

Ecclesiastes: A Book of Wisdom

Poetic speech aided the Israelites to memorize poems, songs, prophecies and both wisdom sayings and longer works. A key verse in Jeremiah shows that three classes of religious leaders were recognized in Israel: “Then said they, Come, and let us devise devices against Jeremiah; for the law shall not perish from the **priest**, nor counsel from the **wise**, nor the word from the **prophet**” (18:18). Solomon is pointed out as the founder of this movement of wise men in Israel: “And Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt” (1 Kgs. 4:30). Solomon’s wisdom is presented as a special gift from God (1 Kgs. 3:12) in response to Solomon’s prayer for it (1 Kgs. 3:9). This marks out the difference between Israelite and eastern and Egyptian wise men.

OT wisdom writings hardly mention the primary emphases of the rest of the OT. The prophetic themes of Israel’s election, the covenant and the Law, the priesthood and the Temple, and the Messianic hope are almost non-existent in the OT wisdom writings. Wisdom interest kept Israel’s faith from becoming either mere sentimentality or religious legalism. It forced both the prophetic and priestly mindsets to face up to the real world of everyday life.

Traditionalist Jews (as well as kindred peoples) had a ready solution for the enigma of why the innocent suffer along with the guilty. To them the problem simply did not exist, for the righteous always prosper on earth and the wicked always suffer. If a man was suffering, it was because he had committed some great sin. This belief was inevitable because of the traditional idea of immortality found in most of the OT in which the afterlife held no attraction: all were the same in *Sheol*, the shadowy aimless existence beyond the grave in which all were equal (Job 3:17-19; 7:9-10; Ps. 39:13; 88:10-12; Eccl. 3:19 ff; 9:4 ff). Since there was no reward in *Sheol* for the good man and since God was righteous, it was necessary for God to reward people in the present world.

Some Christians feel frustrated when first confronting this fact, for they have not yet come to understand that the Bible presents a historically-based revelation that is progressive. Jesus is not presented in Genesis, only beginning-stage messianic predictions that He fulfilled as registered in the New Testament. John 1:14: “The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Hebrews 1:1-2: “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son.” Many people in the OT had no hope of life worthy of the name beyond the grave. In the recent film on Jehovah’s Witnesses, we saw how a young man, raised in a Baptist family, had converted to the Witnesses. Out of fellowship Baptists can be shocked by the Witnesses when they present to them such verses as Ecclesiastes 9:5: “For the living know that they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten.” Some OT passages present hope for life beyond the grave, but the NT affirms that Jesus, through His resurrection, brought life and immortality to light [full light] through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10).

Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon and Lamentations are the primary wisdom books of the Old Testament, while other books like the Psalms contain some wisdom passages and/or chapters: Hymns of Wisdom (1, 32, 34, 37, 49, 73, 112, 119, 127-128, 133).

The book of Job treats the question why do the righteous (or innocent) suffer. Proverbs deals with the wise way to live everyday life in this world.

Ecclesiastes treats finding the supreme good in this earthly life.

Song of Solomon treats the authentic love between a man and a woman that leads to marriage. It was used by the Jews to prepare young women for marriage. Because of its portrayal of sexual feelings and acts, later Jews used it as an allegory on the Lord's love for Israel, his bride, and early Christians on Christ's love for the Church, his bride. Yet no allusion to such meanings in the book is found in either other OT books or NT letters. Some, therefore, hold it is better to see it, not as prophetic allegory, but as wisdom reality that prepares people for the intimacies of marriage within God's plan.

Ecclesiastes: The Supreme Good In Life

1. Its General Description

- A. Kind of writing. The book is a *poetic essay* that treats its theme numbers of times from different perspectives, each time arriving at a semi-conclusion, but coming to a final conclusion in the last chapter.
- B. Its theme: Finding the supreme good in this earthly life (1:12; 12:13).
- C. Its message: In this earthly life it pays to serve God and keep his commandments.
- D. Its hero. The book appears to have been written about Solomon rather than by him (see 12:9-10; cf. Prov. 1:1; 30:1; 31:1), though his name does not appear in its text. It probably was written about him because he was "the father of the wisdom movement in Israel" and his life illustrated what the author was teaching. Every school pupil knows the speaker in a writing is not necessarily the author: Jesus is the author of the parable of the prodigal son, not the father who said, "This my son was dead and is alive again" (Luke 15:24).

