Ecclesiastes
and the Search for Meaning

Erica Brown

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In loving memory of Irving and Beatrice Stone,
who dedicated their lives to the
advancement of Jewish education.
We are proud and honored to continue in their legacy.

Their Children, Grandchildren, Great-Grandchildren
and Great-Great-Grandchildren
Jerusalem, Israel
Cleveland, Ohio USA

To my sweet

Erez,
Adi,
Amir,
Lev,
and those
yet to be born.

The sun also rises.

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Preface

"The making of many books is without limit, and much study is a wearying of the flesh" (Eccl. 12:12). No one needs to write another book, this verse suggests, and no one need read another book. Even a cursory review of scholarly literature on Ecclesiastes suggests that there has been more than enough writing on this book already; another book is simply another exercise in futility. If you would like to act on this sentiment and put this book down now, I completely understand.

If you choose to keep reading, however, please know that there is nothing new under the sun, an oft-repeated Ecclesiastes expression, and that any attempt at originality in the forthcoming pages is inherently misguided, even impossible. The author of Ecclesiastes chastises those who have the gall to *think* they have come up with something innovative and worthwhile: "Sometimes there is a phenomenon of which they say, 'Look, this one is new!' – it occurred long since, in ages that went by before us" (Eccl. 1:11). Essentially, just as Rashi explains this verse, one may think one has produced something new, but upon further inspection, it becomes obvious that the matter has already been discussed in ages past.

It is particularly difficult to justify a new book on Kohelet. One justification popular with medieval Jewish scholars to vitiate the problem of new book-writing originated with the French philosopher Bernard of Chartres and was used by Isaac Newton in his letter of 1675 to English

physicist Robert Hooke.[1] "If I have seen further it is by standing *on the shoulders of giants.*" Relative to the intellectual giants of the past, the saying goes, we are but dwarfs. But dwarfs on the shoulders of giants can see farther than giants.[2] We are carried and lifted not by virtue of our own intellect, but by the height of previous generations.[3] Much of the writing on Ecclesiastes throughout the ages – from commentaries that mined the book's spiritual truths to modern, academic tomes that discuss structure, form, and content – has been the work of giants. But I cannot offer this justification; even on their shoulders, I can see no farther. What I did attempt is to bring these disparate worlds of interpretation into conversation with each other, distill them for the reader's benefit, and share the richness this study has offered me.

Although I cite academic research in the pages ahead, this book emerges primarily from the study of classical Jewish scholarship, from talmudic and midrashic interpretations to medieval and pre-modern commentators. They often anticipated the same issues contemporary scholars point to, but did so hundreds if not thousands of years earlier, with a different agenda: for religious edification. This same impulse will travel through every chapter here; we will try to uncover the spiritual meanings that sages and exegetes saw embedded in the book's 222 verses. In this study of Kohelet, chapters will sometimes focus on a single verse or section that has a long and storied exegetical history; other chapters will feature one theme and take verses from all twelve chapters to support

1 For the intellectual history of this expression, see Robert K. Merton, *On the Shoulders of Giants* (University of Chicago Press, 1993).

2 I would be remiss if I did not mention contemporary sensitivities about the word "dwarf." Many people cite Chartres's expression using the term midget, which is a derogatory reference to those diagnosed with achondroplasia or "dwarfism." Many today prefer the term "little people." For a contemporary discussion of insensitivity and prejudicial treatment and recommendations, see https://www.health.com/mind-body/5-things-you-should-never-say-or-do-to-a-little-person.

3 For a discussion of the regression of knowledge and spiritual authority in Jewish scholarship, see Shnayer Z. Leiman, "Dwarfs on the Shoulders of Giants," *Tradition* 27, no. 3 (Spring, 1993): 90–94. For the epistemological implications of this expression, see Hillel Levine, "'Dwarfs on the Shoulders of Giants': A Case Study in the Impact of Modernization on the Social Epistemology of Judaism," *Jewish Social Studies* 40, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 63–72.

an idea that Kohelet wants to emphasize or that he contemplates again and again. Please note that repetition in this volume emerges from the original author's repetition; I have tried to minimize this where possible by demonstrating a verse's nuances or by offering a different contextualization of an already-identified problem. Even in a book this size, I was sadly unable to discuss each and every verse, although some receive attention in more than one chapter.

The Rabbis who interpreted these verses in the Talmud and early midrashic collections were expert readers of sacred texts – though this label is insufficient to describe the totality of their approach. They were religious readers who regarded the Tanakh as the blueprint for their lives – "*istakel beoraita uvara alma*."[4] They looked to the Torah to build their worlds. As such, their observations on Kohelet often reflect their own unique respective situations or scholarly priorities. Barry Holtz, in his book *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, captures what it means to be such a reader: "Reading was a passionate and active grappling with God's living word.... An active, indeed interactive, reading was their method of approaching the sacred text called Torah and through that reading process of finding something at once new and very old..."[5]

These new/old readings, however, sometimes do not provide us with enough as students. In their important efforts to present line-by-line explications, the classic commentaries often bypass the larger contextualization that illuminates the placement of verses within a chapter or the intertextuality that comes with cross-referencing. Several exegetes used a *hakdama*, a brief introduction that frames some structural or theological issues, but more often than not, they began at the book's beginning and unpacked the meaning of words and phrases verse by verse without commenting on larger religious or moral issues. Contemporary biblical scholarship often provides this broader framework and alerts us to literary, archaeological, and historical aspects that can enhance our understanding. But, as a project of faith, a more scientific approach has limits.

