate in Heshbon.

▣ **“Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon”** Large noses were considered attractive by the ancient Shemites.

**7:5 “Carmel”** This ridge in northern Israel was known for its beautiful forest. So because of this parallelism this refers to her hair.

Some commentators think it is an allusion to the majesty of the mountain ridge and, therefore, refers to her posture. She walks well (v. 1) and she stands well (v. 5).

▣ **“like purple threads”** This may refer to the color (shining dark hair), but probably to the beauty and rarity of this lady's hair. This same color was used to describe Solomon's palanquin in 3:10.

▣ **“The king is captured by your tresses”** There is no DEFINITE ARTICLE with “king.” This terminology (i.e., “king” and “queen”) is common in ancient Near Eastern love poetry.

Notice the man is said to be captivated by the maiden several times:

1. 4:9
2. 6:5
3. 7:5

▣ **“tresses”** This is the word “locks” (BDB 923), found only here in the OT. Apparently it is used in the sense of long flowing curls.

**7:6** He has just listed for the fourth time the physical and sexual attributes (i.e., “charms,” BDB 772) of the maiden. Verses 6-9 are a distinct poetic unity (which NKJV, NRSV, TEV, and NJB recognize, but not NASB, NIV, nor JPSOA).

**7:7-9** He describes her as a tall, thin, and fruitful date palm, which he is about to climb and enjoy her abundant fruit! Erotic love—smell, touch, taste, sight, and sound!

Notice the VERBS of v. 8:

1. “I will climb” - BDB 748, KB 828, *Qal* IMPERFECT used in a COHORTATIVE sense
2. “I will take hold of - BDB 28, KB 31, *Qal* COHORTATIVE
3. “Oh, may your breasts be like” - BDB 224, KB 243, *Qal* IMPERFECT used in a JUSSIVE sense

**7:8 “apples”** This probably refers to apricots (BDB 656 I) since no native apples grew in this part of the world.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 7:9b**

<sup>9b</sup>“It goes *down* smoothly for my beloved,  
Flowing gently *through* the lips of those who fall asleep.”

**7:9** They make love until they fall asleep! It is uncertain who speaks this thought (i.e., the man from 6:13 or the woman who starts in 7:10-8:3).

There is a variant in the ancient versions (LXX, Aquila, Symmachus, Vulgate, and Syriac) which changes v. 9 line 3 from “the lips of those who fall asleep” (MT) to “flowing gently over the lips and teeth” (RSV, TEV).

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 7:10-13**

<sup>10</sup>“I am my beloved's,  
And his desire is for me.  
<sup>11</sup>Come, my beloved, let us go out into the country,  
Let us spend the night in the villages.  
<sup>12</sup>Let us rise early *and go* to the vineyards;  
Let us see whether the vine has budded  
*And its* blossoms have opened,  
*And whether* the pomegranates have bloomed.  
There I will give you my love.  
<sup>13</sup>The mandrakes have given forth fragrance;  
And over our doors are all choice *fruits*,  
Both new and old,  
Which I have saved up for you, my beloved.”

**7:10** See note at 8:10-14.

▣ **“desire”** This term (BDB 1003) is positive here. Sexual fulfilment is a godly desire (in the proper context, with the proper person), but the same strong human emotion can be negative (cf. Gen. 4:7) when it desires that which is not the will of God.

**7:11-12** Notice the calls to action. It is spring. It is time to make love (I am assuming that these are wedding poems and that this couple is married, but the only specific allusion to this is 4:6-11, esp. v. 11, line 4). Also note the rural setting (cf. 2:10-15) and quest for privacy:

1. “Come” - BDB 229, KB 246, *Qal* IMPERATIVE, lit. “walk” or “go”
2. “Let me go out” - BDB 422, KB 425, *Qal* IMPERFECT used in a COHORTATIVE sense
3. “Let us spend the night” - BDB 533, KB 529, *Qal* COHORTATIVE
4. “Let us rise early” - BDB 1014, KB 1492, *Hiphil* COHORTATIVE
5. “Let us see” - BDB 906, KB 1157, *Qal* IMPERFECT used in a COHORTATIVE



This is obviously a rural setting, not Jerusalem. This fits the northern first love theory. Chapter 8 is also the same rural, northern, hometown setting! Would Solomon sneak off and spend the night in a village inn or guest room?

**7:12** In the garden setting (cf. 4:16-5:1; 6:2) of blossoming spring the couple make love (“there I will give you my love,” v. 12, line 5). This shows these poems are not in chronological order!

**7:13** The first line fits well with what goes before in v. 12, but the second through fourth lines are hard to interpret. Obviously the woman is asserting that she has saved herself for this lover (contrast 1:6, which may refer to her skin and not her virginity which was so important in ancient Israel). The VERB is “I have saved up” ( BDB 860, KB 1049, *Qal* perfect, “hide,” or “treasure up”).

▣ **“mandrakes”** This was considered a very strong aphrodisiac (cf. Gen. 30:14-15). It was often called “the love apple” (cf. UBS *Helps for Translators*, “Fauna and Flora of the Bible,” pp. 138-139).

▣ **“And over our doors are all choice *fruits*,**

**Both new and old”** The NET Bible (p. 1177) asserts that the storing of fruit on a shelf over the door to ripen and mature was a common practice in the ancient Near East. The phrase would have denoted:

1. the fruit was ready to be eaten
2. she had saved it just for him
3. the time is now (v. 12, line 5)

# SONG OF SONGS 8

## STANZA DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

NASB	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
The Lovers Speak	Expressions of praise (7:1-8:4)	Praise of the Woman and Her Promise of Love (6:13-8:4)	The Fifth Song (6:4-8:4)	Fifth Poem (6:4-8:4)
8:1-3	The Shulammite (7:9b-8:4) 8:1-2  (To the Daughters of Jerusalem) 8:3-4	8:1-4	(The Woman) (7:9b-8:4) 8:1-2  8:3	8:1-2  8:3
8:4			8:4	(Lover) 8:4
8:5-7	Love Renewed in Lebanon (8:5-14) (A Relative) 8:5a  8:5b  (The Shulammitte to Her Beloved) 8:6  8:7	The Lover's Vows and Their Final Exchange 8:5a  8:5b  8:6-7	The Sixth Song (The Woman) 8:5a  (The Woman) 8:5b-7	Epilogue 8:5a  8:5b  (Beloved) 8:6-7
8:8-9	(The Shulammitte's Brothers) 8:8-9	8:8-12	8:8-9	8:8-9
8:10-12	(The Shulammitte) 8:10-11  (To Solomon) 8:12		(The Woman) 8:10  (The Man) 8:11-13	8:10  8:11-12  Final Additions
8:13	(The Beloved) 8:13	8:13		8:13
8:14	(The Shulammitte) 8:14	8:14	(The Woman) 8:14	8:14

### **READING CYCLE THREE (see p. vii in introductory section)**

#### ***FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL***

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3, p. viii). Compare your subject divisions with the four translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to

following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

1. First paragraph
2. Second paragraph
3. Third paragraph
4. Etc.

## WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

### NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 8:1-3

<sup>1</sup>"Oh that you were like a brother to me

Who nursed at my mother's breasts.

If I found you outdoors, I would kiss you;

No one would despise me, either.

<sup>2</sup>I would lead you *and* bring you

Into the house of my mother, who used to instruct me;

I would give you spiced wine to drink from the juice of my pomegranates.

<sup>3</sup>Let his left hand be under my head

And his right hand embrace me."

