



# ECCLESIASTES

Survey of the Old Testament: The Writings

Fall 2006

## Introduction (Chapter 1)

### Name (1:1)

In the Hebrew bible, this book is called “Qoheleth,” which is most commonly translated as “preacher,” or sometimes “teacher.” This appears to be the title of the author of this book, appearing 7 times (1:1, 2, 12, 7:27, 12:8, 9, 10). The term literally one who collects or gathers. From this a more general meaning is usually interpreted as one who collects an assembly into a meeting in order to teach them. From this, the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew bible, translated this word as “Ecclesiastes,” which means one who calls an assembly.

However, using the literal meaning of a collector or gatherer, *qoheleth* probably better means, “the searcher<sup>1</sup>” or “the seeker.” This fits more appropriately with the purpose of the book, as the author is in search of the meaning of life.

*(Ecclesiastes 1:12-13 NASB) I, the (Seeker),... set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven.*

### Authorship & Date (1:1, 12)

#### Evidence of Authorship

The book states that the author of this book is “the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” It was not until the 17<sup>th</sup> century that Solomon’s authorship was questioned. There are two arguments used against his authorship:

- The first suggests that because we have not indication in Kings or Chronicles that Solomon repented of his sin in his old age, he could not have been the writer of this book<sup>2</sup>. That argument suggests that Solomon had to have been repentant when he wrote the book. To the contrary, the tone of the book almost suggests a lack of repentance on the author’s part. It seems to say, “it’s too late for me, but maybe you get it right.” God can use an unrepentant man to write inspired scripture.
- The second suggests that the language used in Ecclesiastes is closer to the language of the late Persian period rather than the that of Solomon’s day. Recent linguistic evidence suggests that such an argument is inconclusive at best.<sup>3</sup>

The mood of the book suggests that Solomon wrote this book late in life. I picture him as a cynical, foolish old man who is looking back at his life and wonders what purpose there was to all he accomplished. After pursuing wisdom, riches, pleasure, and all of life, he concludes that his life was in vain.

<sup>1</sup> Ray C. Stedman. *Is This All There Is to Life: Answers from Ecclesiastes*. (Grand Rapids MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1999), 11.

<sup>2</sup> H.C. Leupold. *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*. (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1972), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Donald R. Glenn, “Ecclesiastes,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. (Victor Books, 1988).

## **Background of the Author**

Solomon was the King of the nation of Israel, almost 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus. He was well known for his wealth and his wisdom.

### *The Wealth of Solomon*

Solomon was the richest man in his day. His annual income was 50,000 lbs. of gold (2 Chronicles 9:13). Besides that, Solomon had a side business-- the buying and selling of horses. Within the eastern Mediterranean, Solomon had a monopoly on the horse trade. Horses were weapons of war, and the country that had the most horses could dominate in battle. Solomon was the arms dealer of his time, and by being so, he could control the strength of the neighboring nations. He himself had over 4,000 horses (2 Chronicles 9:25).

So many people lived within Solomon's palace, that the bible says just to feed the people in Solomon's court they butchered 30 cows and 100 sheep each day! (1 Kings 4:22) Solomon built for himself a beautiful temple to God, the interior of which was lined completely out of gold and cedar. His own palace was magnificent, with a throne made out of ivory and overlaid with gold. His dishes and drinking cups were made of gold. 2 Chronicles 9:27 says "that silver (was) as common as stones in Jerusalem, and... cedars as plentiful as sycamore trees..."

### *The Wisdom of Solomon*

The Bible says that Solomon was the wisest man of his day. People from all the nations would come to hear his wisdom. He was a scientist. He had tremendous knowledge about biology, writing about animals, birds, and plants. 1 Kings 4:33, "he taught about everything from the great cedar trees of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the walls."

He was a philosopher. He wrote the book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, two of the most philosophical books in the Bible. His logic and understanding have relevance even today. 1 Kings 4:30-31 states Solomon was wiser than all the wise men of Egypt and Mesopotamia, and wiser than the wisest of Israel.

