

Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of Life in the Ancient World

In this book, Arthur Keefer offers a timely assessment of Ecclesiastes and what it has to do with the meaning of life. Drawing on recent psychological research, he argues that this Hebrew Bible text associates the meaning of life with various types of suffering in life. Keefer here situates Ecclesiastes within its ancient intellectual world. Offering an analysis of contemporary texts from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece, he demonstrates that concerns about meaning and suffering were widespread in the greater Mediterranean world. Ecclesiastes, however, handled the matters of suffering and meaning in an unprecedented way and to an unprecedented degree. With its rigorous commitment to precise definitions of life's meaning, Keefer's book provides a comprehensive set of definitions for "the meaning of life" as well as a conclusive point of reference for interpreters of Ecclesiastes. It also opens avenues for the interdisciplinary interpretation of texts from the ancient world.

ARTHUR JAN KEEFER is a schoolmaster and chaplain at Eton College. He has published numerous articles and is the author of *Proverbs 1–9 as an Introduction to the Book of Proverbs* (LHBOTS, 2020) and *The Book of Proverbs and Virtue Ethics: Integrating the Biblical and Philosophical Traditions* (Cambridge University Press, 2021). He also co-edited *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Wisdom Literature* (forthcoming).

Cambridge University Press
978-1-009-10025-0 — Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of Life in the Ancient World
Arthur Keefer
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Cambridge University Press
978-1-009-10025-0 — Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of Life in the Ancient World
Arthur Keefer
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of Life in the Ancient World

ARTHUR JAN KEEFER
Eton College



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-009-10025-0 — Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of Life in the Ancient World
Arthur Keefer
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025,
India
103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009100250

DOI: 10.1017/9781009110082

© Cambridge University Press 2022

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2022

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-009-10025-0 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-009-10025-0 — Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of Life in the Ancient World
Arthur Keefer
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

For Emem

Cambridge University Press
978-1-009-10025-0 — Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of Life in the Ancient World
Arthur Keefer
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xiii
1 Introduction	I
2 Suffering and Meaning in Egyptian Literature	26
3 Suffering and Meaning in Mesopotamian Literature	57
4 Suffering and Meaning in Greek Literature	78
5 Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of Life	89
6 Ecclesiastes, Suffering and Joy	121
7 In Context: Suffering, Meaning and Ecclesiastes in the Ancient World and Old Testament	169
<i>Bibliography</i>	217
<i>Index of Sources</i>	229
<i>Index of Authors and Topics</i>	241

Cambridge University Press
978-1-009-10025-0 — Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of Life in the Ancient World
Arthur Keefer
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Preface

In Hawarden, Wales, there is a small plot of land with a rather large library that belonged to William Gladstone (1809–1898). As the eldest and one of the longest serving Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom, a Chancellor of the Exchequer, an advocate of equal opportunity known as “The People’s William,” a committed Protestant Christian, a husband of fifty-nine years and father of eight children, I suspect that Gladstone considered his life a meaningful one. His contemporaries, not unaware of the man’s faults, nevertheless admired him and did so as colleagues, as distant observers and even as ideological rivals. What neither they nor he would have said, to my knowledge, though, is that Gladstone lived “a meaningful life,” that he “evaded meaninglessness” or wrestled with “the meaning of it all.” That language is quite contemporary, a feature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and now as common as Gladstone was accomplished.

Reference to life’s meaning is not only common to modern thought and conversation but also prevalent within interpretations of Ecclesiastes. Qohelet has become a sort of harbinger of modernity, existentialism and whatever else people associate with the exploration of one’s meaningful livelihood. It doesn’t help that he regularly comments on how difficult life has been amidst apparent meaninglessness: “in much toil is much vexation . . . I saw all that I had achieved and hated life. . . . Thus everything is *hebel* [‘meaningless’ according to the NIV].” The reading of such statements comes naturally: Qohelet has embarked upon the search for meaning and come up empty-handed. But as effortless as such interpretations may be, very little consideration has been given to what we, as interpreters, mean by “meaning” and thus what exactly Qohelet could

have said about it. Definitions of life's meaning are often assumed, or one-sided, sometimes supposedly intuitive. By this I mean no indictment against what many hard-working exegetes have written about one of the most abstruse texts of the Bible. Nor is the situation surprising. For psychologists have only recently established categories for the meaning of life, and without such categories, we cannot very well understand the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes or propose that Qohelet had a keen interest in it or that he deemed life meaningful or meaningless after all.

In an attempt to clear up these matters, I went to Gladstone's Library in 2016 for a short period of residential research and began a small article that appeared in a 2019 issue of *Harvard Theological Review*.¹ It attempted to offer systematic definition to a topic so easily associated with Ecclesiastes – the meaning of life – and soon warranted a longer treatment. An exhaustive account of the various forms of life's meaning within Ecclesiastes was needed, but I also came to realize that meaning for Qohelet has a great deal to do with life's hardship, none of which could be truly appreciated without a sense for where the book stood within its ancient world. The meaning of life, human suffering and the broad intellectual context in which those themes appear comprise the book before you.

Monographs on Ecclesiastes tend to become virtual commentaries on the text, and while this one may be no exception, I have tried to leave detailed philological arguments in the footnotes and keep the wider, clearer concerns in the main body of prose. One question, however, that does not appear in this study is that of how Ecclesiastes informs the meaning of one's life today. For some readers this may be the most important question and hence their greatest disappointment with what follows, so let me say a word here. How Ecclesiastes addresses the meaning of one's own life depends on how one views biblical authority in general, and the normativity of Ecclesiastes in particular, not least in how we interpret its epilogue (12:9–14). For the way in which Ecclesiastes informs our own experience of life's meaning depends upon how authoritative and coherent we consider the book to be. What seems clear, among other things, is that the work aims to provoke thought, and readers with any personal interest in life's meaning will want to attend to the type of meaning it showcases (namely, coherence), Qohelet's charge that humans succumb to delusion or a misapprehension of how life operates, and the

¹ Arthur Jan Keefer, "The Meaning of Life in the Book of Ecclesiastes: Coherence, Purpose and Significance from a Psychological Perspective," *HTR* 112 (2019): 447–466.

