

Ecclesiastes: Introduction and Ch. 1

BACKGROUND

I. Title

- A) Named after the principle speaker of the book, called in Hebrew *qoheleth*, “a member of the assembly.”
- B) In Greek this is translated *ecclesiastes*. (The word *ecclesiastical*, meaning “of or related to the church,” derives from this.)
- C) Since tradition remembers the author as one who “taught the people knowledge...” (12:9), this is translated “teacher.”

II. Authorship

- A) The book itself claims to be written by Solomon (1:1, “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem”). This is the traditional attribution; see for instance this passage from the Talmud:¹

When King Solomon was sitting upon the throne of his kingdom, his heart became greatly elated with riches, and he transgressed the commandment of the Word of God; and he gathered many houses, and chariots, and riders, and he amassed much gold and silver, and he married wives from foreign nations. Whereupon the anger of the Lord and kindled against him, and he sent to him Ashmodai, the king of the demons, and he drove him from the throne of his kingdom, and he took away the ring from his hand, in order that he should roam and wander about in the world, to reprove it; and he went about the provincial towns and cities in the land of Israel, weeping and lamenting, and saying, “I am Qoheleth, whose name was formerly called Solomon, who was King over Israel in Jerusalem.”

While we don’t take the Talmud as inspired, this gives a (somewhat colorful) account of Solomon’s decline, as described in 1 Kings 11.

- B) Many modern scholar doubt this; even the NIV Study Bible lists evidence for a later date and different author alongside Solomon. Here are some pros and cons (Kaiser):

Not Solomon / Later Date	Solomon
“Qoheleth” seems to refer to one in authority, but not necessarily the king.	Yet the author uses that term in the same verse he claims to have been king.
The author’s attitude toward rulers is often more like that of a subject.	Eight verses parallel Solomon’s life as described in 1 Kings; e.g. 1:16, “I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone” cf. 1 Kings 3:12, “I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you”; etc.
Vocabulary is like that between the exile and the NT period. Style also suggests a late composition.	But there are no vowel points, a practice which began in the 8 th cent. BC. Also, Kaiser claims the language is consistent with an early date.

¹ The Mishnah, a commentary on the Law, and the Gemara, the commentary on the Mishnah.

1:12, "I... was king over Israel in Jerusalem uses the past perfect, yet Solomon never ceased to be king.	But in early usage this would have been past progressive.
1:16 refers to multiple previous kings in Jerusalem, but only David was a king of Israel in Jerusalem before Solomon	But there were many previous Canaanite kings in Jerusalem before Solomon, e.g. Melchizedek (Gen 14:18).

C) Number of Authors

- 1) Many believe that the epilogue, 12:8-14, was added by a later author to soften the message. Soft also have suggested that a collection of pessimistic verses which were later redacted to make them more acceptable.
- 2) Kaiser points out that the epilogue represents the themes found throughout the book:
 - (a) *Judgment*, 12:14, "For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil"—11:9; 3:17; 9:1
 - (b) *Fear of God*, 12:13, ""—Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man"—3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13

The presence of a unifying theme removes the *necessity* (but not the possibility) for multiple authors.

III. Theme

Q: What are your impressions of this book? What do people typically think of it, and why?

- A) "Meaningless, meaningless, says the Teacher" (1:1-3). The Hebrew *hebel*, means literally "a puff of air," "a breath," or "vapor." (Eerdman's Bible Dictionary), and is translated "vanity" (KJV, NKJV, NASB, RSV, NRSV), "meaningless" (NIV), "useless" (TEV). The word means **transitory or vaporous**.
- B) Given its conclusion, Kaiser suggests that the theme isn't, as is often suggested, "all is vanity", but rather "all is vanity... [so] *fear God and keep his commandments*" (12:8,b 13b).

IV. Contents and Style

- A) The tone of Ecclesiastes often seems dark; however:
 - 1) In 12:10 the author refers to his book with a term which Kaiser translates as "words of truth" or "words of delight," suggesting that the author himself *perhaps* didn't see his book this way.
 - 2) Ecclesiastes was read on the 3rd day of the harvest feast of Tabernacles.
 - (a) Neh 8:9-10 specifically mandates that this is a joyful festival—"This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep... Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord"
 - (b) Which echoes the refrain of Ecclesiastes 2:24, "That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God."

