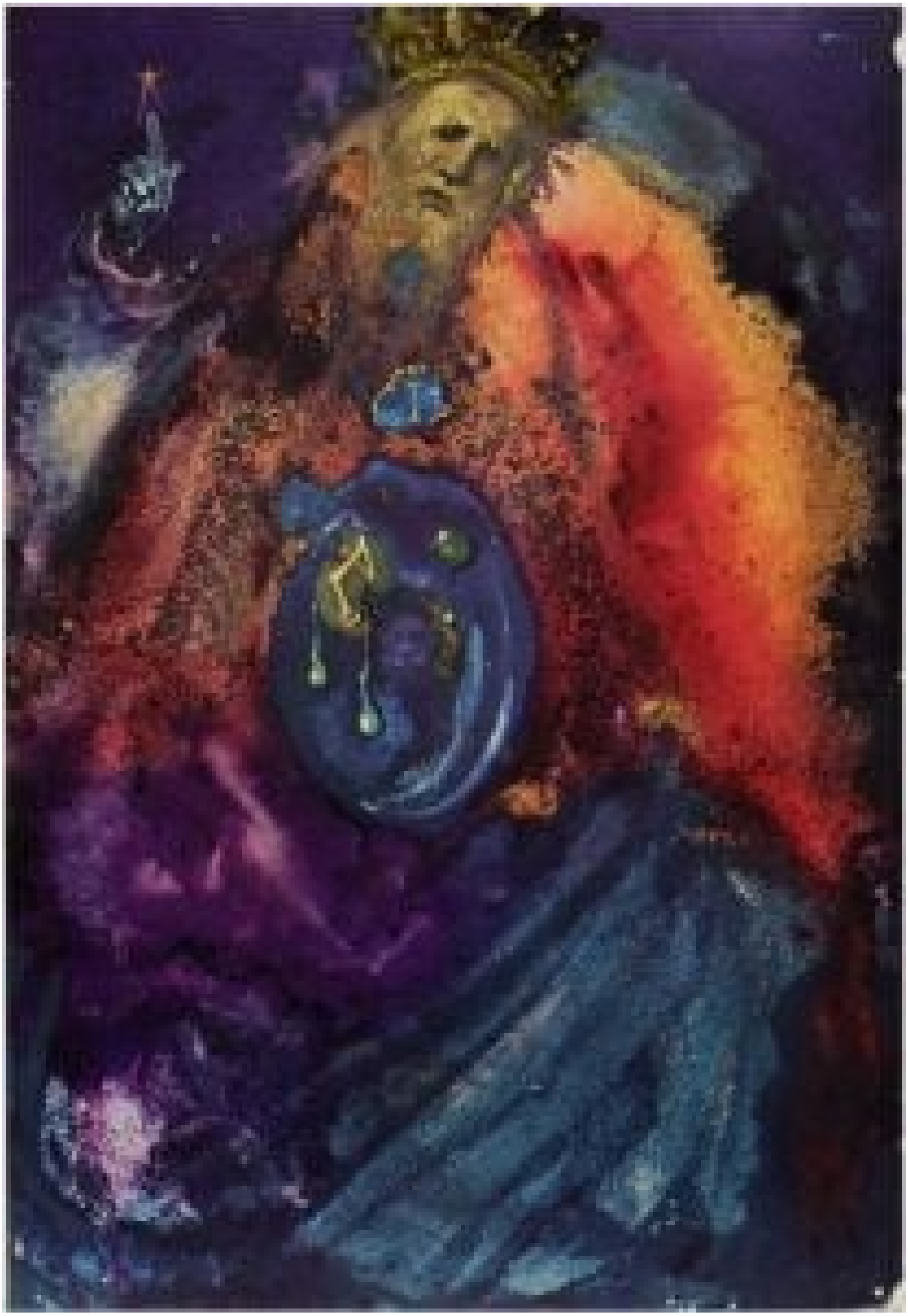
Solomon and ‘The Sun Also Rises’

by **Jeff Plude** (April 2022)



Vanitas Vanitatum, Salvador Dali, 1964

Solomon had it all. He was wiser and richer than any person before him. People came from all over the world to see the great king of Israel, including the queen of Sheba, who wasn't doing too badly herself. And she found him to be even more glorious than he had been touted! But then he went off the spiritual rails. After writing most of one of the most popular books in the Bible—Proverbs, a manual of godly living—he wrote one of the most cynical books of the Bible—Ecclesiastes—a manual of ungodly living. It's the bitter lament of a hedonist who stayed too long at the party and is now blinded by what he sees in the bright light of the morning after.

