

International Day of Study

Leader's Guide: The Biblical Text

PLACE IN THE CANON

The book of *Kohelet* (also known as *Ecclesiastes*) is in the section of the Bible known as *Ketuvim* or “Writings” which consists of a variety of books including poetry (*Psalms*), short stories (*Ruth*, *Esther*), collections of Wisdom (*Kohelet*, *Proverbs*), and history (*Ezra*, *Nehemiah*, *Chronicles*).

In different editions of the Hebrew Bible, *Kohelet* is found in slightly different places within *Ketuvim*: In some, *Kohelet* is presented as one of the five *megillot* in the order of the holidays on which they are read (*Song of Songs* on Passover, *Ruth* on *Shavuot*, *Lamentations* on *Tisha B'Av*, *Kohelet* on *Sukkot*, *Esther* on *Purim*). In other Bibles, these same *megillot* are in a supposed historical order. *Ruth* is first because she is the grandmother of David; *Song of Songs* is next because it is attributed to Solomon (David's son); *Kohelet* is third because it sounds like a work written by an older, wiser Solomon. *Lamentations* is dated to the time of the destruction of the First Temple in 587 B.C.E. (more than three hundred years after Solomon) and *Esther*, set during the post-exilic period, is last.

DATING

Even though *Kohelet* is attributed to King Solomon based on chapter one which says “*Kohelet, the son of David, was king in Jerusalem,*” the book could not have been written by the 10th-century B.C.E King Solomon. Based on the book's vocabulary (Persian and Aramaic words and words that resemble later rabbinic Hebrew), most scholars think the book was written during the time of the Second Temple (after 500 B.C.E.). Opinions on the dating vary from 450 B.C.E. to 200 B.C.E., depending on whether scholars see more Persian or more Greek influence in the book. However, the author may have suggested that King Solomon wrote the book to draw on traditions portraying Solomon as the wisest, wealthiest and most powerful of men.

MEANING OF THE TITLE

Kohelet is taken from the first verse of the book: “*The words of Kohelet, son of David, king in Jerusalem.*” The word *kohelet* may be related to a verb meaning to collect or to assemble. If so, *Kohelet* might refer to one who collects words of wisdom, proverbs, stories, or advice. Alternatively, *kohelet* might refer to one who assembles people or teaches. The English title, *Ecclesiastes*, comes from the Greek translation meaning *a member of an assembly*.

CANONICITY

Canonicity deals with the question of when a text was accepted as authoritative and included in the Bible. In the 1st century C.E., the Jewish historian Josephus noted that there were 22 books in Jewish scriptures. Although he did not list them, scholars believe that he included *Kohelet* as one of three books containing precepts for living.

Later, in the *Mishnah* (early 3rd century C.E.) some rabbis question the sacred nature of *Kohelet*, but the passage concludes that *Kohelet* is inspired, sacred literature (*Yadayim* 3:5). Rabbinic texts suggest that *Kohelet*'s advice was religiously ambiguous:

- *Kobelet* says toil is futile and some might conclude that even the toil of studying Torah is futile.
- *Kobelet* says one should enjoy life's pleasures, some might be led to heresy or hedonism.
- *Kobelet* says one should follow one's heart, and some might think this contradicts the Torah's warning against following one's heart and eyes.

The rabbis justified the inclusion of *Kobelet* in the Bible, in part, based on the pious conclusion an editor gave to the book: *The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: revere God and observe God's commandments! For this applies to all humanity: that God will call every creature to account for everything unknown, be it good or bad. (12:13)*

WISDOM LITERATURE

The books of *Ketuvim* include a variety of different types of literature including the wisdom texts *Proverbs*, *Job* and *Kobelet*. Wisdom literature is primarily composed of proverbs and reflections. Proverbs are poetic sayings and admonitions derived from life experiences that are meant to teach a young person how to succeed in life, and build character. Reflections consider the meaning of life. In ancient Israel, it was thought that for life to be meaningful there should be a clear connection between righteous behavior and reward and between wicked actions and punishment. However, observations and life experiences suggested to *Kobelet* that life does not always make sense, that *"the race is not won by the swift."* (9:11)

Leader's Discussion Guide

Ice-breaker Question: *List three things that you have not yet done but want to do before you die. Why have you not done them yet?*

Answers might include: finances, family obligations, work obligations, health, an opportunity has not presented itself yet, fear.

Kohelet 3:1

For everything, there is a season,
A time for every matter under the heavens.

Leader: Our study of *Kohelet* will focus on the seven-verse poem found in chapter 3, verses 2-8. Let's begin by analyzing the poem's one-verse poetic introduction in 3:1.

Poems in the Bible are characterized by a few specific traits which are very different from elements found in modern poetry. For example, there is rarely rhyme in biblical poetry. Instead, one of its primary traits is *parallelism* in which a verse is composed of two halves, one half says something and the second half says roughly the same thing in comparable language. One half may use fancier language, or stronger words or more elements. The introduction to our poem is an example of parallelism.