4 Zohar, Teruma, 2:161a; see also Genesis Rabba 1:1.

5 Barry W. Holtz, *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* (Simon and Schuster, 1992), 16.

Some perceive these two interpretive communities – the religious and the academic – as at war with each other. For some, even opening a book of scholarship is threatening and diminishes the religious underpinnings of studying Tanakh. Any publication that calls authorship into question is highly problematic, destabilizing, and to be avoided. The very term "biblical criticism" carries the disparaging notion that the Bible is being criticized, making such an undertaking a dangerous encounter designed to topple the faithful – which it sometimes has.

For academics, religious interpretation can involve strange midrashic twists that are not taken literally. Philological issues are often ignored in such readings as are the problematic actions of biblical heroes. Classic Jewish Bible study is often dismissed as unsophisticated, unenlightened, and etymologically inaccurate, despite the fact that those with a solid Jewish education often have far better linguistic tools than many of those who have made their way through the Academy.

In my own work to help understand both the experience and objectives of close textual reading, I discovered a helpful – if inorganic – way to merge these opposing viewpoints; I utilize this method throughout this book.[6] It comes from an unlikely source: the English art historian and critic, Sir Kenneth Clark (1903–83). In communicating how he looks at paintings, Clark unintentionally offers a rather remarkable way to look at sacred texts. He first aims for a general impression about the tone, area, shape, and color of a painting – an experience so immediate he says he "would experience it on a bus going at thirty miles

6 I am not trying to minimize the weighty dimension of authorship questions that have plagued this debate. For a comprehensive discussion of the reconciliation of these different interpretive worlds, see Joshua Berman, *Ani Maamin: Biblical Criticism, Historical Truth, and the Thirteen Principles of Faith* (Maggid Books, 2020). There are advantages of mental merging that should not be easily dismissed. The issue of authorship has shut down much productive and generative conversation. For more on the spiritual dimension of close reading, see Uriel Simon's article "The Religious Significance of the *Peshat*," trans. Edward L. Greenstein, *Tradition* 23, no. 2 (1988): 41–63. On the moral dimensions, see Elie Holzer, "Ethical Dispositions in Text Study: A Conceptual Argument," *Journal of Moral Education* 36, no. 1 (2007): 37–49, and "Allowing the Biblical Text to Do Its Pedagogical Work: Connecting Interpretative Activity and Moral Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 36, no. 4 (2007): 497–514.

an hour if a great picture were in a shop window."[7] This first shock, as he calls it, is followed by a closer examination of what the artist was trying to represent and how it fits within the overall effect. The more skillful the artist is, the greater his enjoyment. But then, when Clark's interest flags, he must fortify himself with "nips of information"; he contends that he cannot enjoy a pure aesthetic experience for more than two minutes. Knowing historical details, criticism, and something about the painter's background helps keep his "attention fixed on the work while the senses have time to get a second wind." This intellectual investigation enhances his "powers of receptivity" and enables them to be renewed afresh. Because of this prolonged observation, he notices other aspects of the painting that he would have "overlooked had not an intellectual pretext" kept his eye "unconsciously engaged." His general impression, followed by deeper study and intellectual analysis, all enable him to have an ultimate experience that is total, intense, and immersive, in his words, "Finally, I become saturated with the work, so that everything I see contributes to it, or is colored by it."[8]

Studying Tanakh benefits from establishing a general, overall impression before reviewing exegetes. This, however, requires more reflection than staring at verses while on a bus traveling at thirty miles an hour. Clark's "first shock" – what is immediately noticeable in a verse – is best followed by laying down speed bumps, slowing down so much that each word becomes highly visible and calls for attention. This allows the text both to speak and to mystify. Then it is time to identify and assemble questions, many – but not all – of which are addressed by classic exegetes, so that one can appreciate the work of these interpreters. Surveying the comments that surround the page, taking special note when they disagree with each other across continents and time, and considering what they see as the verse's mysteries further deepens the study. When they argue with each other about meaning, the reader must be content with irreconcilable readings. Yet, the more familiar a reader is with the background and work of the individual exegetes, the easier it is to appreciate their objectives and use of midrash, Talmud, grammar,

7 Sir Kenneth Clark, *Looking at Pictures* (New York, 1960), 16.
8 Ibid., 17.

philology, and etymology. This, too, is exciting – how one small verse spawns so many possibilities – and adds another important spiritual dimension to learning: to be surrounded by the voices of French, Spanish, Italian, and German experts from so many different centuries, all of whom honored God's words with their careful attention.

Then it helps to step back and away again from microscopic scrutiny to gain the larger perspective of where this verse fits within its neighboring verses, the chapter, or the book itself. The classic exegetes are often little help here, as this was rarely an interest. At this stage, fortifying oneself with academic scholarship helps sustain attention and helps the reader notice details that would have been "overlooked had not an intellectual pretext" kept the reader on the page. While for some, such comments appear threatening and challenge the spiritual/intellectual understandings of religious interpreters, others may find they help provide a more "intense and immersive" reckoning with the words. This eventually culminates, as Clark would say, in an experience of "religious saturation."