He was a theologian. He understood the nature of God and understood how we should honor and obey him. At the dedication to the temple he built, he gave a wonderful speech that shows a very deep understanding of God's nature (1 Kings 8).

### *Solomon was worldly.*

Solomon was also a lover. This man had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3). He had the opportunity to involve himself in every form of sexual activity imaginable (Ecclesiastes 2:8)

Solomon was an amazing diplomat. He arranged treaties with all of the neighboring nations by marrying the daughters of the kings around him. He negotiated favorable trade with surrounding nations. His was not an empire built with military might, but through diplomacy and economic domination.

Solomon was also a poet. He wrote over 1,000 songs in his lifetime (1 Kings 4:32). His skill as a songwriter was so developed that the one song we still have a copy of today was called by the Jews, "The Song of Songs," meaning the best of songs.

But Solomon also got caught up in his wealth and his wives. Late in life he turned from God and built temples to the gods of his wives. He was condemned by God for his behavior and as a result his son would face a civil war and rebellion where more than half his kingdom would be torn away from him.

## **Theme (1:2-11)**

### **Thesis Stated (verses 2-3)**

Solomon states the conclusion of his book right at the beginning of his book. What is the result of life? Meaningless, Vanity, Uselessness.

*(Ecclesiastes 1:2 NASB) "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."*

In Hebrew, the word translated vanity is used of things which soon vanish away, like a vapor, a breath, or a bubble<sup>4</sup>. This is your life. It's like a bubble. There it is, and just when you try to reach out and grab it, poof! It is gone. It is meaningless. It is useless. It just doesn't make sense.

In Hebrew, if you want to state something in the superlative, you repeat the phrase. So by stating "vanity of vanities," the author is saying this is the greatest or the most extreme of vanities.

## Purpose (1:12-18)

### The Pursuit of Meaning (1:12-14)

The purpose of the book is to provide a comprehensive examination of life in order to determine the meaning of life. Solomon is going to seek out every experience in life in order to try to find if there is any meaning at all to life.

*(Ecclesiastes 1:13-14 NASB) And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind.*

With life so meaningless, what are some ways that we try to make sense of life? What do we pursue to make life meaningful? Solomon has four suggestions in this chapter. But we already know the conclusion.

### Seeking Meaning through Hard Work (1:3-7)

People will pour themselves into their careers. They try to find meaning in their jobs. There seems to be meaning, some sense to life in our jobs. I am accomplishing something. I am building something; I have created something that will last. Life makes sense.

But like the soap bubble, poof, that which we have created is gone. A businessman pours his life into the company, and then without warning becomes the victim of corporate downsizing. A farmer toils to grow and harvest a crop, and then without warning the weather freezes, or a heavy rain comes, and destroys the crop. A teacher devotes building into the life of her students, only to realize they could care less about the subject matter.

In Greek mythology, there is the story of Sisyphus, who is condemned by the gods to an eternity of pushing the ball up a hill, only to have it roll back down again once he gets to the top. When we realize our work doesn't make a difference, when our work is meaningless, in vain, like a soap bubble, we lose hope.

### We Try Something New and Different (1:8-10)

Our culture is caught up in the new and different. There used to be commercials on television for Mountain Dew where the characters would go through a series of adrenaline pumping, extreme events. They would then say, "been There, Done That." We are the "Been There, Done That," generation. The implication is, of course, I've done that, and it didn't bring me lasting happiness, so show me something new.

The problem with pursuing the new and different is that just the time you get caught up with the new thing, you find that it too quickly becomes blah, and you have to constantly be pursuing something else to keep that excitement alive.

Solomon says you get tired of pursuing the same old stuff. "The eye has never had enough of seeing." And really, the stuff that seems so new and different is not so different after all. There is

<sup>4</sup> William Wilson, "Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies," MacDonald: McLean VA, p. 465.

nothing so new under the sun that it brings a lasting hope. When you come to realize that the grass is not greener on the other side of the fence, you come to realize what hopelessness there is in life.