In the original Hebrew, the author calls himself *Koheleth*, = Assembly man, Preacher or Teacher, that is, either the one who calls a religious assembly (Num. 10:7), or one who is its spokesman, its preacher.

It is popularly inferred from 1:1 that he is Solomon and some of the book reflects his experiences. Yet would he have used the past tense to say, "I ... have been king ... in Jerusalem" (1:12)? Could he have confessed that the attempt to be wise "was far from" him (7:23)? Under his efficient rulership would he have described oppressors as men against whom no redress existed (4:1; 5:8; 8:9; 10:5-7)? Is he satirizing himself when denouncing the royal

spendthrift and glutton, the misery brought by the ruler on the land, and the danger of criticizing a despot (10:16-20)?

Koheleth apparently wrote when Israel groaned under foreign oppression: probably Persian, between 444 and 321 BC (Ezra 9:7; Nehemiah 4:7; and Esther 3:8-9 provide glimpses).

Some hold that 12:9 points us to him as a wise man who taught the people knowledge. We must remember that God can use any instrument he chooses as his messenger, even Balaam of Peor near the Euphrates (Num. 22:5, 12) and Balaam's donkey (22:28)! Cyrus of Persia is presented by Isaiah as God's servant and spokesman, "even saying to Jerusalem, you shall be built" (44:28). Jesus gave dramatic parables, sometimes putting his words in the mouths of others like the father of the prodigal son (Luke 15).

Our name *Ecclesiastes* comes from the Greek Bible of the Jews just before and after Jesus that was the basis of the later Latin Vulgate Bible of the Roman Christians.

- E. Its *form* is that of a *dramatic monologue*, or, similarly, an *informal essay* (writing dealing with a subject from the limited or personal view of the author) on the highest good in this life. From Martin Luther onward, many commentators have dated the book after the time of Solomon, some even dating it about 450 – 300 BC. The times reflected in it seem to be within the intertestamental period (the approximately 400 years after Malachi and before Matthew) when times were hard and the Jews had no king. We cannot be sure of its exact date of origin.

Clyde T. Francisco cites with hearty approval the view of Dr. Lyman Abbot:

Thus ... Ecclesiastes is a dramatic monologue portraying the complicated experiences of life; these voices are conflicting, but they portray the conflict of a single soul at war with itself. In this monologue the man is represented as arguing with himself; weighing the contrasted experiences of life over against one another ... Ecclesiastes is deliberately and of intention confused because it is the portrayal of the confused experiences of a soul divided against itself.¹

2. Its Purpose and Argument

This is indicated in 1:3: "What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?" The author questions the answers ordinarily given about this, pointing to his own experiences in different areas of pursuit. At the beginning he gives his conclusion about the permanent value of goals normally pursued by humans: "All is vanity," [literally "vapor," which indicates futility] (1:2). At the end he says that the best way to live is to "fear God and keep his commandments" (12:13). The author, a wise man of God,

¹ Lyman Abbot, *Life and Literature of the Ancient Hebrews* (New York: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1901), p 292-293, cited in Clyde T. Francisco, *Introducing the Old Testament*, revised ed. (Nashville: Broadman, 1977), p. 270-271.

tells us that although the intelligent person may raise questions about what God is doing and what life's value is, the person really wise will recognize that the ways of God are too high for humans to understand fully, and so people are not qualified to judge God and his ways.