Question: *Identify the parallel halves of the verse. Which elements in the first half are echoed in the second? What is additional information in the second half?*

Answer:

- The phrase “for everything” is echoed by “for every matter”
- “There is a season” has a parallel expression in “a time”
- “Under the heavens” is added information in the second half

Leader: In ancient thought there were three realms: above the heavens was where gods dwelt; under the heavens was where humans dwelt; and the underworld was the dwelling place of the dead.

The phrase “under the heavens” may refer to the realm of human life or might be used to emphasize that the statement is universally true.

In the introduction, the words “season” and “time” both appear, but throughout the rest of the poem, only “time” appears. The two words probably have the same meaning. Keep in mind some of the following ideas suggested by modern scholars concerning *Kohelet's* concept of time:

- Times are not specific dates.
- Times are occasions when conditions demand a particular action or response.
- Times are not situations people can anticipate or cause.
- People can only respond appropriately to the times as they arise.

Text: Poem of 3:2-8

[Read the poem through once and then review each of the seven verses individually.]

Verse 3:2

A time to be born and a time to die,

A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted;

Leader: “To be born” is translated by some commentators as “to give birth.” Which do you prefer in parallel with “to die”?

Question: *If the right time to be born is at “full term,” when is the right time to die?*

Leader: To uproot plants is a hostile act (especially during war). However, perhaps it could be uprooting weeds in order to clear a new field for planting.

Question: *What is the opposite of planting? [harvesting? letting lie fallow?] Is uprooting plants the opposite? What is the relationship between the pairs in the two halves of this verse: born/die, plant/uproot?*

Answers might include:

- Birthing and planting are beginnings in life.
- Dying and uprooting plants represent endings.
- One set deals with human or animal worlds and the other with plant life.
- Uprooting plants could suggest the beginning of a new field.
- Sometimes something needs to die or end for something else to begin.

Verse 3:3

A time to kill and a time to heal,

A time to tear down and a time to build up;

Question: *Are “to kill” and “to heal” opposites? If not, what would be better opposites? How do they relate to the previous pairs? When might it be the right occasion to kill rather than to heal?*

Answers might include:

- In each line, each parallel pair is composed of contrasting verbs (be born/die, plant/uproot, kill/heal).
- The pairs move from the human/animal world to the plant world.
- Kill/heal could refer to the human, animal or plant worlds.
- In each pair, one item may be positive (be born, plant, heal) and the other may be negative (die, uproot, kill).

Leader: Does the classification of items (born, die, plant, kill) as positive or negative depend on the circumstances?

Question: *Are “to tear down” and “to build up” opposites? When might it be right to tear down rather than build up? How does this pair relate to kill/heal?*

Answers might include:

- Tear down/build up seem to be opposites but often we need to tear down in order to rebuild.
- This pair does not deal with living things, as have the previous pairs.
- Some of the pairs so far focus on knowing when the time is right to begin a new building venture, life or other undertaking, versus knowing when it is the appropriate time to stop.

Verse 3:4

A time to weep and a time to laugh,
A time of mourning and a time of dancing;

Leader: Regarding the pairs to weep/to laugh and to mourn/to dance, consider Psalm 30 in which mourning is opposed to dancing: *“You turned my mourning into dancing; you removed my sackcloth (of mourning) and girded me with joy.”*

Question: *Certain times call for particular responses. Describe a time that calls for laughing or for weeping. Describe when it might be appropriate to laugh at a funeral. How does one feel later if one misread the time?*

Verse 3:5

A time to cast stones and a time of gathering stones,
A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing;

Leader: “To cast stones” and “to gather stones” may be understood in a variety of ways:

- Stones are removed from a field to make it suitable for farming.
- In time of war, stones may be thrown into a field to ruin it.
- Stones are sometimes gathered to build houses or walls.

Question: *What other associations does “casting stones” or “gathering stones” have for you?*

Leader: “To embrace” and “to shun embracing” are clearly opposites. Some commentators argue to shun embracing also refers to a time of mourning during which married couples are to refrain from sexual relations.

Questions: *What situations can you imagine that would be a time to refrain from embracing? Do embracing/refraining from embracing or casting stones/gathering stones form a pattern with any of the previous pairs?*

Verse 3:6

A time to seek and a time to lose,
A time to keep and a time to cast away.

Leader: “To seek” and “to lose” are sometimes explained as there is a time to seek after lost items and a time to give them up for lost.

