



An Introduction to the Book of Ecclesiastes

Author, Title and Date

The traditional English title comes from the book's heading in the Latin Vulgate translation, *Liber Ecclesiastes*, and is an anglicised version of the Greek and Latin renderings of the speaker's designation in Ecclesiastes 1:1, Greek *ekklēsiastēs* or Hebrew *Qoheleth*. The Hebrew word is related to the term for 'assembly', Hebrew *qahal*, and may be a title for someone who addresses an assembly, hence it is often translated 'Preacher'. It could also refer to someone who possesses some other leadership role within an assembly. Scholars have debated whether *Qoheleth* is best understood as a personal name or a title, although the latter seems more likely in view of 12:8, where the definite article 'the' precedes the word.

Strictly speaking, then, the book is anonymous, given that no personal name is attached to it. Nevertheless, traditional Jewish and Christian scholarship has often ascribed authorship to Solomon thus dating it to the 10th Century BC, since the book describes the Preacher as the 'son of David, king in Jerusalem' (1:1), and as someone who was surpassingly wise (1:16) and had a very prosperous reign (2:1-9), which describes the reign of Solomon as confirmed in 1 Kings Chapters 3-4. However, such arguments for Solomonic authorship have been called into question on several grounds:

1. The phrase 'son of David' could refer to any legitimate Davidic descendant, as it does in Matthew 1:20 with reference to Joseph and frequently throughout the NT with reference to Jesus Christ.
2. The distinctive nature of the Hebrew language used in the book is widely believed to be indicative of a date much later than the 10th Century BC, although some scholars explain the linguistic evidence in terms of other factors, such as a later modernising of the language, the influence of foreign languages such as Phoenician or Aramaic, or the possibility of a regional dialect.

3. The Preacher's remarks imply a historical setting that seems in tension with the Solomonic era, such as the fact that many have preceded him as king in Jerusalem, e.g. Ecclesiastes 1:16, and 2:7-9, although these may include non-Israelite kings, that injustice and oppression are openly practiced (3:16-17, 4:1-3 and 8:10-11), that he has observed firsthand the foolishness of kings (4:13-16 and 10:5-6), and their abuse of royal power (8:2-9).

On the other hand, other proposals also have difficulties, for it is difficult to find any later 'king in Jerusalem' (1:1) who is a better candidate than Solomon for being able to claim that he had: **<<acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me>>** (1:16), or that he had great possessions: **<<more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem>>** (2:7). In light of the book's anonymity and the difficulty in using linguistic evidence to establish its date of composition, it is best simply to recognise that some interpreters have concluded the author was Solomon, while others think it was some other writer later than Solomon. Regardless, the book claims that its wisdom ultimately comes from the 'one Shepherd' (12:11), i.e. from God (Genesis 48:15, Psalm 23:1, 28:9 and 80:1).

Theme and Interpretation of Ecclesiastes

The theme of Ecclesiastes is the necessity of fearing God in a fallen, and therefore frequently confusing and frustrating world. The unique character of the book, however, has led to its being interpreted in widely diverse ways: as a statement of pessimism, optimism, religious and philosophical scepticism, either the Preacher's own or a scepticism assumed for the purpose of demonstrating the futility of an irreligious point of view, faithful belief, heterodoxy, and orthodoxy, to name only a few. Such contradictory understandings of the book are made possible by several of its distinctive features:

1. The book's refrain 'vanity of vanities' is open to very different interpretations, see Key Themes, and one's understanding of this important thematic statement will significantly influence one's interpretation of the book as a whole.
2. The attempt to identify any consistent message in the book encounters difficulty because of a number of alleged contradictions within it, e.g. wisdom 'preserves life' in 7:12 but fails to do so in 2:16; death is preferable to life's misery in 4:2 but life is superior to death in 9:4-6.
3. The Preacher makes a number of statements which, on the surface, appear highly unorthodox, e.g. 7:16, and at odds with other biblical statements; compare, for example, 2:16 with Proverbs 3:18, or Ecclesiastes 11:9 with Numbers 15:39. While the book's epilogue (Ecclesiastes 12:9-12) affirms the Preacher's wisdom, a number of scholars have asserted that these

closing verses misrepresent his teaching and his purpose in writing, and therefore conclude that they are to be viewed as a misguided later addition that was intended to make the heterodoxy of the book more palatable to the original readers.

According to the basic interpretative approach adopted here, the Preacher is not to be viewed as some kind of sceptical iconoclast but rather as a teacher of orthodoxy, whose musings on God and human existence present a consistent message that is to be viewed as standing within the broad stream of the biblical wisdom tradition. The epilogue faithfully distils the weightiest themes of the book. In several instances the book affirms themes from elsewhere in the Wisdom Literature: for example, compare 5:2 with Proverbs 10:19; 5:15 with Job 1:21; 7:1 with Proverbs 22:1; 8:12 with Proverbs 1:7; and 10:3 with Proverbs 13:16, most notably the importance of 'the fear of the Lord', thus indicating its basic agreement with the larger biblical message.