### **We Try to Leave a Legacy (1:11)**

When we are younger we tend to try to find happiness in the new and different. But when we get older, we come to realize that that is a dead end path, and we start thinking longer term. When faced with our own mortality, we often look to building a legacy, building up something in our lifetime which will survive us. We hope to make sense of life by knowing that future generations will have received the benefit of our existence.

I've heard at funerals the statement, "he or she will live forever in our memories of them." We want people to remember us, to remember what we've done. We want to have made a difference for having lived.

But Solomon tells us that in one or two generations, whatever you've accomplished will be at best a footnote in some history book, and more realistically will never be remembered at all. There is no hope in trying to leave a legacy.

### **We Try to Become Educated (1:14-18)**

Today, many try to make sense of life by pursuing an education. The thought is, if we know more, we can find solutions to our problems. We think we can solve any problem if we just sit down and work on it enough. That is where we can put our hope.

But Solomon was the wisest, most educated person of his day. And his conclusion was education was meaningless, like chasing after the wind.

In verse 15, Solomon states that "what is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted." Solomon is saying, the more you know, the more you realize how lost we are as a people and how little control we have in our life. As our knowledge has increased, we have come to realize how little we really know. Our universe keeps getting bigger and more finely detailed. And we keep becoming less and less significant. We are becoming less and less important and unable to affect the grand scheme of the universe.

No wonder Solomon says, "for with much knowledge comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief."

## **Literary Style**

### **Pessimism Literature**

The book of Ecclesiastes fits into a style of literature written in the period of history known as the "pessimism literature." This is a sub-set of the larger genre of wisdom literature found throughout the middle east around 1,000 BC. There is both ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian literature of roughly the same era which makes observations about the meaninglessness of life<sup>5</sup>.

### **"Inspired Book of Error"**

Ecclesiastes is one of the most misunderstood and misinterpreted books of the Old Testament. Its seemingly cynical mood is filled with irony. The author develops a case for meaning, only then to declare his reasoning as vanity. This results in much confusion, even among bible scholars. The commentators will often contradict each other as to which statements were sarcastic statements on life and which were valid truths which we should apply to our lives.

Ray Stedman, in his sermon entitled, "The Inspired Book of Error," states that nearly the entire book of Ecclesiastes is "filled with error."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> J. Stafford Wright. "Ecclesiastes." *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*.

<sup>6</sup> Ray C. Stedman, "Ecclesiastes: The Inspired Book of Error," Discovery Publishing: Palo Alto CA, <http://www.pbc.org/dp/stedman/adventure/0221.html>, 1965.

*The book of Ecclesiastes, or "the Preacher," is unique in scripture... This book is filled with error. And yet it is wholly inspired. This may confuse some people, because many feel that inspiration is a guarantee of truth. This is not necessarily so. Inspiration merely guarantees accuracy from a particular point of view; if it is God's point of view it is true; if it is man's point of view it may be true, and it may not.... Inspiration guarantees an accurate reflection of these various points of view.*

*Therefore the Bible does have much error in it. Whenever false views of men are quoted or set forth, the Bible is speaking error....*

*Because of its remarkable character Ecclesiastes is the most misused book of the Bible. This is the favorite book of atheists and agnostics. And many cults love to quote this book's erroneous viewpoints and give the impression that these are scriptural, divine words of God concerning life<sup>7</sup>.*

The clue that this book represents man's point of view is the phrase throughout the book, "under the sun." This phrase is used 27 times in the book. Most of this book represents man's earthly, temporal perspective.

The other difficulty rests in that the author invokes the name of God even in his worldly viewpoint. While the perspective is certainly "under the sun," this perspective is not atheistic. But, as Stedman points out,

*Ecclesiastes views God as men in general view God -- as a not very vital concern of life; sort of a high-calorie dessert which you can take or leave. There is no understanding of God as a vital, living Lord, an authority in life with whom one can have a personal relationship.*

As such, just because the name of God is invoked does not mean that the statement given is truth. For example:

*(Ecclesiastes 6:1-2 NASB) There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men-- (2) a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires, but God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is vanity and a severe affliction.*

The first 11 chapters of this book are written from the "under the sun" viewpoint, and only after the 9<sup>th</sup> verse of chapter 11 do we begin to see God's perspective on life.