Question: *In what type of circumstances might it be right for a person to decide it is time to stop searching?*

Question: *Do “keep” and “cast away” repeat the idea of “seek” and “lose” or are they different?*

Question: *Do you see in this list of times a chronological progression of times?*

Verse 3:7

A time to rend and a time to sew,
A time to keep silent and a time to speak;

Leader: “To rend” may refer to tearing one’s clothes in mourning. There are only a few uses of the verb to sew in the Bible:

- God sews garments for Adam and Eve;
- Job sews mourning sack for himself.
- In later Jewish tradition, one stitches up one’s torn garment after the mourning period is over.

Leader: “To be silent” may refer to the appropriate behavior of one visiting a mourner when one sits silently and waits for the mourner to speak. In addition, Psalm 30 contrasts the ability of humans to speak with the inability of the dead to speak.

Question: *Are there other times in life that call for being silent versus speaking? When is silence good and when is it bad?*

Leader: Note how terse the poem is. It is even more terse in the Hebrew where the word “to” is not a separate word, “a” is implied and “and” is attached to the next word. In Hebrew, therefore, most lines of this poem are only four words long. For example, *et liqro’a ve’et litpor*, [a] time [to] rend [and a] time [to] sew.

Question: *What feeling does the brevity of each line create?*

Answers might include:

- The brevity of each line of the poem has been described as helping to create a stately march, i.e. an orderly rhythmic procession of the constituent parts.
- It portrays a quick succession of ceaselessly changing activities and their opposites.
- It has also been compared to the images of nature ceaselessly moving used by *Kohélet* in chapter 1: *Southward blowing, turning northward, ever turning blows the wind. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full, to the place from which they flow, the streams flow back again.*

Verse 3:8

A time to love and a time to hate;
A time of war and a time of peace.

Leader: The last verse sets in opposition “to love/to hate” and “war/peace.”

Question: *When are appropriate times for hating and for war?*

[Someone might suggest that there is never a time for hating. Ask her to consider whether it might be appropriate to hate a crime or injustice rather than hating the person who perpetrated the crime or injustice.]

Leader: Notice that the poem has seven verses. In the Bible, the number seven symbolizes completion. Can you think of some biblical uses of seven?

Answers:

- Creation takes seven days.
- The Temple was built by Solomon in seven years.

Leader: Here, the seven verses may indicate the poet's list of times is complete. Let's summarize what we have learned about the poem so far.

- The poem of seven verses has 14 half verses; each half verse contains a contrasting pair.
- This long list of contrasting pairs supports the idea in the poem's introduction that everything has its time.
- By stating each as briefly as possible, the poet creates an impression of ceaselessly changing times.
- There does not seem to be a progression between the pairs of times that allows one to predict what will come next.
- Many of the pairs deal with beginnings and endings.
- Many deal with knowing the right course of action to take at a given time (laughing, crying, giving up on something lost, rending, hating, etc).

INTERPRETING THE WHOLE POEM

Leader: After we consider all the details of a poem, we need to put the pieces together and form an overall understanding of the poem. Let's consider different themes associated with *Kobelet* to see if these themes help us interpret the poem.

Kobelet as a collector of Wisdom

Wisdom texts typically provide guidance to people on how to live successfully and guarantee themselves long life, prosperity, health, a large family, supportive friends and community. If we follow the rules of wisdom proverbs (working hard, saving, studying, watching one's tongue, being pious, etc), we will be successful in all ways. Yet, real life contradicts this. The hardest workers do not necessarily succeed, the most righteous people do not necessarily have the best health and the wicked often live well. Or as *Kobelet* says (9:11): *The race is not won by the swift, nor the battle by the valiant; nor is bread won by the wise nor wealth by the intelligent.*

It seems, therefore, that human striving for wisdom and success is futile. The verse immediately following our poem (3:9) sums this up: *What profit does one who does something have in what he toils at?*

Question: *Is it true that a pithy wisdom saying could guarantee success in any and all situations?*

Answers might include:

- Life is full of ambiguities and therefore it is simplistic to think that one manner of behavior is fitting for all situations or all persons.
- Proverbs 15:23 suggests that all depends on the recognition of the appropriate time: "How good is a word rightly timed!" This suggests that the rightness of any particular response depends on it fitting the time.

- Many times the hardest part of finding an appropriate response is understanding the situation: we need more help understanding the time than we need rules telling us how to act.

Question: *By beginning with birth/death and ending with love/hate, war/peace, the poem alludes to all of life's experiences including the most extreme. How do you respond to uncertainty and surprises in life?*

Question: *People may turn to wisdom and proverbs for guidance in life, but perhaps the poem ends with extreme emotional reactions (love/hate) and extreme societal conditions (war/peace) to emphasize how varied are the times that we encounter and we cannot eliminate surprise by predicting times and controlling our future. Can you suggest other reasons the poem may end with love/hate, war/peace?*

The inevitability of death

Leader: According to *Kohelet*, death comes to all: humans and animals, rich and poor, good and bad. There is no escape. In addition, no solace should be taken from the hope that one will be remembered for one's good deeds and accomplishments. Everything one does has been done before, and it will all go unremembered and be done again.

