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## DQs for Ecclesiastes

Here is a reprint of the short [lecture on Ecclesiastes](http://philosophycourse.info/lecsite/lec-hebwislit.html) that you read a week or two ago and may have already forgotten. It includes a couple of discussion questions you’ll want to address in class.

The Book of Ecclesiastes

Rabbi Harold Kushner refers to this book as "the most dangerous book in the bible."

1.) One question I would like you to consider in your discussions when we talk about this book is: What do you suppose it is about this book that has often been seen as dangerous?

This book is perhaps best understood as a kind of discussion/debate going on within the soul of one person. One side of the debate argues that life is pointless, useless, meaningless and all in vain. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," say the book's opening lines. The other side of the debate argues that life does have opportunities for happiness and joy and that we should take delight in those little joys that are available to us. Legend has it that the book was written by Solomon, the wisest of the Hebrew kings, who, after experiencing all the best that life had to offer, still had serious doubts whether it was all worth it. (Legend is almost certainly wrong in the ascription of authorship; however, whoever the author of the book is, he or she is definitely wondering whether life has any lasting meaning.) If you are interested in seeing how a modern author, Leo Tolstoy, struggles with these issues of meaning and emptiness in life, see his extremely well-written and short autobiography titled A Confession available either online or in print.

The way in which Tolstoy phrases the question posed by Ecclesiastes is:

My question - that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide - was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man from the foolish child to the wisest elder: it was a question without an answer to which one cannot live, as I had found by experience. It was: "What will come of what I am doing today or shall do tomorrow? What will come of my whole life?"

Differently expressed, the question is: "Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?" It can also be expressed thus: "Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?" (A Confession, part V)

It is a question that many people, perhaps most, struggle with at some point in their lives, and the Book of Ecclesiastes is one of the earliest writings to give voice to the question.

2.) Another question for your consideration when discussing this book is: Given that this book was considered so dangerous and even so potentially heretical, what reasons do you think the Rabbis might have had for including this book in the canon of holy writ?