### **Diversity of Literary Styles**

*Ecclesiastes is a Logical Book*

The book of Ecclesiastes is a discourse that logically proves that belief in God is the way to meaning and purpose in life. However, the way in which this is done is through the process of elimination. Solomon systematically goes through philosophy after philosophy, worldview after worldview and thoroughly examines the natural consequence of each viewpoint. It is not until the last

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

few verses of the last chapter of the book that he builds up the positive side and concludes that belief in God is the answer to life.

This has led to a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding about this book. The way Solomon explores a particular philosophy is to first state the positives and explore the meanings of this viewpoint. He then shows how this view is in error and leads to hopelessness. But often people will pull things out of context and reach conclusions without seeing Solomon's conclusions about that philosophy.

So while Ecclesiastes is a logical book, we need to be sure we are following Solomon's logic all the way through his arguments.

### *Ecclesiastes is a Lyrical Book*

Ecclesiastes combines the logical with poetic phrases and style. The book's poetic style is probably most evident to the modern reader in the 3rd chapter, from whence the 60s music group, The Byrds, got the words to their hit, "Turn, Turn, Turn".

This lyrical quality can often further the confusion about the book, for Solomon will often take the philosophy he is attacking and present it in a poetic form. We read the poetry and assume he is teaching the truth rather than building the case against that very philosophy.

We must be careful that just because it sounds like a song that we don't take the words out of context and accept them at face value.

## Structure of Ecclesiastes

The structure of Ecclesiastes revolves around the purpose of the book. Solomon has set out to explore all aspects of life in his attempt to discover meaning. Each section of the book explores a different avenue by which humanity has sought out purpose to life.

Finally, after exhausting his search, the seeker makes his conclusion, beginning in 11:9.

Introduction	The Search for Meaning									Conclusion
	Vanity of Hedonism	Vanity of Fatalism	Vanity of Capitalism	Vanity of Religion	Vanity of Materialism	Vanity of Stoicism	Vanity of Politics	Vanity of Discretion	Vanity of Hard Work	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8-9	9-10	11:1-8	11:9-12

### Vanity of Hedonism (Chapter 2)

#### Solomon's Description

- Humor (vs. 2)
- Wine (vs. 3)
- Materialism (vs. 4-9)
- Sexual Pleasure (vs. 8)

#### The Modern Philosophy of Hedonism

- Live life to the fullest.
- The one who dies with the most toys wins
- Sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll

*Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,  
Before we too into the Dust descend (Omar Khayyam)<sup>8</sup>*

<sup>8</sup> Omar Khayyám (11–12th century), Persian astronomer and poet. *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, st. 23 (tr. by Edward FitzGerald; first ed., 1859)

### **Solomon's Conclusion**

*(Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 NASB) And all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. (11) Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.*

*Oh, how desperately bored, in spite of their grim determination to have a Good Time, the majority of pleasure-seekers really are! (Aldous Huxley)<sup>9</sup>*

## Vanity of Fatalism (Chapter 3)

### **Solomon's Description**

- Life has a consistent order (vs. 2-11)
- We should just accept this order & eat drink and be merry (vs. 12-13)
- Life is predetermined (fatalism) (vs. 14-21)

### **The Modern Philosophy of Fatalism**

- "Such is life"
- "S\_\_\_ happens"
- "Let's just make the best of it."
- "The Circle of Life," from Disney's Lion King.
- "What has happened before will happen again." (the Oracle in the movie *The Matrix*).
- Or in the words of that great philosopher, Doris Day, "Ce Sera, Sera"

### **Solomon's Conclusion**

*(Ecclesiastes 3:11 NASB) He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.*

Life may seem to just go around and around in circles, following the same path over and over. And yet God has put a sense of eternity into the hearts of men, so that it seems there ought to be something more than just the endless cycles of life.