**8:1** The fifth poem extends from 6:4 to 8:4. In 8:5 a sixth poem begins; some call it an epilogue (NJB). It occurs in the north and is characterized by several changes in speakers (notice NKJV's characters):

1. the Beloved to the daughters of Jerusalem, 8:3,4
2. a relative speaks, 8:5a, 8:5b
3. the maiden to her beloved, 8:6-7
4. the maiden to her brothers, 8:8-9
5. the maiden, 8:10-11
6. the maiden to Solomon, 8:12
7. the Beloved, 8:13
8. the maiden, 8:14

But this is just one of many theories. The poem itself never designates a change of speaker, except by:

1. gender change
2. subject change
3. groups specifically named
4. a context change (i.e., geographical or imagined)

**8:1 "Oh that you were like a brother to me"** Apparently some people were ridiculing her for her public expression of affection and she was wishing that her lover was a member of her own family where no one would question their fondness and expressions of family love to each other.

Just a further comment about this public display of affection. The maiden does not want to violate the taboos of her culture (i.e., public display of affection), but she wants so badly to be with her lover. It seems that the *hapax legomenon*, "clinging" or "leaning" (BDB 952, KB 1279, *Hithpael* PARTICIPLE) of v. 5 is exactly this. It is uncertain who the feminine "who is this" refers to:

1. the daughters of Jerusalem
2. the maiden

If the maiden, then she is returning from a secret rendezvous with her lover in a very public way (almost flaunting it). This may have elicited her brothers' comments of 8:8-9 (esp. v. 9, lines 3-4).

▣ **“Who nursed at my mother’s breast”** This has been interpreted in several ways:

1. just another way of identifying her natural brothers
2. he should suckle her breasts like a child (i.e., “drink from the juice of pomegranates,” v. 2)
3. she learned to nurse by watching her mother (“my mother, who used to instruct me,” v. 2)

I think option #1 is best in this context.

▣ **“despise”** This term (BDB 100 I, KB 114, *Qal* IMPERFECT) is used several times in this chapter (8:1,7 [twice]) and is common in Proverbs, but not in Job or Psalms (which used BDB 100 II, “contempt,” several times).

The maiden wants to show affection for her lover, but this can only be done in private, so she wishes they were brother and sister because children within the family were allowed to express affection for each other whenever and wherever they met.

**8:2-3** It is obvious that the family fondness of v. 1 (kiss you) has widened to the erotic allusions of vv. 2 and 3:

1. give you spiced wine to drink
  - a. strong wine (cf. 1:2,4; 4:10; 5:1)
  - b. from pomegranates, which were seen as a fertility symbol (cf. 4:3; 6:7; 7:12)
  - c. v. 3 is a position for love (cf. 2:6; Pro. 5:20)

Song of Songs has much in common with other ancient Near Eastern love poetry. In Egyptian love poems the mother of the bride is mentioned often, as is the term “brother,” as a reference to the new husband. Family was very important in the ancient world. Marriage truly did combine two families.

**8:2 “my mother, who used to instruct me”** This is how the MT (and most English translations) reads. Some change “teach” (BDB 540, KB 531, *Piel* IMPERFECT) to “conceive” (RSV), mentioned in 3:4; 6:9; and 8:5 (footnote of JPSOA, p. 1576). This is because the VERB (THIRD PERSON FEMININE SINGULAR) does not fit well (cf. UBS *Handbook For Translators*, p. 218).

It is surely contextually possible that the reference to the one who will teach is the male lover! He will teach her the ways of love in her own home. In poetry the formal distinctions of gender and grammar are loosened for effect and imagery.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 8:4**

**<sup>4</sup>“I want you to swear, O daughters of Jerusalem,  
Do not arouse or awaken *my* love  
Until she pleases.”**

**8:4** This statement is repeated in 2:7, 3:5, and here. It seems to be a reference to the harem, but it refers to patience in lovemaking until the right moment comes for both lovers.

It functions as a literary marker to end a section.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 8:5a**

**<sup>5</sup>“Who is this coming up from the wilderness  
Leaning on her beloved?”**

**8:5** The speaker is uncertain. The verse is either divided into two separate sayings (NKJV, JPSOA) or the 3rd and 4th lines begin a section continuing through 8:7 (NASB, NIV).

The first two lines of poetry may refer to Solomon's travelling palanquin from 3:6-11 and may be the source of the strange allusion of 6:10 (line 4).

However, it may also refer to the northern young lover from whom the maiden was estranged by an arranged marriage (cf. 5:b-7, 9, 12).

▣ **“Leaning”** This is a hapax legomenon (BDB 952, KB 1279). From cognate usage, the root implies “a leaning back” or “to lie against a table,” or “recline.”

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 8:5b-7**

**<sup>5b</sup>“Beneath the apple tree I awakened you;  
There your mother was in labor with you,  
There she was in labor *and* gave you birth.  
<sup>6</sup>Put me like a seal over your heart,  
Like a seal on your arm.  
For love is as strong as death,  
Jealousy is as severe as Sheol;  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
The *very* flame of the Lord.  
<sup>7</sup>Many waters cannot quench love,  
Nor will rivers overflow it;  
If a man were to give all the riches of his house for love,  
It would be utterly despised.”**

**8:5b** This is a strange allusion! The NKJV assigns it to a relative who was present at the maiden's birth out in the countryside under a fruit tree (probably an apricot).

It is uncertain how v. 5b relates to vv. 6-7. The VERB “awakened” (BDB 734, KB 802, *Polel* PERFECT) can refer to

1. rouse (sexual arousal, cf. 2:7; 3:5; 8:4; this is confirmed by the phrase, “beneath the apple tree I awakened you” [cf. 2:3])
2. awake from sleep

**8:6-7** The PREPOSITIONS are MASCULINE (NASB, NJB), but NKJV, TEV, NIV, and NET Bible attribute them to the maiden. In poetry gender and grammar are fluid for effect! These verses express in emotive images the power of human love. Once given and received it becomes a powerful, pervasive life bond! Notice the metaphorical language:

1. Put me like a seal over your heart - The VERB, BDB 962, KB 1321, *Qal* IMPERATIVE; the NOUN “seal,” BDB 368 I, can mean an impression left by a signet ring, which was a sign of security and ownership. Often these seals were worn on a necklace that hung down over the heart.
2. Seal on your arm - Same word as above. If the seal on the heart could not be seen then the one of the arm surely could (note the strong language of Isa. 49:14-16).

3. Love is as strong as death - as lasting as death or as powerful and unrelenting a force!
4. Jealousy (NASB, NJB, NIV) as severe as Sheol - This term can be positive (e.g., Num. 11:29) or negative (e.g., Gen. 26:14; Pro. 14:30; 27:4; Eccl. 4:4).  
Numbers 3 and 4 are parallel. For Sheol see Special Topic: Where Are the Dead? At Eccl. 6:6.
5. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord - This is describing the torments of Sheol awaiting the unrighteous (i.e., love's power can be an inferno!)
6. The first two lines of v. 7 connect to the fire (jealousy) of v. 6, lines 4-6. The fire is so strong that nothing in this world can put it out (i.e., many waters, rivers).
7. Love cannot be bought, v. 7, line 3, which may be an allusion to Solomon's wealth. The term "despised," used in 8:1, is doubled and intensified (*Qal* INFINITIVE ABSOLUTE and *Qal* IMPERFECT).

Since I hold to a love triangle in the book between two young northern lovers who are separated by Solomon's drafting the young beauty for his harem, the purpose of these verses (also 8:9-12) becomes obvious.

