

Ecclesiastes

Message

Based on his personal observations of life, the Preacher, Solomon, states his thesis that to compensate for the seeming transience of human life, the wise man will acknowledge that life is a gift from God's gracious hand to be lived in fear and obedience to Him, seeing as how He will ultimately judge all men.



Title

The Hebrew title of this book is *qohelet*, derived from *qahal*, meaning “an assembly or congregation” (noun form) or “to call an assembly to war or to erect the tabernacle” (verb form).¹ This title comes from the phrase, “The words of the Preacher,” in the opening verse (1:1). The Hebrew word designates one, usually a leader, who convenes and speaks before an assembly of people. The Greek Septuagint (LXX) translation (third century B.C.) named the book *ekklasiastes*, from which the English title “Ecclesiastes” is a transliteration.

Author

While the author is not specifically named, he is nonetheless identified as “the son of David, king of Jerusalem” (1:1). While the Hebrew Bible only attributes authorship to this unnamed “son of David,” the Septuagint translation designates Solomon as the author. As Archer says, “It is fair to assume that the direct successor of David [Solomon] is meant rather than some later descendant.”² This assumption is confirmed by *internal evidence* supporting the traditional view that Solomon was the author (cf. 1:1, 1:2–2:26; 2:4-9; 12:9).³ Consider the following facts: 1) the author’s unrivaled wisdom (1:16; cf. 2:8); 2) his inordinate wealth (2:8); his enormous retinue of servants (2:7); his pursuit of carnal pleasures (2:3); and his extensive and extravagant building programs (2:4-6). All of these characteristics recorded in this book coincide perfectly with direct references to Solomon in the historical record of 1 Kings. For example: 1) Solomon’s unrivaled wisdom (1 Kgs 3:12; 4:30); 2) his inordinate wealth (1 Kgs 9:28; 10:10, 14-23); his enormous retinue of servants (1 Kgs 4:21); and his extensive and extravagant building programs (1 Kgs 6–7).

¹See “lḥq” in *BDB*, 874-75.

²Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 478.

³For a detailed discussion on issues of authorship see Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 478-87. For a good refutation against the linguistic arguments presented to support the denial of Solomonic authorship see the excellent articles by Gleason L. Archer, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 2:184–87; and his “The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of ‘Ecclesiastes,’” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 12:3 (Summer 1969):167-81.

Solomonic authorship remained the traditional Jewish and Christian view until the rise of literary and historical Bible criticism in the seventeenth century. The majority of Conservative critics have joined with Liberal scholars in rejecting Solomonic authorship and advanced the view that the book was written by an impostor in late postexilic times, namely about 350-250 B.C.⁴ Rejection of Solomon as the author is mainly due to linguistic factors (vocabulary and syntax) that some scholars feel were more characteristic of a time much later than Solomon's day.⁵ It may be concluded that while there is no direct information in the Bible that ascribes authorship to Solomon, there is a good amount of evidence that suggests that he did in fact write this inspired book.

Date

Assuming Solomonic authorship, the book must have been written some time during his reign (971-931 B.C.), and most likely toward the later years of his reign. It may be that Solomon wrote this book during or shortly after his period of backsliding when his love for his pagan wives turned his heart away from Yahweh (1 Kgs 11:1-8). As mentioned in connection with the previous study of Proverbs, *ancient Hebrew tradition suggest that Solomon may have written the Song of Solomon in his youth, Proverbs in his middle life, and Ecclesiastes in his old age* (cf. 2:1-11; 11:9; 12:1).⁶ This theory rests on the contents of these three inspired biblical books that he evidently wrote, specifically clues in these books about the age of their inspired author.

Placement in the Bible

In the Hebrew Bible, Ecclesiastes is the fourth of five *Megilloth* writings ("Five Scrolls"): Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther.⁷ Ecclesiastes is the fourth of the five poetical books in the English Bible: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. Ecclesiastes is the third of three Bible books purported to have been authored by King Solomon.⁸ **Ecclesiastes is also one of three biblical writings known as "Wisdom Literature," the other two being Job and Proverbs.**

Purpose

This book is designed to reveal the complete emptiness of life lived apart from God and His marvelous purposes; and to admonish men to live life with God who is the source

⁴Donald R. Glen, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 975-76.

