

# ***Ecclesiastes***

## **Chapter 1**

*All Is Vanity*

**The words of the Preacher,] the son of David, king in Jerusalem. 2 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. 3 What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? 4 A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. 5 The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. 6 The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. 7 All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. 8 All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. 9 What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. 10 Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has been already in the ages before us. 11 There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.**

**Ch 1** Solomon burns at the injustice and disappointment of life and mourns the passing of youth and the universality of inescapable death even as he bids us not to set our hearts on earthly things but on God, in whom alone is “eternity” and “forever” (3:11, 14; cf Mt 6:19–21; 7:7–8). (TLSB)

**1:1 preacher.** The teacher of wisdom (12:9). The Hebrew term for “Teacher” (*qoheleth*) is related to that for “assembly.” Perhaps the Teacher, whose work is described in 12:9–10, also held an office in the assembly. The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT) word for “Teacher” is *ekklasiastes*, from which most English titles of the book are taken, and from which such English words as “ecclesiastical” are derived. (CSB)

Hbr *qoheleth*, “teacher” or “leader of the assembly.” (TLSB)

*son of David.* Suggests Solomon, though his name occurs nowhere in the book. The Hebrew word for “son” can refer to a descendant (even many generations removed)—or even to someone who follows in the footsteps of another. (CSB)

King Solomon (1Ki 8; cf 1Ki 11:42). Luther: “I think that these words were spoken by Solomon in some assembly of his retinue, perhaps after dinner or even during dinner to some great and prominent men who were present. He spoke this way after he had thought long and hard to himself about the condition and the vanity of human affairs, or rather of human affections. Then he poured this out to those who were present, as usually happens, and afterwards what he said was put down and assembled by the leaders of the community or of the church. Therefore they also acknowledge at the end (12:11) that they have received and gathered these things from one Shepherd. In the same way it could happen that one of us would discourse about human affairs while seated at table and others would take it down. This is, then, a public sermon which they heard from Solomon” (AE 15:12). (TLSB)

This verse actually serves more as a title than as a part of the book itself.

With our imagination we can travel back in time to a faraway age and to a distant city. We are part of an assembly in ancient Jerusalem, perhaps standing in the courtyard of the temple. (PBC)

Before us looms the magnificent temple Solomon which took the king's best workmen seven years to build. Framing the building's doorway are the two massive pillars with their cast bronze capitals. As a tribute to the Lord, his God, Solomon had named those pillars Jakin and Boaz, meaning "He established" and "in Him is strength." (PBC)

Suddenly the king and his retinue enter the scene. This is the great King Solomon who is known throughout the world for his unmatched wisdom and his fabulous wealth. He wears a crown of gold and a scarlet robe. But as our attention moves from the trappings to the man himself, we see the face of an old man. His eyes betray a weary sorrow. (PBC)

This is the king whose name would never be forgotten and whose history would live until the end of time. A story of grandeur, yes, but also of tragedy. The sacred historian tells the story in 1 Kings 11:4-11. (PBC)

1 Kings 11:4-11, <sup>4</sup> "As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. <sup>5</sup> He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. <sup>6</sup> So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done. <sup>7</sup> On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. <sup>8</sup> He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods. <sup>9</sup> The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. <sup>10</sup> Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the LORD's command. <sup>11</sup> So the LORD said to Solomon, "Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates.

This is the man who stands before us. His ears must still be ringing with God's judgment. Like the man in Jesus' parable who, "would not even look up to heaven, but beat his "breast," Solomon must have prayed a thousand times, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). (PBC)

We hear no mention of the king's name. Maybe he no longer feels worthy of the name Solomon, which means "Peace." For he had broken peace with God. This is Solomon the great king and humble sinner. He now begins his speech: (PBC)

**1:2** Briefly states the author's theme (see 12:8). (CSB)

*Meaningless!* This key term occurs about 35 times in the book and only once elsewhere (Job 27:12). The Hebrew for it originally meant "breath" (see Ps 39:5, 11; 62:9; 144:4). The basic thrust of Ecclesiastes is that all of life is meaningless, useless, hollow, futile and vain if it is not rightly related to God. Only when based on God and his word is life worthwhile. (CSB)