This was in the latter part of Solomon's forty-year reign. By that time he had amassed a harem of seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines! And some of these wives were pagans, the first book of Kings tells us, and seduced him into worshipping their gods and abandoning the one true God, who had given him all he had.

After indulging in everything the world has to offer—knowledge, wine, song, humor, building houses, planting vineyards, orchards, gardens, piling up gold—"the preacher," as he calls himself in Ecclesiastes, declares that life is nothing but "vanity of vanities." Meaningless and futile.

Near the end of his sermon the man whom First Kings credits with writing three thousand proverbs and a thousand and five songs, including one of the most beautiful books in the Old Testament—the Song of Solomon, a love poem about his first wife when they were young—stares into the abyss of all the words written in all the world and sees his own worn-out soul. "Of making many books there is no end," Solomon sighs; "and much study is a weariness of the flesh."

And this was in the tenth century B.C.!

So wisdom, according to the wisest man in history up till then

(and perhaps the wisest man of all time except for another descendant of David a millennium later), isn't generally found in books. Or at least in most books not inspired by or espousing God's plan for a life he considers successful.

Since Ecclesiastes is laced with irony, it seems fitting that one of the first times I came across it was in a popular book. But the very first time I encountered it was in a popular song, though I didn't realize the source. In the book the source was clear but the excerpt was cryptic.

First I heard the Byrds' "Turn! Turn! Turn!" with its trippy half-rock half-folk sound and its twangy electric-guitar fingerpicking. It lifts the first third of Chapter 3 in Ecclesiastes almost word for word. This is where Solomon, showing the same eloquence as his father in Psalms (of which he also wrote two himself), tells us that there is a time and a purpose for everything. He uses the iconic Jewish literary device of parallel but contrasting phrases: "A time to be born, and a time to die; / A time to love, and a time to hate," etc. Well I was in high school and entranced with the later Beatles' stuff like the White Album, which was only about a decade old at the time. "Turn! Turn! Turn!" was a few years earlier, the mid-sixties, and pretty tame for me and the guys I hung out with.

Then a few years later I was about twenty and in college when I read *The Sun Also Rises*. The novel's epigraph comes from the first chapter of Ecclesiastes, verses 4–7, in which Solomon laments with an eternal world-weariness the endless, monotonous ebb and flow of life:

> *One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth forever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to the place where he arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to its circuits. All the rivers run into the*

> *sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.*

The novel has another epigraph above the one from Ecclesiastes, from Gertrude Stein: "You are all a lost generation," referring to Ernest Hemingway and the other young adults who had been traumatized by the carnage of World War I.

The verses from Ecclesiastes made almost no impression on me at the time. Of course I didn't know exactly what it was. I was a Catholic boy and that kind of Old Testament book is only for the initiated in the robes who presided on the altar. As far as I knew Ecclesiastes had never been mentioned in the missal or in a homily. Coincidentally Jake Barnes, the novel's hardboiled hard-drinking newspaperman and narrator, is also "technically" Catholic. I remember reading later on that Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos used to read the Bible—the King James Version, of course—out loud to each other to absorb the cadence of the sublime language. Strange, I've never seen that wise suggestion in the morass of writing advice.

Up till then I'd read very few novels. I was too young and too ignorant to understand the whole import of the novel, or to make sense of it. I was just starting out on life's journey, and the characters were midway along in theirs and about to enter Dante's dark woods of middle age. Hemingway himself was twenty-seven when *The Sun Also Rises* was published. Solomon calls himself "a little child" in First Kings when he started his reign; evangelical Pastor John MacArthur estimates that the young king was about twenty, which means he was likely approaching sixty—my age now—when he wrote Ecclesiastes.

In *The Sun Also Rises* readers watch a group of thirtysomethings with too much money and too much time on their hands carouse and talk "rot" between sips and guzzles of a deluge of wine and martinis and whiskey. The meals are

reported one after the other—roast chicken with green beans and mashed potatoes and apple pie and cheese, etc. Well this goes on and on as the gang careens from Paris to the French and Spanish countryside, finally culminating in the bacchanal at the annual weeklong running of the bulls in Pamplona where fiesta-goers are gored literally and figuratively. The travel set pieces are intriguing and vivid the first few times but then get old and tiresome. Hemingway was doing his Cezanne impression with the rolling fields and the mountains and the rivers and the "fine trees" and such. Back in the day I was attracted by the lean and lucid and evocative prose. But it had the opposite effect on me as Solomon's passionate exhortation, and only inflamed my appetites. "Better is the sight of the eyes," Solomon declares, sounding like one of his proverbs, "than the wandering of the desire."