⁵See J. Stafford Wright, "Ecclesiastes," in *Psalms-Song of Songs*, vol. 5 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 1139-43.

⁶See the previous discussion in the argument of Proverbs, page 350, note 1.

⁷The *Megilloth* were read in conjunction with the various Jewish feasts. Ecclesiastes was read during the Feast of Tabernacles, the most joyous of the Jewish feasts.

⁸The three books authored by Solomon are Song of Solomon (written as a young man), Proverbs, (written as a middle aged man), and Ecclesiastes (written as an elderly and possibly backsliden man).

of all that is good. The writer, the “Preacher,” Solomon, records his personal reflections on life lived “under the Sun” (found thirty-one times) apart from divine revelation. From this limited and naturalistic perspective he observes that the seemingly aimless cycles (1:4ff.) and inexplicable paradoxes of life (4:1; 7:15; 8:8), suggest that all is vanity and vexation of spirit—“*Vanity of vanities! All is vanity*” (this key phrase is used thirty-seven times).⁹ Nevertheless, life is to be lived to the fullest, realizing that it is the gracious gift of God (3:12-13; 3:22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9). The wise man will live his life in fear and obedience to God (12:13), recognizing that God will eventually judge all men (3:16-17; 12:14).¹⁰

Outline¹¹

I. Prologue 1:1-11

A. The Title and Author¹² 1:1

1. The title: *qohelet* “The Word’s of the Preacher” 1:1a
2. The author 1:1a-1c
 - a. *qohelet*, “the Preacher/Teacher,” 1:1a
 - b. “The son of David,” 1:1b
 - c. “King in Jerusalem” 1:1c

B. The Theme: “The Futility of all Human Endeavor” 1:2-11

1. Statement of the theme 1:2
 - a. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, 1:2a
 - b. **Vanity of vanities! All is vanity** 1:2b
2. Support of the theme 1:3-14
 - a. The futility of man’s work 1:3
 - b. The futility of life’s endless cycles 1:4-11
 - 1) The endless cycles of generations of natural creation 1:4
 - 2) The endless cycles of the sun’s rising and setting 1:5

⁹Tom Constable writes on the meaning of this key phrase that “to dethrone God is to lose the key to life. We may pursue many human endeavors, but all we will find is vanity, lack of ultimate fulfillment. On the other hand if we enthrone God we will enter into the fullness of life in Him (John 17:3; Ps. 16:11)” [Thomas L. Constable, “Ecclesiastes” (unpublished class notes in course # 303 Old Testament History II and Poetry, Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall 1995)].

¹⁰Roy Zuck provides a chart detailing the repeated refrain of Ecclesiastes that men are to “Fear God.” see *Appendix A* at the end of these notes on Ecclesiastes. Chart adapted from Roy B. Zuck, “Ecclesiastes” (unpublished class notes in 303 Old Testament History II, Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall 1994).

¹¹For a good discussion of possible ways of dividing and tracing the argument of the Book of Ecclesiastes see Glenn, “Ecclesiastes,” in *BKC*, 978. This outline is adapted in part from my own study of the analyses of Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 475-78; Glenn, “Ecclesiastes,” in *BKC*, 978-79; Hill and Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 295; Wright, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Psalms-Song of Songs*, 1151.

¹²For the purposes of this study it will be assumed that Solomon is the author of Ecclesiastes, and any references to the author (“Preacher”) in the following outline and argument will be to Solomon as such.

- 3) The endless cycles of the winds circling the earth 1:6
- 4) The endless cycles of the rivers flowing into the sea 1:7
- 5) The endless cycles of the life of man 1:8-11
 - a) Man is never satisfied 1:8
 - b) There is nothing new under the sun 1:9-10
 - c) There is no remembrance of earlier things 1:11

II. Solomon's Investigations and Observations About the Futility of Human Life 1:12–6:12

A. Solomon's Investigations of Life's Futility's 1:12–2:17

1. Seeking to understand life by means of human wisdom is futility 1:12-18
 - a. Wisdom will not resolve life's paradoxes and frustrations 1:12-17
 - b. Wisdom will increase a man's perplexity over life's futility 1:18
2. Seeking to understand life by means of pleasure-seeking is futility 2:1-11
 - a. Solomon's pursuit of fulfillment *through indulgence* 2:1-3
 - b. Solomon's pursuit of fulfillment *through achievements* 2:4-6
 - c. Solomon's pursuit of fulfillment *through possessions and wealth* 2:7-8
 - d. Solomon's pursuit of fulfillment *through great fame* 2:9
 - e. Solomon's pursuit of fulfillment *through activities and labor* 2:10-11
3. Seeking to understand life by means of human wisdom is futility 2:12-17