Similarly to Job, Koheleth questioned the traditional answers that his wise colleagues were offering the people. To Koheleth their answers were generalizations and broad definitions that over-simplified life and its rules, overstated the blessings and curses of God and thus led their followers to frustrations and doubts about the value of trusting in God and his revelation. Our present generation is being disillusioned by well-intentioned "wise persons" who teach biblical answers in a superficial way. Some offer simplistic and exaggerated answers like whoever tithes will be blessed with riches and whoever teaches the Bible to his/her children will guarantee that they will always be consecrated and victorious Christians.

Koheleth says that God reveals a liberty in the way he exercises his sovereignty that is not fully captured by the rules of religious leaders. God's ways, though basically disclosed to mankind in the inspired Bible, still contain mystery. In his sovereignty God has placed certain limits on human understanding, even on that of our wisest religious leaders: "For who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime, during the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?" (6:12).

People sometimes put too much value on their own wisdom, wealth, prestige, pleasure and/or righteousness. It is this false trust that Koheleth challenges with his theme "all is vanity."

3. Its Permanent Values are at least three.

- 1) Without knowing, the author, in the providence of God, demonstrated the failures of the traditional idea of immortality reflected, for example, in 9:5: "For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten" (cf. 9:10 and 3:14). While the book of Job carries positive arguments for human immortality, Ecclesiastes demonstrates the need for such hope. The widespread traditional view of that time was that both good and evil people will be rewarded only in this life. Even today, where the resurrection of Christ is unknown or denied, many hold the same conclusion. As in the day of Koheleth, this produces depression, defeatism, rebellion and hopelessness. Against the background of Ecclesiastes, believers in Jesus can appreciate the brilliant light of immortality that Christ brought through his resurrection from the dead: "...but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus who abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:10).

- 2) Ecclesiastes demonstrates, however, that it pays to serve God in this earthly life. There are certain rewards from God that come in this life. For the one who serves him, God gives an additional capacity for living life here with a sense of fulfillment (see 12:13; 3:12, 22; 5:18; 11:9; 12:1).
- 3) The questionings of Ecclesiastes about traditional wisdom and its wrong application prepared the way, within the progressive revelation reflected in the Bible, for him who is “greater than Solomon” (Matt. 12:42), “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3).

4. Its Outline

The book gives four analyses of the theme, each one ending in a semi-conclusion, the last of which is followed by a final conclusion with which the book ends.

1. The Scene and the Theme: “All is vanity [vapor],” that is, futile or without full meaning (1:1-3).
2. The Theme is Verified by Life (1:4 – 2:26).
 - a. In the monotonous cycle of life experienced by everyone (1:4-11).
 - b. In the quest for wisdom about living (1:12-18).
 - c. In the quest for pleasure and possessions (2:1-11).
 - d. In the fate of death for all mankind (2:12-17).
 - e. In the quest for meaning through work (2:18-23).
 - f. Semi-conclusion: Because it comes from God, life ought to be put to good use (2:24-26).
3. A Second Analysis of the Theme (3:1 – 5:12).
 - a. Everything has its own time (3:1-15).
 - b. Death comes to all (3:16-22).
 - c. The prevalence of oppression on earth (4:1-3).
 - d. Rivalry motivates the accumulation of wealth (4:4-12).
 - e. Popularity does not endure even for kings (4:13-16).
 - f. Semi-conclusion: Worship God in an acceptable way and do not expect too much of life (5:1-12).
4. A Third Analysis of the Theme (5:13 – 8:9).
 - a. Wealth may be lost (5:13-20).
 - b. Possessions may not be utilized (6:1-9).
 - c. Life is sometimes an enigma (6:10-12).
 - d. Semi-conclusion: Avoid extremes (7:1 – 8:9).
5. A Fourth Analysis of the Theme (8:10 – 12:8).
 - a. Injustice in the Judicial System (8:10-15).
 - b. God is inscrutable [cannot be understood fully](8:16-17).

- c. Death is the common element (9:1-10).
- d. The uncertainties of life (9:11-12).
- e. Semi-conclusion: Take advantage of the life that comes to you (9:13 – 12:8).

Note the beautiful allegory on the advance of old age in 12:1-8.

6. Final Conclusion (12:9-14). Key verse is 13.