

# Introduction to Ecclesiastes

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## The name of the book

In the Hebrew Bible this book is classified as one of the "Writings" and titled "Koheleth."

The name is probably a personification of wisdom. Wisdom is not presented in an abstract form such as doctrine or teaching, but it is presented as a person. A definition of personification is: “the representation of an abstract quality in human form.”. Consider Proverbs 8:

- Doth not wisdom CRY? and understanding put forth HER VOICE? v.1
- She STANDETH in the top of high places, v.2
- the opening of MY LIPS shall be right things. v.6 ...
- Ultimately, the personification of wisdom paints a picture of Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:24 —

1 Corinthians 1:30 — But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:

Colossians 2:2-3 —

James 1:5 — If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

It isn't completely clear what the exact translation of "ecclesiastes" should be, but it is rendered in English as "preacher" or "one who addresses an assembly."

The Hebrew word *qôhelet* is the Qal feminine singular participle of the verb *qahal*, meaning “to call,” “to assemble.” Thus the nickname may allude to one who gathers an assembly to address it or to one who gathers words for instruction. The feminine participle is used elsewhere in the OT to refer to particular offices or occupations (Ezra 2:55; Neh. 7:57, 59).

The English title derives from the Septuagint (*ekklêsiaistês*) via the Latin Vulgate (*Liber Ecclesiastes*). The Septuagint translator(s) interpreted *qôhelet* to refer to a citizen of the assembly or *ekklêsia*. English translations have traditionally translated *qôhelet* as “Preacher” (KJV, RSV), which goes back to Luther’s translation of *qôhelet* as “der Prediger.”[3] This translation is somewhat anachronistic, with its overtones of the NT concept of the *ekklêsia* as the church. *Qôhelet*’s “office” is clearly identified in the epilogue (12:8–14) as that of a wise man, but “preacher” is helpful in that it alerts us to the fact that *Qôhelet* was wise and taught the people knowledge (12:10).

Baker Commentary, p. 20

# What is the message? Why is this negative book in the canon?

Abraham asserts that “to have a canon of Scripture is to have a sophisticated means of grace which is related to formation in holy living in a host of ways. On this . . . reading, Scripture functions to bring one to faith, to make one wise unto salvation, to force one to wrestle with awkward questions about violence and the poor, to comfort those in sorrow, and to nourish hope for the redemption of the world.”[18] This is helpful to remember in terms of the canonicity of Ecclesiastes. Thiselton notes, “Such texts as Job, Ecclesiastes, and the parables do not function primarily as raw-material for Christian doctrine. . . . Their primary function is to invite or to provoke the reader to wrestle actively with the issues, in ways that may involve adopting a series of comparative angles of vision.”[19] Ecclesiastes is one of those books that force us to wrestle with very difficult questions that are pursued relentlessly. In the process it leads us back to the starting point of faith, but this time to know it more fully. Faith, we might remind ourselves, is a gift, but Ecclesiastes reminds us that it is not cheap. Baker, p. 23

Rashbam locates the essence of the argument of Ecclesiastes in 1:2–11. Ecclesiastes here contrasts the transience of human life with the permanence of nature, thus showing the latter’s advantage. None of the experiments in Ecclesiastes is successful in dispelling this melancholy; the only adequate response is to live in conformity to traditional values, to enjoy life calmly while resigned to providence. Present mysteries will be rectified in the future life. Baker, p. 27

Nathan Rosenthal in his work on Ecclesiastes (1858) still maintains Solomonic authorship.[45] In his view, Solomon wrote the book to demonstrate that wisdom is only useful when combined with the fear of God and the keeping of his commands. Baker, p. 28

Contra Jerome, Luther, Melancthon, and Brenz insist that Ecclesiastes is fundamentally positive about civic life even as it wrestles with the difficulties of poor leadership, a problem with which the Reformers were only too familiar. Luther read Ecclesiastes as a book about politics and the family, about human existence in the context of creation order. He envisaged Solomon not as a solitary but as a political figure deeply concerned about social life. In contrast to Jerome’s allegorical and christological exegesis of 4:4–12, Luther read this text as a strong affirmation of communal and civic life. Baker, p. 38

Qoheleth demonstrates the futility of trying to find meaning in a fallen world apart from remembering one’s creator and starting with the fear of the LORD, but he also affirms life, and this tension is resolved at the conclusion of his journey precisely through his exhortation to remember one’s creator. Thus the futility Ecclesiastes exposes is that of trying to find meaning while embracing human autonomy in a world which depends at every point upon its creator. Bartholomew, C. G. (2014). *The Intertextuality of Ecclesiastes and the New Testament*. In C. V. Camp, A. Mein, W. Kynes, & K. Dell (Eds.), *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually* (Vol. 587, p. 232). London; New Delhi; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury.