B. Solomon's Observations of Life's Futility's 2:18–6:12

1. The pursuit of labor is futility 2:18-26
 - a. The fruits of a man's labor are left to another, possibly a wasteful fool 2:18-23
 - b. The final conclusion: *enjoy the fruits of your labor and acknowledge God* 2:24-26
 - 1) There is nothing better for a man than to enjoy the fruits of his labor 2:24a
 - 2) There is no fulfillment apart from God 2:24b-25
 - 3) There is no happiness apart from God; *all is vanity and striving after wind* 2:26
2. The providence of God controls all things 3:1–4:3
 - a. God is sovereign over all events of men's lives 3:1-15
 - 1) The events of a man's life are "timed" by God 3:1-11; **cf. Heb 9:27**
 - 2) The events of a man's life are to be enjoyed as a gift from God 3:12-13
 - b. God is sovereign over all injustices of men's lives 3:14-22

- 1) The patterns of life are ordained by God 3:14-15
 - 2) The pursuit of justice among men is often inequitable 3:16
 - 3) The provision of justice is promised by God 3:17-21
 - a) God alone judges righteously 3:17
 - b) God appoints both man and beast to die 3:18-21
 - 4) The prescribed answer: nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities [in life], for that is his lot 3:22
3. The problem of inequalities in life 4:1-16
- a. The oppression of men 4:1-3
 - b. The obtaining of riches 4:4-6
 - c. The value of companionship 4:7-12
 - d. The benefits of wisdom over political success 4:13-16
4. The practice of perverted (foolish) worship versus proper worship (wise) 5:1-7
- a. Fear God and avoid the empty religious activity of fools 5:1-7
 - 1) Come before God to listen and learn 5:1-3
 - 2) Complete your vows: Pay what has been promised to God 5:4-7a
 - b. Fear God by practicing proper worship 5:7b
5. The problem of corruption and emptiness of material gain 5:8-17
- a. The corruption of authority and oppression of the poor 5:8-9
 - b. The emptiness of material gain 5:10-17
 - 1) Happiness is never attained through riches 5:10
 - 2) Hoarding of riches leads to loss 5:11-17
6. The provider of joy in life is God 5:18-20
- a. Life and labor are to be enjoyed as gifts from God 5:18
 - b. Riches and wealth are not to be worried over, but enjoyed as gifts from God 5:19
 - c. It is God who provides enjoyment of life with gladness of heart 5:20
7. The problems faced by man in life 6:1-12
- a. It is a terrible evil when riches amassed are confiscated by a foreigner 6:1-2
 - b. It is a terrible evil when a man lives a long and prosperous life with no inner contentment—it would be better that he never lived 6:3-4
 - c. It is a terrible evil that a man's appetite is never satisfied 6:5-9

- d. It is a terrible evil that carnal man can never discern what is truly worthwhile during his life “under the sun” 6:10-12