This approach may not work for others, but it works for me. In this study of Kohelet, in addition to commentary, I include the work of contemporary philosophers, psychologists, artists, novelists, and others because Kohelet is both very ancient and strikingly modern in its themes: wisdom, mortality, work, purpose, meaning, memory, pleasure, piety, and oblivion. The search for meaning is universal, from Aristotle to Tolstoy to Jack Kerouac. We will meet fellow existential travelers on the pages ahead. Additionally, at a time when major assumptions we have made about work, relationships, community, and life itself have been called into question by global health threats, political havoc, and natural disasters, it would seem a missed opportunity not to bring Kohelet's wisdom to bear on these tectonic shifts. I have included references throughout, collected in a bibliography for those who wish to do further research on Kohelet or the book's implications for aspects of modern living.

Throughout the book, I will use the terms "Ecclesiastes" and "Kohelet" coterminously but prefer the word Kohelet for authenticity's sake (I also frequently misspell Ecclesiastes). K-H-L is the three-letter Hebrew root for "to gather" or "to assemble," and Kohelet is a gatherer of aphorisms.

Ecclesiastes is the Greek parallel for a gatherer. I will use Kohelet as both the name of the book and the name of the author throughout. Although the traditional view is that King Solomon wrote the book, a subject that will be discussed in an introductory chapter, few contemporary scholars believe this to be the case. To keep within the authentic Hebrew sense of the terminology, I will use the honorific or descriptor language of "Kohelet" or "the author" to signify verses written in the first-person autobiographic style without naming the author as King Solomon, since the author is never explicitly named in the book. Readers will also see the spelling Qohelet or Koheleth used in the citations of modern scholarship. These spellings have been retained for the sake of academic integrity, but I have opted to use Kohelet instead, since that is the spelling most familiar to readers of Maggid publications. Where available, I always used the translations of others: those from the Magerman Edition of The Koren Tanakh, the 1990 JPS Tanakh (Masoretic text) cited by Sefaria, as well as other Sefaria translations where available. For Talmud, I relied upon the Noé Edition of the Koren Talmud Bavli and included the way its editors filled in the text's ellipses for the reader's ease. Sefaria has deeply enriched my Jewish learning of texts once obscure, and I am most grateful to my good friends at Sefaria for making Torah so accessible. At times, however, and for the sake of clarity and consistency, I emended a translation here or there because it was archaic or difficult to understand. I used H. Norman Strickman's 2017 translation of Ibn Ezra's commentary on Kohelet, the first biblical book Ibn Ezra interpreted when he shifted his intellectual energy largely from poetry to exegesis. Where linguistically feasible, I changed the generic translation "man" to human, person, or individual. Language should serve as a tool of inclusion.

The sages saw fit to canonize Ecclesiastes, a subject that will also be addressed in the introductory chapters to follow. They saw spiritual merit not despite the book's darker observations about the human condition but *because* of them. Kohelet's enduring appeal is its gift of truth-telling; it does not minimize the difficulties we face in our short lives but names them and brings us into the struggle for meaning. It acknowledges that wisdom is equal parts hope and despair. I hope you will conclude, as I have, that ultimately Kohelet is not only a fascinating book but also, and primarily, a courageous one.

Introduction

The Exasperating Search for Meaning

Genre, Style, Structure, and Canonization

Who Wrote Ecclesiastes?

The Exasperating Search for Meaning

Kohelet, the author of Ecclesiastes, tells his readers how he actively searched for the meaning and purpose of life: "I set my mind to study and to probe (*lidrosh velatur*) with wisdom all that happens under the sun – an unhappy business, that, which God gave men to be concerned with!" (Eccl. 1:13). Rashi on 1:13 elaborates that Kohelet probed the Torah for answers:

> *I set my mind to study*: In the Torah, which is wisdom, and to ponder over it concerning all the evil deeds mentioned above, which are committed under the sun, and I pondered over it that it is a sore task that the Holy One, blessed be He, set before mankind: "The life and the good, and the death and the evil" (Deut. 30:14).

But the verse itself does not limit Kohelet's search to the words of the Torah; in this book Kohelet's pursuit takes him inward to the heart and mind and outward to the workings of nature and human nature. Abraham ibn Ezra on the verse draws our attention to the verb *latur* as the very same one used by our ancient tribal leaders when reconnoitering the land of Israel in the book of Numbers: "The word *latur* (to search

out) is similar to *mitur* (from searching out) from searching out the land (Num. 13:25) and has a similar meaning." There as here, the search is dynamic, vital, and urgent.

Perhaps no biblical book speaks to our times more than Ecclesiastes.