The Sun Also Rises mimics the repetition in Ecclesiastes, but with ten times the words. What would the preacher think of it? Let's look to his sermon: "The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself. The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness: and the end of his talk is mischievous madness." I remember reading that Gabriel García Márquez, a fellow newspaper reporter who once hailed Hemingway from across a street in Paris as "Maestro!," claimed that *The Sun Also Rises* isn't even really a novel at all but a padded-out short story. That may be a bit of a stretch itself, but I don't think it's too much of one.

With the emotional wreckage of a week of bullfighting and brain-sloshing behind them, *The Sun Also Rises* fizzles out in Madrid. Brett Ashley, the aristocratic floozy and man-eater and star attraction of this multi-ring circus, summons Jake because she's gored another conquest, this one an actual fledgling matador, and is "rather in trouble." As they try in vain to slake their bottomless pit of thirst in a hotel bar she announces to the impotent Jake (physically, thanks to a war wound, as well as emotionally), the only man she's not on

the make for but in fact loves, that “I feel rather good deciding not to be a bitch.”

Then she delivers the punch line: “It’s sort of what we have instead of God.”

Sort of? Since it’s only their second martini before lunch, Jake’s ready for her charge.

> *“Some people have God,” I said. “Quite a lot.”*
>
> *“He never worked very well with me.”*
>
> *“Should we have another Martini?”*

So now, at last, we come full circle to the epigraph. Now that I’ve read Ecclesiastes many times, it reminds me of the preacher’s sobering finale:

> *Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.*

In contrast Hemingway ends his great inner war with a contrived snippet of melodrama that feels tacked on to somehow end this mess and at the same time ratchet up the flatness of it all. The cab stops suddenly. The star-crossed couple are jostled together. Brett drops her devil-may-care mask and cries out about how the two lovers will never be truly lovers. Jake snarks: “Isn’t it pretty to think so?” Curtain. To me, it all feels phony. One thing is for sure: the cycle will continue.

Or as Solomon repeats near the end of Ecclesiastes, just as he started it: “Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.” After the Fall, evil reigned and futility flourished.

The difference is that Solomon seems to embrace what he’s

learned in his self-imposed exile from God. Jake seems to shun it. I think it's too simplistic to say the war is the main or only reason he does this. I realize the devastating fallout from war—my father was in World War II and I interviewed many Vietnam War veterans when I was a young reporter—but it's hard to imagine that Jake and the rest of his *Sun* comrades would've fared a lot differently, in essence, without the war.

Interestingly Ecclesiastes isn't all doom and gloom. A few things "under the sun" survive the preacher's thorough investigation: godly wisdom, a good wife and family, and whatever labor gives you to eat and drink and other blessings in due portion. Enjoy it, Solomon warns, because you can't take it with you. Life is short, art is longer, but eternity is longest of all.

What is godly wisdom? In Solomon's day it was following the God of Israel and the law he delivered to Moses. But the Jewish prophets spoke of a Messiah, a savior, who would rule the kingdom forever. According to First Kings, Solomon even claimed that he was the fulfillment of the covenant in which God promised David that his son would build God a house that would last forever. Of course Solomon built the Temple, but since he didn't fulfill the condition of that contract to remain obedient to God, as Ecclesiastes makes plain, he clearly wasn't the promised heir. The house God was talking about wasn't a physical house but a dynasty, one that would be established by another descendant, or son, of the king of Israel.

So like most Christians I think of Jesus's Passion at Easter, but I also think of Solomon. For me he's like the thief on the cross who comes to his senses at the last minute. Ecclesiastes is perhaps the most cautionary autobiography of all time. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus tells the Pharisees who reject him that the pagan queen who came to hear Solomon's wisdom is worthy to judge them in the end "and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here." Yet Ecclesiastes is one of only a handful of

Old Testament books that aren’t quoted in the New Testament.

As for the Lost Generation, there’s nothing new under the sun. The conclusion of the whole matter is this: the Son of God is also risen—the Son of David—and he will never die. Neither, he promises, will his true followers.

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