III. Solomon’s Counsel on the Limitations of Human Wisdom for Coping with Life’s Frustrations 7:1–11:6

A. Counsel in View of Man’s Ignorance About Life 7:1–8:15

- 1. Adversity and prosperity is determined by God 7:1-14
 - a. Proverbs contrasting wisdom and folly 7:1-12
 - 1) A good name is better than luxurious living 7:1
 - 2) Sobriety is better than feasting and folly 7:2-7
 - 3) Cautiousness is better than rashness 7:8-10
 - 4) Wisdom and wealth is better than wisdom alone 7:11-12
 - b. Prosperity and adversity both have a positive purpose 7:13-14b
 - 1) Prosperity and adversity are both the work of God 7:13
 - 2) Prosperity is to promote happiness 7:14a
 - 3) Adversity is to promote humble recognition of God 7:14b
- 2. Advantages and limitations of wisdom: Proverbs contrasting righteousness and wickedness 7:15–8:15
 - a. Solomon’s observations on wisdom’s limitations 7:15-26
 - 1) Wisdom should be pursued and practiced in moderation 7:15-22
 - 2) Wisdom is insufficient to comprehend all the mysteries of life 7:23-25
 - 3) Wisdom will deliver a man from an evil woman 7:26
 - b. Solomon’s conclusion on wisdom’s limitations 7:27-29
 - 1) Wisdom is pursued by one man out of a thousand 7:27
 - 2) Wisdom among women is an even more rare thing 7:28
 - 3) God made men upright, but they have been corrupted by pursuing sin 7:29
 - c. Solomon’s declaration that a wise man will submit to governmental authority 8:1-9
 - 1) To compromise is sometimes better than to be right 8:1-5
 - 2) Temporal wisdom and authority have limits 8:6-9
 - d. Solomon’s determination that man cannot discover the work’s of God “under the sun” 8:10-17
 - 1) Solomon was perplexed by the incongruities of life 8:10-14
 - 2) Solomon’s repeated recommendation to enjoy life as a gift from God 8:15
 - 3) [Solomon exhausted himself with the study of wisdom] 8:16
 - 4) Solomon concludes that man cannot discover the workings of God’s Omniscient plan 8:17

B. Counsel in View of Man’s Ignorance About the Future 9:1-18

1. The future of the righteous on earth 9:1-10
 - a. The righteous and the wicked share one certain fate—death 9:1-6
 - b. The recommendation is to enjoy life to the fullest 9:7-10
2. The future of the wise on earth 9:11-18
 - a. The issues and length of life are unpredictable 9:11-12
 - b. Wisdom is better than strength though no one heeds it 9:13-18

C. Counsel on the Value of Wisdom in View of Life's Uncertainties 10:1–11:6

1. Wisdom and folly contrasted 10:1-20
 - a. A little folly can undermine much wisdom and honor 10:1
 - b. A foolish man demonstrates that he is a fool; while a rich man often appears as a humble man and a prince as a poor man 10:2-7
 - c. At times wisdom fails to deliver from dangers encountered in life 10:8-11
 - d. A wise man knows when to be silent; while a fool rambles on 10:12-15
 - e. A wise man honors human authority; while a fool curses a king in private and is found out 10:16-20
2. Wise behavior in view of life's uncertainties 11:1-6
 - a. Wisdom is found in diversified investments 11:1-2
 - b. Wisdom is lacking in many of life's events 11:3-4
 - c. Wisdom is useless in determining the workings and ways of God 11:5
 - d. Wisdom is not idle but works cheerfully hoping for reward 11:6

IV. Solomon's Recommendations on How to Find Joy and Meaning in Life 11:7–12:14

A. Solomon Admonishes Men to Enjoy God's Gift of Life 11:7–12:7

1. Men are exhorted to enjoy life 11:7-10
2. Men are exhorted to accept the Creator in their youth, before the frustrations of old age overtake them 12:1-7
 - a. Young men are exhorted to remember their Creator while a youth 12:1
 - b. Young men are exhorted to accept Him before old age overtakes them 12:2-7
 - 1) Young men are to accept the Creator before old age overtakes them 12:2-6
 - 2) Old men die, and their spirit returns to God who gave it 12:7

B. Solomon Advances His Theme for the Book 12:8

“‘Vanity of vanities’ says the Preacher, ‘All is Vanities!’”

- C. Solomon's Concluding Summary¹³ 12:9-14
 - 1. The Preacher's Activities 12:9-11
 - 2. The Preacher's Advise 12:12
 - 3. The Preacher's Final Conclusion 12:13-14
 - a. The command: "Fear God and keep His commandments" 12:13
 - 1) Fear of God—reverential respect and love—will result in: 12:13a
 - 2) Faithful obedience to His commands: 12:13b
 - 3) Because this applies to every [truly wise] person 12:13c
 - b. The reason: "For God will bring every act [of every man] to judgment" 12:14

¹³Ryrie suggests by way of conclusion, that "Solomon had learned to live with all of life's paradoxes by maintaining a proper attitude toward life and God. "God has not told man how to comprehend all the frustrating futility's [paradoxes] of life, but He has instructed man to enjoy life as His gift (2:24), and to make the most of every opportunity (9:10), and to live life with reverence toward God (12:13), accompanied by an awareness of [His] future judgment (12:14)" (Ryrie, "Ecclesiastes," in *Ryrie Study Bible*, 999).