Just a note about #5. It is possible to take the last line of v. 6 as a reference to YHWH (BDB 529, NASB, "the very flame of the Lord"), but most translations (NKJV, NRSV, TEV, JPSOA) think that the phrase is really just one word in Hebrew (BDB 529, KB 1504; this is a hapax legomenon of the NOUN "flame" and an added ending that could be (1) a contraction of YHWH found often in Hebrew poetry or (2) a textual marker for a SUPERLATIVE (NIDOTTE, vol. 1, p. 480). If this is a reference to YHWH it is the only one in the whole book. This cannot be used as evidence that this book is an allegory!!

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 8:8-9**

**8<sup>th</sup> "We have a little sister,  
And she has no breasts;  
What shall we do for our sister  
On the day when she is spoken for?  
9<sup>th</sup> If she is a wall,  
We will build on her a battlement of silver;  
But if she is a door,  
We will barricade her with planks of cedar."**

**8:8-9 "We have a little sister"** This seems to refer to her brothers in the north (cf. 1:6) and their protective attitude toward her. This attitude had two objects:

1. to protect her virginity until marriage (vv. 8-9, line 2)
2. if she was promiscuous (cf. 1:6 and the secret meetings in the country mentioned throughout the book), they would restrict her freedoms and movements (v. 9, lines 3-4)

**8:9 "barricade"** This word (BDB 848 II) means "confine," "bind," or "besiege." It is never used of "decorate." The commentators who interpret this verse as "adornment" (NIDOTTE, vol. 1, p. 963) get

this from the CONSTRUCT (BDB 531 and 72) “boards of cedar.” I see the poetic line as one of restriction and lack of freedom. The maiden has been violating standards of public decency.

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 8:10-12**

<sup>10</sup>**I was a wall, and my breasts were like towers;  
Then I became in his eyes as one who finds peace.**  
<sup>11</sup>**Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon;  
He entrusted the vineyard to caretakers.  
Each one was to bring a thousand *shekels* of silver for its fruit.**  
<sup>12</sup>**My very own vineyard is at my disposal;  
The thousand *shekels* are for you, Solomon,  
And two hundred are for those who take care of its fruit."**

**8:10-14** She has eyes only for him (if it is Solomon, even in the midst of his harem she will patiently wait for him because she knew she was his favorite). The monogamous implications of 2:16; 6:3; and 7:10 make it hard for me to think it is Solomon. I still favour the northern first love theory of Song of Songs! Even Solomon cannot buy his love (i.e., vineyard).

**8:10**

**NASB** “as one who finds peace”  
**NKJV** “as one who found peace”  
**NRSV, TEV** “as one who brings peace”  
**NJB** “I have found true peace”

The phrase is another euphemism for sexual activity. The focus seems to be on her bringing fulfilment to the longing lover.

Verses 8-9 may refer to her earlier life, while v. 10 describes her current life.

The Hebrew term “peace” (*shalom*, BDB 1022) has a wide semantical field. It can be metaphorical for maturity (“my breasts were like towers”) or favour or contentment. The ambiguity of poetry and the fluidity of terminology makes for great multi-level imagery!

**8:11 “Baal-hamon”** If this is a geographical location, it is unknown. It may have symbolic meaning (i.e., master/lord/owner of wealth, BDB 128). If so, it is connected to v. 7, lines 3-4.

When vv. 11 and 12 are taken together they are similar to v. 7, in that:

1. Solomon’s vineyard had many who came in and out and worked it
2. She wants to be the only worker (exclusivity, cf. 2:16; 6:3; 7:10)

**8:12** If this is the woman’s reaction to the attempt to be married for money or status, then it relates directly to 8:7 and 11! She controls her own sexuality! She cannot be bought!

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 8:13**

<sup>13</sup>**O you who sit in the gardens,  
My companions are listening for your voice—  
Let me hear it!"**

**8:13** This seems to be a final word from the man (the owner of the garden). The “companions” (BDB 288) are (1) wedding guests of the groom (3:11) or (2) other shepherds (1:7).

▣ **“Let me hear it”** This is a *Hiphil* IMPERATIVE (BDB 1033, KB 1570), which refers to the maiden’s call to come to her (cf. v. 14; 2:14).

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: 8:14**

<sup>14</sup>“Hurry, my beloved,  
And be like a gazelle or a young stag  
On the mountains of spices.”

**8:14** This is the final word from the maiden to the owner of the vineyard. “Hurry” (BDB 137, KB 156, *Qal* IMPERATIVE) is the word he longed to hear in v. 13. It could imply:

1. come quickly to me
2. let us flee away to a secluded garden of love

▣ **“be like a gazelle or a young stag”** This is another *Qal* IMPERATIVE (BDB 197, KB 225) that links to 2:7,9,17 (as a description of her lover’s physical prowess).

▣ **“the mountains of spices”** This is another euphemism of lovemaking (cf. 2:17; 4:6). Mixing spices is common in Song of Songs (cf. 4:10,14,16; 8:14). It was a way to prepare for lovemaking!

This poetry is powerful, beautiful, and ambiguous. The central plot line is difficult to follow because it is a series of six love poems with similar vocabulary and poetic illusions. There may be no unifying theme. It is primarily an affirmation of the glory and joy of human sexuality (cf. Pro. 5:15-19; 30:18-19; see Introduction).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

These discussion questions are provided to help you think through the major issues of this section of the book. They are meant to be thought provoking, not definitive.

1. Why is this book in the canon of sacred scripture?
2. What is this book saying to us today?
3. Why have there been so many theories postulated for the different ways to interpret this book?
4. Is this book in chronological sequence?



# APPENDIX ONE

## INTRODUCTION TO OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. Opening Statements

1. The believing community does not agree on how to interpret prophecy. Other truths have been established as to an orthodox position throughout the centuries, but not this one.
2. There are several well defined stages of OT prophecy
  - a. premonarchial (before King Saul)
    - 1) individuals called prophets
      - a) Abraham - Gen. 20:7
      - b) Moses - Num. 12:6-8; Deut. 18:15; 34:10
      - c) Aaron - Exod. 7:1 (spokesman for Moses)
      - d) Miriam - Exod. 15:20
      - e) Medad and Eldad - Num. 11:24-30
      - f) Deborah - Jdgs. 4:4
      - g) unnamed - Jdgs. 6:7-10
      - h) Samuel - I Sam. 3:20
    - 2) references to prophets as a group - Deut. 13:1-5; 18:20-22
    - 3) prophetic groups or guilds - I Sam. 10:5-13; 19:20; I Kgs. 20:35,41; 22:6,10-13; II Kgs. 2:3,7; 4:1,38; 5:22; 6:1, etc.
    - 4) Messiah called prophet - Deut. 18:15-18
  - b. non-writing monarchial prophets (they address the king)
    - 1) Gad - I Sam. 7:2; 12:25; II Sam. 24:11; I Chron. 29:29
    - 2) Nathan - II Sam. 7:2; 12:25; I Kgs. 1:22
    - 3) Ahijah - I Kgs. 11:29
    - 4) Jehu - I Kgs. 16:1,7,12
    - 5) unnamed - I Kgs. 18:4,13; 20:13,22
    - 6) Elijah - I Kgs. 18; II Kgs. 2
    - 7) Milcaiah - I Kgs. 22
    - 8) Elisha - II Kgs. 2:8,13
  - c. classical writing prophets (they address the nation as well as the king):  
Isaiah—Malachi (except Daniel)

#### B. Biblical Terms

1. *ro'eh* = seer, I Sam. 9:9. This reference shows the transition to the term *Nabi*, which means “prophet” and comes from the root, “to call.” *Ro'eh* is from the general Hebrew term “to see.” This person understood God’s ways and plans and was consulted to ascertain God’s will in a matter.
2. *hozeh* = seer, II Sam. 24:11. It is basically a synonym of *ro'eh*. It is from a rarer Hebrew term “to see in a vision.” The participle form is used most often to refer to prophets.
3. *nabi'* = prophet, cognate of Akkadian verb *nabu* = “to call” and Arabic *naba'a* = “to announce.” This is the most common OT term to designate a prophet. It is used over 300 times. The exact etymology is uncertain, but “to call” at present seems the best option. Possibly the best understanding comes from YHWH’s description of Moses’ relationship to Pharaoh through Aaron (cf. Exod. 4:10-16; 7:1; Deut. 5:5). A prophet is someone who speaks for God to His people (cf. Amos 3:8; Jer. 1:7,17; Ezek. 3:4).