Therefore, the wisest course is to enjoy life before death or illness makes enjoyment impossible. *Kohelet* preaches against excesses—too much working, too much collecting wealth and too much collecting wisdom is absurd and is like a chasing after nothing. When we die, someone else will enjoy the wealth, and our acquired wisdom will be lost.

Seven times *Kohelet* says to eat, drink, enjoy happiness and take pleasure from your labors and from the fruits of your labors. One of those seven times appears right before our poem (2:24-26) and another appears right after (3:12-13): “*Thus I realized that the only worthwhile thing there is for them is to enjoy themselves and do what is good in their lifetime; Also, that whenever a man does eat and drink and get enjoyment out of all his wealth, it is a gift of God.*”

Question: *Do you agree with this outlook? Does this outlook cause you to regret any choices you have made in life?*

Question: *Does this outlook (sometimes called carpe diem) help explain the structure or ending of the poem in Kohelet 3:1-8?*

Answers might include:

- Since *Kohelet* concludes that there are no guarantees for success and the only policy one should follow is to enjoy what one has while one has it, he seems to be expressing resignation. Perhaps the poem ends with peace (instead of with war) because *Kohelet* has found some measure of peace.
- Although *Kohelet* may not like the inevitability of death, nor the injustices he has observed, nor the sufferings inherent in the times, nor uncertainty, yet he is resigned and can be at peace with life.

Project I: As a group, re-write the poem with actions you think should be in it.

Project II: Consider your list of things you have not yet done but want to do before you die. Based on your study of *Kohelet*, would you revise your list of things you want to do before you die?

Additional Topics

Why is *Kobelet* read on the holiday of *Sukkot*?

Leader: One of the names for *Sukkot* is the Time of Our Rejoicing. Since *Kobelet* teaches that the best thing for a person to do in life is to eat, drink and enjoy the fruits of one's labors, the theme of enjoying/rejoicing links the text and the holiday.

Project III: *Kobelet* encourages us to enjoy today. But not everyone has the resources to eat, drink and live well. On *erev Yom Kippur*, collect non-perishable foods to deliver to local food banks or collect money to send to a food bank in Israel to help others to enjoy life more fully.

Leader: In contrast with the rest of our lives, at *Sukkot*, we sit in rickety make-shift huts and we note how temporary our existence is. Moreover, we have just finished *Yom Kippur*, the time when we confront death and how to live in the coming year.

Question: *Do you think the poem (3:2-8) may be interpreted as reflecting the altered way in which we live during Sukkot or the fragile nature of our existences?*

Gilgamesh

Kobelet is not the first writer to say that one should enjoy life while one can. Consider the following text which is roughly 4000 years old. It contains advice given to Gilgamesh, King of Uruk (as *Kobelet* was King of Jerusalem) when Gilgamesh went in search of immortality:

Gilgamesh, where do you roam?
You will not find the eternal life you seek.
When the gods created mankind,
They appointed death for mankind,
Kept eternal life in their own hands.
So, Gilgamesh, let your stomach be full,
Day and night enjoy yourself in every way,
Every day arrange for pleasures.
Day and night, dance and play,
Wear fresh clothes.
Keep your head washed; bathe in water.
Appreciate the child who holds your hand,
Let your wife enjoy herself in your lap!
For this is the task (of mankind).
(*Myths From Mesopotamia*, Stephanie Dalley, p. 150)

Compare this text to *Kobelet*'s advice: 2:24-26, 3:12-13, 3:22, 5:17-19, 8:15, 9:7-9, 11:7-10.

Gezer Calendar

A three-thousand-year-old artifact, the Gezer Calendar was discovered in Israel. It is a poem, dating roughly to the time of King Solomon, written on a piece of limestone. The poem lists the times of the year based on the agricultural task appropriate to each season. [An explanation of the inscription, picture and translation may be found in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, “Gezer Calendar,” volume 7, p. 537-8.] The calendar begins with the fall fruit harvest:

two months of fruit picking
two months of grain sowing
two months of late sowing
one month of flax harvesting
one month of barley harvesting
one month of wheat harvesting
two months of vine-tending
one month of summer fruit.

Compare this calendar to *Kobelet*'s list of times. In modern times, do we mark our months based on an agricultural cycle. What cycles do characterize our years?

Sevens

Other biblical texts follow patterns of seven. Study the seven wisdom sayings in *Kobelet* 7:1-14. Just as our seven-verse poem repeats the word “time,” this unit is composed of seven proverbial units using the word “good” (7:1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 11 and 14). These sayings also use parallelism and focus on mortality. [For more information, see Robert Gordis, *Kobelet: The Man And His World*, p. 109 and 255-265.]