Q: How does the relationship Qoheleth had with God differ from the relation we in the New Covenant have with God?

A: (1) The HS was restricted under the OC to prophets, judges and kings; (2) The only afterlife they were aware of was Sheol, the shadowy world anticipated by OT Jews.

Sheol (1) comes from the root word meaning “to ask” or “to demand” suggesting insatiability (Prov 30:15-16); (2) Is where our souls, joined in life to our bodies (Gen 2:7) go after separated from our bodies in death; (3) is a place where all go (Eccl 3:20) for eternity (12:5), from which none return (Job 7:6); (4) Is a place without activity or knowledge (Eccl 9:10); (5) Is a place without activity or knowledge (Eccl 9:10); (6) Is a place figuratively in the depths of the earth; (7) Is a place where people are cut off from God (Ps 6:5; 88:5, 10) and forgotten by men (Eccl 9:5).

- B) This book is *speculative wisdom literature*. (See handout on *Wisdom Literature*.)
- 1) As wisdom literature, it has many parallels with Pss and Prov; e.g. Eccl 1:3, “What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?” and Ps 62:9, “Lowborn men are but a breath, the highborn are but a lie; if weighed on a balance, they are nothing; together they are only a breath.”
 - 2) It addresses *theodicy*, the question of why a good God created or allows suffering and evil.
 - (a) In contrast to many other biblical treatments of theodicy, Eccl addresses the emotional as well as the cognitive question.
 - (b) This is part of its appeal: it doesn’t hide from trouble or pull any punches.
 - 3) Eccl takes the “big picture” view of our lives and suffering.

Q: Ask people to raise their hands if they know their mother’s name. Now their grandmother’s. Now their great-grandmother’s. See how many remain. This is the perspective Ecclesiastes represents—the long view, which takes into account the cyclical nature of life and humankind.

Quote: “Trying to determine what is going on in the world by reading newspapers is like trying to tell the time by watching the second hand of a clock.” (Writer Ben Hecht)

- C) Ecclesiastes has parallels with the creation theology of Gen 1-11:

We are to live in companionship	Gen 1:27	Eccl 4:9-12; 9:9
We are given to sin	Gen 3:1-6	Eccl 7:29; 8:11; 9:3
Knowledge has God-given limits	Gen 2:17	Eccl 8:7; 10:14
Life involves tiresome toil	Gen 3:14-19	Eccl 1:3; 2:22
Death is inevitable	Gen 3:19, 24	Eccl 9:4-6; 11:8
Order and regularity of nature of God’s sign of blessing	Gen 8:21-9:17	Eccl 3:11-12
Life is a “good” gift from God	Gen 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31	Eccl 2:24, 26; 3:12-13; 5:18

- D) The author probably saw his words as inspired: 12:11, “The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one Shepherd” (“shepherd” is used throughout the OT to refer to God; e.g. Gen 48:15; Ps 23:1; etc.).

Q: Do you know of any famous verses from Ecclesiastes? Do you have any favorite verses from Eccl?

- E) Favorite and Famous Verses From Eccl:

- 1) “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.” (Ecclesiastes 5:1)
- 2) “Do not say ‘Why were the old days better than these?’ For it is not wise to ask such questions.” (Ecclesiastes 7:10)
- 3) “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” (Eccl 4:12)
- 4) “That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God.” (Eccl 3:13) (This is a repeated refrain in Ecclesiastes.)
- 5) “He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men.” (Eccl 3:10)
- 6) “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.” (Eccl 3:1)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Read Eccl 1.* Given that Eccl is written from the standpoint of the Old Covenant, what value do you find in this chapter? What resonates with you, and what is dissonant? Under what circumstances would you recommend a friend turn to this chapter for guidance or solace?

The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, eds. Ray Brown et al. (Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, NJ) 1990.

Walter C. Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes: Total Life* (Moody Press: Chicago) 1979.