4. All three terms are used of the prophet's office in I Chron. 29:29; Samuel - *Ro'eh*; Nathan - *Nabi'*; and Gad - *Hozeh*.
5. The phrase *'ish ha - 'elohim*, "man of God," is also a broader designation for a speaker for God. It is used some 76 times in the OT in the sense of "prophet."
6. The word "prophet" is Greek in origin. It comes from (1) *pro* = "before" or "for"; (2) *phemi* = "to speak."

## II. DEFINITION OF PROPHECY

- A. The term "prophecy" had a wider semantic field in Hebrew than in English. The Jews labeled the history books of Joshua through Kings (except Ruth) "the former prophets." Both Abraham (Gen. 20:7; Ps. 105:5) and Moses (Deut. 18:18) are designated as prophets (also Miriam, Exod. 15:20). Therefore, beware of an assumed English definition!
- B. "Propheticism may legitimately be defined as that understanding of history which accepts meaning only in terms of divine concern, divine purpose, divine participation" (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3, p. 896).
- C. "The prophet is neither a philosopher nor a systematic theologian, but a covenant mediator who delivers the word of God to His people in order to shape their future by reforming their present" ("Prophets and Prophecy," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 13, p. 1152).

## III. PURPOSE OF PROPHECY

- A. Prophecy is a way for God to speak to His people, providing guidance in their current setting and hope in His control of their lives and world events. Their message was basically corporate. It is meant to rebuke, encourage, engender faith and repentance, and inform God's people about Himself and His plans. They hold God's people to fidelity to God's Covenants. Often it is used to clearly reveal God's choice of a spokesman (Deut. 13:1-3; 18:20-22). This, taken ultimately, would refer to the Messiah.
- B. Often, the prophet took a historical or theological crisis of his day and projected it into an eschatological setting. This end-time view of history (teleological) is unique to Israel and her sense of divine election and covenant promises.
- C. The office of prophet seems to balance (Jer. 18:18) and supplant the office of High Priest as a way of knowing God's will. The Urim and Thummim transcend into a verbal message from God's spokesman. The office of prophet seems to also have passed away in Israel after Malachi (or the writing of Chronicles). It does not appear until 400 years later with John the Baptist. It is uncertain how the New Testament gift of "prophecy" relates to the OT. New Testament prophets (Acts 11:27-28; 13:1; 14:29,32,37; 15:32; I Cor. 12:10,28-29; Eph. 4:11) are not revealers of new revelation, but forth-tellers and fore-tellers of God's will in recurrent situations.
- D. Prophecy is not exclusively or primarily predictive in nature. Prediction is one way to confirm his office and his message, but it must be noted ". . . less than 2% of OT prophecy is Messianic. Less than 5% specifically describes the New Covenant Age. Less than 1% concerns events yet to come" (Fee & Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth*, p. 166).

- E. Prophets represent God to the people, while Priests represent the people to God. This is a general statement. There are exceptions like Habakkuk, who addresses questions to God.
- F. One reason it is difficult to understand the prophets is because we do not know how their books were structured. They are not chronological. They seem to be thematic, but not always the way one would expect. Often there is no obvious historical setting, time-frame, or clear division between oracles, it is difficult (1) to read the books through in one sitting; (2) to outline them by topic; and (3) to ascertain the central truth or authorial intent in each oracle.

#### IV. CHARACTERISTICS OF PROPHECY

- A. In the Old Testament there seems to be a development of the concept of “prophet” and “prophecy.” In early Israel there developed a fellowship of prophets, led by a strong charismatic leader such as Elijah or Elisha. Sometimes the phrase “the sons of the prophets” was used to designate this group (II Kgs. 2). The prophets at times were characterized by forms of ecstasy (I Sam. 10:10-13; 19:18-24).
- B. However, this period passed rapidly into the time of individual prophets. There were those prophets (both true and false) who identified with the King, and lived at the palace (Gad, Nathan). Also, there were those who were independent, sometimes totally unconnected with the status quo of Israelite society (Amos, Micah). They are both male and female (II Kgs. 22:14).
- C. The prophet was often a revealer of the future, conditioned on a person’s or a people’s immediate response. Often the prophet’s task was to unfold God’s universal plan for His creation which is not affected by human response. This universal eschatological plan is unique among the prophets of Israel in the ancient Near East. Prediction and Covenant fidelity are twin foci of the prophetic messages (cf. Fee and Stuart, p. 150). This implies that the prophets were primarily corporate in focus. They usually, but not exclusively, address the nation of Israel.
- D. Most prophetic material was presented orally. It was later combined by means of theme or chronology, or other patterns of Near Eastern literature, which are lost to us. Because it was oral, it is not as structured as written prose. This makes the books difficult to read straight through and difficult to understand without a specific historical setting.
- E. The prophets use several patterns to convey their messages
  1. Court scene - God takes His people to court; often it is a divorce case where YHWH rejects his wife (Israel) for her unfaithfulness (Hosea 4; Micah 6).
  2. Funeral dirge - the special meter of this type of message and its characteristic “woe” sets it apart as a special form (Isaiah 5; Habakkuk 2).
  3. Covenant blessing pronouncement - the conditional nature of the Covenant is emphasized and the consequences, both positively and negatively, are spelled out for the future (Deuteronomy 27-29).

## V. BIBLICAL QUALIFICATIONS FOR VERIFICATION OF A TRUE PROPHET

- A. Deuteronomy 13:1-5 (predictions/signs are linked to monotheistic purity)
- B. Deuteronomy 18:9-22 (false prophets/true prophets)
- C. Both men and women are called and designated as prophets or prophetesses
  - 1. Miriam - Exodus 15
  - 2. Deborah - Judges 4:4-6
  - 3. Huldah - II Kings 22:14-20; II Chronicles 34:22-28
- D. In the surrounding cultures prophets were verified by means of divination. In Israel they were verified by
  - 1. a theological test - the use of the name of YHWH
  - 2. a historical test - accurate predictions

## VI. HELPFUL GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING PROPHECY

- A. Find the intent of the original prophet (editor) by noting the historical setting and the literary context of each oracle. Usually it will involve Israel breaking the Mosaic Covenant in some way.
- B. Read and interpret the whole oracle, not just a part; outline it as to content. See how it relates to surrounding oracles. Try to outline the whole book (by literary units and to paragraph level).
- C. Assume a literal interpretation of the passage until something in the text itself points you to figurative usage; then attempt to put the figurative language into prose.
- D. Analyze symbolic action in light of historical setting and parallel passages. Be sure to remember that this is ancient Near Eastern literature, not western or modern literature.
- E. Treat predictions with care
  - 1. Are they exclusively for the author's day?
  - 2. Were they subsequently fulfilled in Israel's history?
  - 3. Are they yet future events?
  - 4. Do they have a contemporary fulfillment and yet a future fulfillment?
  - 5. Allow the authors of the Bible, not modern authors, to guide your answers.
- F. Special concerns:
  - 1. Is the prediction qualified by conditional response?
  - 2. Is it certain to whom the prophecy is addressed (and why)?
  - 3. Is there a possibility, both biblically and/or historically, for multiple fulfillments?
  - 4. The NT authors under inspiration were able to see the Messiah in many places in the OT that are not obvious to us. They seem to use typology or word play. Since we are not inspired, we best leave this approach to them.

