I have been talking about the distinctive views of the book of Ecclesiastes, one of the real
gems of the Hebrew Bible, a book that refuses to accept easy answers or blithe truisms
about life, but faces reality head on. No matter what we do or how we try to explain it
away, life is short. Very very short. The author of course had no conception of what we
know now about time in relation to lifespan. What would he say if he knew that the world
(what we would call the universe — something about which also he had no knowledge) was
not a few thousand years old but 13.8 billion?

My guess is that he would say the same thing he already does, but possibly with a few more
explanation points. Given how incredibly brief our life is, even if we live to “old” age —
what’s the point of it? Is there a point? I think there is. And I find not just value but also
hope in his reflections. Here is the final bit of what I say about it in my book The Bible: A
Historical and Literary Introduction, (starting right before where I left off yesterday).

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The ultimate problem is that no matter how much wisdom you gain, or how many
possessions you accumulate, or how many pleasures you enjoy – in the end, you die, and
then you are no different from a miserable, impoverished fool: “the same fate befalls all...
for there is no enduring remembrance of the wise of or fools, seeing that in the days to come
all will have been long forgotten” (2:14, 16).

Moreover, Qoheleth finds no comfort in the traditional teachings of positive wisdom. In no
small measure this is because in his experience, they simply are not true: “In my vain life I
have seen everything; there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and
there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing” (7:15; see also 8:14);
“Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor
bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance
happen to them all” (9:11-12).

And one should not think that ...

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What Is The Meaning of Life? The Book of Ecclesiastes