A pervasive sense of meaninglessness and ennui has draped itself as a heavy cloth across the shoulders of a universe in crisis, rendering Kohelet's ancient words profoundly resonant. Looking back on a century of two world wars, nuclear disasters, the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, the tragedy of Rwanda, natural disasters, political polarization, antisemitism, racism and other hate crimes, harassment, terrorism, a pandemic, and a daily onslaught of difficult news, it is not hard to augment our personal disappointments with those of a world that seems to let us down hour after hour. There is a breathlessness to it all. For some, this modern undertow of desperation has made the search for meaning more critical. Victor Frankl, in writing one of the most important books of the twentieth century, *Man's Search for Meaning*, understood the almost primal need to reinterpret, reframe, and make meaning out of even the most challenging circumstances. We are not free from this task or its implications: "When we are no longer able to change a situation … we are challenged to change ourselves."[1] For others, the search itself seems pointless and arbitrary, in the words of George Carlin: "Just when I discovered the meaning of life, they changed it."[2]

It is not surprising then that some of the most popular and enduring novels of the early twentieth century turned to Ecclesiastes to frame their own observations on the banality and struggle of modern life.[3] Henry James draws the title of his 1904 novel *The Golden Bowl* from Ecclesiastes (12:6). Edith Wharton did the same a year later in *The House of Mirth* (7:4), as did Ernest Hemingway in his 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1:5). T. S. Eliot was influenced by Ecclesiastes in his 1922 poem

1 Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Beacon Press, 2012), 112.

2 George Carlin, *Napalm and Silly Putty* (Hachette, 2002), 172.

3 For more, see Dustin Faulstick, "'Nothing New Under the Sun': Ecclesiastes and the Twentieth-Century-US-Literary Imagination" (PhD diss., Ohio University, English [Arts and Sciences], 2014).

"The Wasteland," particularly the twenty-third line.[4] When we turn from literature to philosophy, we find studies comparing Ecclesiastes to the works of Albert Camus, among others.[5] Jumping from the book to the screen, Robert K. Johnston, a professor of theology and culture, wrote an entire book, *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes through the Lens of Contemporary Film*, discussing themes in thirteen iconic films produced between 1952 and 2003 that deal with major issues raised in Kohelet.[6] In 2000, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts hosted a mixed-media exhibit entitled "Vanitas: Meditations on Life and Death in Contemporary Art" that used verses from Ecclesiastes in its catalogue.

Kohelet began his search for meaning long ago. As scholar C. L. Seow notes, Kohelet's problems were not cosmological – what is our world like? – as much as anthropological – what does it means to be human?[7] More specifically, Kohelet begins the book with "I" statements conferring the sense that his primary question was not how

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4 See Thomas Esposito, "Echoes of Ecclesiastes in the Poetry and Plays of T. S. Eliot," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 98–123; and John Robert Printz, *The Relevance of Ezekiel and Ecclesiastes to the Theme of 'The Wasteland'* (T. S. Eliot) (PhD diss., American University, 1968).

5 See Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Re-Reading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 8–11; Christian A. Sanchez, "Qohelet and Camus: Answering the Absurd," in *Global Tides* (Pepperdine University), 12:6: 1–15; and Lesley J. Brown, "The Futility of Wisdom: An Exploration of the Book of Ecclesiastes and Its Parallels with Existentialism," in *Voices from the University: The Legacy of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Heidi M. Szpek (iUniverse, 2002), 97–108.

6 Robert K. Johnston, *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes through the Lens of Contemporary Film* (Baker Academic, 2004). The idea for the book emerged from a conference called "Cinematic Wisdom and the Book of Ecclesiastes," held at the University of Cambridge in September 2000. Johnston cites Larry Kreitzer, *The Old Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), to describe what his book aims for, namely that not only does the biblical text give greater depth to a film's expression of similar sentiments, but also the film contributes to a better understanding of the biblical text. This is the meaning of reversing the hermeneutical flow. For those interested in the thirteen, they are *Ikiru, Crimes and Misdemeanors, American Beauty, Six Feet Under, Magnolia, Punch-Drunk Love, Run Lola Run, The Princess and the Warrior, Monster's Ball, Signs, The Sixth Sense, Election,* and *About Schmidt.*

7 C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (Doubleday, 1997), 102.

humans should live but how *he* should live? "I set my mind to study and to probe with wisdom all that happens under the sun" (Eccl. 1:13) is immediately followed by "I observed all the happenings beneath the sun." How, Kohelet ponders, should *I* live in a world that is filled with injustice, futility, contradictions, and mystery? Ryan P. O'Dowd contends that from Ecclesiastes 1:12 to 2:26, 80 percent of the words used in the text reflect the first person and constitute the highest frequency of "I" statements in the entire Hebrew Bible, followed by 40 percent in Kohelet's eighth chapter.[8] Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks cites this fact and expounds upon its significance: "There is no other book in the Bible that uses the word 'I' so many times as so those first chapters of Ecclesiastes. Kohelet's problem was that he kept thinking about himself. It made him rich, powerful, a great success. As for happiness, though, he did not have a chance. Happiness lives in the realm called Not-I."[9] Rabbi Sacks illustrates this sentiment with a story he heard while waiting for an audience with the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

> Someone had written to the Rebbe in a state of deep depression. The letter went something like this. "I would like the Rebbe's help. I wake up each day sad and apprehensive. I can't concentrate. I find it hard to pray. I keep the commandments, but I find no spiritual satisfaction. I go to synagogue but I feel alone. I begin to wonder what life is about. I need help."
>
> The Rebbe wrote a brilliant reply that did not use a single word. All he did was this: he circled the first word of every sentence and sent the letter back. The disciple understood. The Rebbe had answered his question and set him on the path to recovery. The ringed word was "I."