## VII. HELPFUL BOOKS

- A. *A Guide to Biblical Prophecy* by Carl E. Armerding and W. Ward Gasque
- B. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart
- C. *My Servants the Prophets* by Edward J. Young
- D. *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* by D. Brent Sandy
- E. *Cracking the Old Testament Code*, D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr.

## APPENDIX TWO

### A BRIEF HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE POWERS OF MESOPOTAMIA

(using dates based primarily on John Bright's *A History of Israel*, p. 462ff.)

#### I. Assyrian Empire (Gen.10:11)

A. Religion and culture were greatly influenced by the Sumerian/Babylonian Empire.

B. Tentative list of rulers and approximate dates:

1. 1354-1318 - Asshur-Uballit I:
  - (a) conquered the Hittite city of Carchemish
  - (b) began to remove Hittite influence and allowed Assyria to develop
2. 1297-1266 - Adad-Nirari I (powerful king)
3. 1265-1235 - Shalmaneser I (powerful king)
4. 1234-1197 - Tukulti-Ninurta I
  - first conquest of Babylonian empire to the south
5. 1118-1078 - Tiglath-Pileser I
  - Assyria becomes a major power in Mesopotamia
6. 1012- 972 - Ashur-Rabi II
7. 972- 967 - Ashur-Resh-Isui II
8. 966- 934 - Tiglath-Pileser II
9. 934- 912 - Ashur-Dan II
10. 912- 890 - Adad-Nirari II
11. 890- 884 - Tukulti-Ninurta II
12. 883- 859 - Asshur-Nasir-Apal II
13. 859- 824 - Shalmaneser III
  - Battle of Qarqar in 853
14. 824-811 - Shamashi-Adad V
15. 811-783 - Adad-Nirari III
16. 781-772 - Shalmaneser IV
17. 772-754 - Ashur-Dan III
18. 754-745 - Ashur-Nirari V
19. 745-727 - Tiglath-Pileser III:
  - a. called by his Babylonian throne name, Pul, in II Kings 15:19
  - b. very powerful king
  - c. started the policy of deporting conquered peoples
  - d. In 735 B.C., there was the formation of the "Syro-Ephramatic League" which was an attempt to unify all the available military resources of the transjordan nations from the head waters of the Euphrates to Egypt for the purpose of neutralizing the rising military power of Assyria. King Ahaz of Judah refused to join and was invaded by Israel and Syria. He wrote to Tiglath-Pileser III for help against the advise of Isaiah (cf. II Kgs. 16; Isa. 7-12).
  - e. In 732 Tiglath-Pileser III invades and conquers Syria and Israel and places a vassal king on the throne of Israel, Hoshea (732-722). Thousands of Jews from the Northern Kingdom were exiled to Media (cf. II Kings 15).
20. 727-722 - Shalmaneser V
  - a. Hoshea forms an alliance with Egypt and is invaded by Assyria (cf. II Kgs.17)
  - b. besieged Samaria in 724 B.C.

21. 722-705 - Sargon II:
  - a. After a three year siege started by Shalmaneser V, his successor Sargon II conquers the capital of Israel, Samaria. Over 27,000 are deported to Media.
  - b. The Hittite empire is also conquered.
  - c. In 714-711 another coalition of transjordan nations and Egypt rebelled against Assyria. This coalition is known as “the Ashdad Rebellion.” Even Hezekiah of Judah originally was involved. Assyria invaded and destroyed several Philistine cities.
22. 705-681 - Sennacherib:
  - a. In 705 another coalition of transjordan nations and Egypt rebelled after the death of Sargon II. Hezekiah fully supported this rebellion. Sennacherib invaded in 701. The rebellion was crushed but Jerusalem was spared by an act of God (cf. Isa. 36-39 and II Kgs. 18-19).
  - b. Sennacherib also put down the rebellion in Elam and Babylon.
23. 681-669 - Esarhaddon:
  - a. first Assyrian ruler to attack and conquer Egypt
  - b. had great sympathy with Babylon and rebuilt its capital city
24. 669-633 - Ashurbanipal:
  - a. also called Osnappar in Ezra 4:10
  - b. His brother Shamash-shum-ukin was made king of Babylon (later demoted to viceroy). This brought several years of peace between Assyria and Babylon, but there was an undercurrent of independence which broke out in 652 led by his brother (who had been demoted to Viceroy).
  - c. fall of Thebes, 663 B.C.
  - d. defeated Elam, 653, 645 B.C.
25. 633-629 - Asshur-Etil-Ilani
26. 629-612 - Sin-Shar-Ishkun
27. 612-609 - Asshur-Uballit II:
  - a. enthroned king in exile in Haran
  - b. the fall of Assher in 614 B.C. and Nineveh in 612 B.C.

## II. Neo-Babylon Empire:

- A. 703-? Merodach-Baladan
  - Started several revolts against Assyrian rule
- B. 652 Shamash-shum-ukin:
  1. Esarhaddon’s son and Asshurbanipal’s brother
  2. he started a revolt against Assyria but was defeated
- C. 626-605 Nabopolassar:
  1. was the first monarch of the Neo-Babylonian Empire
  2. he attacked Assyria from the south while Cyaxares of Media attacked from the northeast
  3. the old Assyrian capital of Asshur fell in 614 and the powerful new capital of Ninevah fell in 612 B.C.
  4. the remnant of the Assyrian army retreated to Haran. They even installed a king.
  5. In 608 Pharaoh Necho II (cf. II Kings 23:29) marched north to help the remnant of the Assyrian army for the purpose of forming a buffer zone against the rising power of Babylon. Josiah, the godly king of Judah (cf. II Kings 23), opposed the movement of the Egyptian army through Palestine. There was a minor skirmish at Megiddo. Josiah was

wounded and died (II Kgs. 23:29-30). His son, Jehoakaz, was made king. Pharaoh Necho II arrived too late to stop the destruction of the Assyrian forces at Haran. He engaged the Babylonian forces commanded by the crown prince Nebuchadnezzar II and was soundly defeated in 605 B.C. at Carchemesh on the Euphrates River.

On his way back to Egypt Pharaoh Necho stopped at Jerusalem and sacked the city. He replaced and deported Jehoahaz after only three months. He put another son of Josiah, Jehoiakim, on the throne (cf. II Kings 23:31-35).

6. Nebuchadnezzar II chased the Egyptian army south through Palestine but he received word of his father's death and returned to Babylon to be crowned. Later, in the same year, he returned to Palestine. He left Jehoiakim on the throne of Judah but exiled several thousand of the leading citizens and several members of the royal family. Daniel and his friends were part of this deportation.

D. 605-562 - Nebuchadnezzar II:

1. From 597-538 Babylon was in complete control of Palestine.
2. In 597 another deportation from Jerusalem occurred because of Jehoakim's alliance with Egypt (II Kings 24). He died before the arrival of Nebuchadnezzar II. His son Jehoiachin was only king for three months when he was exiled to Babylon. Ten thousand citizens, including Ezekiel, were resettled close to the City of Babylon by the Canal Kebar.
3. In 586, after continued flirtation with Egypt, the City of Jerusalem was completely destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar (II Kgs. 25) and a mass deportation occurred. Zedekiah, who replaced Jehoiachin, was exiled and Gedaliah was appointed governor.
4. Gedaliah was killed by Jewish renegade military forces. These forces fled to Egypt and forced Jeremiah to go with them. Nebuchadnezzar invaded a fourth time (605, 596, 586, 582) and deported all remaining Jews that he could find.

