

Three interpretations of Ecclesiastes 12: 1 – 8

Michael Fox, author of the Commentary on Ecclesiastes¹ provides a summary of three possible ways of understanding Ecclesiastes 12: 1 – 8. This a summary of his summary. He writes that there are three primary ways to look at this section which he describes as a poem. They are (i) allegorical, (ii) literal, and (iii) eschatological. The table below illustrates each of these as applied to the text. In the VVSS I will be assuming an allegorical interpretation.

Text (as supplied in JPS)	Allegorical	Literal	Eschatological
Overall text of 12: 1 – 8	The aging human body	An estate falling apart A death and buriel event	Human death with cosmic overtones (“when you die, a world is ending – yours)
12:1 – Creator ²			
Sun, moon, stars grow dark	Eyesight fails, cheeks lose their colour	The moment of death	Refs to similar phrases in Joel 2:10, Ezek 32:7-8 (and NT in Matt and Lk)
Clouds come back	Vision blurs from weeping	Weeping and depression won’t stop	Day of the Lord is a day of cloud
Guards of house become shaky	Human limbs become unstable	Servants are in mourning and dismay	Fear and trembling on the day of judgement
Men of valour are bent	Arms, legs, spine weaken and bend	The Rich bend in fear and mourning	Universal terror (Is 21:3)
Maids that grind are few	Teeth fall out	Mill-maids stop work for the funeral	Depopulation. (Is 13:12)
Peering ladies grow dim	Eyes become weak and blind	Women of the house sad / sickly with grief	Fear and gloom everywhere (Joel 2:6)
Doors to street are shut	Bodily apertures suffer or close	Funeral doors close	People hide in terror
Noise of the mill get fainter	Digestion fails	Sounds of domestic life cease	Normal sounds cease (Jer 25:10-11)

¹ Jewish Publication Society Commentary on Ecclesiastes (JPS, Philadelphia, 2004)

² The Hebrew could refer to the Creator, the male ‘seed’, or to the grave

Birdsong quietens	Waking to birdsong? Birds start singing? ³ Light sleeping prevalent	Birdsong as omen, funerary wailing	Birds of ill-omen in desolate world (Is 13:21, 34:13, Jer 50:39)
Strains of music die away	Aging voice fails, deafness	Ref to professional mourners	Lamentation following cataclysm
Afraid of heights	Fear of walking uphill	Mourners fear God	-
Terror on the road	Fear of walking, getting lost	Dismay during the funeral procession	Terrors everywhere
Almond tree blossoms	Hair turns white / hipbone protrudes	Nature but not humans are reborn in spring	-
Grasshopper burdened	Old people get bent / sex is onerous / even a grasshopper seems heavy	Ref to the Carob tree being laden with fruit	-
Caper bush may bud again ⁴	Sexual desire fails, aphrodisiacs don't work	The Caper regains vitality and blooms again	-
Eternal abode	Grave		
Mourners walk about the street	Maggots on the corpse	The funeral procession	Lament on judgement day (Amos 5:15)
Silver cord snaps	The hold on life is broken ⁵		-
Golden bowl crashes	Human life falls and breaks ⁶		-
Jug smashed at cistern	Body lies useless in grave		
Dust returns to ground	Body slowly disintegrates (Gen 2:7, 3:19)		
Lifebreath returns to God	<i>Ruach</i> / lifeforce returns to God (Gen 2:7) ⁷		

³ Hebrew obscure

⁴ Hebrew obscure

⁵ I have read elsewhere that this could refer to the breaking of the spinal cord

⁶ I have read elsewhere that this could refer to the breaking of the skull

⁷ This is not a reference to an immortal soul