Hbr *hebel*, "mere breath" (cf Jas 4:13-14). By repetition, he describes life that drones on and on until death, life that is empty apart from the Lord. Luth: "This is a Hebraism.... They say "Song of Songs," that is, the supreme and most excellent song that Solomon composed. Vanity of vanities, that is, the greatest and highest vanity of all, total and utter vanity" (AE 15:13). Vanity is

the seemingly endless loop of life searching for meaning and absolute contentment but never really finding satisfaction. *Vanity of vanities*. Translated in LXX as “frustration” (or “futility,” Rm 8:18–22) to reflect the condition of creation, the despair of a world without God. Jesus Christ, by virtue of His cross and resurrection, has redeemed us from this meaninglessness and vanity. Luth: “Solomon introduced courtly language; and as courtiers make it a practice to avoid the simple language of their fathers, especially in writing, so Solomon does also, to avoid giving the impression that he speaks as the common people do. He departs from the simplicity not only of his father but also of Moses” (AE 15:13). (TLSB)

The original idea behind the term “meaningless” is “breath.” This idea becomes very vivid on a cold day, when we see our breath, only to see it quickly vanish. St. James captured this thought when he wrote “What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (James 4:14). Because it is so fleeting and unstable, life seems to be vain, frustrating, without purpose, empty – in a word, “meaningless.” (PBC)

How accurately this describes life on earth! Beneath all the hustle and bustle, the tinsel and glitter, lurks that terrible sense of emptiness. But it was not that way in Eden, before man fell into sin. It is part of God’s judgment upon our sinful world. “The creation was subjected to frustration,” declared the Apostle Paul, “not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it” that is God Himself (Romans 8:20). It is interesting to note that the name Adam and Eve gave their second son, Abel, is the Hebrew word for “Meaningless.” Perhaps this was their commentary on life after the Fall. (PBC)

It was a season when the fortunes of Israel stood at low ebb; men in Israel were discouraged and disappointed; faith burned with a dim light. One reason for this spiritual and physical depression was the fact that men had expected too much from purely earthly values. If a man assesses the worth of earthly things rightly he will not expect too much of them, and consequently when they fail him, he will not be unduly disappointed. (Leupold)

*all is vanity*. See v. 8; whatever man undertakes apart from God. (CSB)

Everything that is looked to for meaning in life, including wealth, pleasure, and philanthropy. (TLSB)

**1:3–11** In this section the author elaborates his theme that human effort appears to be without benefit or purpose. (CSB)

Excursus indicating that human effort appears to be without benefit or purpose and demonstrates the restless cycling of human history and creation. Apart from the Lord, life is a fleeting vapor, yet by the power of God’s Word, creation continues in its cyclical rhythm and souls are saved for His eternal kingdom. Ephraim Syrus: “The righteousness of man is as nothing accounted. The work of men, what is it? His labor is altogether vanity. Of You, O Lord, of Your grace it is that in our nature we should become good. Of You is righteousness, that we from men should become righteous. Of You is the mercy and favor, that we from the dust should become Your image” (NPNF 2 13:331–32). (TLSB)

**1:3** Jesus expands on this question in Mk 8:36–38. (CSB)

*what does man gain* – Means solid and permanent good. (CB)

Verse 3 could be formulated as follows: “If a man thus busies himself with earthly values alone, what he has left in the end is practically nothing. (Leupold)

*at which he toils* – In spite of modern technology and machines, work is still hard and discouraging. Ever since the Fall, human labor is under God’s curse. (PBC)

Hbr *‘amal*; toil is cyclical and dissatisfying. Generation after generation rises and falls in this broken world. We must not forget the simple pleasures of life (cf 2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:7–10) that come from the gracious hand of our heavenly Father and are to be accepted gratefully (TLSB)

Genesis 3:17-19, “<sup>17</sup>To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. <sup>18</sup>It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. <sup>19</sup>By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

*under the sun*. Another key expression (used 29 times), which refers to this present world and the limits of what it offers. “Under heaven,” though it occurs less frequently (v. 13; 2:3; 3:1), is used synonymously. (CSB)