E. 562-560 - Evil-merodach, Nebuchadnezzar's son, was also known as Amel-Marduk (Akkadian, "Man of Marduk")

- He released Jehoiakim from prison but he had to remain in Babylon (cf. II Kings 25:27-30; Jer. 52:31).

F. 560-556 - Neriglissar

- He assassinated Evil-merodach, who was his brother-in-law
- He was previously Nebuchadnezzar's general who destroyed Jerusalem (cf. Jer. 39:3,13)

G. 556 - Labaski-Marduk

- He was Neriglissar's son who assumed kingship as a boy, but was assassinated after only nine months (Berossos).

H. 556-539 - Nabonidus (Akkadian, "Nebo is exalted"):

1. Nabonidus was not related to the royal house, so he married a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar
2. He spent most of the time building a temple to the moon god "Sin" in Tema. He was the son of the high priestess of this goddess. This earned him the enmity of the priests of Marduk, chief god of Babylon.
3. He spent most of his time trying to put down revolts (in Syria and north Africa) and stabilize the kingdom.
4. He moved to Tema and left the affairs of state to his son, Belshazzar, in the capital, Babylon (cf. Dan.5).



- I. ? - 539 - Belshazzar (co-reign)
  - The city of Babylon fell very quickly to the Persian Army under Gobryas of Gutium by diverting the waters of the Euphrates and entering the city unopposed. The priests and people of the city saw the Persians as liberators and restorers of Marduk. Gobryas was made Governor of Babylon by Cyrus II. Gobryas may have been the Darius the Mede of Dan. 5:31; 6:1. "Darius" means "royal one."

III. Medio-Persian Empire: Survey of the Rise of Cyrus II (Isa. 41:2,25;44:28-45:7; 46:11; 48:15):

- A. 625-585 - Cyaxares was the king of Media who helped Babylon defeat Assyria.
- B. 585-550 - Astyages was king of Media (capital was Ecbatana). Cyrus II was his grandson by Cambyses I (600-559, Persian) and Mandane (daughter of Astyages, Median).
- C. 550-530 - Cyrus II of Anshan (eastern Elam) was a vassal king who revolted:
  - 1. Nabonidus, the Babylonian king, supported Cyrus.
  - 2. Astyages' general, Harpagus, led his army to join Cyrus' revolt
  - 3. Cyrus II dethroned Astyages.
  - 4. Nabonidus, in order to restore a balance of power, made an alliance with:
    - a. Egypt
    - b. Croesus, King of Lydia (Asia Minor)
  - 5. 547 - Cyrus II marched against Sardis (capital of Lydia) and it fell in 546 B.C.
  - 6. 539 - In mid-October the general Ugbaru and Gobryas, both of Gutium, with Cyrus' army, took Babylon without resistance. Ugbaru was made governor, but died of war wounds within weeks; Gobryas was then made governor of Babylon.
  - 7. 539 - In late October Cyrus II "the Great" personally entered as liberator. His policy of kindness to national groups reversed years of deportation as a national policy.
  - 8. 538 - Jews and others (cf. the Cyrus Cylinder) were allowed to return home and rebuild their native temples (cf. II Chr. 36:22,23; Ezra 1:1-4). He also restored the vessels from YHWH's temple which Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Marduk's temple in Babylon (cf. Ezra 1:7-11; 6:5).
  - 9. 530 - Cyrus' son, Cambyses II, succeeded him briefly as co-regent, but later the same year Cyrus died while in a military campaign.
- D. 530-522 - reign of Cambyses II
  - 1. added Egyptian empire in 525 B.C. to the Medo-Persian Empire
  - 2. he had a short reign
    - a. some say he committed suicide;
    - b. Heroditus said he cut himself with his own sword while mounting his horse and died of the resulting infection.
  - 3. brief usurpation of the throne by Pseudo-Smerdis (Gaumata) - 522
- E. 522-486 - Darius I (Hystapes) came to rule
  - 1. He was not of the royal line but a military general.
  - 2. He organized the Persian Empire using Cyrus' plans for Satraps (cf. Ezra 5-6; also during Haggai's and Zechariah's time).
  - 3. He set up coinage like Lydia.
  - 4. He attempted to invade Greece, but was repulsed.
- F. 486-465 - Reign of Xerxes I
  - 1. put down Egyptian revolt
  - 2. intended to invade Greece and fulfill Persian dream but was defeated in the battle of Thermopyli in 480 B.C. and Salamis in 479 B.C.
  - 3. Esther's husband, who is called Ahasuerus in the Bible, was assassinated in 465 B.C.

- G. 465-424 - Artaxerxes I (Longimanus) reigned (cf Ezra 7-10; Nehemiah; Malachi):
  - 1. Greeks continued to advance until confronted with the Peloponnesian Civil Wars
  - 2. Greece divides (Athenian - Peloponnesian)
  - 3. Greek civil wars lasted about 20 years
  - 4. during this period the Jewish community is strengthened
  - 5. brief reign of Xerxes II and Sisydianos - 423
- H. 423-404 - Darius II (Nothos) reigned
- I. 404-358 - Artaxerxes II (Mnemon) reigned
- J. 358-338 - Artaxerxes III (Ochos) reigned
- K. 338-336 - Arses reigned
- L. 336-331 - Darius III (Codomannus) reigned until the Battle of Issus 331 and was defeated by Greece

#### IV. Survey of Egypt:

- A. Hyksos (Shepherd Kings - Semitic rulers)-1720/10-1550
- B. 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (1570-1310):
  - 1. 1570-1546 - Amosis
    - a. made Thebes the capital
    - b. invaded southern Canaan
  - 2. 1546-1525 - Amenophis I (Amenhotep I)
  - 3. 1525-1494 - Thutmose I
  - 4. 1494-1479 - Thutmose II - married Thutmose I's daughter, Hatshepsut
  - 5. 1479-1435 - Thutmose III (nephew of Hatshepsut)
  - 6. 1435-1414 - Amenophis II (Amenhotep II)
  - 7. 1414-1406 - Thutmose IV
  - 8. 1406-1370 - Amenophis III (Amenhotep III)
  - 9. 1370-1353 - Amenophis IV (Akhenaten)
    - a. worshiped the Sun, Aten
    - b. instituted a form of high-god worship (monotheism)
    - c. Tel-El-Amarna letters are in this period
  - 10. ? Smenkhare
  - 11. ? Tutankhamun (Tutankhaten)
  - 12. ? Ay (Aye-Eye)
  - 13. 1340-1310 Haremhab
- C. 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (1310-1200):
  - 1. ? Rameses I (Ramses)
  - 2. 1309-1290 - Seti I (Sethos)
  - 3. 1290-1224 - Ramesses II (Ramses II)
    - a. from archaeological evidence most likely Pharaoh of the exodus
    - b. built the cities of Avaris, Pithom and Ramses by Habaru (possibly Semites or Hebrew) slaves
  - 4. 1224-1216 - Merneptah (Merenptah)
  - 5. ? Amenmesse
  - 6. ? Seti II
  - 7. ? Siptah
  - 8. ? Tewosret

- D. 20<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (1180-1065)
  - 1. 1175-1144 - Rameses III
  - 2. 1144-1065 - Rameses IV - XI
  
