

Dr. Elaine Phillips, Old Testament Literature, Session 26, Wisdom Literature (Eccles. & Song of Songs) Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Phillips, Old Testament Literature, Session 26, Wisdom Literature (Eccles. & Song of Songs), Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. Phillips' lecture focuses on the Old Testament books of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. For Ecclesiastes, she emphasizes interpreting the Hebrew word "hebel" as transient rather than meaningless, impacting the book's overall message. The lecture explores the book's structure, key phrases, and the ongoing debate about its authorship, particularly regarding Solomon's potential influence. **Phillips also discusses the human crisis presented in Ecclesiastes and the counterpoint of God's gifts.** Shifting to Song of Songs, **the lecture highlights its celebration of human sexuality as a gift and challenges traditional allegorical interpretations.** She also suggests the book might be a polemic against the public use of sex in the wider culture, further exploring the vivid imagery used to describe love and beauty within the text.

2. 17 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Phillips, Old Testament Literature, Session 26 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Old Testament → OT Introduction → OT Lit).



**Phillips_OTLit_Sessi
on26.mp3**

3. Briefing Document: Phillips, Old Testament Literature, Session 26, Wisdom Literature (Eccles. & Song of Songs)

Okay, here's a briefing document summarizing the main themes and ideas from Dr. Phillips' lecture on Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs.

Briefing Document: Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs

Overview: This lecture explores two books of wisdom literature: Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. Dr. Phillips focuses primarily on Ecclesiastes, examining its themes of transience, the human condition, and the paradoxical relationship between life under the sun and God's gifts. She then introduces Song of Songs as a celebration of human sexuality and intimate love, potentially as a counterpoint to the cultural practices of the time.

I. Ecclesiastes:

- **Central Theme: Transience (Hebel)**
- The lecture emphasizes a re-evaluation of the key Hebrew word "hebel," traditionally translated as "meaningless" or "vanity." Dr. Phillips argues for a translation of "transient" or "elusive" as more accurate and insightful. "The word itself simply means breath or vapor." She encourages students to "read this as transient or elusive. Maybe that will change our frame in terms of how to look at this book, and it may not then be so pessimistic. It may simply be realistic."
- The book is framed by this concept: "Hebel, hebel, says the teacher... Everything is hebel" (Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12:8). This framing highlights the fleeting nature of all earthly pursuits.
- The repetition of themes in Ecclesiastes mirrors the repetitive nature of breath. The brevity of breath mirrors the brevity of life.
- Translating "hebel" as "meaningless" implies a value judgement, suggesting something is not worth pursuing. Dr. Phillips posits that Ecclesiastes may be arguing that these things are profoundly meaningful, but are cut short by death.
- **Key Phrases and Perspectives:**
- "Under the sun/heaven": Represents a perspective of living in a fallen world (referencing Genesis 3 and the curse on the ground). "We live, as the author of Ecclesiastes says, under the sun."
- "I saw": Highlights the author's observations of the world.

- "Chasing after the wind/striving after the wind": Illustrates the futility of pursuing things that are ultimately elusive.
- "What profit/What good": Questions the ultimate value and advantage of various pursuits, considering the inevitability of death.
- **God's Gifts vs. The Human Crisis**
- The lecture emphasizes a "large-scale parallelism" in the book, contrasting the frustrations of finitude and fallenness ("life under the sun") with the recognition that "God has given us the things that we can enjoy." This duality reflects the tension between daily struggles and faith.
- Enjoyment of food, drink, and work are presented as "gifts from God," not simply hedonistic pursuits. "This nothing better than to do these things is usually in the context of, these are gifts from God."
- Ecclesiastes acknowledges a "heavenly perspective," an awareness of God's presence and gifts, even amidst anxieties.
- **Structure and Progression of Thought:**
- The book is structured with a prologue (1:1), the "hebel" statement (1:2, 12:8) serving as bookends, a long central section, and an epilogue (12:9-14) that concludes with the call to "Fear God and keep his commandments. This is the whole duty of humankind."
- The poem in chapter 1 highlights the monotony and labor of life, mirroring Genesis.
- The poem in chapter 12 uses metaphors to describe the dissolution of the human body in old age before death.
- The author's thinking evolves throughout the book, with an increasing awareness of "grievous evil" (ra).
- Towards the end, there's a lighter, more humorous tone, suggesting a coming-to-terms with life's frustrations.
- **Authorship:**
- Traditionally attributed to Solomon ("Son of David, king in Jerusalem"). There are references to Solomon's wisdom, wealth, and building projects.