8 Ryan P. O'Dowd, "Epistemology in Ecclesiastes: Remembering What It Means to Be Human," in *The Words of the Wise Are Like Goads: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century*, ed. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman, and Christian G. Rata (Penn State University Press, 2013), 199.

9 Jonathan Sacks, *Celebrating Life* (Bloomsbury, 2019), 15.

> It is hard to translate a Biblical text into contemporary English and still preserve the nuances of the original, but Kohelet's problem was the same as that of the letter-writer above. "I built for myself… I planted for myself… I acquired for myself…" In Hebrew the insistence on the first-person singular is striking, reiterated, discordant.[10]

There are other words whose repetition reflects the centrality of Kohelet's project. The Hebrew word *ra'a* – seeing – appears in the book forty-three times. The Hebrew word *lev* – "heart" (or more accurate to its biblical context, "mind") appears forty-one times. Kohelet uses these instruments – what he sees, thinks, and feels – to make his personal observations. Contemporary scholar Michael V. Fox credits the extensive use of "heart" in the book with Kohelet's method of research: "He mentions his heart so frequently in 1:12–2:26 because he is reflecting on the process of perception and discovery, and the heart has a central role in this process. He is not only exploring but also observing himself explore. He is his own field of investigation."[11] Throughout the book, Kohelet is not only engaged in conversation. He is also engaged in the meta-conversation about the way that he thinks.[12]

To that end, Ecclesiastes surfaces disturbing questions about the nature of human purpose we would often rather avoid. Kohelet asks us to consider the cycles of time, the disappointments of work, the vanity of acquisitions, the limits of wisdom, and the ever-present persistence of death. As the book advances, Kohelet shifts from "I" statements to general observations and then finally, toward the book's end, to actual recommendations drawn from his experience.[13]

Epistemologically, Kohelet arrives at his conclusions about a topic, frames and supports them, and often contradicts them from one

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10 Ibid., 14.

11 Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 78.

12 Harold Fisch discusses these two levels of thinking and credits Ecclesiastes with one of the earliest uses in literature of irony in *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Indiana University Press, 1988), 169.

13 J. L. Crenshaw, for example, notes that in Proverbs, the dominant way humans achieve knowledge is through hearing, while in Ecclesiastes, it is through seeing (*Ecclesiastes*

verse to another or in another chapter. This may be an expression of a shift in Kohelet's thinking as he ages or the way he perceives his subjects differently in different seasons or cycles. These contradictions – and we will discuss them at length – are a source of frustration for readers who would like to harmonize the book's teachings and want them to be singular, consistent, and repeated for emphasis, much the way wise sayings are delivered in the book of Proverbs. But Kohelet's use of contradictions may in itself present a message: human beings may strive for consistency but will always be riddled with imperfections and ambiguities. Accepting this can minimize frustrations, not only with Kohelet, but also with the world, others around us, and within ourselves.

Rabbi Norman Lamm once said in a sermon, "I have always been troubled by Kohelet and I am myself annoyed by my own sarcastic conclusions from it."[14] Kohelet offers few answers and many pessimistic conclusions. In life, questions are often better than attempted answers. Kohelet offers little lucidity on issues of consequence, almost reveling in despair rather than offering clarity. Fox comments on the intellectual whiplash of the book as a result:

> A life with a strict correspondence between deed and consequence, virtue and reward, vice and punishment, would make sense. But Koheleth sees that this does not happen, and he is weighed down by the collapse of meaning, as revealed by the contradictions that pervade life. These are antinomies, contradictory propositions that seem equally valid. These antinomies should not be eliminated by harmonization, for they are the essence of what Koheleth observes. He is not consistent because the world he sees is not consistent.[15]

[SCM Press, 1988], 28). See also "Qoheleth's Understanding of Intellectual Inquiry," in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, ed. A. Schoors (Leuven University Press, 1998), 205–25.

14 Norman Lamm delivered "A Slightly Sarcastic Sermon" at The Jewish Center, Manhattan (October 9, 1971). It can be accessed at the Norman Lamm Archives, Yeshiva University, https://archives.yu.edu/gsdl/collect/lammserm/index/assoc/HASH0155/1adacab9.dir/doc.pdf.

15 Michael V. Fox, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes* (Jewish Publication Society, 2004), xxx.

At times, these antinomies cause bitterness and anguish, but for the most part, they are observations that bring comfort because they ask the reader to revise expectations of consistency.[16] Nonlinear complications can arise at any time across the lifespan. Perhaps Kohelet is actually preparing the reader for a lifetime of encountering the same dilemmas by revisiting certain problems chapter after chapter, albeit as an ever-maturing observer. The expectation that one day it will all make sense is put to rest by Kohelet, who ostensibly wrote a book to articulate dilemmas that only get more complex and opaque over time. Kohelet, ironically, offers readers a gift by *not* having all the answers.

