

## Review Article

# An Analysis of Symbolism and Metaphorical Elements in The *Book of Ecclesiastes*: A Literary Approach

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**Abstract** - The study aims to analyse the symbolism and metaphorical themes through the book of Ecclesiastes chapter 12 phrases. The author metaphorizes human life by representing nature and symbolically says man is the ultimate creation of the creator. The world was created only for the man to rule over. This interpretation of phrases and meanings is done by each verse of chapter 12 individually. Through this chapter, the ultimate aim of creation and the quest for existence are also analysed at the end of the article. Here, the metaphorical interpretations are made and analysed; the accurate meaning is undefined by the author. However, the theological scholars defined the metaphorical meanings according to the phrases built by the author, King Solomon. The first verse in chapter 12 helps to know the author's intention to describe the upcoming verses and the last seven verses. Here, we can divide the first verse as an introduction of his insights, two to seven is a description of human life, and the last seven verses, eight to fourteen, talk about the in-depth truths to lead a life with care and some wise commandments and advice and the whole duty of man are drawn. Wholly the chapter is like a piece of advice to a son, a father who likes to give for his peaceful life on earth. From this, the interpretation is made of each verse, and the quest for existence is analysed from the work of art by the author or preacher, King Solomon.

**Keywords** - Creator, Quest of existence, Human life, Metaphor, Young days, Imagery.

## 1. Introduction

The Book of Ecclesiastes belongs to wisdom literature where the author is unknown. Yet, according to the verses, it is considered the son of David, King Solomon. This book is found in the Hebrew scripture and also present in the Christian Bible, Old Testament, following the book of Proverbs. For this study, chapter 12 in the book of Ecclesiastes contains 14 verses to analyse the metaphor where the author addresses his views on life and man. The book comprises philosophical discourses written between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE by a Persona known as 'Qoheleth' ("the Teacher"). The book was written by King Solomon, according to the Peshitta, Targum, and Talmud [9]. Here, the author or preacher conveys his advice as a father who wishes to give his son to live carefully and keep commandments, and almost his advice is to know the end of the journey and the meaning of living. King Solomon was a great king called Jeddidah who ruled ancient Israel around 970-931 AD; he is known for building the first temple of Jerusalem. He is the third and the last king of Israel, an ultimate ruler, and made many innovations in construction, creeping things, fishes, and beasts and fowl. Such a philosopher and wise man



says under the sun everything is vain, "Vanity, of vanities saith the preacher; all is vanity" [2]. In chapter 12, he once again said vain and nothing new under the sun.

He starts this chapter with a word, 'Remember now thy Creator.' So the main theme is proposed in the very beginning of the chapter; then he continues to symbolize human life and its shortness, and we should make use of it by remembering the Creator in the days of youth. Otherwise, everything will be in vain.

Symbolism is a literary term, Merriam Webster dictionary says:

"the art or practice of using symbols especially by investing things with a symbolic meaning or by expressing the invisible or intangible by means of visible or sensuous representation such as artistic imitation or invention that is a method of revealing or suggesting immaterial, ideal, or otherwise intangible truth or states, the use of conventional or traditional signs in the representation of divine beings and spirits." [4]

The author of the book projects symbolism, especially in chapter 12, which is taken for study. He extraordinarily explains symbolically about getting older and expects the readers to remember the Creator. The metaphor is used to explain the stages of getting older and how body parts are damaging one by one. This description can be seen especially in this last chapter, where it connects all values and means together. Usually, at a young age, they like to walk happily at all times and have strength physically, mentally, and emotionally together, such a good feeling that everybody expects this to happen forever. However, here, the author warns on a high note about using the time rightly and seeking the presence of God for better old age.

Representing absolute truths symbolically in chapter 12, the wholeness and beauty of the creation that is human life came to light. This article explores the symbolism and metaphorical elements in the book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 12. Finally, the quest for existence and essentiality will be analysed and concluded.

The phrases in the book of Ecclesiastes chapter 12 show a certainty of existence that keeps everyone looking at the wholeness of human life. Symbolically, the nature of the human life stage is explained from birth, desire in youth, till death; the intuitions we have everything are metaphorically explained.