I.e., on earth. The fleeting sense of this world contrasts with the permanence of heaven. (TLSB)

**1:4** *generation goes...comes* – Each generation grows up, labors, grows old and then returns to the ground. To use Shakespeare’s expression “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.” (PBC)

*earth remains forever*. By contrast, man’s life is fleeting. (CSB)

When creation is compared with the vanity of life, it seems eternal and unchangeable, though all things in the world are changeable. Only almighty God is eternal and unchanging. (TLSB)

What irony! In the beginning God created man to rule over all the earth (Genesis 1:26). Yet it is the earth, not man, which remains. Man, created to be the ruler, is swallowed up by earth, the subject. The term “forever” does not mean the earth will never come to end. Although, “forever” can refer to eternity, here it signifies a long and indefinite time. Finally God will destroy the present form of this earth and create “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1). (PBC)

**1:5** *sun rises...goes down* – God’s Word created these things out of nothing (Gn 1:14–19), and His first Word of creation still sustains them. (TLSB)

This is not meant to be a scientific statement. It merely reflects our earthbound point of view, in which the sun appears to move across the sky. Even the sun is caught up in the tedium of having to labor day after day! (PBC)

The great novelist Ernest Hemingway went to this verse of Ecclesiastes for the title of one of his books, “The Sun Also Rises.” Like most modern literature, this first novel of Hemingway depicts heroes and heroines who are disillusioned and wearied with life. (PBC)

**1:6** *wind blows...returning* – The wind is constantly moving, moving. And for what? It all seems so meaningless. (PBC)

Ever shifting, the wind and vanity are repeatedly compared. (TLSB)

Only south and north are mentioned, but the intermediate points of the compass are plainly included. And the end of the matter is: the wind is always turning back to the circuits or rounds that have been planned for it. The only constant thing about the wind is it changing. This idle round of movement is typical of all earthly existence and shows the world, animate as well as inanimate, to be subject to the same law of fluctuation. (Leupold)

**1:7** *all streams run to the sea...flow again* – The ancient world spoke of four elements which made up nature: earth, air, fire and water. In pointing to the earth, wind and sun, Solomon alludes to the first three. Now he turns to the fourth, water. In this verse the king pictures the water cycle. But again, he is not attempting to speak in scientific terms. He is only giving another example to show that everything under the sun is meaningless. (PBC)

Continual movement of the water cycle: evaporation, condensation, precipitation. Dry stream beds (wadis) in Israel become uncontrollable torrents during heavy rain. (TLSB)

**1:8** *All things*. Everything mentioned in vv. 4–7). (CSB)

According to Solomon, everything is so tiresome that one can't even describe it. What a contrast this verse makes with John's words concerning Jesus: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have enough room for the books that would be written"! (John 21:25) This is the exclamation of man whose soul has found rest in Christ and His promise, "Come to me, all you are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). In Christ everything is new and fresh beyond description. (PBC)

But Solomon is not talking about that. He is talking about the person who is living without God. This individual is constantly looking and listening, but never satisfied. New styles of dress continually appear, only to be discarded for a different look. The popular music charts are constantly fluctuating, as people want and new sound. Why? Because the old so quickly becomes wearisome. (PBC)

*eye is not satisfied...nor ear filled* – Eye and ear covet new and tantalizing things. The things mentioned in vv 4–7 seem never ending. Although we are to be grateful for God's gifts, we can even grow weary of His fatherly kindness toward us. (TLSB)

**1:9-11** Luther: "This passage creates very great difficulties for the sophists, because they read in Sacred Scripture that many new things have been done. For example, the nativity of Christ is something new, and it is a new thing that His mother was a virgin. Again (Is. 65:17): 'I create new heavens and a new earth'; also (Rev. 21:5): 'I make all things new'; and again (Num. 16:30): 'The Lord creates something new on the earth.' These passages caused them to perpetrate enormous kinds of nonsense as they sought to harmonize what Solomon says here with what these passages say. But this happened because of an ignorance of Solomon's way of speaking, because they did not pay attention to what he means when he says *under the sun*. For if you take this to refer to the things and works of God themselves, it is not true; for God is constantly doing new things. But it is we who do nothing new, because the same old Adam is present in all of us" (AE 15:20–21). (TLSB)

