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Introduction

MIDWAY THROUGH MY LIFE, three pressing questions weighed down my soul.

First, there was the question of my marriage. I just didn't think I could do it anymore, it felt too dishonest. While I loved my wife, my heart told me that we weren't working as a couple, that our relationship needed to come to an end. Despite the truth I felt in my heart and my unwillingness or incapacity to fully commit to something I felt was wrong, my brain was torn by the issue: "Why should I leave a situation that had become so . . . familiar?" I drank alone at night in my basement cave to try to numb my uncertainty and doubts. If my situation didn't change, and soon, I would continue to damage my body and hide from the difficult reality that I was depressed.

Then there was the synagogue. Although I had been the spiritual leader of my Greenwich Village congregation since its founding, and while we'd weathered the horrors of 9/11, personal tragedies, and a catastrophic recession together—as well as celebrated births, marriages, and other joyous events—if I had to sit through another irritating board meeting or officiate at another idolatrous bar or bat mitzvah, I'd blow my brains out. After a decade of service, it was time for me to move on, and time for them find a new rabbi who wasn't disenchanted and burned out. But what should I do next?

Finally, after nearly twenty years of living and working there, I felt that I had reached the end of my relationship with New York City. The same frenetic energy that had fed me in my twenties and thirties was now devouring my soul. I'd come to loathe the city's unapologetic relentless-

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ness, its rat race sensibility, and its noise. By then, the noise enraged me most of all. Whether it was due to construction, a siren, or an incoming subway car, New York’s oppressive din made it almost impossible for me to find peace. How could I remain in a city that was driving me to the end of my rope?

That summer, I left my wife, the synagogue, and New York, and I spent time by myself in a cabin near Hood River, Oregon.

Oregon wasn’t an escape, it was a mirror—still, silent, and far removed from the frenzy of New York. I landed in Portland in early July, picked up my rental car, and drove east for an hour or so through the Columbia River Gorge until I emerged in the town of Hood River. Then, after stopping for supplies, I turned south toward Mount Hood and my isolated cabin that was tucked away in its foothills.

In my seclusion, I forced myself to face the life-altering choices that loomed before me. Within two months, I’d be unemployed for the first time in my life. I asked myself, *What am I going to do next, a rabbi who has no desire to serve another congregation?* And then I turned to the more emotional and frightening question: *Should I get a divorce from a woman I still care about?* These two questions reverberated inside my soul day and night, whether I was on a hike, river rafting, going for a drive, or watching the sunset. I couldn’t shake them—and I wouldn’t let myself. Was I about to enter a brave new world and free myself from the burdens of boredom and despair, or was I, like Ahab, a wounded man in midlife pursuing a “phantom” that would either elude me or drive me to the ends of the earth—and, perhaps, self-destruction?

All I had were questions.

I found solace at a brewpub in nearby Parkdale. On many evenings, I would sit on the back deck, drink beer, pet the dogs that roamed the grounds, and watch the sun gradually sink behind Mount Hood. Those were the only moments when I had contact with other human beings, and I became friendly with a local woman who had grown up in the area. She was newly divorced herself, and we spoke about her own doubts and fears prior to making the decision to end her marriage, about the challenges of throwing in the towel and starting again from scratch.

The woman’s parents lived about half an hour east on a small farm

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on the outskirts of The Dalles, and they were horse trainers by trade. She invited me to join her on a sunset ride one afternoon, and I readily accepted. When I arrived at the farm, her father, grizzled but polite, was already saddling up the horses. Her mother asked me questions about living in New York and confessed that she had never traveled outside of Oregon. Their marriage seemed warm and solid; they'd been partners, both personally and professionally, for a very long time. It made me think about how my own marriage was on its last legs. As we rode our horses over brown hills and brush, and as deer and pheasants darted out of our path, I wondered why a comfortable partnership wasn't enough for me. What was I seeking with such restlessness, and why?

Yet again, all I had were questions.

