

OVERVIEW OF ECCLESIASTES

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I. Introduction to Lesson

A. I think few would quarrel with J. Stafford Wright's description of Ecclesiastes as "one of the most puzzling books of the Bible." Part of the difficulty is that the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes is unusual in comparison to the other O.T. books. It is loaded with difficult words, grammar, and syntax, but the difficulty runs deeper than the language. It includes identifying the genre, structure, and ultimately the meaning of the book.

B. The bulk of the book is skeptical and pessimistic, a complaint about the apparent meaninglessness of life and the inability to perceive "rhyme or reason" in the world. It thus resonates with our present atheistic culture, though God's existence is not doubted in the book.

C. As one commentator summed up the theological outlook of the central portion of the book (1:12 - 12:7), "Life is full of trouble and then you die." The most pressing issue is how such theology fits with the rest of Scripture. Just consider:

1. Qohelet's most frequent refrain is "Meaningless, meaningless! All is meaningless!" He uses the term "meaningless" in well over thirty passages. His frustration was such that he "hated life" (2:17).

2. Even wisdom is ultimately meaningless because both the fool and the wise man end up dead (2:14b-16).

3. As far as Qohelet knew for certain, death was the end of the story.

a. As far as he could tell, the dead know nothing, have no reward, and are forgotten (9:5).

b. He writes (3:19-21): "Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath (spirit); man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust and to dust return. Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?"

c. To Qohelet, death is like a severed rope, a broken bowl, a shattered pitcher, and a ruined wheel (12:6). Life is valuable, but it is completely ruined at death. He has no hope that things will be "put right" after death.

D. I have pondered Ecclesiastes for years and read others who have pondered it far longer, but for a long time I never really felt like I was getting it. But thanks largely to the work of Tremper Longman, I think I have made a significant advance in my understanding of the book.

II. Framework for Understanding Ecclesiastes

A. The title "Ecclesiastes" comes from the main speaker in the book, a man who goes by the Hebrew nickname Qohelet. It is a nickname that literally means "assembler" or "convener," which was translated *ekklesiastes* in Greek, then *Ecclesiastes* in Latin, and thus Ecclesiastes in English. The common English translation Qohelet as "the Preacher" or "the Teacher" is misleading because it suggests that in the book Qohelet is addressing a group that he has assembled. That probably is incorrect.

B. Though Qohelet is the main speaker in the book, he is not the book's author. The author is an unidentified narrator. The author speaks in the prologue (1:1-11) and epilogue (12:8-14) and thus frames the lengthy first-person narration of Qohelet (1:12 - 12:7).

1. Notice that Qohelet is referred to in the third person in 1:1-2 and 12:8-10. Throughout 1:12 - 12:7 Qohelet speaks in first person, with the one interjection by the narrator in 7:27. Qohelet's story has been incorporated into the larger work of the author.

2. Longman has found that the first-person section (1:12 - 12: 7) follows the pattern of ancient "fictional (or pseudonymous) autobiographies." This suggests it is a separate and complete literary unit. In other words, Qohelet's work was known and used by the author of Ecclesiastes in composing his own work.

3. Longman suggests, and it answers a lot of questions for me, that Qohelet's lengthy autobiographical speech has been incorporated into Ecclesiastes by the book's author, no doubt himself a wisdom teacher, as a foil for his point that efforts to comprehend reality that are divorced from divine revelation are futile and dangerous. In other words, the point of Ecclesiastes, its normative value, is derived from the author's (or "frame narrator's") negative judgment on the teaching of the skeptic which comprises most of the book. Qohelet's road is one of despair because he demands to know by his intellect, observation, and experience what can only be known, if at all, by revelation from God. This is so much the road of our world.

4. The structure is somewhat like the Book of Job. The arguments of Job's friends and even Job regarding his suffering reflect an inadequate understanding of God's relationship to Job's situation. Not that everything that they say is wrong, but much is out of keeping with the divine perspective revealed in the Yahweh speeches at the end of the book.

C. Qohelet has traditionally been considered to be Solomon, who was king in Jerusalem after David in the 10th century B.C., but there is good reason to believe that Qohelet simply was adopting the literary persona of Solomon as a vehicle for presenting his skeptical theology.

1. He did so because Solomon was the ideal historical character to make his point that the best efforts to find satisfaction and meaning in life fail. If Solomon could not find satisfaction and meaning through wisdom, wealth, women, and building projects, no one can.

2. The readers of his day would have understood what he was doing and would not have taken the allusions to Solomon as a claim of his actual authorship. They apparently were familiar with this genre of writing, what Longman calls "fictional (or pseudonymous) autobiography." These works were written years, often centuries, after the noted historical figure died and were identifiable by the subject and form of the writing.