**1:9** *what has been is what will be* – The desperate state of human restlessness does not change from one generation to the next. (PBC)

*nothing new under the sun* – Generations, winds, waters, and even heavenly bodies simply repeat their circuits. We keep searching for something new with meaning and purpose, but life has meaning only through the redemption in Jesus Christ. In D: “God being perfect becomes perfect man, and brings to perfection the newest of all new things, the only new thing under the Sun, through which the boundless might of God is manifested. For what greater thing is there, than that God should become Man?” (NPNF 2 9:45). (TLSB)

**1:10** *this is new*. Many things seem to be new simply because the past is easily and quickly forgotten. The old ways (CSB)

The old falls and reappears as something new to a new generation. In contrast, in Christ we become a new creation (2Co 5:17). (TLSB)

The explanation is, therefore, that the thing which is claimed to be new, indeed appeared on the scene before, only it was long ago in a previous generation. (Leupold)

**1:11** *no remembrance of former things* – Famous names or achievements may be discussed by new generations. Many find satisfaction in this. Yet many who were great in their age are no longer remembered. (TLSB)

Certainly people are remembered. But they are not remembered as they should be or as they would like to be. One generation after another commits the same sins of greed and hatred and lust. Although history records many examples of God’s judgments upon nations and individuals, we do not remember what happened to others and apply it to ourselves. (PBC)

And even if the names and deeds of certain individuals might be passed on, this thought affords no comfort. To quote from Shakespeare again, “The evil that men do lives after them. The good if oft interred with their bones.” (PBC)

Ancient civilizations built monuments to immortalize their outstanding leaders. Who today remembers them as they hoped to be remembered? Who really care about the ancient Romans or Greeks or Egyptians? Who in the future generations will appreciate the accomplishments of our age? Much less, who is going to care about the struggles and achievement that mean so much to you and me? (PBC)

So we see that future generations are of no help to us. They will be caught up in the unbreakable cycle of this meaningless existence, just as we are. (PBC)

**1:1–11** Our lives, no matter how well lived, will not win favor in God’s sight on the Last Day. Life is fleeting and has no meaning apart from God’s love in Christ Jesus. Faith worked in us by the power of the Gospel brings meaning to life and the certainty of forgiveness, life, and salvation. • Lord God, our heavenly Father, through Your Holy Spirit, You have enlightened the hearts of all believers by the Gospel of Your beloved Son. Through that same Spirit, grant us a right understanding that we might always rejoice in His salvation, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (TLSB)

*The Vanity of Wisdom*

**12 I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 14 I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. 15 What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. 16 I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” 17 And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. 18 For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.**

**1:12–18** Having set forth his theme that all human striving seems futile (see especially vv. 3, 11, which frame the section), the Teacher shows that both human endeavor (vv. 12–15; cf. 2:1–11) and the pursuit of human wisdom (vv. 16–18; cf. 2:12–17) are futile and meaningless. (CSB)

**1:12-13** Luther: “Let us learn, therefore, to submit ourselves to the counsels of God and to refrain from the cares and thoughts that God has not commanded. There is nothing safer or more acceptable to God than if we refrain from our own counsels and rely on His Word. There we shall find sufficient guidance about what we ought to do. His commands to us are faith, love, and bearing the cross. With these things, I say, we can happily occupy ourselves. Let us deal with everything else as it comes into our hands, leaving to Him the concern about its outcome” (AE 15:25). (TLSB)

**1:12 I.** The author shifts to the first person, returning to the third person only in the conclusion (12:9–14). (CSB)

The author now speaks personally about his experiences and study. (TLSB)

**1:13 wisdom** – By philosophic inquiry, a sense in which the word wisdom is often used in this book. (CB)

*unhappy business* – Wearisome and unsatisfying toil. The reference is to “all the works that are done under the sun” by men. (CB)