Amid Kohelet's nihilistic opening that all is utterly futile, he proposes a question that will, in various guises, dominate the book: "What profit is there for a person in all the labor he performs beneath the sun?" (Eccl. 1:3). This may be asked with a rhetorical flush, namely, if all is futile then what value could there ever be to a life? Alternatively, at a low moment when all seems futile and absurd, Kohelet, nevertheless, musters the reserve to ask a question about human purpose in earnest: What does it mean to lead a significant life? For some, significance is measured by a long and impressive list of personal accomplishments. For others, it is about "making a difference" in the lives of others, although what this difference is, is rarely defined. Some gauge their self-worth and life's meaning through ties with family and friends. For others it comes through one's professional calling, volunteering, or through philanthropic contributions. To some, significance is only achieved on a large playing field – inventing something that has global impact, for instance. For others yet, significance is determined on a narrower scale: the influence they have in their own families and communities. A maximalist output may be driven by the relentless push for immortality stirred by daily productivity, while a minimalist may reject these larger goals and find purpose solely in small, daily bursts of pleasure.

Kohelet stirs restlessness with his words, interrogating what the reader may find irrefutable. Meaning for many is simply unattainable because life satisfaction is not guaranteed. No matter what one creates,

16 Peter J. Leinthart sees a modern strain in the existential questions Kohelet poses in *Solomon among the Postmoderns* (Brazos Press, 2008), 97.

someone has already made a version of it. No thought is ever truly original. Fifteen minutes of fame lasts just fifteen minutes. Love, time, and money invested in family may backfire through estranged relationships or the death of a loved one. Rejection, job loss, suffering – all of these disjunctive moments – surface questions of worth and vulnerability. At such times, we are able to see the fragility of a human life clearly and wonder whether it's worth the torment.[17] Kohelet, too, suffers these moments, but he continues to ponder life's meaning and often reduces it to a simple, joyous meal. We do not arrive at the book's end with any pat formula for mental health and success, with a sense that Kohelet's search is finally over. His life will soon be over but the agonizing quest continues. In the words of one scholar, "Closure is not part of the reading experience."[18]

Kohelet joins many others throughout history who regarded life as an experiment to be studied. Aristotle (384–322 BCE) in his *Nicomachean Ethics* assumed that the purpose of life was eudaemonia, literally translated as good spirits or happiness. But unlike Epicurean happiness, which rests in pleasure, Aristotle's happiness consists of a life of virtue and goodness:

> Anyone who does not delight in fine actions is not even a good man; for nobody would say that a man is just unless he enjoys acting justly, nor liberal unless he enjoys liberal actions, and similarly in all the other cases. If this is so, virtuous actions must be pleasurable in themselves. What is more, they are both good and

17 For some, the realization that their lives have no meaning can be triggered suddenly and painfully with dire consequences. Recent studies have demonstrated that one in four people who attempt suicide make the decision within five minutes, often right after a difficult argument or crisis (T. R. Simon et al., "Characteristics of Impulsive Suicide Attempts and Attempters," *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 32 [2001]: 49–59). The implications are that such attempts may be partially thwarted if given the time and opportunity to slow down the reactionary impulse, reflect, and process a problem. See also C. Williams, J. Davidson, and I. Montgomery, "Impulsive Suicidal Behavior," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 36 (1980): 90–94.

18 G. D. Slayer, *Vain Rhetoric: Private Insight and Public Debate in Ecclesiastes* (Sheffield Academic, 2001), 128.

> fine, and each in the highest degree.... So happiness is the best, the finest, the most pleasurable of all.[19]

This will always be a struggle because of human failure, selfishness, laziness, and a host of other dispositions that make the pursuit of virtue an everyday battle, but virtue is always worth its pursuit.

Jumping many centuries forward, the nineteenth-century German nihilist Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) concluded that existence is meaningless and that God is dead.[20] To him, there is no single truth that humans can latch onto to derive a life of purpose and no relief for being human: "You have made your way from worm to man, and much in you is still worm."[21] To think that there is one way to live would be preposterous because all leads to nothingness: "Are we not perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?"[22] Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) struggled with his life's path, a tormented journey he described in his short book *Confession*. His "achievements" as a young man later disgust him:

> I killed people in war, challenged men to duels with the purpose of killing them, and lost at cards. I squandered the fruits of the peasants' toil and then had them executed; I was a fornicator and a cheat. Lying, stealing, promiscuity of every kind, drunkenness, violence, murder – there was not a crime I did not commit, yet in spite of it all I was praised, and my colleagues considered me and still do consider me a relatively moral man.[23]

In his wretchedness, as he aged, Tolstoy began to examine his despair and came up empty. He described this in words that might have been inspired by Ecclesiastes: "And I searched for an answer to my questions

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19 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Penguin Classics, 2004), 19.
20 Friedrich Nietzsche, *A Nietzsche Reader* (Penguin Classics, 1978), 203.
21 Ibid., 238.
22 Ibid., 203.
23 Leo Tolstoy, *Confession*, trans. David Patterson (W. W. Norton, 1983), 19.

in every area of knowledge acquired by man. For a long time I carried my painstaking search; I did not search casually, out of mere curiosity, but painfully, persistently, day and night, like a dying man seeking salvation. I found nothing."[24] Tolstoy sought out the counsel and the wisdom of scholars in books and conversations. He turned to science. He turned to simplicity. By the age of fifty, he confessed that he was "on the edge of suicide," unable to answer why he should go on: "What will come of what I do today and tomorrow? What will come of my entire life?"[25]

Tolstoy died in 1910 from pneumonia at the age of eighty-two; he had obviously found reasons to live several decades beyond the age of fifty.[26] His *Confession* ends with a dream in which he acknowledges the modest fact of his existence in his body's materiality; as long as he was still alive, he would go on. And the man who could not, at times, find any enduring worth to his existence wrote books that continue to shape Western civilization and bring meaning to those who came after him. What Tolstoy gave the world in his *Confession* was not only insight into the dark, black hole of this period in his life, but also the confidence that we, too, can enter that murky tunnel and emerge on the other side.