At the same time, however, the Preacher is distinctly original and creative in his thought and manner of expression and is not merely restating what other sages have taught. As a genuine wisdom teacher, he has a gift for penetrating observation and for stating things in a profound and challenging manner that spur the listener on to deeper thought and reflection. Many of the difficulties or paradoxes in the book can be reasonably explained in terms of:

1. His provocative style.
2. the general method of wisdom teaching, which can state apparently contradictory principles, e.g. Proverbs 26:4-5, and leave it to the listener to work out which principle applies in a particular situation.
3. The fact that, rather than focusing primarily on stating general truths that are applicable to most situations, as is the tendency with the teaching of the book of Proverbs, the Preacher devotes much of his attention to examining unique individual situations, e.g. 4:7-8, 5:13-14 and 9:13-16, which can represent deviations from what one might normally expect, for example 4:13-16 and 9:11. Thus, while he does not deny the validity of the general depiction of reality found in the Wisdom Literature, the Preacher is also keenly aware of the complexities of life in a fallen world, which result in many individual exceptions to the 'rules' of biblical wisdom.

One can see the Preacher's most distinctive contribution from the way he uses the term 'find out'. Every human being wants to find out and understand all the ways of God in the world, but he cannot, because he is not God. And yet the faithful do not despair but cling to God, who deserves their trust; they can leave it to him to make sense of it all, while they seek to learn what it means to 'fear God and keep his commandments', even when they cannot see what God is doing. This is true wisdom.

Purpose

Like the rest of the Bible's Wisdom Literature, Ecclesiastes is concerned with imparting wisdom and knowledge to the people of God (12:9-11), and teaching them to fear the Lord. The speaker's designation indicates that he is addressing an assembly of some kind, although his counsel in 5:1-7 would seem to suggest a setting outside of the temple. The socioeconomic diversity of his audience is indicated by his remarks directed toward royal counsellors, e.g. 8:1-9, as well as common farmers, for example 11:6.

Key Themes

1. *The tragic reality of the fall*. The Preacher is painfully aware that the creation has been 'subjected to futility' and is 'groaning ... in the pains of childbirth' (Romans 8:20 and 8:22), and his more troubled musings are to be viewed as the cry of the heart of one who likewise is 'groaning inwardly' as he eagerly awaits the resurrection age (Romans 8:23). It is especially noteworthy that when Paul refers to the creation being 'subjected to futility', the Greek word he uses, *mataiotēs*, is the one utilised 38 times in the LXX version of Ecclesiastes to render the word vanity (Hebrew *hebel*), indicating that this book might well have formed the background to Paul's thought in Romans 8:18 onwards. The emphasis on the fall and its disastrous effects is closely related to the book's other key themes described below.
2. *The vanity of life*. The book begins and ends with the exclamation, 'Vanity of vanities! All is vanity' (Ecclesiastes 1:2 and 12:8). While vanity is obviously a key word throughout the book, its 38 occurrences account for more than half of its total usage in the OT, it is notoriously difficult to translate. Literally the word means 'vapour' and conjures up a picture of something fleeting, ephemeral and elusive, with different nuances to be ascertained from each context. When applied to human undertakings or the pleasures and joys of earthly life, it indicates that <<***the present form of this world is passing away***>> (1 Corinthians 7:31b); applied to the darker realities of living in a fallen world, e.g. death, it expresses frustration, anger or sorrow; applied to the Preacher's search for understanding of all things, it indicates something that remained incomprehensible or inscrutable to him, e.g. Ecclesiastes 1:14-15. This last-mentioned usage is particularly significant, as the book presents itself as primarily a quest to figure out all of life, refer especially to 1:12-18.
3. *Sin and death*. Human beings forfeited the righteousness they originally possessed before God (7:29), and thus all people are sinners (7:20). The opening chapters of Genesis make it clear that death was a result of the fall (Genesis 2:16-17 and 3:19), and the Preacher is only too aware of this dreadful reality that affects everyone, e.g. 2:14-17, 3:18-21 and 6:6.

4. *The joy and the frustration of work.* God gave Adam work to accomplish prior to the fall (Genesis 2:15), but part of the punishment of his sin was that it would become painful toil (Genesis 3:17-19). Both realities are borne out in the Preacher's experience, as he finds his work to be both satisfying as well as aggravating.
5. *The grateful enjoyment of God's good gifts.* The Preacher spends a great deal of time commenting on the twisted realities of a fallen world, but this does not blind him to the beauty of the world God created (3:11), or cause him to despise God's good gifts of human relationships, food, drink and satisfying labour. These are to be received humbly and enjoyed fully as blessings from God.
6. The fear of God. The fact that 'all is vanity' should drive people to take refuge in God, whose work endures forever (3:14), and who is a 'rock' for those who take shelter in him, e.g. Psalm 18:2, 62:8 and 94:22. In other words, it summons people to 'fear' or 'revere' God.