Politics and human affairs are complex and become a burden upon body and soul. The Preacher’s exploration of wisdom was vigorous and constant as he gained insight into philosophy, mathematics, trade, merchandise, mechanics, history, kingdoms, law, etc. (TLSB)

*God.* The only Hebrew word the writer uses for God is *Elohim* (used almost 30 times), which emphasizes his absolute sovereignty. He does not use the covenant name, *Yahweh* (translated “LORD.”) (CSB)

*given to the children of man* – Literally means “sons of man,” that is, the sons of Adam. Again our thoughts are drawn back to the early history of mankind and to everything it means to be a descendant of the first man and woman. We are conceived and born in sin, as Solomon’s father David declared in Psalm 51. Mankind struggles under the curse of sin. All this is part of the “heavy burden” to which God has subjected fallen creation. (PBC)

**1:14** *striving after the wind*. A graphic illustration of futility and meaninglessness. These words are used nine times in the first half of the discourse (here; v. 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9; see also 5:16). (CSB)

Wind can be used (e.g., in sailing ships), but never captured. People cannot master the world, lay bare its foundational secrets, or break the bonds of sin and death (cf Jb 38–39). Life apart from the Lord is chasing after something that cannot be captured (cf Jn 16:33). (TLSB)

The old KJV translates this expression “vexation of spirit.” Since the Hebrew word for wind and spirit is the same, either might fit the tone of Ecclesiastes. Yet the idiom “chasing the wind” seems to give is the better picture. In and of themselves, all human endeavors are but futile attempts to grab hold of the wind. You clench it in your fist and what do you have? A handful of nothing! No matter how much you see and learn, that’s what you end up with. (PBC)

Along with Solomon and a few others, the Greek philosopher Socrates (460-399 B.C.) stands as one of history’s greatest thinkers. His search for wisdom led to a conclusion not unlike Solomon’s: “I know nothing except the fact of my ignorance.” (PBC)

Hosea 12:1, “Ephraim feeds on the wind; he pursues the east wind all day and multiplies lies and violence. He makes a treaty with Assyria and sends olive oil to Egypt.”

**1:15** Because of the unalterableness of events, human effort is meaningless and hopeless. We should therefore learn to happily accept things the way they are and to accept our divinely appointed lot in life, as the Teacher later counsels. (CSB)

We do not know God’s hidden will, so we must trust in His mercy and clearly see His will revealed in the Word. (TLSB)

*crooked* – In the course of human affairs. (CB)

*counted* – Supplied so as to be counted among the things that are. The vanity of life, growing out of what is crooked and wanting in human affairs, is without remedy. (CB)

You can’t count what isn’t even there. (PBC)

**1:16** *all who were over Jerusalem before me*. † See 2:7, 9. Although Jerusalem did not become the Israelite capital until David’s time, this expression does not necessarily exclude Solomon as the Teacher. The reference could include kings prior to David, such as Melchizedek (Ge 14:18), Adoni-Zedek (Jos 10:1) and Abdi-Khepa (mentioned in the Amarna letters from Egypt; see chart on “Ancient Texts Relating to the OT”). (CSB)

David and the Jebusite kings prior to David. Jerusalem became the Israelite capital during David’s time. (TLSB)

**1:17-18** Wisdom speaks of prudent people, madness and folly of foolish, self-aggrandizing people. See p 1016. Human wisdom alone creates madness and folly, bringing injustice and sorrow. But godly wisdom reveals the imperfection and vanity of life “under the sun.” (TLSB)

**1:17** *applied my heart to know wisdom* – To understand their nature and effects. (CB)



Hbr *chokmah*, Wisdom naturally unveils the injustice and corruption of human kind. To see and understand such corruption due to sin is difficult apart from seeing the world in light of Holy Scripture. (TLSB)

See notes from pp. 775-778 of TLSB below:

**FROM WHERE, THEN, DOES WISDOM** come?... God understands the way to it, and He knows its place.... And He said to man, “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.” (Jb 28:20, 23, 28) (TLSB)

With these poetic lines, Job reaches an important conclusion in his debate with three friends. They have come to mourn with him because of his deep suffering and to explain to him why things are the way they are. Job disagrees with them and, in the passage above, concludes that only God understands how things really work in life, death, and suffering. Their debate has to do with wisdom, which, as Job explains, is difficult to find and understand. The issues are described in poetry, which also can be difficult to understand. (TLSB)