Remembering his creator is the solid ground to which Qoheleth finally returns and which enables him to affirm life—thereby granting the *carpe diem* passages the final say—without detracting from the brokenness of life as evident in the threefold “before” in 12:1–7. Bartholomew, C. G. (2014). *The Intertextuality of Ecclesiastes and the*

New Testament. In C. V. Camp, A. Mein, W. Kynes, & K. Dell (Eds.), *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually* (Vol. 587, p. 233). London; New Delhi; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury.

In my reading of Ecclesiastes, resolution comes through remembering your creator before ... before ... before ... The decentering of the ego evoked by such remembrance puts one in a position of creature before the Creator and thus in a position to receive instruction and to obey, rather than relying on reason, experience and observation as the royal route to truth. Bartholomew, C. G. (2014). *The Intertextuality of Ecclesiastes and the New Testament*. In C. V. Camp, A. Mein, W. Kynes, & K. Dell (Eds.), *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually* (Vol. 587, p. 235). London; New Delhi; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury.

The carpe diem passages in Ecclesiastes affirm feasting but within the context of a hallowing of the ordinary. They are not, in my view, a representation of despairing hedonism but a typically Israelite affirmation of created life, an affirmation of the ordinary we might say, evoking Charles Taylor's use of the term in his *Sources of the Self*. Bartholomew, C. G. (2014). *The Intertextuality of Ecclesiastes and the New Testament*. In C. V. Camp, A. Mein, W. Kynes, & K. Dell (Eds.), *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually* (Vol. 587, p. 236). London; New Delhi; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury.

Ecclesiastes, I have argued, provides an important witness to the richness of ordinary, created life. Bartholomew, C. G. (2014). *The Intertextuality of Ecclesiastes and the New Testament*. In C. V. Camp, A. Mein, W. Kynes, & K. Dell (Eds.), *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually* (Vol. 587, p. 236). London; New Delhi; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury.

# Authorship

## Possibly Solomon?

Authorship of Ecclesiastes is often ascribed to Solomon.

Ecclesiastes 1:1 — The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Jewish and early Christian tradition attribute the book to Solomon. The author identifies himself as "the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1). He also refers to himself as "the Preacher" (1:1,2,12; 7:27; 12:8,9,10). Many of the experiences spoken of in Ecclesiastes correspond quite well with what we know about Solomon's life. Internal evidences point to Solomon. Note the references to:

- His wisdom (1:16; cf. 1 Ki 3:12)
- His building activities (2:4-6; cf. 1 Ki 7:1-12)
- His wealth (2:7-9; cf. 2 Chr 9:13-28 - all the things he built would require the wealth of an exceptionally wealthy king)
- His activities after writing this book (12:9-10; cf. 1 Ki 4:30-34)

According to rabbinic tradition, Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon in his old age and possibly edited under Hezekiah. If Solomon is indeed the author, then the date the book was written would be around 945 B.C.

## Doubtfully Solomon?

Critical scholars have long rejected the idea of Solomon having written this book before the Babylonian exile. Part of the argument is that the presence of Persian "loan-words" and Aramaic figures of speech, point to a date sometime after the exile.

Some question whether certain conditions described in the book (3:16; 4:13-16; 5:8) existed during the reign of Solomon. But these conditions could have been noted by Solomon in neighboring countries, or in lower-level positions of his administration.

# Frame narrator

A breakthrough for literal interpretation came with Rashbam (1085–1155). He interprets according to the principle that the text has only one meaning. Rashbam displays great sensitivity to the literary nature of Ecclesiastes and was the first to realize that Qohelet was set within a framework; 1:1–2 and the last seven verses were written by those who edited the book. Baker, p. 27

# Key Verse

Ecclesiastes 12:13 — Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

# Key Words

Occurring more than 25 times:

- vanity
- under the sun

Life lived without good results, no matter how lived, is a waste and vain. "All is vanity" (1:2). This theme is repeated by the Preacher time and again:

- Prior to describing his search for meaning (1:14)
- Pleasure is vain (2:1)
- Labor is vain (2:11,22-23; 4:4)
- Human wisdom is vain (2:15)
- All life is vain (2:17)
- Leaving an inheritance is vain (2:18-21)
- Earthly existence is vain (3:19-21)
- Acquiring riches over family is vain (4:7-8)
- Political popularity is vain (4:16)
- Many dreams and many words is vain (5:7)
- Loving abundance is vain (5:10)
- Wealth without the gift of God to enjoy it is vain (6:2)
- Wandering desire is vain (6:9)
- Foolish laughter is vain (7:6)
- Injustice in this life is vain (8:14)
- The days of darkness is vain (11:8)
- Childhood and youth is vain (11:10)
- At the conclusion of the book (12:8)

Indeed, the key word in this book is "vanity." It occurs 35 times in 29 verses. It means "futility, uselessness, nothingness." But a key phrase to be noted is "under the sun." It is found 29 times in 27 verses. It suggests that this message of vanity is true when one looks at life purely from an earthly perspective. Leave God and eternity out of the equation, and life is truly vanity!

# Contents

The 12 Chapters of this book contains the reflections and experiences of someone whose mind is in conflict over the problems of life. What value or purpose is there for living?