The author asks us to remember the Creator at a young age before the evil days come. [2] in youth, all seek pleasure in any way what they admire, taste the richness of fleshy desires. Fleshy desires in the sense of not having a likeness on spiritual and divine or not urging to seek God, the Creator, to know the real goal of existence. He insists that everyone on earth needs to know the purpose of existence before the evil days come before we say there is no pleasure in youth days. Evil days are a death or sickness physically and spiritually. It denotes the separation from God of sinful heart. It is imminent for every being, either at dawn or dusk, to know the Creator personally. The days are short like smoke. Once again, by addressing to remember the Creator, he says everyone should give an account of their own living days. The youth days are the beginning point, like an early dawn to see clearly the rising sun getting energy to run the whole day. It is full of happiness and joy, and one needs to be careful of their young days, not poisoning them with wicked and sinful activities. This is the specific urge that the author indicates in the very first verse of the chapter. This is a spiritual responsibility for everyone to fulfill it. The upcoming phrases are about the organs of the body.

The Metaphorical meanings of the phrases are drawn as follows;

"While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain: "(Ecc. 12:2) [2].

It speaks of the heavenly creatures getting darkened because of not having proper sight, or a storm will happen when the cloud gets dark and gloomy. The vision gets gloomy as the age grows. As old age is usually referred to as the dusk of the day, the end of the man can also be a dark one when he does not know the Creator personally in his life.

“In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened” (Ecc. 12:3) [2].

The arms are shaken because of fear or age factor, and the shoulders are weak. The teeth become few grinding for long years. The eyes get dim and glare of light, unable to see clearly [3]. The strength gets broken as a glass; this can be experienced by all. The soul expects its Creator to redeem it from sinful life. When the flesh enjoys all worldly ways, what is the use of living? The soul, that is, we are the guest in the body. If we live with all pleasures and do not care about the soul’s longings, the older days become more bitter than ever. For this, the author is deeply concerned about the body’s frailty, which is all about the world, but once death has happened, there is an afterlife with our Creator. It promotes a greater meaning: though we live in our eye’s likeness, there is an end. Our Creator will deeply stress that in our lives at any point.

“And the doors shall be shut in the streets when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low;” (Ecc 12:4) [2].

The teeth are a few of the age factors. So, the ears are unable to hear the sound of birds. The lack of hearing may lead to a lack of sexual interest. [3] Of course, it brings changes in sexual functions. The sleeplessness continues, and some indigestion problems might be there when the chewing becomes slow. The hearing sensation damages physical activities, mental health, lack of trust, and communication problems. These are the most essential for growing and living a joyful life. Of course, sleep, sound, taste, sex, touch, and feel are the origin of living. If all is about to fall on the old days, how fast do we have to think wisely about the purpose of existence? Yes, this is our primary duty of the whole living.

“Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:” (Ecc. 12: 5) [2]

The high places like hillocks became a burden to walk, and they feared moving in high places because of weakness in their legs. The almond tree refers to the old age of the white hair. The almond tree is in white blushing, where the author finds the image as white hair. The grasshopper refers to a bent walk, and the steps become the burden of being overweight or underweight. The walk of the elderly is like dragging, the way they walk.

Moreover, elderly people suffer from all these cases when their appetite falls. In this verse, caperberries are used to indicate the loss of appetite; usually, it is an appetite stimulant, but it blocks the hunger of the elderly. The caperberries are pointers in another version of the Old Testament, like the amplified version [6]. The old people talk about their funeral service to be done in a proper manner. So they want to hire the mourners, and the people feel the sorrow of their death in a funeral procession. No one will like one’s older personality. But they honour the deeds done in the young days. This is a grateful thing a man earns in his young days. Does this is enough to reach our Creator? No, the seeing is temporary; unseeing is permanent. We shall not satisfy or gratify the temporary deeds with permanent expectations. It is a wise thing we should analyse.

“Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.” (Ecc. 12: 6) [2]

The silver cord is the life of a man. It is the spinal cord. Obviously, the spinal cord is in the form of a silver cord. It will get broken or crushed, and elder age brings unbearable pain. The benson commentary suggests the following meaning about silver cord and golden bowl [7]. The golden bowl may be the brain. The spinal cord dysfunction brings changes in brain functions like thinking, reasoning, smell, taste, etc.; the inner parts of the brain collapse and bring heavy disorder when one becomes older. The gold is a precious one; of course, the brain is also the most precious and inevitable for existence. The pitcher and wheel metaphorically point to the household items. The pitcher refers to the heart, which contains the fountain of blood. When it fails, the arteries and veins are blocked or broken. The inner organs reflect the Creator’s unimaginable and mighty wisdom. Science reveals it because man is created specially to live. From this, we can see the love of the Creator, where he expects to live happily. But now we can see man doing evil as he wishes, which is not good. For this thing, death came to the world.

“Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.” (Ecc. 12: 7) [2]

The dust is the body where the Creator makes man in his own image and likeness out of his spirit. It shall go to the ground and become dust as it found at the beginning; before that, remember your Creator. The spirit blown in man by the Creator will return to him who gave. So this thing exactly says that there is another life after death. All people on earth have the same thing and one day, and he must return to the Almighty to take account of his living. This is the wise thing to deeply analyse in our young days of where we originate.

Then the preacher finishes symbolizing the human organs and life and pronouncing the greatest truth that all is vain on earth; no one is new. Verse 8-14 speaks a universal and unseen truth that answers the quest for existence. It pours wisdom into reading and acknowledges the hidden truth. Hope these are the 7 truths as 7 verses, which is complete.

1. “Vanity of vanities” The first truth is that all is vain. What we see is vain and sorrowful. For us, it is acceptable that the world we are living in is in vain. History is repeating itself. Days are shorter. Health is minimized. Day by day, everything is getting questionable of living. The happiness we are experiencing in the world is temporary; someone is earning a lot and not spending. However, the person who does not have much wealth is spending his money lavishly. The things that are done without the Creator’s guidance are in vain.
2. The preacher is wise and finds knowledge to teach his people; he wrote many proverbs by seeking good. Yes, teaching wise is a good thing; it is like gold that no one can find. Though the world is vain, it is an upper layer, so something is hidden in the depth of words and knowledge. By question, it can be found. Questioning things and waiting for answers is an unbearable one. This burden brings wisdom where one can dig out the good and healthy words to the soul. The preacher said these are the acceptable words. Listen to the words acknowledged by the soul, not by flesh.
3. The words written are good and true, where he tried to search for upright. All words are not good and upright for living pleasant. Reality always exists and is upright. Search for the righteous thing that exists from the beginning. The truth is not born when the human was born. It should be there from beginning to end.

4. The words are driven by one shepherd that is endless and accurate. So in this, the preacher says one Almighty Creator gives these thoughts. As a father, He makes these thoughts teach his son to know the upright and lawful thing that is not written by any flesh. Flesh means not by any men, by one's own thinking.
5. In the next thing, he says one can write as many books as possible but no end. Too much of study is a weariness of flesh (vs.12) [2]. Hope this is the upright thing for the previous point to accept that one shepherd gives this. Think about the word that is said, whether it is new and reveals the truth. Lies are cooked in the likeness of truth.
6. In conclusion, he says, this is the acceptable one; keeping the commandments of the Creator is the foremost thing of man; it should be practiced with fear. This is the duty of the man, and it is appointed one. For every good thing, there is a condition to live as a good man must tolerate evil by not accepting it. By keeping commandments in heart, it is good for us and our generations to taste everlasting life by following it on earth.
7. For this, the Creator concludes human life by accounting for the good and bad he did on earth. Because everything, whether good or bad, will be testified in judgment. Of course, this is the last of the last truth and the end of human life that everyone should accept, and it is written.

These are certain things that help to know the wisdom and also living truth. Searching for knowledge is minimized, but wisdom is prolonged for generations. It is a believable and acceptable truth. In this manner, the above points are drawn as truth.