After almost two weeks away, I'd resolved nothing about the decisions that awaited me back home but that I knew could no longer be pushed aside. What were my options? I could brood alone in the cabin, numb myself with booze, or get outside and at least feel like I was part of a larger reality beyond my inner turmoil. On the morning before my return flight, I drove over the Bridge of the Gods, crossed the border into Washington, and entered Gifford Pinchot National Forest, a wilderness area in the heart of the volcanic Cascade mountain range. I decided to hike up Sawtooth Trail, a former section of the famous Pacific Crest Trail that stretches from Mexico to Canada.

The arduous trail climbed up to the fifty-four-hundred-foot summit in virtually a straight shot, and I was dripping with sweat ninety minutes later when I finally broke through the tree line and reached the exposed but level ridge at the top of Sawtooth Mountain. The setting was spectacular. Wind howled over the summit; craggy boulders crammed the peak; any misstep would lead to a sheer fall of thousands of feet. From that uneasy perch, there was a 360-degree view of Mount St. Helens to the west, Mount Rainier to the north, and Mount Hood to the south. While I couldn't actually make it out, I sensed the Pacific Ocean as its waves muscled inexorably into the rugged coastline on one side of me; on the other, great rolling plains unraveled east as far as my eyes could see. I was just a speck, a bag of bones surrounded by an unfathomable enormity.

I began to cry. I'd never felt so starkly alive, yet so profoundly lost, at

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the same time. “What am I supposed to do?” I asked aloud. “What happens now?”

The reply to my query was silence. That was the gospel of the mountain.

At this stage of my life, would I have the maturity and strength to tolerate that kind of ambiguity? It was too early to tell. I looked for an answer through the lens of my faith tradition. The gospel of Sawtooth was, for me, the gospel of Sinai—mystery, ineffability, at times even silence. While Moses received the Torah from God on top of the desert mountain, its many laws and teachings often raise more questions than they answer: What is the meaning of life? Why do I exist? Where am I heading?

It is questions such as these that have preoccupied my mind (and transformed my life) in recent years, both as a rabbi and as a man.

I have written this book, in part, to share my search. And because I know I am not the only one who voices these queries.

What has intrigued me most about the Hebrew Bible specifically is not its dramatic stories, colorful characters, or moral lessons, but its *questions*. These many and varied questions are profound, pedagogic, rhetorical, challenging, at times even painful. Some of them are famous and some infamous; some have elevated souls and others have humbled them. Many of these questions are voiced by biblical figures, while others are attributed to God, either through intermediaries or directly. At their core, almost all of these questions are as relevant and compelling today as they were in antiquity.

This book explores the following questions:

- ~ How do we live when we know we are going to die?
- ~ Why is humility so important?
- ~ Are we responsible for other people?
- ~ What is the purpose of human life?
- ~ Is some knowledge too dangerous to possess?
- ~ Has God abandoned us?
- ~ How do we return when we have lost our way?
- ~ What happens to us after we die?

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These are questions that all of us ask at one time or another, in varying order, during the course of our lives. As I have strived to navigate through the transitions of midlife—and my own personal and spiritual trials—these inquiries have granted me a paradoxical sense of security, an invisible yet very palpable feeling of comfort and community. They’ve shown me that, in all my perplexity, I am far from alone.

The Bible is neither a philosophical treatise nor, in my view, a roadmap for redemption. It is instead a complex, existential expression of uncertainty and confusion, of yearning and hope, of wonderment, suffering, and joy. The Bible, and the timeless questions interwoven in it, is a testament to, and a portrait of, the valleys and peaks of the human condition. It doesn’t offer us rigid answers; it graces us with fellowship.

This book highlights several of the signposts of the human journey—and offers, I hope, a framework through which we can find more guidance for and meaning in our own lives. *Eight Questions of Faith* takes us into the psycho-spiritual muck and mire of concepts such as mortality, sin, responsibility, fear, courage, and the afterlife, drawing not only from the rabbinic and mystical traditions but also from insights in philosophy, psychology, literature, and real experience.

