

Kohelet Summary Sheets

The following pages aim to encapsulate the main points of each individual section of the book of Kohelet, organizing the important flow of ideas from one section to the next.

Underlying Assumption: Kohelet is usually understood as a book full of contradictions. We find very opposing views throughout the book. These difficulties can be resolved, however, by looking at the book not as a monologue but as a dialogue or discussion between varying views on life, opposing opinions, each presented as a unique personality, and as part of the life of King Solomon. (Meiri)

1) 1:1-11 - First Introduction

4 cycles involving (a) generations, (b) rivers, (c) wind, and (d) the sun. These represent 4 states of nature: Earth, Water, Air, Fire respectively. Metaphorically, these represent 4 aspects of the human being, and further represent the four main personalities in the dialogue of the book.

Earth	River	Sun	Wind
Body	Physical Life	Wisdom	Soul
עמל - Builder	נהנתן - Hedonist	חכם - Philosopher	ירא אלקים - God Fearer

The Problem: “The Endless Futile Cycle” - if life always returns to the starting point, what is the point of the journey?

2) 1:12-2:23 - Second Introduction

The 3 “contrasting” personalities are introduced:

- (a) עמל Creator, Builder one who wishes to **leave his mark on** the world.
- (b) חכם Philosopher, planner one who wishes to **understand** the world.
- (c) נהנתן Man of Joy / pleasure one who wishes to **enjoy** the world.

(The 4th is introduced later - the ירא אלקים – the God Fearing - the one who utilizes the world for a higher purpose, namely to serve God.)

Each parallels a specific aspect of Solomon’s life as King:

- Builder see I Kings 9:15-20
- Pleasure see I Kings 11:1-3
- Wisdom see I Kings 5:9-14, 10:1-13,23-25

In Solomon's vision in Givon (I Kings 3), God offered Solomon to fulfil any wish. Solomon asked to understand good and evil, reminiscent of Adam’s request to partake of the Tree of Knowledge. He is granted three aspects of life which define **worldliness** - *Wisdom, Honour, and Wealth*. But he is also told that all is meaningless without the Tree of Life, and that is conditional upon total adherence to the Will of God. Without the Tree of Life, “death” will destroy all other achievements in the world.

This is expressed in recurring frustration.

כְּמִקְרָה הַכָּסִיל גַּם אֲנִי יִקְרַנִּי ... וְשָׂנֵאתִי אֶת הַחַיִּים... כָּל עֲמָלִי שֶׁאֲנִי עֹמֵל תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַשׁ שֶׁאֲנִי חֹנֵן
לְאָדָם שֶׁיִּהְיֶה אַחֲרָי : (ב: טו-יח)

It is also a reflection of the primary theme of the book – namely to understand good and evil, and life and death, the two anchor themes of the Garden of Eden – עץ החיים and עץ הדעת. In much the same way as Adam, Solomon's mission to build the Temple was an effort to create a path back to the Tree of Life, the Torah. But he chose the path of the Tree of Knowledge instead.

3) 2:24-3:22 הנהנתן - The Hedonist

Starting Point: The world of nature is seen as perfect, created by God. Man's function in this world is to enjoy the pleasures which God has created for him. All of life is ruled by God. Man is powerless to change the world.

לכל זמן ועת לכל חפץ תחת השמים (ג:א)...
מה יתרון העושה באשר הוא עמל... את הכל עשה יפה בעתו... (ג:ט-ו)

Problem: The world God created may be beautiful, but the world man creates – society – is deeply flawed. It is a world in which evil and injustice flourish. But since man cannot change the world, he must enjoy what exists, and rely on God to punish the evil in the next world! (A perspective unique in Tanakh)

את הצדיק ואת הרשע ישפט האלהים כי עת לכל חפץ ועל כל המעשה שם...
ומותר האדם מן הבמה אין... (ג:טז-ט)

Man is likened to the animals who cannot effect change in the world but live only on instinct.

4) 4:1-16 העמל - The Builder

Response: In a world filled with the “tear of the oppressed” one cannot sit back and simply “enjoy life.” One cannot ‘enjoy’ the world and leave injustice for God to handle, for then life itself loses all meaning. In such a world it would be better not to be born at all!

וטוב משנייהם את אשר עָדוֹן לא היה אשר לא ראה את המעשה הרע אשר נעשה תחת השמש (ג:ד)

2 problems with human effort:

1. “For whom do I toil?”

- In ch. 2, the עמל felt he was toiling for himself alone. Here he wants to toil for someone else. “But after I die - what is left?” Perhaps he won't have a son, or a brother, or anyone to whom to leave it all?