This essay will explore unique features of the Books of Wisdom and Poetry, which stand together in the Old Testament because of their forms, themes, and authorship. It will help you understand these unique and challenging passages of God’s Word and their important message. (TLSB)

### **The Ways of the Creator**

The biblical term *wisdom* (Hbr *chokmah*) occurs most often in Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes (c three-fifths of all usages). Whereas numerous psalms recount the history of early Israel and draw wise observations from that history, the main Books of Wisdom and Poetry never talk about the earliest history of Israel (e.g., Abraham, Jacob, and Moses are never mentioned in Job, Proverbs, or Ecclesiastes). These Books of Wisdom and Poetry mention some of Israel’s important rulers (e.g., Proverbs mentions David, Solomon, and Hezekiah), but their main focus has to do with God’s orderly creation and living in harmony with that order. (TLSB)

Hebrew wisdom was not theoretical or speculative but practical and based on God’s ways observed in creation. However, biblical wisdom is not simply a natural knowledge of God and His ways. Nor is it derived from human reason. As Jb 28 shows, wisdom is something God understands (v 23). He has declared it and spoken it (vv 27–28). Wisdom could not be “the fear of the Lord” (v 28) unless the Lord made Himself known. Biblical wisdom is a special revelation from God, as surely as the Ten Commandments or the sermons of the prophets. Ultimately, it is knowledge leading to repentance and faith in the Lord. (TLSB)

Wisdom is the art of life, living the way God intended. As a result, biblical wisdom focuses on ethics and spiritual conduct—the way of righteousness. This wise way of life comes from a personal God who is righteous and holy; wisdom is one of His attributes. (When you read the mundane details about life in Proverbs, see in them the intimacy of the Creator’s care for His creation.) Wisdom is distinct from philosophy (as recorded by the Greeks), though these disciplines share a common interest in created order, an interest that ultimately developed into what we call science. (TLSB)

### **Common Themes in Biblical Wisdom**

The Books of Wisdom and Poetry display common themes in the following introductory and concluding passages: (TLSB)

There was a man ... whose name was Job ... who feared God and turned away from evil. (Jb 1:1)

The LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps 1:6)

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Pr 1:7)

Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. (Ec 12:13–14) (TLSB)

The themes of (1) fear toward God, (2) the difference between the righteous and the wicked, and (3) the Lord's role as judge appear repeatedly. Wisdom teaches that people may walk along one of two ways or paths: one leading to destruction, the other leading to life. (TLSB)

An exception among the Books of Wisdom and Poetry is the Song of Solomon, which celebrates the wonder of love that “is strong as death.... Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD” (8:6). Here is the only reference to the Lord in the Song, connecting the bond of marital love with His power. The Song of Solomon probably stands with the other Wisdom Books because of its poetic form and its authorship by Solomon the Wise. (TLSB)

### **Wise Men and Counselors**

The Books of Wisdom and Poetry likely had their start as wise sayings offered by judges and teachers in Israel. Their poetic form has its root in the oral culture of the ancient Near East (see “Biblical Poetry,” pp 777–78). Numerous biblical passages refer to wise men and counselors who guided the decision making for kings and communities (cf Ex 18:13–27; Ru 4:1–2; 1Ki 12:6–8; Jer 18:18; Ezk 7:26). Their wise sayings were collected for instructing the young (1Ki 4:29–34; Pr 25:1). For example, Pr 1–9 presents a series of educational speeches from a father to a son, or from a teacher to his student. Leaders in Israel expected their people to learn wisdom—in fact, the Lord commanded it. Children were expected to learn the texts of the Commandments (Dt 6:4–9), and citizens were expected to learn certain songs (Dt 31:19; 2Sm 1:17–18; Ps 60). Education in wisdom had personal, family, clan, and national importance. (TLSB)

