

Book of Ecclesiastes Explained

Title

The Hebrew title assigned to the speaker in the book is Qohelet, “One Who Addresses an Assembly,” and thus “Preacher,” or better, “Teacher.”

The Greek translation of the word is Ecclesiastes, from which the English title is derived.

Within the history of the church there have been two basic views on the theology of the book.

On the one hand, some describe the contents of the book as pessimistic, cynical, skeptical, hedonistic, or agnostic, and picture the author as a man of doubt who has wandered far from God.

Along with Ruth, Song of Solomon, Esther and Lamentations, Ecclesiastes stands with the Old Testaments books of the Megilloth, or “five scrolls”.

Later rabbis read these books in the synagogue on 5 special occasions during the year, Ecclesiastes being read on Pentecost.

Author – Date

The autobiographical profile of the book’s writer unmistakably points to Solomon.

Evidence abounds such as:

- (1) The titles fit Solomon, “son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1), and “king over Israel in Jerusalem” (1:12);
- (2) The author’s moral odyssey chronicles Solomon’s life (1 Kings:2-11); and
- (3) The role of one who “taught the people knowledge” and wrote “many proverbs” (12:9), corresponds to his life.

All point to Solomon, the son of David, as the author.

Once Solomon is accepted as the author, the date and occasion become clear.

Solomon was writing, probably in his later years (no later than ca. 931 B.C.), primarily to warn the young people of his kingdom, without omitting others.

He warned them to avoid walking through life on the path of human wisdom; he exhorted them to live by the revealed wisdom of God (12:9-14).

Background – Setting

Solomon's reputation for possessing extraordinary wisdom fits the Ecclesiastes profile.

David recognized his son's wisdom (1 Kings 2:6, and 9), before God gave Solomon an additional measure.

After he received a "wise and discerning heart" from the Lord (1 Kings 3:7-12), Solomon gained renown for being exceedingly wise by rendering insightful decisions (1 Kings 3:16-28), a reputation that attracted "all the kings of the earth" to his courts (1 Kings 4:34).

In addition, he composed songs and proverbs (1 Kings 4:32; compare 12:9), activity befitting only the ablest of sages.

Solomon's wisdom, like Job's wealth, surpassed the wisdom "of all the sons of the east" (1 Kings 4:30; Job 1:3).

The book is applicable to all who would listen and benefit, not so much from Solomon's experiences, but from the principles he drew as a result.

Its aim is to answer some of life's most challenging questions, particularly where they seem contrary to Solomon's expectations.

This has led some unwisely to take the view that Ecclesiastes is a book of skepticism.

But in spite of amazingly unwise behavior and thinking, Solomon never let go of his faith in God (12:13-14).

Interpretation – Purpose

Within the history of the church there have been two basic views on the theology of the book.

On the one hand, some describe the contents of the book as pessimistic, cynical, skeptical, hedonistic, or agnostic, and picture the author as a man of doubt who has wandered far from God.

On the other hand, many interpret the book quite positively: the author is a man of faith, a realist, who sees that man simply cannot put the whole of life together.

The latter view is favored since the author believes God is good (2:24; 3:13); believes God has a wise plan (3:11, 14; 7:14; 8:17); believes God is just (3:17; 8:11-13); and always exhorts men to fear God (8:12, 13; 12:13, 14).

The author's declaration that "all is vanity" envelops the primary message of the book, (1:2 and 12:8).

The word translated "vanity" is used in a least three ways throughout the book.

In each case, it looks at the nature of man's activity "under the sun" as:

- (1) Fleeting, this has in view the vapor like or transitory nature of life (James 4:14);
- (2) Futile or meaningless, which focuses on the cursed condition of the universe and the debilitating effects it has on man's earthly experience; or
- (3) Incomprehensible or enigmatic, which gives consideration to life's unanswerable questions.

Solomon draws upon all 3 meanings in Ecclesiastes.

While the context in each case will determine which meaning Solomon is focusing upon, the most recurring meaning of vanity is "incomprehensible or unknowable, referring to the mysteries of God's purposes.

The thought of the book centers in six key ideas.

Three of these are negative and revolve around the problems of life:

- (1) All is vanity;
- (2) Man is limited;
- (3) God is hidden.

The other three are positive and give the solution to life's crises:

- (4) Fear God and keep His commandments;
- (5) Enjoy life;
- (6) Use wisdom properly.

All six ideas are scattered throughout the book, but taken together they demonstrate that the purpose of the book is to show men that they should lead godly and joyous lives, though they live in a world of divinely condoned mysteries.

Solomon's conclusion to "fear God and keep His commandments" (12:13-14), is more than the book's summary.

It is the only hope of the good life and the only reasonable response of faith and obedience to sovereign God.

He precisely works out all activities under the sun, each in its time according to His perfect plan, but also discloses only as much as His perfect wisdom dictates and holds all men accountable.

Those who refuse to take God and His Word seriously are doomed to lives of the severest vanity.

Historical – Theological themes

As is true with most biblical Wisdom literature, little historical narrative occurs in Ecclesiastes, apart from Solomon's own personal pilgrimage.

The kingly sage studied life with high expectations but repeatedly bemoaned its shortcomings, which he acknowledges were due to the curse (Gen. 3:14-19).

Ecclesiastes represents the painful autobiography of Solomon who, for much of his life, squandered God's blessings on his own personal pleasure rather than God's glory.

He wrote to warn subsequent generations not to make the same tragic error, in much the same manner as Paul wrote to the Corinthians (compare 1 Cor. 1:18-31; 2:13-16).

The Hebrew word translated "vanity," "vanities," and "vain life" expresses the futile attempt to be satisfied apart from God.

This word is used 38 times expressing the many things hard to understand about life.

All earthly goals and ambitions when pursued as ends in themselves produce only emptiness.

Paul was probably echoing Solomon's dissatisfaction when he wrote, " ... the creation was subjected to futility" (Solomon's "vanity"; Romans 8:19-21).

Solomon's experience with the effects of the curse (see Gen. 3:17-19), led him to view life as "chasing after the wind".

Solomon asked, "What advantage does a man have in all his work ... ? (1:3), a question he repeated (in 2:22 and 3:9).

The wise king gave over a considerable portion of the book to addressing this dilemma.

The impossibility of discovering both the inner workings of God's creation and the personal providence of God in Solomon's life were also deeply troubling to the king, as they were to Job.

But the reality of judgment for all, despite many unknowns, emerged as the great certainty.

In light of this judgment by God, the only fulfilled life is one lived in proper recognition of God and service to Him.

Any other kind of life is frustrating and pointless.

A proper balance of the prominent “enjoy life” theme with that of “divine judgment” tethers the reader to Solomon’s God with the sure chord of faith.

For a time, Solomon suffered from the imbalance of trying to enjoy life without regard for the fear of Yahweh’s judgment holding him on the path of obedience.

In the end, he came to grasp the importance of obedience.

The tragic results of Solomon’s personal experience, coupled with the insight of extraordinary wisdom, make Ecclesiastes a book from which all believers can be warned and grow in their faith (compare 2:1-26).

This book shows that if one perceives each day of existence, labor and basic provision as a gift from God, and accepts whatever God gives, then that person lives an abundant life (compare John 10:10).

However, one who looks to be satisfied apart from God will live with futility regardless of their accumulations.