What you hold in your hands is not a linear, verse-by-verse commentary or a systematic examination of the Bible’s “greatest hits” of human inquiry. It is a very personal book constructed around questions that I myself have asked—using different words and in different contexts—in my life, questions I have also encountered, repeatedly, from others whom I have counseled or conversed with over my nearly two decades in the rabbinate. They have regularly served as springboards for intense and passionate conversations, often with life-altering consequences.

The conversations have not been easy.

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante finds enlightenment only after, having become disoriented, he enters a dark forest. Similarly, the skin on the face of Moses becomes “radiant” only after he enters the thick, smoky cloud that covers Mount Sinai at the moment of divine revelation. The message seems clear: it is in the heart of unknowing, the “thick darkness” where the *lack* of clarity fuels a hunger for answers, that we mature, evolve, and ultimately discover our true path. Viewed in this way, perplexity is as much

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a gift as it is a source of discomfort, a conduit toward inner advancement as well as a crucible through which our minds and souls are pushed to their breaking points.

I wrote this book for anyone who questions or quests, seeks or sojourns. May it—and the ageless questions it explores—grant solace to the restless and fellowship to the forlorn. May it bring us closer to truth, to each other, and ultimately to our God.

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Between Cradle and Grave



THE SUMMER AFTER MY TRIP to Oregon, my wife and I decided to get a divorce. While we looked like a good couple on paper—we both loved to travel, we came from similar educational and Jewish backgrounds, we shared a quirky sense of humor—we weren't making each other happy. And frankly, I wasn't ready for the commitment and discipline of marriage. I had talked myself into our union, seeking counsel from my friends, family, and therapist, but I was never really present for my wife in the way that she deserved. I felt guilty for that, inadequate, and ashamed.

Several months before, I'd parted ways with the congregation I'd helped to found. Major differences had emerged between my vision for the shul and that of our lay leadership. While I fought for more robust (and overt) religiosity in our services and programs, my board favored the social dimension; its focus on food and fun was, in my view, dwarfing talk of ritual and God. I also had to contend with creative but strong-willed founders who wouldn't let go and cede power to others. Taken together, these new realities made my experience as a spiritual leader intolerable.

I also moved out of New York. Now that my marriage and my longtime job had both come to an end, there was nothing to keep me there any longer—and I was sick of the city anyway. I'd avoided getting sucked into the narcissism of New York, a mind-set that made the rest of the country seem like a suburb. As an author and teacher, I'd spoken in other cities all over the country, and I knew firsthand that there were plenty of happy people who lived outside the Big Apple. I'd actually come to envy their much better quality of life and the far more human pace by which they lived.

These changes were important and necessary. Yet having them all occur

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at the same time—that was surreal. And soon they came to feel overwhelming.

One year after I made the biggest decisions of my life, I stood high above the jagged shoreline of Lake Superior. I'd been invited by a synagogue to lead a retreat in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and I stayed on afterward to do some traveling and hiking on my own. It was early fall, and it had been over two decades since I last set foot in the UP. I viewed my journey there as a pilgrimage of sorts, a return to a place that had given me a measure of solace at another time of transition, following college graduation. So much had occurred during the intervening years. Maybe too much.

My life was still unsettled, personally and professionally. I had moved back to Chicago, where I grew up, but I was living as an adult in my parents' condo downtown; all of my books and other meaningful possessions were in storage in Yonkers. I hadn't yet landed a new full-time position, and I wasn't even sure what it was that I wanted to do with the next chapter of my life. I had failed at marriage and I continued to struggle with commitment. Mainly to distract myself from my feelings of pain and humiliation, I was drinking and debauching like a teenager. But this state of limbo was taking its toll on me. I didn't know how much more uncertainty and anxiety I could endure. There were days when, for no apparent reason, I'd suddenly burst into tears.

A few days after the retreat, I drove to the trailhead of one of the UP's most spectacular hikes, the Chapel Loop, a twelve-mile trail that cuts through the center and outer edges of Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. On the loop trail, I passed birch, beech, and pine trees, streams, waterfalls, and small lakes. After a few miles, the trail opened onto the southern shore of Lake Superior, where I saw Chapel Rock itself. Like the other rock formations along the lakeshore, Chapel Rock was sculpted by erosion from the wind, ice, and waves. As the trail climbed steeply, I looked down from sheer sandstone cliffs and saw arches, turrets, and dunes. The sky was gray and the wind was strong. Whitecaps rolled toward the shore and crashed into coves and caves below me.