- E. 21<sup>st</sup> Dynasty (1065-935):
  - 1. ? Smendes
  - 2. ? Herihor
  
- F. 22<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty (935-725 - Libyan):
  - 1. 935-914 - Shishak (Shosenk I or Sheshong I)
    - a. protected Jeroboam I until Solomon's death
    - b. conquered Palestine about 925 (cf. I Kgs. 14-25; II Chr. 12)
  - 2. 914-874 - Osorkon I
  - 3. ? Osorkon II
  - 4. ? Shoshnek II
  
- G. 23<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty (759-715 - Libyan)
  
- H. 24<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (725-709)
  
- I. 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (716/15-663 - Ethiopian/Nubian):
  - 1. 710/09-696/95 - Shabako (Shabaku)
  - 2. 696/95-685/84 - Shebteko (Shebitku)
  - 3. 690/689, 685/84-664 - Tirhakah (Taharqa)
  - 4. ? Tantamun
  
- J. 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (663-525 - Saitic):
  - 1. 663-609 - Psammetichus I (Psamtik)
  - 2. 609-593 - Neco II (Necho)
  - 3. 593-588 - Psammetichus II (Psamtik)
  - 4. 588-569 - Apries (Hophra)
  - 5. 569-525 - Amasis
  - 6. ? - Psammetichus III (Psamtik)
  
- K. 27<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (525-401 - Persian):
  - 1. 530-522 - Cambyses II (Cyrus II's son)
  - 2. 522-486 - Darius I
  - 3. 486-465 - Xerxes I
  - 4. 465-424 - Artaxerxes I
  - 5. 423-404 - Darius II
  
- L. Several brief dynasties (404-332)
  - 1. 404-359 - Artaxerxes II
  - 2. 359/8 - 338/7 - Artaxerxes III
  - 3. 338/7 - 336/7 - Arses
  - 4. 336/5 - 331 - Darius III

\*for a differing chronology see Zondervan's Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia, vol. 2 p. 231.

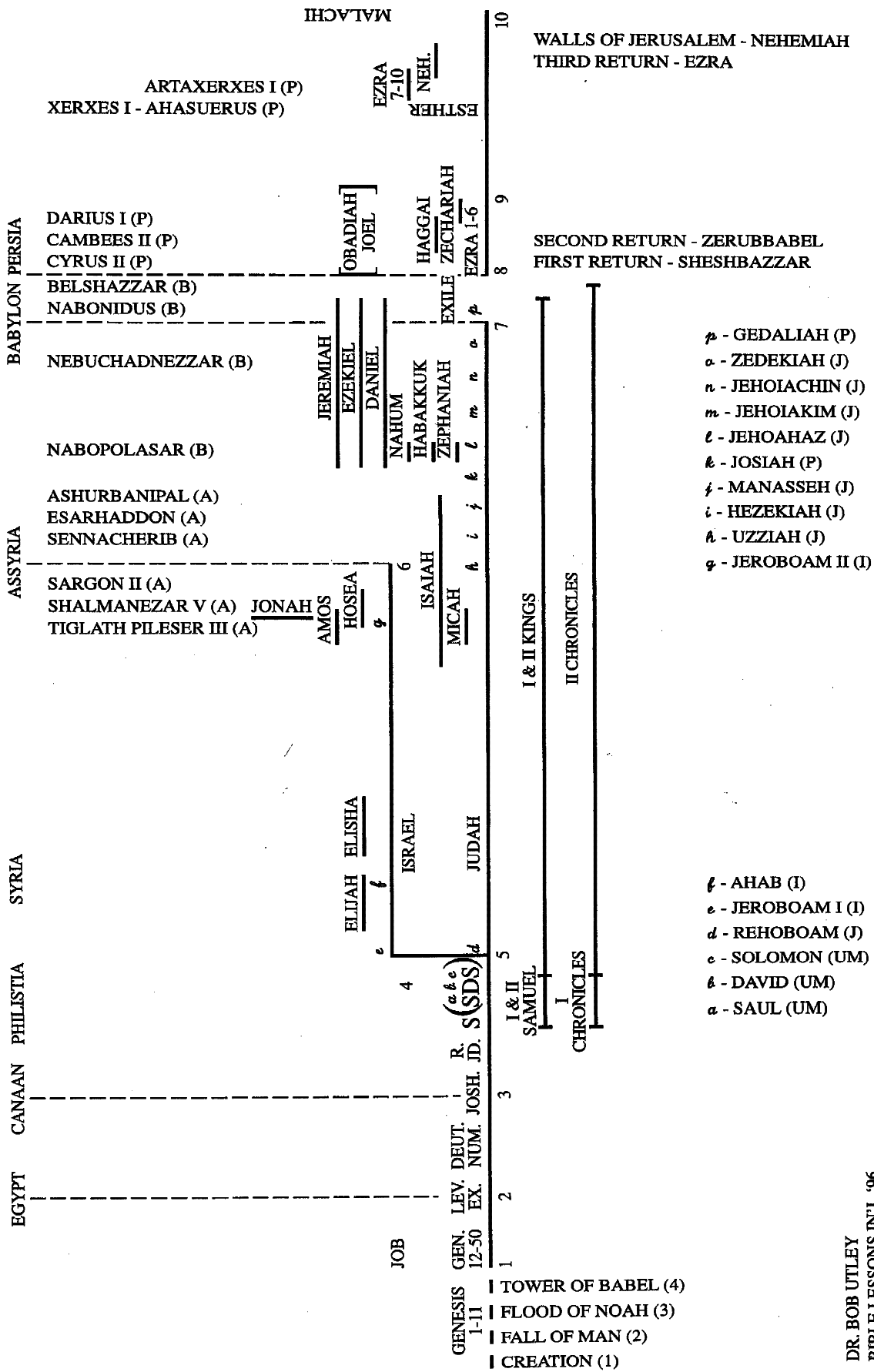
## V. Survey of Greece:

- A. 359-336 - Philip II of Macedon:
  - 1. built up Greece
  - 2. assassinated in 336 B.C.
- B. 336-323 - Alexander II “the Great” (Philip’s son):
  - 1. routed Darius III, the Persian king, at the battle of Isus
  - 2. died in 323 B.C. in Babylon of a fever at 32/33 yrs. of age
  - 3. Alexander’s generals divided his empire at his death:
    - a. Cassander - Macedonia and Greece
    - b. Lysimachus - Thrace
    - c. Seleucus I - Syria and Babylon
    - d. Ptolemy - Egypt and Palestine
    - e. Antigonus - Asia Minor (He did not last long)
- C. Seleucids vs. Ptolemies struggle for control of Palestine:
  - 1. Syria (Seleucid Rulers):
    - a. 312-280 - Seleucus I
    - b. 280-261 - Antiochus I Soter
    - c. 261-146 - Antiochus II Theus
    - d. 246-226 - Seleucus II Callinicus
    - e. 226-223 - Seleucus III Ceraunus
    - f. 223-187 - Antiochus III the Great
    - g. 187-175 - Seleucus IV Philopator
    - h. 175-163 - Antiochus IV Epiphanes
    - i. 163-162 - Antiochus V
    - j. 162-150 - Demetrius I
  - 2. Egyptian (Ptolemaic Rulers):
    - a. 327-285 - Ptolemy I Soter
    - b. 285-246 - Ptolemy II Philadelphus
    - c. 246-221 - Ptolemy III Euergetes
    - d. 221-203 - Ptolemy IV Philopator
    - e. 203-181 - Ptolemy V Epiphanes
    - f. 181-146 - Ptolemy VI Philometor
  - 3. Brief Survey:
    - a. 301 - Palestine under Ptolemy rule for 181 years.
    - b. 175-163 - Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the eighth Seleucid ruler, wanted to Hellenize Jews by force, if necessary:
      - (1) constructed gymnasiums
      - (2) constructed pagan altars of Zeus Olympius in the Temple
    - c. 168 - December 13 - hog slain on the altar in Jerusalem by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Some consider this to be “the abomination of desolation” in Daniel 8.
    - d. 167 - Mattathias, priest in Modin, and sons rebel. The best known of his sons was Judas Maccabeas, “Judas the Hammer.”
    - e. 165 - December 25 - Temple rededicated. This is called Hanukkah or “Festival of Lights.”