History of Salvation Summary

The history of salvation is the grand overarching story of the Bible; embracing it gives coherence to all of life. It calls each of God's people to own the story, and it dignifies each one with a role in the further outworking of the story. Nevertheless, it is impossible for any human being to fully grasp how his or her decisions will contribute to God's grand scheme; and Ecclesiastes helps people to see that they do not have to understand this. Each of the faithful, by 'fearing God and keeping his commandments' (12:13), participates in ways that he cannot 'find out', trusting that God will take care of the big plan. Despite the fact that the Preacher is a great king and a teacher of true wisdom, he ultimately surpasses Solomon and others. From a Christian theological perspective, reading the biblical story line as a whole, one can see analogies between the Preacher and Jesus Christ who is the 'Son of David' (Matthew 1:1), king (Matthew 2:2, Acts 17:7, Revelation 17:14 and 19:16), 'wisdom from God' (1 Corinthians 1:24 and 1:30), and 'one Shepherd' (Ezekiel 34:23, 37:24, John 10:11 and 10:16), in whose ministry 'something greater than Solomon' has arrived (Luke 11:31).

Literary Features

Although Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature, it does not read like a typical collection of proverbs. The proverbs are moulded into clusters, and furthermore there is a unifying plot line that organises the units together. The units fall into the three categories of recollections, reflections, and mood pieces. All of these are expressed by a narrator who in effect tells the story of his quest to find satisfaction in life. This quest is reconstructed from the vantage point of someone whose quest ended satisfactorily. The transitions between units often keep the quest in view: 'so I turned to consider', 'again I saw', 'then I saw', etc. As the

quest unfolds, one is continuously aware of the discrepancy between the narrator's present outlook and his futile search undertaken in the past. In effect, the speaker recalls the labyrinth of dead ends that he pursued, recreating his restless past with full vividness but not representing it as his mature outlook. Along with the narrative thread, the observational format of much of the material gives the book a meditative cast.

This mini-anthology is strongly unified by recurrent words and motifs. The phrase 'under the sun' or its equivalent occurs more than 30 times. The Hebrew words translated vanity (*hebel*), and 'find' (*matsa'*) appear throughout the book and suggest the fleetingness of any human being's grasp of the full meaning of events. To keep the reader rooted in the real world, the author repeatedly uses the imagery of eating, drinking, toil, sleep, death and the cycles of nature.

The proverb is the basic building block of the book. While all wisdom literature tends to make use of the resources of poetry, including the verse form of parallelism, the Book of Ecclesiastes flaunts its poetic medium much more than ordinary wisdom literature does. The author is a master of image, metaphor and simile. The book is partly observational and descriptive in format; one should approach such passages in a meditative way, reflecting on experience of the phenomena that the author describes. The book is also very affective, so the reader needs to be receptive of the moods that it seeks to instil.

Outline

- I. First Catalogue of vanities (1:1-2:26)
 - a. Reflections of a Royal Philosopher (1:1-11)
 - b. The Futility of Seeking Wisdom (1:12-18)
 - c. The Futility of Self-Indulgence (2:1-11)
 - d. Wisdom and Joy Given to One Who Pleases God (2:12-26)
 - i. More on the Vanity of Wisdom (2:12-17)
 - ii. The Vanity of Labour (2:18-26)
- II. Everything Has Its Time (3:1-8)
- III. The God-Given Task (3:9-15)
- IV. Second Catalogue of Vanities (3:16-4:16)
 - a. Judgement and the Future Belong to God (3:16-4:8)
 - b. The Value of a Friend (4:9-16)
- V. Reverence, Humility, and Contentment (5:1-20)
- VI. The Frustration of Desires (6:1-12)

- VII. A Disillusioned View of Life (7:1-14)
- VIII. The Riddles of Life (7:15-29)
- IX. More on Life 'Under the Sun' (8:1-12:8)
 - a. Obey the King and Enjoy Yourself (8:1-9)
 - b. God's Ways Are Inscrutable (8:10-17)
 - i. The Importance of Fearing God (8:10-13)
 - ii. The Limits of Human Knowledge (8:14-17)
 - c. Take Life as It Comes (9:1-12)
 - i. The Unpredictability of Life and Certainty of Death (9:1-6)
 - ii. Finding Enjoyment as Circumstances Allow (9:7-10)
 - iii. More on the Unpredictability of Life (9:11-12)
 - d. The Paths of Wisdom and Foolishness (9:13-12:8)
 - i. Wisdom Superior to Folly (9:13-18)
 - ii. Miscellaneous Observations (10:1-20)
 - iii. The Value of Diligence (11:1-6)
 - iv. Youth and Old Age (11:7-12:8)
- X. Epilogue (12:9-14)