Not long afterward, I reached a particularly stunning and exposed ridge just off the trail. I walked to the very edge and gazed down at the churn-

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ing water. Chapel Rock was no longer in sight, but its symbolism was not lost on me. As I stood alone, buffeted by wind, my life adrift, there was no sanctuary left to protect me. Here I was, in the middle of life’s journey, confronted by what seemed like endless bewilderment and sorrow. I was an outsider, someone unable to fit into a stable, normal path. It felt harder to hold myself back than to leap into Lake Superior. *Why go on?* I asked myself. It would be so easy to jump, to kiss the void rather than to get back on the trail and continue my journey into the dark forest. Death might be a mystery, but so was life. What was the difference? My heart raced. Adrenaline coursed through my body. The impulse to end things felt irresistible—and it scared the hell out of me.

The seconds seemed like an eternity. Yet with genuine effort, and with utter terror at the power and pull of my temptation, I backed away from the edge.

I chose life. But I could have just as easily made the other decision.

What most likely drew me away from the cliff was less the result of rational, conscious deliberation than of intuition, a gut feeling that my mission on the earth as a man and as a rabbi was not yet over. I wasn’t ready to die and I had much more to give. As difficult as life seemed at the moment, I held on to the hope that the place in which I stood—a place of anxiety, despair, and frustration—would end. I felt overwhelmed by my past decisions and angry about my current state of uncertainty. I was also world-weary and haunted by great doubts about ever being able to fit in. Yet my challenges could have been worse. I had a roof over my head and parents to lean on. Like so many others who had struggled and suffered before me, I’d somehow get back on my feet.

I had to. If I didn’t believe in myself, nobody else would.

“Why did I ever issue from the womb?” (Jeremiah 20:18)

This first inquiry is as relevant as it is ancient. How many of us, when we have gone through agonizing and dark episodes in our own lives, have asked ourselves this question? It may not be universal, but it is certainly commonplace. As I know from my own and others’ experiences, when relationships and marriages fall apart, when confusion grips our minds, when unemployment seems like a snare from which we can’t break free,

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when addictions crush our bodies and spirits, it is a very rare sort of human being who does *not* wish, even momentarily, for everything to come to an end.

Death is an appealing prospect when life’s trials feel insurmountable.

In this particular case, the question is asked by the prophet Jeremiah. “Why did I ever issue from the womb?” (Jer. 20:18) occurs within the larger context of what are known as Jeremiah’s “confessions,” emotionally rich and deeply personal passages that have no real parallel in the Hebrew Bible’s other books. Jeremiah speaks here in his own name; the “I” he refers to in these passages is not God, as in the biblical book’s other oracular sections, but himself. The only other book that even remotely comes close to this style and tone is Lamentations, the masterwork of biblical gloom and doom—a text that is, not coincidentally, attributed by the classical tradition to the prophet Jeremiah himself.

AN OUTBURST OF PAIN AND DESPAIR

The life of Jeremiah (645–580 BCE) spanned a critical period in the history of Judah, the southern part of what had become, as a result of civil war, a divided Israelite kingdom. Other than a brief period of independence, Judah had devolved from a regional power into a vassal state and a political pawn under the successive and oppressive empires of Assyria, Egypt, and Babylonia. The northern kingdom of Israel had ceased to exist—it had fallen to the Assyrians a century before Jeremiah was even born. A weak, wounded Judah was all that was left of a once strong, unified Jewish nation. But it, too, was coming to a violent end. Jeremiah would bear witness to its horrific destruction and travel with his people into exile. He would be the monarchy’s last prophet.

