

Ecclesiastes

Fall 2017

Rabbi Michael Safra

Utter futility! All is futile · That which is crooked cannot be made straight · To everything there is a season · There is nothing new under the sun · Two are better than one · A lover of money is never satisfied by money · There is nothing worthwhile but to eat, drink, and enjoy · Revere God and observe God's commandments

The name Kohelet/ Ecclesiastes, means “preacher” or “convener,” from the Hebrew word *kahal* (*ecclesia* in Greek), which means congregation. This particular preacher seeks to make sense of a world that does not seem to work the way it is “supposed to.” He tells the story of his own life – by most outward measures, he has been successful, and yet he is disappointed by certain realities of the world that strike him as unfair. In the words of James Williams, Kohelet is “the skeptic par excellence of the Old Testament.” And yet he is able to learn from his experiences and offer advice on how to find satisfaction in the world as it is.

There is no scholarly consensus regarding the organizational structure of the book. Kohelet outlines a general problem with the world – because things don’t generally work out as they ought to, most toil is ultimately worthless. He responds to the problem by suggesting an outlook of moderation – don’t get too enmeshed in any single pursuit, don’t be too righteous or too wicked, work hard but don’t become obsessed with wealth. But he does not get “from here to there” in a systematic way. While time will require us to pick and choose passages to read and discuss in class, I strongly recommend that you take the time to read the book in its entirety on your own.

Our division of time aligns roughly with the divisions used by Michael Fox:

November 1 – Introduction: Success Isn’t All It’s Cracked Up to Be (chapter 1)

November 8 – Reflections and Meditations (Chapters 2-4)

November 15 – Counsels and Teachings (chapters 5-10)

November 22 – Conclusion: Learning to Live with Uncertainty and Accept the World as it Is (chapters 11-12)

Resources:

1. Any edition of the New Jewish Publication Society translation of *Tanakh*.
2. Michael V. Fox, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes* (2004).
3. H.L. Ginsberg, ed. *The Five Megilloth and Jonah* (1969).