The French philosopher and novelist Albert Camus (1913–60) rejected Nietzsche's nihilism in favor of absurdism, perhaps best summarized in the famous offhand question associated with him that he never actually said or wrote: "Should I kill myself or have a cup of coffee?"[27] And yet, in "Letters to a German Friend," Camus conceded that life did have meaning, just not a decisive one: "I continue to believe that this world has no ultimate meaning. But I know that something in it has a meaning and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one."[28]

24 Ibid., 33.

25 Ibid., 34.

26 For a nonfictional and fictional discussion of his last days, see Mary Beard, "Facing Death with Tolstoy," *New Yorker*, November 5, 2013, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/facing-death-with-tolstoy; and Jay Parini, *The Last Station: A Novel of Tolstoy's Last Year* (Henry Holt, 1990).

27 See Giovanni Gaetani, "The Noble Art of Misquoting Camus – from Its Origins to the Internet Era," *Journal of Camus Studies* (2015): 37–50.

28 Albert Camus, "Letters to a German Friend," *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: Essays* (Vintage, 1995), 28.

For a famous few, trying to understand the purpose of life inspired them to set out quite literally. From Homer's fictional *Odyssey* to Jack Kerouac's memoir *On the Road*, the search for meaning can be peripatetic and often, sadly, leads to many of the same conclusions Kohelet arrives at from the safety of his writing desk. Kerouac (1922–69) captures this starkly, "I realized these were all the snapshots which our children would look at someday with wonder, thinking their parents had lived smooth, well-ordered lives and got up in the morning to walk proudly on the sidewalks of life, never dreaming the raggedy madness and riot of our actual lives, our actual night, the hell of it, the senseless emptiness."[29] This, too, is futility. The insistence on meaning does not make the search for meaning any easier or more successful today. *New Yorker* writer Jia Tolentino, the author of *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion*, believes that nihilism and pessimism are making a comeback: "I think it's the millennial condition. It's this kind of ecstatic, fundamentally ironic but also incredibly sincere, unhinged quality."[30] Wendy Sefret has labeled this sunny-nihilism. Struck one random day with the thought that her life was meaningless and would soon be over, she relaxed her expectations and found her new reality liberating:

> In the months since discovering I'm worthless, my life has felt more precious. When your existence is pointless, you shift focus to things that have more longevity than your own ego. I've become more engaged in environmental issues, my family and the community at large. Once you make peace with just being a lump of meat on a rock, you can stop stressing and appreciate the rock itself.[31]

29 Jack Kerouac, *The Road* (Penguin Classics, 2008), 253.

30 Wendy Sefret, "The Cultural Insights of Jia Tolentino," *Saturday Paper*, October 19–25, 2019, https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/culture/books/2019/10/19/the-cultural-insights-jia-tolentino/15714036008958#hrd.

31 Wendy Sefret, "Sunny Nihilism: 'Since Discovering I'm Worthless My Life Has Felt Precious,'" *Guardian*, December 17, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/dec/18/sunny-nihilism-since-discovering-im-worthless-my-life-has-felt-precious.

Unexpected life events can also force a search for meaning that comes up short. Kate Bowler, a professor of religion, was told at thirty-five that she had stage 4 colon cancer and little chance of survival. She wrote a book aptly called *No Cure for Being Human (And Other Truths I Need to Hear)*, and described how the tragic news made her question the aspirations that drive us.

> There is nothing like the tally of a life. All of our accomplishments, ridiculous. All of our strivings, unnecessary. Our lives are unfinished and unfinishable. We do too much, never enough and we are done before we've even started. We can only pause for a minute, clutching our to-do lists, at the precipice of another bounded day. The ache for more – the desire for life itself – is the hardest truth of all.[32]

The persistent ache of life and for life and the confusion it causes is the subject of a recent study of 225 life stories that resulted in the book *Life Is in the Transitions*;[33] Bruce Feiler and his team of researchers concluded that humans today are "haunted by the ghost of linearity."[34] The expectation that life will follow a particular path can have insidious consequences: "Primed to expect that our lives follow a predictable path, we're thrown when they don't. We have linear expectations but not linear realities."[35] He observes that even when people enjoy linearity in one aspect of their lives, say a stable career or marriage, they may face unpredictability in others: health scares, strained family dynamics, unexpected geographic moves, or changes in their religious identities. These transitions do not only happen in middle age to be dismissed as

32 Kate Bowler, "Why I'm Not Making a Bucket List," *New York Times*, August 29, 2021, Sunday Review, 8.

33 The title comes from a 1904 essay by William James called "World of Pure Experience." For more on this essay, see Jonathan Levin, "Life in the Transitions: Emerson, William James, Wallace Stevens," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 48, no. 4 (1992): 75–97.