- The lecture acknowledges that the Hebrew language in Ecclesiastes is unusual and may suggest a later author writing in the persona of Solomon.
- **Human Crisis:**
- Kohelet recognizes that "With much wisdom comes much anger...The more knowledge, the more pain."
- Things deemed substantial are "hebel" because death ends them.
- Injustice abounds.
- **Counterpoint: God's Gifts:**
- God gives a sense of continuity. "A time for everything. A season for every activity under heaven."
- God has made everything beautiful in its time and set eternity (Olam) in the hearts of humankind, yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.
- God gives enjoyment. "A man can do nothing better than to eat, drink, and find satisfaction in his work. It's from the hand of God."
- God gives relationships. "Two are better than one. If one falls down, his friend can help him up."
- God will bring judgment. "God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil." This will set all injustice right.

II. Song of Songs:

- **The Best Song (Superlative):** "Song of Songs means the best song."
- Traditionally interpreted allegorically as God's love for Israel (and Christ's love for the church). The dove hid in the cleft of the rock is read as Israel at Mount Sinai waiting for God's revelation.
- Celebrates human sexuality: It is a "celebration of human sexuality," with the woman's voice often prominent.
- **Interpretations:**
- Allegorical: Lover represents God, and beloved represents God's people.

- Ritual Drama: Expresses love for a deity in a cultic context (though Dr. Phillips finds this less compelling).
- Love Poetry: Primarily exquisite love poetry expressing sexual enjoyment.
- **Imagery and Setting:**
 - The garden is a central image: Initially locked and guarded (representing virginity), then opened to the lover. "Representative of the young woman's virginity. And then the lover is allowed into that garden."
 - Emphasizes the senses: "The imagery there is intended to appeal to all of the senses because sexual expression is a very, well, it's a whole-body experience."
 - Connects to Genesis 2: Alludes to Adam and Eve's intimacy in the Garden of Eden.
- **Absence of the Divine:**
 - God is not explicitly named in the song.
 - There is no religious language (temple, priesthood, sacrifices).
- **Describing Love:**
 - The lovers describe each other using elaborate imagery: birds, animals, floral patterns, jewelry, spices, food, celestial bodies, and geographical references.
- **Purposes:**
 - Celebrates sexual love as a gift of God.
 - Potentially a polemic (argument) against the widespread public and often prostituted forms of sexuality in the culture, emphasizing intimacy and privacy. "The suggestion is that maybe this book is intended to privatize...to express how sexuality ought to be used and take it out of this rampant, sacred prostitution stuff that was going on."
 - Celebrates physical beauty.
 - Demonstrates the power of love. "Love is as strong as death...Many waters cannot quench love."

This briefing doc provides a strong overview of the key points of the lecture, feel free to ask if you need any clarification or further details.

4. Study Guide: Phillips, Old Testament Literature, Session 26, Wisdom Literature (Eccles. & Song of Songs)

Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs: A Study Guide

Quiz

Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each.

1. According to Dr. Phillips, what are some of the core components in defining biblical wisdom?
2. What is the literal Hebrew meaning of the word *hebel*, and why does Dr. Phillips suggest translating it as "transient" or "elusive"?
3. How does the concept of *hebel* frame the book of Ecclesiastes?
4. Identify at least two key phrases that appear repeatedly in Ecclesiastes and explain what they reveal about the author's perspective.
5. How can reading Ecclesiastes through the framework of Genesis 3 provide greater understanding?
6. According to Phillips, what is the significance of the "nothing better than to eat, drink, and be merry" passages in Ecclesiastes?
7. How does the ending of Ecclesiastes challenge or confirm the perspectives shared throughout the book?
8. Name the five Megillot (scrolls) read at the festival times. At which festival is Song of Songs read?
9. Describe the allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs.
10. According to Dr. Phillips, what kind of message might the Song of Songs be making in view of wider cultural practices of the time?