Like other biblical prophets (such as Moses and Jonah), Jeremiah at first resists his call to divine service. In the very first chapter of the book, we see his protest:

Ah, Lord GOD!
I don’t know how to speak,
For I am still a boy. (Jer. 1:6)

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But God tells Jeremiah not to be afraid, not to recoil from his mission no matter how daunting it may seem. God promises to be with him during the difficult days ahead. Jeremiah is forewarned of a disaster that will strike from the north, yet he does not know at the outset of his prophetic journey that the cataclysm will take concrete form in the siege of Israel by Babylonia. Jeremiah's sacred mandate is to sound the alarm among his people and urge them to repent of their moral and spiritual transgressions before it is too late.

The prophet carries out his mission. Jeremiah publicly warns the Israelites of the impending calamity, the invasion that God is directing—using Babylonian troops as God's agents—as punishment for their crimes. But he also experiences, and expresses verbally, the pain and loneliness he feels as the sole harbinger of such great ruination:

Oh, my suffering, my suffering!
How I writhe!
Oh, the walls of my heart!
My heart moans within me,
I cannot be silent. . . .
Suddenly my tents have been ravaged,
In a moment, my tent cloths.
How long must I see standards
And hear the blare of horns? (Jer. 4:19–21)

It isn't clear whether Jeremiah is describing a present event or having a premonition of a future one. What is clear is the agony his prophetic detachment causes in him.

While Jeremiah accepts his role, he is ambivalent about his people. On the one hand, he grieves for his fellow countrymen:

When in grief I would seek comfort,
My heart is sick within me. . . .
Because my people is shattered I am shattered;
I am dejected, seized by desolation.
Is there no balm in Gilead? (Jer. 8:18, 21–22)

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On the other hand, he recoils from them in disgust:

Oh, to be in the desert,
At an encampment for wayfarers!
Oh, to leave my people,
To go away from them—
For they are all adulterers,
A band of rogues. (Jer. 9:1)

Jeremiah has no option but to play the part his destiny demands. God chose him and in so doing set him apart from the rest of his people; that choice sentenced him, in effect, to a life of isolation and torment:

You enticed me, O LORD, and I was enticed;
You overpowered me and You prevailed.
I have become a constant laughingstock,
Everyone jeers at me. . . .
For the word of the LORD causes me
Constant disgrace and contempt. (Jer. 20:7–8)

Jeremiah heeds his call to duty, but it too is rooted in ambivalence and conflict. Whenever Jeremiah attempts to throw off the burden of his prophetic mantle, he finds that he just can't do it:

I thought, "I will not mention Him,
No more will I speak in His name"—
But [His word] was like a raging fire in my heart,
Shut up in my bones;
I could not hold it in, I was helpless. (Jer. 20:9)

Though he craves escape from the painful scorn his role has brought him, Jeremiah confesses that he is unable to hold himself back from speaking the word of God. Since the book begins with a description of God placing divine words into Jeremiah's mouth, this doesn't come as a complete

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surprise. Jeremiah has become a conduit for God's message, and he now fully grasps the terrible existential consequences of that transformation:

I have not sat in the company of revelers
And made merry!
I have sat lonely because of Your hand upon me,
For You have filled me with gloom.
Why must my pain be endless,
My wound incurable,
Resistant to healing? (Jer. 15:17–18)

Jeremiah's question may very well be rhetorical, a verbal expression of his inner angst, perhaps even anger. Yet it is his next question that is truly revealing, for it discloses that Jeremiah has reached the point of suicidal despair. In a raw outburst of emotion, of suffering, regret, anguish, and rage, he cries out:

Accursed be the day
That I was born!
Let not the day be blessed
When my mother bore me!
Accursed be the man
Who brought my father the news
And said, "A boy
Is born to you,"
And gave him such joy! . . .
Because he did not kill me before birth
So that my mother might be my grave. . . .
Why did I ever issue from the womb,
To see misery and woe,
To spend all my days in shame? (Jer. 20:14–15, 17–18)

These are the tortured words of a man in a state of existential crisis, someone who wishes he had never entered the world at all. In the biblical

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and religious context, his words—which amount to a spiteful rejection of an act of God’s love, the gift of life—seem blasphemous. Yet Jeremiah’s question lays bare a death wish, a desire to escape from a life that has become unbearable for him. The personal loneliness and public derision that have accompanied his prophetic office are too much for him. Why did he have to be born, he implies, if life was going to be so wretched and painful?