34 Bruce Feiler, *Life Is in the Transitions* (Penguin, 2020), 72.

35 Ibid.

anticipated midlife crises;[36] they occur throughout life. And while rapid, dramatic changes are surprising and can leave us unprepared, they can also precipitate, through their interpretation, a richer, more empathic life. The search for meaning grows us.

Ironically, the search for happiness, however, rarely does. Scores of books, articles, and T-shirts promise a worry-free life of bliss. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks distinguishes between the all-consuming search for happiness and the contemporary neglect of the search for meaning: "Happiness is largely about how you feel in the present. Meaning is about how you judge your life as a whole: past, present, and future."[37] He talks about the search for meaning as a distinctly human phenomenon because it is about culture rather than nature. "It is not about what happens to us, but about *how we interpret*[38] what happens to us. There can be happiness without meaning, and there can be meaning in the absence of happiness, even in the midst of darkness and pain."[39] Happiness is about now. Meaning is often about our reflections on the past, the commitments we make in the present, and the way that we think about and shape the future.[40] Happiness, however, can never replace meaning.

The wrestling described in Kohelet emerges from an attenuated desire for life that permeates the book. The utter futility of its opening verses is bookended by the end of life in the final chapter: "And the dust returns to the ground, as it was, and the life breath returns to God who bestowed it. Utter futility, said Kohelet; all is futile!" (Eccl. 12:7–8). Ultimately, there is little we can do to quell the drumbeat of nihilism in our own minds because we will, in Kohelet's words, return as dust to the ground. But this harsh reality only intensifies Kohelet's

36 Feiler sites research to contend that "there is relatively little evidence to support the idea that most Americans experience a midlife crisis or, more generally, a universal course of life with expectable periods of crisis and stability." Orville Brim, Carol Ryff, and Ronald Kessler, *How Healthy Are We? A National Study of Well-Being at Midlife* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 586.

37 Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "The Pursuit of Meaning," in *Studies in Spirituality: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (Maggid Books/OU Press, 2021), 121.

38 Italics appear in the original text.

39 Sacks, "Pursuit of Meaning," 122.

40 See also Roy F. Baumeister et al., "Some Key Differences between a Happy Life and a Meaningful Life," *Journal of Positive Psychology* 8, no. 6 (2013): 505–16.

musings. Catastrophe will break us and also educate us. Experience that comes with age is Kohelet's teacher.[41] One scholar of the book, J. Stafford Wright, regards futility as an observation rather than a conclusion about living:

> Koheleth forces us to admit that it is vanity, emptiness, futility; yet not in the sense that it is not worth living. Koheleth's use of the term "vanity" describes something vastly greater than that. All life is vanity in this sense that it is unable to give us the key to itself. The book is a record of a search for the key to life. It is an endeavor to give meaning to life, to see it as a whole and there is no key under the sun. Life has lost the key to itself. "Vanity of vanity, all is vanity." If you want the key you must go to the locksmith who made the lock. "God holds the key to all the unknown." And He will not give it to you. Since, then, you cannot get the key, you must trust the locksmith to open the doors.[42]

Meaning is a by-product of what we deem worthwhile. For many, meaning is determined within a relatively predictable and comprehensible structure. What I do and what results from what I do cohere; therefore, I will do what I am doing again and again. Kohelet defies this neat assumption and instead offers his readers a serpentine path of switchbacks and dead ends. Wisdom is worthwhile and also useless. Money can purchase a degree of security but is ultimately a waste because the labor of one generation can result in the spendthrift ways of the next. Women can ruin men but, at the end of the day, enjoy life with the woman you love. One can still, however, to borrow the title of C. S. Lewis's book, be "surprised by joy."

Could Kohelet, the man who questioned the value of anything that lived after him and devalued the worth of books, have ever imagined that his own ruminations would still be read and relevant today?

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41 There are only two verses that mention youth directly: Ecclesiastes 11:9 and 12:1.

42 J. Stafford Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation* (Baker, 1972), 140.

Likely not. In an abject state of mind, it is hard to imagine creating anything of purpose.[43]

But Kohelet's words did indeed outlive him by millennia. For whom did Kohelet toil? He toiled for us, that we may see our questions in his, that we may continue the search for meaning that he so painstakingly pursued, and that we may find our own circuitous way in the world.

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43 In 1871, for example, Judah Leib Gordon (1830–92) published "For Whom Do I Toil?" (*LeMi Ani Amel*?), a poem using the language and themes of Ecclesiastes. Its mood is somber and despairing about the future of Hebrew and Zionism in nineteenth-century Russia:

> My enlightened brothers have acquired worldly wisdom
> And are but loosely bound to the language of their people;
> They scorn the aged mother holding her spindle.
> Abandon that language whose hour has passed,
> Abandon its literature, so tasteless, so bland.

As the poem continues, Gordon bemoans the loss of his own identity as a Hebrew-language poet with his question "For whom do I toil?" His audience was shrinking and with that, his sense of self and purpose collapsing. He concludes with "Perhaps I am the last of Zion's poets/And you, the last readers?" Gordon was not Zion's last poet. Hebrew did not die. Instead, it became revitalized in the modern State of Israel. His generation may have lost interest, but they were not his last readers. If only Gordon had known that in his lifetime. See the poem and notes in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Juda Reinharz, *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 386. The poem originally appeared in *Hashahar* 2 (Vienna, 1871): 353–54, trans. D. Goldman.