After speaking of his disillusionments, he presents a materialistic view of life where there is nothing better than the carnal enjoyment of the pleasures of life.

Throughout the book the writer is struggling with this as though he would utter profound truths, he would often return to the materialistic theme. Koheleth is in conflict in his own mind throughout the book that thought he speaks great truths at time, he'll revisit the value of materialism and pleasure. He is struggling and confused himself until the final conclusion in 12:13. We live in an age of confusion. We must have our answer ready.

- Our witness must be consistent and clear.
- They are confused as they do not live for God.
- Solomon was confused when he left off God's Word.
- The majority of our witness will be in flashes ... Just a word here or a smile there ... Rare are occasions to admonish for hours at a time ... More often will be the stressful moments and timely questions
- Not memorizing the answers but having an experience. (Like when taking a test in school and then the teacher randomizes or shuffles the test questions.)
- Our testimony should be outflow of our experience. Walking with Jesus. His person.

The book concludes with the author apparently emerging from his doubts and reaching the noble conclusion in 12:13. Therefore another message in this book is the importance of serving God throughout life. This is the message the Preacher would leave with the young (11:9-12:1), and is stated in his final words:

## Epicureanism and other philosophies in Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes prods us to consider our presentation of the Gospel. It is common for the upright to become flabbergasted by the logical gymnastics and deceptions used to justify sin, denial of God and explain life. The contrast of light and darkness is great and our thoughts may be "that's just stupid", but our Gospel presentation must be more evangelistic than that.

Paul probably was dumbfounded internally by what he found at Athens, but his chosen action was a clear presentation of the Gospel.

Acts 17:23 — For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.

The author of Ecclesiastes does this well as he suggests to the reader, "Ok, let us consider to the end what you have concluded about life." Does life have a point? If so, what is the point? How can we make sense of being here?

Ecclesiastes does not teach epicureanism or any of the several other philosophies suggested in it. Ecclesiastes is a mirror held up to humanity. This book is a self-look and inspection of the human condition and some common conclusions. Koheleth helps us consider who we are and why we are under the sun by walking down the different avenues common to man.

One example of the philosophies considered in Ecclesiastes is epicureanism:

"Epicureanism is an ancient school of philosophy founded in Athens by Epicurus. It rejects determinism and advocated hedonism (pleasure as the highest good), but of a restrained kind: mental pleasure was regarded more highly than physical, and the ultimate pleasure was held to be freedom from anxiety and mental pain, especially that arising from needless fear of death and of the gods."

Ecclesiastes 2:24 — There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.

Ecclesiastes 3:12,13 — I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life. 13 And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God.

The conclusion to epicureanism or any of the other human philosophies void of the one true God, is that these "streets" are "dead end streets." Knowing this from the beginning, we must be more prepared to reach out to the lost and better explain the gospel than just resorting to "bullying" and "manipulative" tactics.

How ready is our answer for those caught in the snare of the enemy? Some absurdities when humanity looks for fulfillment and meaning while shutting God out concern:

- Gender (Genesis 1:27)
- Marriage (Matthew 19:5,6)
- Truth is relative (John 18:37,38; John 14:6; 1 John 5:20)
- Do what feels good (Psalm 16:11; Proverbs 21:17; Galatians 5:19-21)
- Hypocrisy in religion (Matthew 7:5; James 1:26)
- Religion and violence (James 1:27)

## Quotable Book

- There is nothing new under the sun (1:9)
- To everything there is a season (3:1)
- Two are better than one (4:9)
- Eat, drink, and be merry (8:15)
- Time and chance happen to them all (9:11)
- He who digs a pit will fall into it (10:8)
- Money answers everything (10:19)

Ecclesiastes is one of the more quotable books of the Bible. But, should we? How should we interpret and use this book? Like the book of Job, the best counsel can be found at the end of the book. The advice in-between must be taken with caution.

Throughout the book, we will find what Koholeth later describes as "goads" and "nails."

Ecclesiastes 12:11 — The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd.

These are wise sayings that will "prod" our thinking, and exhortations that will provide stability and direction for living. Ecclesiastes is certainly a book worthy of careful study!

## The organization of our study

- Chapters 1 & 2 (Introduction, the search, and conclusions)
- Chapter 3 (The natural man's view of the weary round of life.)
- Chapter 4 (The study of the social evils apart from faith)
- Chapter 5 (Religious duties, riches, and a conclusion.)
- Chapter 6 (The vanity of long life.)
- Chapter 7 (Series of wise sayings and evil woman.)
- Chapter 8 (Civil duties, uncertainty of life, certainty of divine judgment and injustices of life, epicureanism, the work of God and man)

- Chapter 9 (Like things happen to the righteous and the wicked, wisdom is preeminent and often unappreciated)
  - Chapter 10 (Various wise sayings and the contrast between wisdom and folly)
  - Chapter 11 (Benevolences and advice to the young.)
  - Chapter 12 (Description of old age and conclusion concerning the highest duty of man.)
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