Death would be a welcome alternative.

It is the experience of loss, and of being lost, that often triggers this kind of yearning. Yet where is the boundary between wanting to die and wishing that you’d never left the womb? Do these impulses represent two discrete desires, or do they express the same longing, but in different ways?

In *The Balcony*, the French playwright Jean Genet (1910–86) refers to the human journey as “a quest for immobility.” What does he mean? I think Genet is saying that all of us, deep down and perhaps even unconsciously, hunger for a halt to our seemingly ceaseless moving, roving, and being. We crave rest and peace. We yearn to cast away our burdens and, as Shakespeare put it in *Hamlet*, to “shuffle off this mortal coil.” In this sense, immobility—whether represented by a corpse in the earth or, to use Jeremiah’s image, a fetus in the womb—is a source of liberation, of stillness, silence, and serenity.

Jeremiah’s question cuts straight to the heart of the human condition. Through his rhetorical outburst, the prophet expresses much of the pain, frustration, anger, grief, loneliness, and yearning that so many of us have felt at different times and in different places, from antiquity to the present. Which leads inevitably to the great paradox: embedded in the experience of living our lives is the longing to be freed from the tumult and tribulation of life itself.

Other biblical figures verbalize similar world-weary (and often self-destructive) feelings and desires. At times, these expressions take the form of questions. In the book of Ecclesiastes, after the jaded king famously proclaims, “Utter futility! All is futile!” (Eccles. 1:2), he then asks himself a basic question that evolves into a monologue:

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What real value is there for a man
In all the gains he makes beneath the sun?
One generation goes, another comes,
But the earth remains the same forever.
The sun rises, and the sun sets—
And glides back to where it rises.
Southward blowing,
Turning northward,
Ever turning blows the wind;
On its rounds the wind returns.
All streams flow into the sea,
Yet the sea is never full;
To the place [from] which they flow
The streams flow back again.
All such things are wearisome:
No man can ever state them;
The eye never has enough of seeing,
Nor the ear enough of hearing.
Only that shall happen
Which has happened,
Only that occur
Which has occurred;
There is nothing new
Beneath the sun!

Sometimes there is a phenomenon of which they say, “Look, this one is new!”—it occurred long since, in ages that went by before us. The earlier ones are not remembered; so too those that will occur later will no more be remembered than those that will occur at the very end. (Eccles. 1:3–11)

What begins as a question about the benefits of our labor quickly becomes—refracted through the lens of the king’s reflective mind—a meditation on time. For Kohelet, the man speaking in Ecclesiastes, human

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toil is an exercise in futility and pointlessness. Anything we do has been done before; all that is created will perish and then be re-created. Memory will preserve nothing. Even the cycles of the natural world are exercises in repetition. Heraclitus, the ancient Greek philosopher, argued that no one could step into the same river twice. Kohelet claims exactly the opposite. In his view, existence is *not* in a state of perpetual change and transformation; it is, instead, forever bound by the laws of stasis.

While Jeremiah (a prophet called individually by God) focuses on his own unique struggle and pain, Kohelet (a man who inherits the dynastic crown) draws from his personal journey but then, in a more philosophical and abstract way, makes an assessment about human life in general. In the end, it isn't a very uplifting one.

Kohelet the king first addresses the topic of pleasure. What is the purpose of life? When we are children and in our youth, the pursuit of pleasure is often the driving force behind many of our actions. As we mature, those things that give us pleasure usually evolve along with us—we crave wealth, knowledge, success, renown. Nonetheless, it is the same pursuit of pleasure that motivates us.

The king challenges himself: “I said to myself, ‘Come, I will treat you to merriment. Taste mirth!’ . . . What good is that?” (Eccles. 2:1–2).