Many teachings in Israelite wisdom overlap with wise sayings from other cultures. For example, Pr 22:17–24:22 is similar to the Egyptian “Wisdom of Amenemope,” which dates from before the time of Solomon. In part, such overlaps occurred because the problems of living are much the same everywhere, regardless of religion, culture, and history. Naturally, similar observations would arise. Yet Scripture also tells us that Solomon “collected” wise sayings. He probably did not limit his collecting to the sayings of Israelites (see chart below). Since wisdom was based on God's created order, all true wisdom naturally belonged to God and His people. (TLSB)

### **Conclusions about Wisdom**

The early Christian apologist Justin Martyr (c 100–c 165) reflected on the universal presence of God's wisdom as follows: (TLSB)

Whatever things were rightly said among all men, are the property of us Christians. For next to God, we worship and love the Word who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God, since also He became man for our sakes, that, becoming a partaker of our sufferings, He might also bring us healing. For all the [ancient] writers were able to see realities darkly through the sowing of the implanted word that was in them. (ANF 1:193) (TLSB)

Justin's attitudes reflect a long-standing approach to wisdom in ancient Israel, in Judaism, and among the first Christians. Since truth comes from God, whatever is true belongs to God's people. Yet biblical wisdom is different from that of other cultures and religions because it

emphasizes one God as the source of all knowledge and understanding; it focuses on right and wrong and is fulfilled in Christ, our righteousness. (TLSB)

Over time, biblical wisdom focused more and more on the Scriptures—God’s Word—where God’s ways are faithfully recorded (Ps 1; 119). Just as God’s creation is orderly and harmonious, so God’s Word is harmonious and orders our steps in the way of life. Biblical wisdom illustrates the faithful living found in the “legal” sections of the Books of Moses. Ultimately, wisdom embodied two things: Scripture as Wisdom (pursued by Judaism and Christianity) and Christ as Wisdom (pursued by Christianity as described in Colossians and John). The Lutheran hymn writer Erdmann Neumeister (1671–1756) expressed all this most beautifully: (TLSB)

I know my faith is founded  
On Jesus Christ, my God and Lord;  
And this my faith confessing,  
Unmoved I stand on His sure Word.  
Our reason cannot fathom  
The truth of God profound;  
Who trusts in human wisdom  
Relies on shifting ground.  
God’s Word is all-sufficient,  
It makes divinely sure,  
And trusting in its wisdom,  
My faith shall rest secure. (LSB 587:1)

For all the discoveries of science, it hasn’t brought man any closer to knowing what life is all about. So people turn from reason to un-reason, rushing headlong into the occult, or drugs, or alcohol, or Eastern mysticism. This, too is a “chasing after the wind.” (PBC)

**1:18** Humanistic wisdom—wisdom without God—leads to grief and sorrow. (CSB)

*much wisdom is much vexation...who increases knowledge...sorrow* – Luther: “Knowledge does not refer to speculative knowledge, but to a practical and experiential insight, a discretion in the performance of actions, what we call experience and practice in human affairs, as in the psalm (Ps. 119:66): ‘Teach me good judgment and knowledge.’ Wisdom, on the other hand, is the insight by which I know how the state ought to be established and administered; this is then modified by knowledge or experience, in accordance with things as they are at present and with circumstances, in the manner and pattern that the facts and the times warrant” (AE 15:28). (TLSB)

He learns how many and great are the evils of life, without find on earth any remedy for them. The mere knowledge of human character and life, however deep and full cannot make men blessed. It can only show the desperate malady for it. True happiness comes only from faith and communion with God. (CB)

There is, however, a wisdom that doesn’t lead to grief. Jesus spoke of it when He said, “The Queen of the South...came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one great than Solomon is here” (Matthew 12:42). For real, lasting wisdom we must turn to that One who is greater than Solomon. In Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). (PBC)

**1:12–18** Our minds cannot fathom God’s wisdom, which is hidden in Christ (cf Jas 3:13–18; 1Co 1:30). We know His mercy only through the wisdom revealed to us in Holy Scripture. • O God of all mercies, You have begun Your good work in us. Continue, we pray, to fill us with all dimensions of wisdom and knowledge. Grant that the devil would have no power over us, but that our hearts and minds might be directed to the blessed hope of the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. (TLSB)