

IEBELE ABEL

THE FEMALE ENTITY

A CONTEMPORARY TAKE ON THE WISDOM OF ECCLESIASTES



ELMTREE & WATERS
2026

First edition, 2026

Originally published in Dutch as *Prediker in één adem* (2017)

© 2009–2026 Iebele Abel

© 2026 Elmtree and Waters Publishing

Edited by Norman Shaw, Marlinde van Roekel and Francesca Naudi

ISBN 9789079735082

ISBN 9789079735976 (e-book)

NUR 728

Design and typography: Klaas Jacob Kort

Cover design: Studio Hogeland

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means — electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise — without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Contents

	Introduction	5
1.1–1.11	Everything is volatile	9
1.12–1.18	Seeking wisdom	21
2.1–2.26	The worldly life	29
3.1–3.15	There is a time for everything	55
3.16–3.22	Dishonesty is of all times	71
4.1–4.7	Where to find peace of mind?	79
4.8–4.12	Rather together than alone	87
4.13–5.6	Empty words say nothing	93
5.7–5.19	Wealth, knowledge and power	103
6.1–6.12	The meaning of life	117
7.1–7.29	Simple wisdom	129
8.1–8.17	Awe for the unknown	155
9.1–9.18	The same fate for everyone	171
10.1–10.20	Wisdom, respect and trust go hand in hand	187
11.1–11.10	Making choices	207
12.1–12.14	Time flies	217
	<i>Notes</i>	227

Introduction

This book is a verse-by-verse interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes. It is not a 'translation' in the usual sense of the word, but it gives its own distinctive version of this well-known book from biblical wisdom literature.

Perhaps because of its sometimes somewhat depressed, sometimes bold directness, Ecclesiastes is a popular and frequently cited text. It knows a large number of translations and interpretations. By making the effort to compare these translations, one can see big differences. Ever since childhood, I have read the book of Ecclesiastes in all kinds of versions. In all its variations, it has been an important and formative book for me, with which I have become thoroughly familiar.

Ecclesiastes, also known as Qohelet (collector of wisdom), was a king, cleric, and teacher. Over 2000 years ago, Qohelet searched in a creative way for words to express a sense of life that balances between skepticism and trust, certainty and uncertainty, kindness and severity. Something of the profundity of the words of Qohelet can be found in the wide variety of versions of Ecclesiastes that have appeared throughout the ages; the texts can be read in many diverse ways.

In 2008 I started writing my first version of the text for this book. I did this on the basis of the different translations of Ecclesiastes that I knew¹. I wrote the text for a work of art in which the verses from Ecclesiastes were recited one by one by a female narrator, Lyndsey Housden. I wrote it in a first-person narrative, loosely, quickly and inspired. It was important for me that the text could be read as

a personal life story, with an eye for daily worries and intimacies. I wanted the scope of the story to be clear, direct and appealing to a large audience, especially to people who are not familiar with books of wisdom or religious texts. If there were parts of the biblical text that I did not like, I omitted them or changed them rigorously. This resulted in the first blueprint for the text from this book within a few weeks. After the artwork was exhibited in 2009², the text went into the archives.

I wrote the second version of the text between 2011 and 2016. I then lived on Patmos, the Greek island known from the Revelation of John. On Patmos, I have had many conversations – mainly with young men and monks – about their spiritual quests, in which the existence and meaning of God were regularly called into question. When I sometimes quoted from Ecclesiastes during these conversations, I noticed that a single sentence could already provide food for detailed reflections. Often the men were surprised that texts like these – at least, as I had already made them my own – could be found in the Bible at all. Thus, the idea arose to publish the texts as a book. However, a lot of verses were missing in my version from 2009. During my years on Patmos, I gradually added these. At that time, the idea for the title for this work also arose: Ecclesiastes in one breath, which was first published in Dutch in 2017 (*Prediker in één adem*). While working on this, I was tempted to add all sorts of notes and references to the text, but I did not do that. I wanted this book to remain an artistic expression, which has no bond with traditional biblical learning. Rather a book in 'normal' language than full of artificial particulars and details. For the purpose of this book – an interpretation of Ecclesiastes that everyone can read and understand – an accessible text is a better fit.

The design also contributes to this. The topics that the king and spiritual teacher wrestled with over 2,000 years ago are placed on their own pages, verse by verse. This way every page allows you to reflect on each verse separately.

I have tried to do justice to the way of thinking with which Ecclesiastes tackled his ideological themes. Over time, my interpretations and ideas have changed, and with each version I have worked with different editors, resulting in slightly different texts. I am thankful to have worked with them, each bringing such enthusiasm and insight to this project.

In 2026, this book was published in English. When working on this current version, I worked with Francesca Naudi, as an editor, but also as an actress, for the new video installation based on this book. I hope we have concluded this artistic endeavour in a way that makes people like you and I feel comfortable, and from which inspiration can be drawn.

Ilebele Abel

Everything is volatile

1.1

When a person of prestige takes
the floor, people listen attentively.

But when you say something,
who is listening to you? Will you be heard?



1.2

I direct my words to everybody. What I say
may have crossed your mind already.

Of most books, only the first page is read.
That is why I summarize what I have to say,
right here at the beginning of this book.

What I say is: "Everything is volatile.
Everything passes as a breath of wind."

Because that's how it is, right?
My words, my life, and my work
are just as volatile as my breath.



1.3

I work every day. But why do I actually
work? What does all this work bring me?



1.4

People come and people go.
They talk constantly and they
always think of something new.

The only things that do not change
are the ground under my feet
and the path of the sun.



1.5

The sun rises and sets. It is marvellous.

The sun follows its path, year after
year, always in the same way.



1.6

The wind can arise suddenly
and from any direction. And just
as suddenly the wind can die down again.



1.7

All the water eventually flows to the sea.

Yet the sea never gets full. The sea
is never saturated. The water evaporates,
falls down as rain and returns to the sea.



1.8

I will not be able to stop looking
as long as I have eyes. I will also keep
listening to the stories of others
as long as my ears can hear.

It never stops. It wears me out.
I cannot describe how tired I have
become of everything I have
heard and seen during my life.



1.9

It seems as if the future is just
repeating the past. Everything I do,
I've done so many times before.
There is nothing new for me to discover.



1.10

When I think of something new, it might
be something old for someone else.

Everything has already been done
before or thought up by someone else.



1.11

Who will remember me? My children
– and the children of my children –
who will remember them after they die?