Kohelet then answers his own question by sharing his personal experiences:

I ventured to tempt my flesh with wine, and to grasp folly, while letting my mind direct with wisdom, to the end that I might learn which of the two was better for men to practice in their few days of life under heaven. I multiplied my possessions. I built myself houses and I planted vineyards. I laid out gardens and groves, in which I planted every kind of fruit tree. I constructed pools of water, enough to irrigate a forest shooting up with trees. I bought male and female slaves, and I acquired stewards. I also acquired more cattle, both herds and flocks, than all who were before me in Jerusalem. I further amassed silver and gold and treasures of kings and provinces; and I got myself male and female singers, as well as the luxuries of commoners—coffers and coffers of them. Thus, I gained more

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wealth than anyone before me in Jerusalem. In addition, my wisdom remained with me: I withheld from my eyes nothing they asked for, and denied myself no enjoyment; rather, I got enjoyment out of all my wealth. And that was all I got out of my wealth. (Eccles. 2:3–10)

In an attempt to uncover the true purpose of human life, the king tries to satiate himself with carnal delights, with wine, women, and song. He accumulates riches, homes, and lands; he owns massive herds; he controls legions of slaves (all marks of affluence for a sovereign of his era). Kohelet is concerned with his legacy as well. He constructs great public works, reservoirs and aqueducts, gardens and parks. He experiences, possesses, and achieves beyond the imaginings of most mortals.

Yet he is, in the end, still mortal. Despite everything the king has gained and accomplished, he concludes that the pursuit of pleasure that drove his actions is ultimately purposeless and pointless. Like Jeremiah, Kohelet offers another saturnine, though arguably less angry, expression of despair and futility: “Then my thoughts turned to all the fortune my hands had built up, to the wealth I had acquired and won—and oh, it was all futile and pursuit of wind; there was no real value under the sun!” (Eccles. 2:11).

Having dismissed pleasure as a successful pathway to “the good,” Kohelet turns next to a different kind of pursuit, the pursuit of wisdom:

My thoughts also turned to appraising wisdom and madness and folly. I found that

Wisdom is superior to folly
As light is superior to darkness;
A wise man has his eyes in his head,
Whereas a fool walks in darkness.

But I also realized that the same fate awaits them both. So I reflected: “The fate of the fool is also destined for me; to what advantage, then, have I been wise?” And I came to the conclusion that that too was futile, because the wise man, just like the fool, is not remembered

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forever; for, as the succeeding days roll by, both are forgotten. Alas, the wise man dies, just like the fool! (Eccles. 2:12–16)

While there are some short-term temporal benefits to wisdom, the end for both the sage and the fool is the same: death is the great equalizer. As a result, Kohelet concludes, the pursuit of wisdom is meaningless as well, an act of utter futility.

To be human is to strive and to toil, yet Kohelet argues that both activities are nothing more than the “pursuit of wind.” If rich and poor, sage and fool, all suffer the same fate, what is the point of anything at all? The implication of the king’s observations mirrors that of Jeremiah’s question, *Why were we ever born?* This brings Kohelet to a very dark place, where he conveys, if not an overt death wish, then at least a profound regret about existence itself: “And so I loathed life. For I was distressed by all that goes on under the sun, because everything is futile and pursuit of wind” (Eccles. 2:17).

Kohelet may be more philosophical, and Jeremiah more emotional, in their verbal expressions about mortality and mission, but their underlying question is essentially the same: When all is said and done, is human life really worth it?

Jeremiah pleads for the cessation of his pain. Kohelet strives to find meaning in his labor. And though the two men lived centuries apart, both of them are highly concerned (either implicitly or explicitly) with memory, with being remembered, respected, and relevant, even after they have died.

Most scholars think that the book of Ecclesiastes was written during the Hellenistic period in Palestine, in the third or fourth century BCE, and the author clearly displays ample evidence of being influenced by Greek Stoicism. A few centuries later, the Stoic philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE) would write in his *Meditations* that “the memory of everything is very soon overwhelmed in time.”

Kings will eventually be forgotten. Monuments will crumble and vanish. Sages, heroes, palaces, herds—nothing will leave a lasting memory in the eternity of the cosmos. In this respect, Kohelet and Marcus Aurelius are just two of the countless thinkers and writers who have mused on the link between mortality and memory.