Quiz Answer Key

1. Biblical wisdom involves the fear of the Lord, the ability to choose wisely and make godly choices, and applying truth to life in light of experience. It's not just theoretical knowledge but a practical application of divine principles.

2. The Hebrew word *hebel* literally means "breath" or "vapor." Dr. Phillips suggests translating it as "transient" or "elusive" to avoid the negative connotations of "meaningless" and to highlight the fleeting nature of life and pursuits.
3. The concept of *hebel* acts as a bookend, appearing in the beginning (1:2) and end (12:8) of Ecclesiastes, emphasizing the transience and fleeting nature of all things under the sun. This framing shapes the reader's understanding of the book's themes.
4. "I saw under the sun" indicates the author's observation of life in a fallen world, marked by toil, injustice, and the limitations of human existence. "Chasing after the wind" symbolizes the futility of pursuing things that are ultimately transient and cannot provide lasting satisfaction.
5. Genesis 3 describes the curse on the ground and the introduction of toil and pain into human existence. Understanding this context helps to illuminate the author's perspective on the hardships and frustrations of life in a fallen world.
6. The "nothing better than to eat, drink, and be merry" passages are not endorsements of hedonism but rather acknowledgments of God's gifts. They encourage the reader to enjoy the blessings God has provided, even amidst the frustrations of life.
7. The ending of Ecclesiastes emphasizes the importance of fearing God and keeping his commandments, reminding readers of God's coming judgment. By implication, this confirms that despite the frustrations and injustices observed throughout the book, there is hope in God's perfect judgment, which will ultimately set all things right.
8. The five Megillot are Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. Song of Songs is read at Passover.
9. The allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs reads the lover as God and the beloved as God's people. Thus, the book is seen as a beautiful picture of the love relationship between God and his people.
10. The Song of Songs, with its focus on intimacy and privacy in sexual expression, may be intended as a polemic against the widespread sacred prostitution practices of the time. It might discourage any connections between what's going on in this celebration of human, intimate love (a gift of God) and appealing to a deity for presence in any way.

Essay Questions

1. Explore the significance of the word *hebel* in Ecclesiastes. How does understanding its literal meaning and alternative translations impact the overall interpretation of the book's message?
2. Analyze the structural elements of Ecclesiastes, including the prologue, epilogue, and recurring phrases. How do these structural components contribute to the development of the book's themes and arguments?
3. Compare and contrast the perspectives of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs on the nature of human existence and the role of God in human life.
4. Discuss the various interpretations of Song of Songs, including the allegorical, ritual drama, and love poetry approaches. Which interpretation do you find most convincing, and why?
5. Examine the imagery used in Song of Songs to describe love and beauty. How does the use of natural, geographical, and sensory imagery enhance the emotional impact of the poem?

Glossary of Key Terms

- ***Hebel***: A Hebrew word meaning "breath" or "vapor," often translated as "meaningless" or "vanity," but suggested to mean "transient" or "elusive" in the context of Ecclesiastes.
- **Kohelet**: The Hebrew name for the author of Ecclesiastes, often translated as "teacher" or "preacher."
- **Under the Sun**: A recurring phrase in Ecclesiastes that refers to life in the earthly realm, marked by toil, frustration, and limitations.
- **Megillot**: The Hebrew word for "scrolls." These are five books (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther) from the Hebrew Bible that are read during specific Jewish festivals.
- **Allegorical Interpretation**: An approach to interpreting Song of Songs that views the lovers as symbolic representations of God and his people.
- **Polemic**: A strong verbal or written attack on someone or something.
- **Shalom**: A Hebrew word meaning peace, completeness, wholeness, well-being, and harmony.

