

## 17. Compositional Structure of Ecclesiastes<sup>1</sup>

The key to the compositional structure of this book may be found in the positioning of its mathematic centre. Having determined the centre, one can explore the text from this point on backwards and forwards to ascertain the seams of the composition.

In terms of the 2987 words of the entire text, the centre is to be found in **6:9b**:

גַּם־זֶה הַבָּל וְרֵעוֹת רֵיחַ

*'this too is futility and a chasing of wind'*

1:1-6:9a	1491 words	} 2987 words altogether
<b>v. 9b</b>	<b>5 words</b>	
6:10-12:14	1491 words	

This centre is positioned at the interface of the two equal halves of the book, more precisely at the end of the first half, because its **222** verses divide into 111 + 111

1:1 – 6:9	<b>111 (3x37) verses</b>	<b>1496 (88x17) words</b>
6:10 – 12:14	<b>111 (3x37) verses</b>	<b>1491 words.</b>

This means that the last **5** words of the first half constitute the mathematic centre, a construction which has an exact parallel in Psalm 119 and Third Isaiah! See my analysis of [Psalm 119](#), especially footnote 1. Therefore, we may conclude that **v. 9b** constitutes the mathematical centre of the book as a whole. It is indeed a most appropriate middle, fully deserving the qualification 'meaningful centre'. As a matter of fact, it expresses the gist of the book's message in a nutshell.

The number of verses (**222**) is a multiple of **37** ( $6 \times 37$ ), the numerical value of **הַבָּל**, 'futility' ( $5+2+30=37$ ).

Duane Christensen regards 2,1-11,6 as the 'inner frame' of the book (in a private communication). In the 'outer frame', 1:1-18 and 11:7 - 12:14, the 36 verses ( $18+18$ ), together with the single verse (6:9) in the centre of the entire structure add up to **37**. This means that according to him the whole framework of the book is governed by the number **37**, the numerical value of **הַבָּל**, 'futility'.

Outer frame: 1:1-18		<b>18 verses</b>
Inner frame: 2:1 - 6:8	92 verses	
<b>Centre 6:9</b>		<b>1 verse</b>
Inner frame: 6:10 - 11:6	93 verses	
Outer frame: 11:7 - 12:14		<b>18 verses</b>
Book as a whole	<b>185 (5x37) + 37 = 222 (6x37).</b>	

Christensen's idea about the structure of the book is based upon his view of the 'outer frame' and the supposition that 6:9 constitutes the mathematical centre of the book. However, 6:9 is in fact the centre of his 'inner core', not that of the entire book. Moreover, one may seriously question his delimitation of **1,1-18** and **11,7-12,14**.

<sup>1</sup> This is an improved version of what I wrote in 1999 about the framework of the book in my *Numerical Secrets of the Bible*, North Richlands Hills, 2000, pp. 138-140; downloadable from my website: <http://www.labuschagne.nl/z%26oz/6.pdf>.

A more plausible view of the ‘outer frame’ is that it is constituted by what may be called the *preamble*, 1:1-11 (so delimited in the *Leningrad Codex* by means of the only **א** occurring in the whole text!), and the *epilogue*, 12:9-14. The core of the book (1,12-12,8) begins with 1:12, “*I, Qohelet, ruled as king over Israel in Jerusalem,*” and ends with 12:8, “*Utter futility, says Qohelet, everything is futile.*”

The editor responsible for Ecclesiastes in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* took the liberty of indicating the mathematical centre of the text on the level of verses between 6:9 and 6:10, which is of course correct. He did so by using the current reference found elsewhere in the codex, **הצ"י הספר**, ‘centre of the book’, and by adding in the note the word **בפסוקים**, meaning “in the verses.” However, a glance at *Codex Leningrad* (and at Kittel’s *Biblia Hebraica*) tells us that the sign in the margin signifying the centre of the book and the words **הצ"י הספר**, ‘centre of the book’, are not situated at 6:9/10, but at 6:12! Moreover, there is no trace of the word **בפסוקים**, ‘in the verses’, of which the editor gave the impression that it figures in the codex.<sup>2</sup>

The editor of the *BHS* clearly tried to “correct” the Masorah in *Codex Leningrad*, which is, to say the least, unjustified and misleading, because the codex obviously represents a different view of what the centre of the book is, or more correctly, what the Masoretes regarded as ‘the book’: the core of the present book, 1:12 - 12:8.

As Nobel has suggested, without the **17** verses of the preamble and the epilogue (the **11** verses of 1:1-11 and the **6** verses of 12:9-14), the ‘book itself’ (1:12 - 12:8) is made up of **205** verses. The mathematical centre of these verses, which constitute the core of the book, is the **103rd** verse, **6:12**, which appears to contain the quintessence of Qohelet’s view of life ( $205 = 102 + 1 + 102 = 6 \times 17$ ):

*For who can know what is good for anyone in this life, this brief span of futile existence through which one passes like a shadow? What is to happen afterwards here under the sun, who can tell?*

No wonder that this verse was regarded in the tradition as the meaningful centre of the book. *Codex Leningrad* reflects the following view of the structure of the book, by which the centre was computed on verse level on the basis of the core, 1:12 - 12:8:

The Preamble	1:1-11				11
First half of the book	1:12 - 6:11	<b>102</b>	} 205	}	<b>17</b>
<b>Mathematical centre</b>	<b>6:12</b>	<b>1</b>			
Second half of the book	7:1 - 12:8	<b>102</b>			
The Epilogue	12:9-14				6

The central verse of the ‘core’, **6:12**, is flanked by **102** ( $6 \times 17$ ) verses on either side, which means that the divine Name number **17** has been interwoven into the verse fabric of the text surrounding the central verse.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. H. Nobel has pointed this out to me in a private communication.

Significantly enough, the preamble and the epilogue taken together are made up of exactly **17** verses, which appears to seal the whole book with the divine Name. Exactly the same procedure is to be found in the book of Deuteronomy, where the 5-verse Prologue (1:1-5) and the 12-verse Epilogue (34,1-12) surround the book with their **17** verses to finalize and seal it. This means that the writer of Ecclesiastes was familiar with this numerical feature of the book of Deuteronomy.

If there were any doubts about whether this book belongs in the canon, such doubts could have been removed by the fact that Qohelet was provided with such a watermark of canonicity. With regard to the numerical structure of Ecclesiastes Duane Christensen has remarked: “Qohelet appears to be the most finely crafted numerical composition in the Bible.” Very true indeed, though I would say “*one* of the most finely crafted numerical compositions,” since there are more of such compositional gems, which render the Bible a high-grade literary work of art, as we have seen above and as I have illustrated in the large number of texts I have so far analysed.