Table. 1 Metaphorical meaning of the phrases

S. No.	Phrases/Words	Symbolisms/Metaphors
1	Sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars	The outward beauty of men, face and body complexion, the liveliness of eyes, ears, and other parts of the body (Ecc. 12:2) (Benson)
2	Nor the clouds return after the rain	Natural heat and strength (Ecc. 12:2) (Mathew Poole)
3	Keepers of the house shall tremble	Our body has housekeepers that are the hands and arms defense against attack (Ecc. 12: 3) (Benson)
4	Strong men shall bow	Thighs and legs bow of weakness (Ecc. 12:3) (Benson)
5	Grinders cease	Strength of teeth became low in old age (Ecc. 12:3) (Benson)
6	Those that look out of the windows be darkened	Eyes get gloomy, and eyelids are closed and darkened. Unable to see clearly (Ecc. 12:3) (Benson)
7	Doors shall be shut in the streets	Ears, eyes, and mouth are closed for the elderly. The openings are shuttered. Sometimes, it refers to inner organs when they become dull. (Ecc. 12:4) (Benson)
8	Sound of the grinding is low	Of few teeth, the grinding power, speech is low (Ecc. 12:4) (Benson)
9	He shall rise up at the voice of the bird	Unable to sleep, so raise for the birds chirping sound (Ecc. 12:4) (Benson)
10	Daughters of music shall be brought low	The senses of the body are shattered, and music and other sounds are unpleasant (Ecc. 12:4) (Benson)
11	Afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way	Fear of hills or little high roads or steps leads to health issues, fear of falling (Ecc. 12:5) (Benson)
12	Almond tree shall flourish	White hair of old age, early wakeup or insomnia (Ecc. 12:5) (Benson)

13	Grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail	Intolerance of the least burden, drinks, music, and delights they enjoyed in youth fail. Burden in bones changes the shape of the body like a grasshopper (Ecc. 12:5) (Benson)
14	Man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the Streets	For going to the eternal home, they hire mourners, burial place, and funeral procession. (Ecc. 12:5) (Benson)
15	Silver cord be loosed	Spinal marrow from the brain (Ecc. 12:6) (Benson)
16	Golden bowl be broken	Brain membranes thinness of grey and white matters (Ecc. 12:6) (Benson)
17	Pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern	Pitcher – Arteries Cistern – left ventricle Fountain – veins Wheel broken at cistern – When the cycle gets broken of arteries not performing, it nears death. (Ecc. 12:6) (Benson)
18	The dust return to the earth	The body dies on the ground. The body is made up of dust, so it returns to it again. (Ecc. 12:6) (Benson)
19	Spirit	The soul of the body. (Ecc. 12:6) (Benson)
20	Shall return to God	The creator (Ecc. 12:6) (Benson)

In this literary approach, the metaphorical or symbolic meanings are shown in Table 1. It is described individually with the help of verses, and the depth of the words is analysed. The organs and their functions are deeply written symbolically. The author of the work of art is wise in constructing the origins of wisdom everyone needs to admire. Man is made up of dust, but the inbuilt of organs, soul, and spirit are outstanding and admirable one. Apart from the metaphorical structure of the phrases, the last seven verses emit the absolute things that are based on human existence, and one should know the inner man and his needs. Knowing wise things is essential for the soul other than the soul gets peace on having a good relationship with the Creator. For everything, there is a purpose such that before all these things happen to man in old age, he should know and build a relationship with the Creator. This is the primary truth of our quest for existence. Why should we live on earth for such long days? The purpose is to get out of the unlawful things that are ruling our soul, which should be relaxed only by knowing the Creator that is the wise thing and also untie the quest for existence.

## 2. Conclusion

The explanations made in the table and the approach may differ, but they try to bring the ultimate meaning of the phrases. The author is considered King Solomon and also a preacher. Chapter 12, taken for study, imbibes numerous thoughts that cannot written. It can only be analysed by reading from the soul and tasting the plenty of thoughts how the author can receive many wise things about human life. Wisdom is important for man to attain the deepest knowledge. Pondering the right words are essential [10]. The above literary approach not only speaks about metaphors and symbolisms but also reveals the natural way to know the wise and new things.

Staying in a mourning place brings a wise thing where one can see the end of life. In the house of happiness, foolish people will be there. This is what the author says in his other chapters of the book of ecclesiastes. If we see from death, it is enough to lead a wise life by having a good mind for the people, enough with the assets we have. So everything will be good to know the truth. If one's heart is in the house of happiness always, it is a terrible one. They want more and more of anything that is not satisfied. Of course, the things are a lie and temporary one. Our



soul is a permanent house and true where it always does good for us. Whereas our flesh always wants to satisfy our daily needs corruptively to our soul. Because it is temporary and searches to satisfy only for worldly pleasure, not caring for the permanent soul that lives forever. These metaphorical analyses of interpretation bring out the wise thing that is the foremost one. It is wonderful to know about our living days' preciseness and value in symbolic representation. The author's presentation is still admirable and thinkable for all generations. There is no difference in age; rolling out the wise thing only helps to move out of danger. For all ages, it is a suitable thing to think and repent.

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