

## Homily for Thursday in the Seventeenth Week after Pentecost

September 24, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Proper 20, Thursday: Ecclesiastes 1:1–11; Psalm 90:1–6; Luke 9:7–9*

Ecclesiastes is one of the very few wisdom books in the Hebrew Bible. The others are Job, Proverbs, and the Song of Songs. There are also a few examples among the psalms.<sup>1</sup> For us, the name of this book, “Ecclesiastes,” is a Latin form of the Greek translation of the Hebrew word used to name the author, *Qobeleth*.<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew root means assembly or congregation.

Let’s get the text’s ascription of authorship by Solomon, David's son, out of the way. The reference to Solomon is used in the first and second chapters. The book is not written from the perspective of a king. Solomon's name at the beginning and a theological instruction at the end seems to have

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<sup>1</sup> Roland E. Murphy, “Introduction to Wisdom Literature,” *The Jerome Biblical Commentary: Volume I: The Old Testament*, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 487.

<sup>2</sup> Choon-Leong Seow, “Ecclesiastes,” *New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 935.

enabled the inclusion of this book in the Hebrew canon.<sup>3</sup>

The King James and the Revised Standard Version call him "Preacher." The New Revised Standard Version calls him "Teacher"—"Philosophical Teacher" may better reflect the text's actual content.<sup>4</sup>

This is the famous beginning of the book in the King James Version:

*The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.*<sup>5</sup>

I think it's fair to say that "vanity" in ordinary American usage refers to one's appearance or self-absorption—and it's been that way for a while. (I was a junior in high school when Carly Simon's 1971 record, "You're so vain," came out.)

I'm not surprised that the Revised Standard Version repeated "vanities of vanities; all is vanity." The first

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<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford Annotated The Apocrypha of the Old Testament Revised Standard Version Expanded Edition containing the Third and Fourth Books of the Maccabees and Psalm 151*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 805.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 935.

<sup>5</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:1–2.

edition of the RSV New Testament was published in 1946, the Old Testament in 1952. The RSV represented a significant shift in the integrity of biblical translations.

That said, I am often disappointed by the New Revised Standard Version. It, too, uses "vanity of vanities." But the Hebrew word here is *hevel*. Robert Alter, emeritus professor of Hebrew at the University of California, Berkeley, writes that *hevel* refers to the breath exhaled in breathing, in contrast to *ruach*, the breath of life.<sup>6</sup> Professor Alter translates *hevel* as "merest breath. All is mere breath."<sup>7</sup>

Ecclesiastes was probably written in the Persian period before the conquests of Alexander the Great.<sup>8</sup> It was a time of relative prosperity—the Persians had a good, not debased coinage. It was also a time of unease and distress. Ecclesiastes is a reflection on how to cope with uncertainty, to enjoy what one can along the way, and to face death.

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), III: 675.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 677, 679.

<sup>8</sup> Seow, 935.

In addition to “vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” two other phrases are repeated over and over, “chasing after wind” and “under the son.” Ernest Hemingway took the title of his book *The Sun Also Rises* from the fifth verse of today’s lesson, “The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.”<sup>9</sup>

Tomorrow we have another reading from Ecclesiastes, and I'll have more to say about this book then.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:5.