For a good discussion of the dating problems, procedures and presuppositions see *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, pp. 10-17.

## **APPENDIX THREE**

### **CHART OF THE WHOLE OLD TESTAMENT (on next page)**



DR. BOB UTLEY  
BIBLE LESSONS IN 'L '96

## Undateable Events (Genesis 1-11)

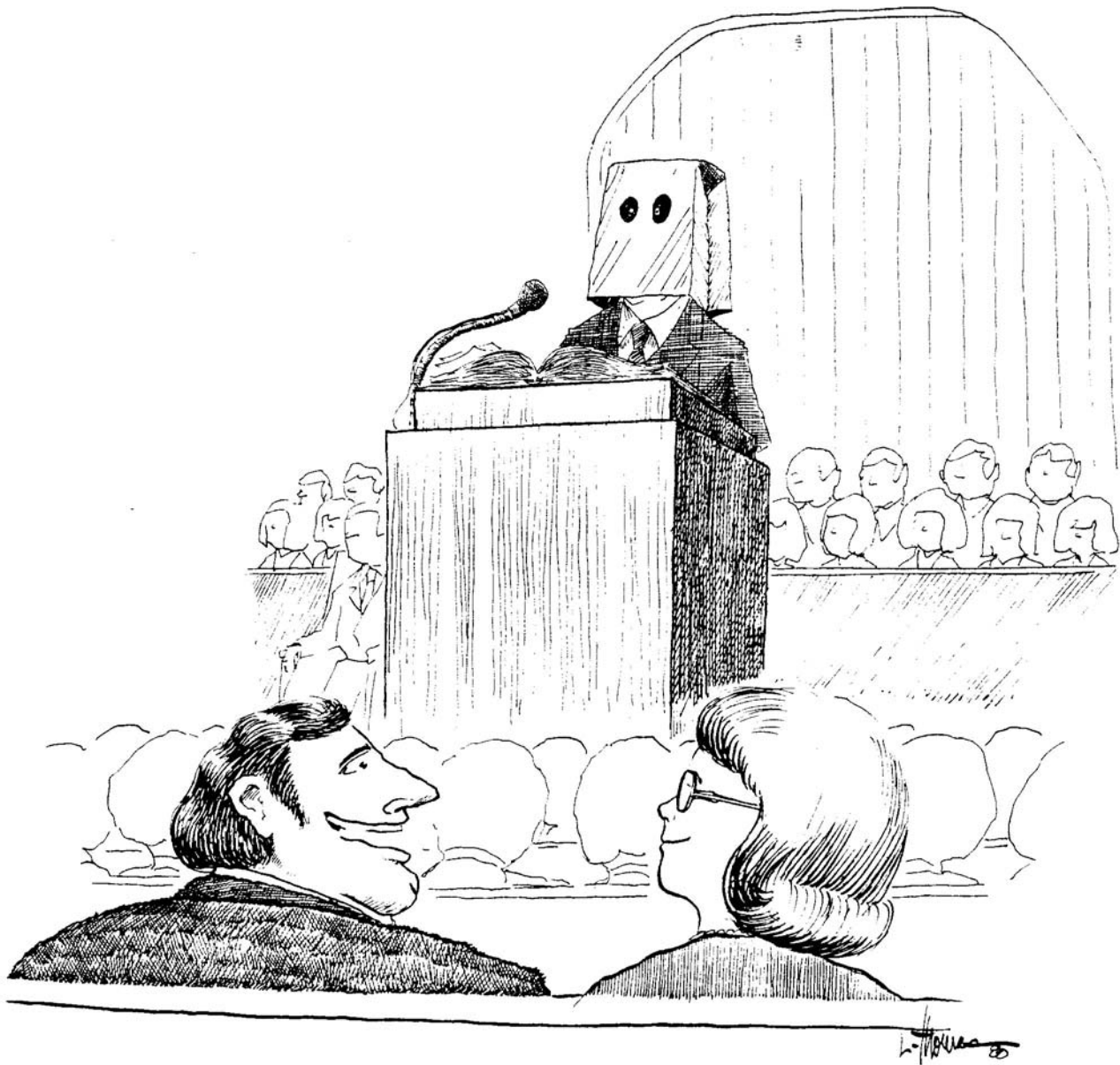
1. Creation (Gen. 1-2)
2. Fall of Man (Gen. 3)
3. Flood of Noah Day (Gen. 6-9)
4. Tower of Babel (Gen. 10-11)

## Dateable Events

- |  |                   |
|--|-------------------|
| 1. Patriarchal Period (Gen. 12-50 and Job) | 2000 B.C.         |
| 2. Exodus from Egypt (Exodus)              | 1445 or 1290 B.C. |
| 3. Conquest of Canaan (Joshua)             | 1440 or 1250 B.C. |
| 4. United Monarchy (Saul, David, Solomon)  | 1000 B.C.         |
| 5. Divided Monarchy (Rehoboam-Jeroboam I)  | 922 B.C.          |
| 6. Fall of Samaria (Israel) to Assyria     | 722 B.C.          |
| 7. Fall of Jerusalem (Judah) to Babylon    | 586 B.C.          |
| 8. Decree of Cyrus (Persia) to Return      | 538 B.C.          |
| 9. Temple Rebuilt                          | 516 B.C.          |
| 10. Close of OT Period (Malachi)           | 430 B.C.          |

## List of Kings

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| A. United Monarchy               |  |
| 1. Saul (a)                      |  |
| 2. David (b)                     |  |
| 3. Solomon (c)                   |  |
| B. Israel                        |  |
| 1. Jeroboam I (e)                |  |
| 2. Ahab (f)                      |  |
| 3. Jeroboam II (g)               |  |
| C. Judah                         |  |
| 1. Rehoboam (d)                  |  |
| 2. Uzziah (h)                    |  |
| 3. Hezekiah (i)                  |  |
| 4. Manasseh (j)                  |  |
| 5. Josiah (k)                    |  |
| 6. Jehoahaz (l)                  |  |
| 7. Jehoiakim (m)                 |  |
| 8. Jehoiachin (n)                |  |
| 9. Zedekiah (o)                  |  |
| 10. Gedaliah (p)                 |  |
| D. Assyria                       |  |
| 1. Tiglath Pileser III (745-727) |  |
| 2. Shalmaneser V (727-722)       |  |
| 3. Sargon II (722-705)           |  |
| 4. Sennacherib (705-681)         |  |
| 5. Esarhaddon (681-669)          |  |
| 6. Ashurbanipal (669-663)        |  |
| E. Babylon                       |  |
| 1. Nabopolassar (626-605)        |  |
| 2. Nebuchadnezzar (605-562)      |  |
| 3. Nabonidus (556-539)           |  |
| 4. Belshazzar                    |  |
| F. Persia                        |  |
| 1. Cyrus II (550-530)            |  |
| 2. Cambyses II (530-522)         |  |
| 3. Darius I (522-486)            |  |
| 4. Xerxes I (486-465)            |  |
| 5. Artaxerxes I (465-424)        |  |



*"I see the pastor is going to preach on 'Song of Solomon' again!"*