5. FAQs on Phillips, Old Testament Literature, Session 26, Wisdom Literature (Eccles. & Song of Songs), Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Ecclesiastes

1. Why is the book of Ecclesiastes included in the Bible, given its seemingly pessimistic outlook?

Ecclesiastes addresses universal human experiences such as dealing with daily life in a sinful world, confronting the inevitability of death, and grappling with issues of meaning and purpose. It challenges the reader to find perspective and to consider what truly matters in life beyond the transient and frustrating aspects of the world "under the sun." The book invites honest reflection on life's complexities.

2. What does the Hebrew word *hebel* mean in Ecclesiastes, and how does understanding its meaning affect our interpretation of the book?

The Hebrew word *hebel*, frequently translated as "meaningless" or "vanity," actually means "breath" or "vapor." Interpreting *hebel* as "transient" or "elusive" rather than "meaningless" shifts the book's emphasis. Instead of a pessimistic dismissal of life's endeavors, it becomes a realistic acknowledgement of their fleeting nature in the face of death. The author isn't dismissing the value of experiences, relationships, or work but recognizes their impermanence.

3. What are some of the key recurring phrases in Ecclesiastes, and what do they reveal about the author's perspective?

Key recurring phrases include:

- "I saw": This emphasizes the author's observations and experiences in the fallen world.
- "Under the sun" or "Under heaven": This defines the limited, earthly perspective from which the author is viewing life.
- "Chasing after the wind" or "Striving after the wind": This illustrates the futility of pursuing things that are ultimately transient and elusive.
- "What profit?" or "What good?": This questions the ultimate value and advantage of various pursuits, considering the inevitability of death.

These phrases collectively reveal the author's struggle to find lasting meaning and satisfaction in a world marked by transience, toil, and injustice.

4. How does Ecclesiastes use the idea of God's gifts to provide a counterpoint to the human crisis of transience and mortality?

Despite recognizing the frustrating aspects of life, Ecclesiastes acknowledges that many things are gifts from God that can and should be enjoyed. This includes work, relationships, and simple pleasures. The author suggests that when one recognizes these gifts, a different perspective emerges – a perspective acknowledging the blessings amidst life's challenges.

5. How does the structure of Ecclesiastes contribute to its message?

The book is structured with a prologue and epilogue framing the main body. The opening poem highlights the repetitiousness and monotony of life, echoing the curse from Genesis. The closing poem poignantly describes the dissolution of the human body in old age. The recurring use of "*hebel, hebel*" (transient, transient) bookends the text and reinforces the theme of impermanence. Furthermore, the structure features a constant counterpoint between life "under the sun" and the recognition of God's gifts and presence, creating a tension that mirrors the lived human experience.

6. Who is the author of Ecclesiastes, and what evidence supports this?

The book identifies the author as "the Teacher" or "the Preacher," the "son of David, king in Jerusalem," suggesting Solomon. Evidence supporting this includes the author's apparent wisdom, wealth, and building projects, which align with descriptions of Solomon. Additionally, the book mentions setting proverbs in order, and Solomon was known for writing 3,000 proverbs.

7. What is the significance of the ending of Ecclesiastes, which emphasizes fearing God and keeping his commandments?

The ending provides a crucial perspective: "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil." This suggests that despite the transience and injustices observed throughout the book, there is ultimate accountability and a future judgment. This hope for justice and the right order of things (*shalom*) is rooted in God's character and provides a basis for meaning and purpose beyond the "*hebel*" of earthly pursuits.

8. How does Ecclesiastes represent both the human crisis and the counterpoint through conceptual parallelism?

Ecclesiastes employs a large-scale conceptual parallelism in its poetry. It often juxtaposes descriptions of the frustrations of finitude and fallenness with acknowledgments of the gifts God has provided. This parallelism reflects the tension inherent in the human condition, where we experience both the difficulties of life in a fallen world and the blessings of God's grace and provision. This suggests that both perspectives are valid and should inform our understanding of life.

Song of Songs

This source includes some details on Song of Songs, however, I'm unable to formulate any questions about it using the available information.