Preface

xi

book's metaphysical and theological presuppositions, on which its views are grounded. As to how authoritative or applicable one wishes to take these points of view, that I leave to the reader, with the hope that it will help those of various interests, whether it be academic, personal, ecclesial or otherwise.

A word of thanks goes to the hospitable staff at Gladstone's Library and the generous Residential Study Scholarship provided by them. I am also greatly appreciative of the man himself, William Gladstone, who, in his older age, made it clear that his library should be made available to the public. His bust is one of twenty-five in a frequented room at Eton College, an institution that demands much from its teachers but supports their professional activities to whatever extent possible. My research is no exception. As mentioned, *Harvard Theological Review* gave first voice to the ideas presented here and that article, aided greatly by the eye of Dr. Michael Rhodes, forms the backbone of Chapter 5. The Latimer Trust provided a research grant that helped the article become a book, a process finally made possible thanks to the enthusiasm of editor Beatrice Rehl, the exceptional diligence and good humor of copy-editor Beth Morel, and the shrewd comments of the manuscript's reviewers.

I did not write this book because my life lacks meaning; it does not and, in my judgment, never has. But there is one person who has shown me ways of living a meaningful life that were, to me, unfamiliar, and this work is dedicated to her: my wife, Emem Ukor Keefer.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-009-10025-0 — Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of Life in the Ancient World
Arthur Keefer
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Abbreviations

AAeg	<i>Analecta Aegyptiaca</i>
ABs	Anchor Bible
AEL	Miriam Lichtheim, <i>Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings</i> . 3 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973–1980.
AIL	Ancient Israel and Its Literature
AJSL	<i>The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures</i>
AnBib	Analecta biblica
ANET	James B. Pritchard, <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950.
AnSt	<i>Anatolian Studies</i>
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
ATD	Das Alte Testament Deutsch
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BBRSup	Supplements to the <i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford: Clarendon, 1959.
BEATAJ	Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentum

BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium
BHS	<i>Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> , ed. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph. 5th edition. Stuttgart, 1997.
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament
BM	British Museum
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
BTB	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BWL	W. G. Lambert, <i>Babylonian Wisdom Literature</i> . Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996.
BZAW	Beihefte zur <i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
CAD	<i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> . Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1956–.
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBR	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
CC	Continental Commentaries
COS	<i>The Context of Scripture</i> . Edited by W. W. Hallo. 3 vols. Leiden, 2003.
CTR	<i>Criswell Theological Review</i>
DL	Diogenes Laërtius, <i>Lives of Eminent Philosophers</i> , trans. R. D. Hicks. Loeb Classical Library. 2 vols. Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1931 and 1972.
EA	Amarna Letters
ESV	English Standard Version
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
FAT	Forschung zum Alten Testament
GKC	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> , edited and enlarged by E. Kautzsch, trans. A. E. Cowley. 2nd edition. Oxford: Clarendon, 1910; repr. with corrections, 1966.
HAR	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
HS	<i>Hebrew Studies</i>
HTKAT	Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Altes Testament
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
IBHS	Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, <i>Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax</i> . Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JANES	<i>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JEA	<i>The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i>

List of Abbreviations

xv

JM	Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, <i>A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew</i> . 2nd edition. Subsidia Biblica 27. Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2011
JNSL	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
JSJ	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>
JSJPHRP	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period</i>
JSJSup	Supplements to the <i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Supplements to the <i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSS	<i>Journal for Semitic Studies</i>
KJV	King James Version
LÄ	<i>Lexikon der Ägyptologie</i> , ed. W. Helck, E. Otto and W. Westendorf. Wiesbaden, 1972.
LHBOTS	The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LNTS	The Library of New Testament Studies
LTP	<i>Laval théologique et philosophique</i>
LXX	Greek Septuagint: from <i>Septuaginta</i> , ed. A. Rahlfs. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006.
MS(S)	manuscript(s)
MT	Masoretic Text: generally from <i>BHS</i> 1997.
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEchtB	Neue Echter Bibel
NICOT	The New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> , ed. William A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OB	Old Babylonian Version
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
obv	obverse
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta
OT	Old Testament
OTE	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
OtSt	<i>Oudtestamentische Studiën</i>
RelS	<i>Religious Studies</i>

RSR	<i>Recherches de Science Religieuse</i>
rto	recto(s)
SAAB	<i>State Archives of Assyria Bulletin</i>
SBJT	<i>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLWAW	Society of Biblical Literature Writings from the Ancient World
SDBH	<i>Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew</i>
SJOT	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> , ed. G. J. Botterweck et al., trans. D. E. Green et al., 15 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2015.
ThLZ	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
TLOT	<i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> , ed. E. Jenni and C. Westermann, trans. M. E. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997.
TS	<i>Theological Studies</i>
TWOT	Bruce K. Waltke, R. Laird Harris and Gleason Archer, <i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i> . Chicago: Moody, 1980.
TynBul	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
V	Vulgate
VetE	<i>Verbum et Ecclesia</i>
vso	verso(s)
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Bible Commentary
ZÄS	<i>Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZDPV	<i>Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i>