*(Ecclesiastes 3:22 NASB) And I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?*

## Vanity of Capitalism (Chapter 4)

### **Solomon's Description**

- Oppression of the poor (vs. 1-3)
- Workaholics (vs. 4-12)
- Climbing the corporate ladder (vs. 13-16)

<sup>9</sup> (Aldous Huxley) (1894–1963), British author. *Do What You Will*, "Holy Face" (1929)

## The Modern Philosophy of Capitalism

*Greed is all right, by the way . . . I think greed is healthy. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself. (Ivan F. Boesky)*

*The point is that you can't be too greedy. (Donald Trump)*

### Solomon's Conclusion

*(Ecclesiastes 4:3 NASB) But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.*

*(Ecclesiastes 4:7 NASB) Then I looked again at vanity under the sun.*

*(Ecclesiastes 4:16 NASB) There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them, and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him, for this too is vanity and striving after wind.*

## Vanity of Religion (Chapter 5)

### Solomon's Description

- Live the righteous lifestyle (vs. 1-7)

### Solomon's Conclusion

- Religion brings oppression (vs. 8)
- Eat, drink & be merry (vs. 18)

*(Ecclesiastes 9:2 NASB) It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean, and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear.*

## Vanity of Materialism (Chapter 6)

### Solomon's Description

- A man lacks nothing (vs. 2)
- Has abundant children (vs. 3)

### Solomon's Conclusion

Life is too short to enjoy all your riches.

*(Ecclesiastes 6:6-7 NASB) "Even if the other man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things-- do not all go to one place?" (7) All a man's labor is for his mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied.*

## Vanity of Stoicism (Chapter 7)

### Solomon's Description

- Be solemn (vs. 2-3)
- Be patient & balanced (vs. 8-9)
- Do not be excessively righteous or wicked (vs. 15-17)

### The Modern Philosophy of Stoicism

- All things in Moderation
- Balance. Avoid the peaks and valleys.
- Don't rock the boat.

### Solomon's Conclusion

*(Ecclesiastes 7:15 NASB) I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness.*

## Vanity of Worldly Wisdom (Chapters 8-11)

### Get Involved in Politics (Chapter 8-9)

#### *Philosophy Stated*

- Obey the king (vs. 2)
- Be loyal to him (vs. 3-4)
- The King will bring about justice (vs. 5-6)

#### *Conclusion*

- Government's authority is limited (vs. 8-9)
- Government can not restrain evil (vs. 10-12)
- Therefore, eat, drink, and be merry (vs. 15)

### Live a life of discretion (Chapter 9-10)

#### *Philosophy Stated*

- Wisdom is better than strength (vs. 9:16)
- Wisdom directs to the right path (vs. 10:2-3)

#### *Conclusion*

*(Ecclesiastes 10:5-7 NASB) There is an evil I have seen under the sun, like an error which goes forth from the ruler-- (6) folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places. (7) I have seen slaves riding on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land.*

### Live a life of hard work (Chapter 11)

*(Ecclesiastes 11:6 NASB) Sow your seed in the morning, and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good.*

## Conclusion (11:9-12:14)

### The Danger of Solomon's Conclusion (11:9-10)

Solomon concludes with verse 9, that we can go ahead and follow his philosophy of eat drink and be merry. But there is a consequence that is not "under the son."

*(Ecclesiastes 11:9 NASB) Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things.*

### Remember God in Your Youth (12:1-8)

True joy in life will only come through remembering your creator (12:1) in the days of your youth. Solomon is warning comes from an old man who has lived his life and now is regrets the course he has taken.

*(Ecclesiastes 12:6-8 NASB) Remember Him before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed; (7) then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. (8) "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "all is vanity!"*

### Fear God! (12:9-14)

Solomon conclusion is that we could philosophize forever and never get anywhere. The real end to life, the only thing that will bring satisfaction is the fear of God.

*(Ecclesiastes 12:11-13 NASB) The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. (12) But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body. (13) The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.*

According to Ray Stedman, this is a poor translation of the conclusion. He would better translate it, "Fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is **the whole of man,**" or, better yet, "this is what makes man whole."

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