2. “Why do I toil?”

- Jealousy! What good can come from something inherently negative?

Solution: Society

=> Toil for society - society lives forever.

=> Common goals for everyone in that society.

טובים השנים מן האחד... והחויט המשלש לא במהרה ינתק (ד:ט-ב)

Two are better than one; three are better than two... A society is better than an individual, and the King / leader of the society can take responsibility for the solution of the problems of injustice and evil in the world.

Failure: Experience proved the failure of this approach. Solomon himself tried and failed.

טוב ילד מסכן ורחם ממלך זקן וכסיל אשר לא ידע להזהר עוד (ד:ג)

The poor child who emerged from jail to take over and lead the path to justice (Jeroboam), for all his noise and promises of a better future, fared no better than the “old” king who could no longer take care of himself (Solomon or Rehoboam).

5) 4:17-5:11 - ירא האלקים - The God Fearer

Response:

- a) To וְלִבְךָ אֵל יִמְהַר לְהוֹצִיא דָבָר לְפָנַי הָאֱלֹקִים (ה: א) - Don't complain so much against God - נהנתן
 b) To עֲמַל - Don't promise so much - טוֹב אֲשֶׁר לֹא תִדְרֹךְ מִשְׁתַּדּוֹר וְלֹא תִשְׁלֹם (ד: ה) - עמל

Response to the עמל who claimed that the King was solely responsible for justice in the world, e.g. Solomon, Jeroboam: “Don't promise to achieve - who says you are capable? Who gave you the power to control the world?”

Meaning of Work:

Man is not exempt from working, from trying to develop and advance this world, but not as עמל = toil that only has value if it is successful, but rather as עבודה = work and service which has intrinsic value!

מְלָךְ לְשֹׁדָה נֶעְבֵּד (ח) ... מִתּוֹקָה שְׁנֵית הָעֶבֶד... (יא)

Response to the נהנתן: Man must work, he must strive to achieve; he cannot throw responsibility on to the “shoulders” of God and walk away to enjoy this world.

Response to the עמל: Whether one sees results from his actions or not is irrelevant. Ultimately one must work with faith that he will succeed, with God's help. The very process of trying is mankind's responsibility. Yet he is not solely responsible for the world; God is.

Role of Temple Sacrifices:

Ultimately, the world is controlled through a hierarchy - man's efforts together with God's Providence.

אִם-עֲשֶׂק רָשׁ וְגִזַּל מִשְׁפָּט וְצָדֵק תִּרְאֶה בְּמִדְיָנָה אֶל-תִּתְמָה עַל-הַחֹפֶץ כִּי גִבָּה מַעַל גִּבָּה שְׁמֵר (ה: ו)

This relationship is best depicted by what happens inside the Temple. The central focus is not man's actions (the sacrifices) but rather God's Voice. One comes to the Temple bringing sacrifices, but these remain “outside”. They are not the central element: וְקָרֹב לְשִׁמְעַ מִתַּת הַכְּסִילִים - *It is better to listen than to bring the sacrifices of fools.*

Summary: The basic tenant of the God Fearer can be summed up in the key phrase **גבה מעל גבה שמר**, “Higher than high”, a pictorial description of the relationship between the two “palaces”, the palace of the King of Israel, over which towered the palace of the King of Kings. Man is required to work (“עבודה”) in this world, to build, and try to perfect society, to bring justice, and in that context to bring sacrifices to the Temple. But God is above him, guiding his efforts, whether he sees the success or not. The primary agenda, then, is to heed the word of God:

שְׁמֵר רְגְלְךָ בְּאֲשֶׁר תִּלְדֶּה אֶל-בַּיִת הָאֱלֹהִים
 וְקָרֹב לְשִׁמְעַ מִתַּת הַכְּסִילִים זָבַח (ד: ז)

6) 5:12-6:12 - העמל - The Builder

The third and final time we find the עמל:

- (a) 5:12-19 Final attempt to find meaning.
- (b) 6:1-12 Failure, and despair.

(a) 5:12-19 “One Last Try”

The Problem (5:12-16): The loss of all wealth in one's life, the futility of toiling and having nothing to show for it, nothing to give over to the next generation:

וְאָבָד הָעֵשֶׂר הַהוּא בְּעֵנָן רַע וְהוֹלִיד בּוֹ וְאִין בְּיָדוֹ מְאוּמָה (ה: יג)

In describing man ending up exactly where he started – going from the grave (=womb) to the grave – with nothing to show for the journey – we repeat the futile ‘cycle’ of nature which the book began!

כְּאִשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִבֶּטֶן אִמּוֹ עָרוֹם יָשׁוּב לְלֶקֶת כְּשֶׁבָא וּמְאוּמָה לֹא יֵשֵׂא בְּעַמְלֹו שְׂיֵלֵךְ בְּיָדוֹ : (יד)
וְגַם־זֶה רָעָה חוֹלָה כָּל־עֲמֵת שֶׁבָא בּוֹ יֵלֵךְ וּמְהֵרָתָיו לֹו שְׂיַעֲמֹל לְרוּחַ : (טו)

Yet we also see a maturing process in the עמל. If we look at the question of inheritance:

- 2:18-20 No purpose – **egocentric** – why should I work for somebody else?
- 4:8 No heir – **caring** – wants to work for others, but for whom?
- 5:12-16 Nothing left – **desperate** – after a lifetime of toil – nothing to show...

Conclusion (17-19): If all attempts to toil for the future fail to provide meaning, then enjoy the fruits of that toil **now**, before death. Live for the moment.

טוֹב אֲשֶׁר יָפָה לֶאֱכֹל וְלִשְׂתוֹת וְלִרְאוֹת טוֹבָה בְּכָל עֲמָלוֹ... מִתַּת אֲלֵהִים הִיא...

(b) 6:1-12 Rejection, Despair

What happens if a person cannot even enjoy the fruits of his labour here in this world? What about the person who loses everything, who doesn't even have a “burial plot”?! The “stillborn” is better off, for at least he has a grave (the womb)!

וְלֹא יֵשְׁלִיטֵנוּ הָאֱלֹקִים לְאָכֵל מִמֶּנּוּ... טוֹב מִמֶּנּוּ הַנֶּפֶל (ו: א-א)

It is better not to be born than to live life as a meaningless cycle that achieves nothing.

Kohelet extrapolates this predicament to be that of every person because nobody is ever really “satisfied” from physical pleasures. The more one achieves, the greater the appetite for more.¹

כָּל עֲמַל הָאָדָם לְפִיּהוּ וְגַם הַנֶּפֶשׁ לֹא תִמְלָא (ו: ו)

But since “not to be born” is not a solution to the meaning of life the עמל has failed in his task.

¹ Chazal famously countered this philosophy with the statement in Ethics of our Fathers: “Who is wealthy? One who is satisfied with their (allotted) portion... (אבות ד: א)

The “cycle” in the Introduction:

The עמל’s final words, he repeats the same examples of the cycles of nature as indicators of the futility of life, the introduction of the book.

Earth – 5:15, 6:6, Wind - 5:15, Sun - 6:4, and Water 6:7.

קַל עֲמַת שָׂבָא כּוֹ יֵלֵךְ... אֶל מְקוֹם אֶחָד הַכֹּל הוֹלֵךְ	ה: טו, ו: ו	הָאָרֶץ
וּמָה יִתְרוֹן לוֹ שֶׁיַּעֲמַל לְרוּחַ	ה: טו	הָרוּחַ
כִּי בַהֶבֶל בָּא וּבַחֲשָׁךְ יֵלֵךְ וּבַחֲשָׁךְ שָׁמוּ יִכְסֶה... גַּם שָׁמֶשׁ לֹא רָאָה	ד: ו	הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ
כֹּל עֲמַל הָאָדָם לְפִיָּהוּ וְגַם הַנֶּפֶשׁ לֹא תִמְלֵא	ז: ו	הַמִּים

In addition, the עמל himself has come full circle, ending with the same question with which he started: What is the meaning of the needless toil in the world? compare 6:12 with 2:3.

ב: ג	ו: יב
תִּרְתִּי בְלִבִּי לְמַשׁוֹךְ בִּינִי אֶת־בְּשָׂרִי וְלִבִּי נִהְגַּ בַּחֲקָמָה וְלֹאֲחִזוּ בְּסִכְלוֹת עַד אֲשֶׁר־אֶרְאֶה אִיזָה טוֹב לִבְנֵי הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּ תַחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם מִסִּפְּרֵי יְמֵי חַיֵּיהֶם :	כִּי מִיִּיּוֹדֵעַ מִה־טוֹב לָאָדָם בַּחַיִּים מִסִּפְּרֵי יְמֵי חַיָּיו הַבָּלוּ וְיַעֲשֶׂם כִּצֶּל אֲשֶׁר מִיִּיגִיד לָאָדָם מִה־יִהְיֶה אַחֲרָיו תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם :

Clearly, then, in both form and content, the עמל has achieved nothing in his quest – and essentially has ‘written himself out of the remainder of the script.’