3. In addition to the form of 1:12 - 12:7, there are some clear signs in the book that Solomon was a literary persona:

a. Rather than explicitly identify himself as Solomon, the skeptic only does so indirectly. The nickname Qohelet ("Assembler") may well be an allusion to Solomon's assembling of the people for the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8. The verbal root *qhl* occurs quite often in that section. If Solomon himself was the author, there does not seem to be any reason for his adopting such a name. It is more likely that the nickname was adopted to associate the actual writer with Solomon while retaining his distance from the actual person. It is a way of indicating that the Solomonic persona is being adopted for literary and communicative purposes.

b. Eccles. 1:12 says, "I, Qohelet, was king over Israel in Jerusalem." There was never a time that the real Solomon could have written such a thing because he died while ruling Israel (1 Kings 11). He never "used to be" king over Israel. It is a signal that the author is harking back to an historical figure.

c. Eccles. 1: 16a says, "I said to myself, 'I have surpassed in wisdom everyone who ruled Jerusalem before me.'" David was the only Israelite king in Jerusalem before Solomon. This again is a signal that the section was written by someone adopting the persona of Solomon rather than by Solomon himself.

d. The association between Qohelet and Solomon is adopted only during the search for meaning (1:13 - 6:9), and even after the first three chapters the distance between Qohelet and Solomon widens. In fact, when the kingship is mentioned in 4:1-3 and 5:8-9 there appears to be a large gap between the speaker and the institution. These are complaints against oppression (4:1-3) and protests against the king (5:8-9).

4. Even if one believes Qohelet was Solomon, it would not make Solomon the author of Ecclesiastes. Remember, the "author" is the narrator who incorporates the work of Qohelet into his own writing. The traditional view that sees the third-person references to Qohelet as changes between the young and old Solomon seems quite strained. Why would the older Solomon refer to himself as a young man using the third person? Further, the third-person reference in 7:27 seems clearly to mark the presence of a narrator who is distinct from Qohelet.

D. If Qohelet was not Solomon, who was he? We know little, but the author or frame narrator provides some information in 12:9. Longman translates 12:9 as: "Furthermore, Qohelet was a wise man. He also taught the people knowledge." The narrator simply tells us that Qohelet was a "wise man" by profession and that in that capacity he also taught people. It is not an endorsement of Qohelet. There are examples in the Bible of bad "wise men," e.g., Jonadab (2 Sam. 13:3; unofficial wise man) and Ahithophel (2 Sam. 16:15 - 17:29).

E. About the author or frame narrator, we can only surmise that he was also a wisdom teacher, one who speaks as an insider when he critiques Qohelet (12:8-12).

III. Some Issues Raised By This Framework

A. The key is the narrator's appraisal of Qohelet in 12:8-12. Here is Longman's translation of each of these verses (in italics) followed by a comment on their meaning.

1. Verse 8: *"Completely meaningless," Qohelet said. "Everything is meaningless."*
A summary of Qohelet's pessimistic teaching.

2. Verse 9: *Furthermore, Qohelet was a wise man. He also taught the people knowledge. He heard, investigated, and put in good order many proverbs.* This is a neutral statement that he did a lot of work, that he was industrious. It is like damning him with faint praise. He is not honored for his contribution.

3. Verse 10: *Qohelet sought to find words of delight and to write honestly words of truth.* His goal or intention was, as with all wise men, to bring delight through the presentation of the truth, but seeking and finding are two different things. In fact, Qohelet admits that he sought to find many things but was constantly frustrated (7:24-29; 8:17). His entire life was spent seeking and coming up empty. The implication is that this is but another of his failures.

4. Verse 11: *The words of the wise are like goads, and like firmly implanted nails are the masters of collections. They are given by a shepherd.* The teaching of scholars is very influential, like the prodding applied by a shepherd. That is what makes them so dangerous. ("Masters of collections" refers to the group of sages who belonged to the guild responsible for gathering and transmitting wisdom teaching.)

5. Verse 12: *Furthermore, of these, my son, be warned! There is no end to the making of many books, and much study wearies the body.* Here we have the author or frame narrator telling the recipient of his work, his son (which may mean a disciple), to avoid wisdom writings like Qohelet's. There's no end to the drivel, and one can waste valuable time in the pursuit of such.

B. There are a number of passages (2:24-26, 3:12-14, 3:22, 5:18-20, 8:15, and 9:7-10) in which Qohelet urges one to find contentment in eating, drinking, and labor, but in doing so he expresses resignation rather than affirmation. In the darkness of a life that has no ultimate meaning, the best one can do is to enjoy the temporal pleasures that lighten the burden. But since the ability to enjoy these things also is dispensed by God in accordance with his will, which to Qohelet seems like whim, Qohelet considers even this a chasing after the wind. He apparently did not consider himself a person so blessed by God (see, 5:18 - 6:12).

C. Isolated from the context of the book, some of Qohelet's statements about God are quite positive. For example, he says God is a giver of all good gifts (2:26), is sovereign over everything (7:13-14), is our Creator (12:1), and is the one to whom we owe our very existence (12:7). But in

context, many commentators characterize Qohelet's view of God as distant, occasionally indifferent, and sometimes cruel.

1. James Crenshaw identified Qohelet as a prime representative of skepticism in Israel. He argued that "Israel's skeptics severed the vital nerve at two distinct junctures. They denied God's goodness if not his very existence, and they portrayed men and women as powerless to acquire essential truth."

2. Qohelet refers to God solely by the generic *elohim*, never by God's personal, covenantal name Yahweh.

3. God's sovereignty is affirmed by Qohelet, but this sovereignty actually calls into question God's concern for his people. From Qohelet's perspective, we are largely in the dark and things seem unpredictable and chaotic. He sees evil, injustice, and oppression, and nothing gives him any confidence God will set it all right.

4. Even 5:1-7 is a note of caution in dealing with the God who is so distant, perhaps even indifferent. He is to be "feared" in the sense of being afraid before such a powerful and dangerous being, not in the sense of respect or awe for a mighty and compassionate deity.