

An Introduction to Ecclesiastes

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Ecclesiastes is perhaps the most unusual book in the Bible. Non-Christian religions, and groups outside the bounds of orthodox Christianity, base some weird teachings on their views of this book. Both Jewish and Christian scholars have questioned why this book is included in the canon (authorized collection) of Holy Scripture. There are different interpretations of this book among Bible believers; in this paper I present my views on Ecclesiastes for your reflection.

Why Read This Book?

There are several 'unknowns' about this unusual book, but one thing we do know is that it is the Word of God. We are not sure who the human author is, but we know the primary author is God the Holy Spirit. Like the other sixty-five books of the Bible, we believe Ecclesiastes is "God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

A primary reason Christians receive this book as the Word of God in the words of men is the testimony of Jesus and the Apostles. Although it is hard to make the case that they quoted from this book directly, it was a recognized part of Hebrew Scripture by the First Century. Thus when Jesus said, "...and the Scripture cannot be broken..." (John 10:35) He made reference to the completed rule of faith organized as "the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). Similarly, when the Apostle wrote "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching..." (2 Timothy 3:16); this obscure book was included in the authorized collection.

Another primary reason for receiving this book as divinely authoritative is the witness of God the Spirit. Just as God the Son spoke about this book being within the body of Scripture, God the Spirit speaks from this book within the heart of believers. This has been called the 'self-attestation' of Scripture. The witness of God the Son is objective, the witness of God the Spirit is subjective. And it is by their witness that we 'hear God's voice and follow him' (John 10.27). And it has been the testimony of the people of God, in both old and new covenants, that this book of Ecclesiastes has been used by God in their lives. "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15.4).

Who Wrote This Book?

Many Bible teachers credit Solomon for Ecclesiastes. As a young king he humbly prayed for wisdom and his Proverbs are acknowledged as evidence of God's answer. The introduction of Ecclesiastes is

intentionally similar to the opening words of Proverbs.

“The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel” (Proverbs 1:1)

“The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Ecclesiastes 1:1)

But notice one significant difference, the name Solomon does not appear anywhere in Ecclesiastes. Many Bible teachers have no problem ‘reading’ his name into the book. “After all,” many argue, “what other king of Israel had such a ‘wide range’ of experiences?!” Indeed Scripture records the ‘joys’ of his one thousand ‘wives’ – but we read nothing about his ordeals with one thousand mothers-in law! I believe the author of this book is clearly making reference to the life of Solomon. He is trying to ‘piggy-back’ on the status of Solomon. But I am not convinced that Solomon is the author. I have several reasons.

1. What gain does Solomon get by not naming himself? He was one of the greatest kings of Israel. His name would have carried great weight for this book, as it does for Proverbs. Simply calling himself ‘Qohelet’ (the Hebrew word translated ‘Teacher’ in the NIV) adds nothing to the potential ‘kingly authority’ of the book. Qohelet means ‘the gatherer or assembler.’ This name may hold a veiled reference to Solomon who is recorded as ‘gathering’ the people of God for the dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 8). The NIV, and other English translations, make the logical assumption that Qohelet gathered the people with the purpose of teaching them. Thus they translate Qohelet as ‘The Teacher’ or even ‘The Preacher.’ Pastor Ray Steadman suggested from the nature of his message the word may be more accurately translated ‘The Searcher.’ I propose that Qohelet is not Solomon but intentionally alludes to Solomon who was widely known as the wisest and richest man in the world of his day. If he could not find meaning in the things of this world, who could?

2. The time frame of the writing seems to not fit Solomon. According to 1 Kings 11 Solomon died while he was the ruler of Israel. Yet we read, “I, the Teacher, *was* king over Israel in Jerusalem” (Ecclesiastes 1:12). The use of past tense here is striking. The Bible does not allow such a period when Solomon lived *after* being king. Another text which raises questions is, “I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me” (Ecclesiastes 1:16). There was only one king of Israel who reigned in Jerusalem before Solomon, his father David. The most natural reading of this text is that several kings of Israel passed between Solomon and the writing of Qohelet.

3. The powerlessness of the author does not sound like Solomon. In several places Qohelet laments the oppression of the poor and the abuses of the ruling rich.

“I saw the tears of the oppressed - and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors” (Ecclesiastes 4:1).

The tone of the author is that there is nothing he could do about this misery. Surely Solomon could

have done something! His power over Israel was absolute.

“If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields” (Ecclesiastes 5:8-9).

It would be quite strange for the king to be protesting against himself! Again, if such injustices transpired on Solomon’s watch, he could have corrected them.

“Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say” (Ecclesiastes 10:20).

If this is Solomon, he sounds like a suspicious bully! Again, the most natural reading of this verse is that it is about Solomon, but not by Solomon.

4. In order for Solomon to have written Ecclesiastes, he would have had to experience a life-changing reform near the end of his reign. Surely we can hope he did. The ancient Jewish ‘Targum’ – which is not a part of Holy Scripture – describes such a ‘repentance’ by Solomon. The Targum provides the ‘missing data’ which is necessary to support the theory of Solomonic authorship of this book. But there is no repentance of Solomon described in Scripture (read 1 Kings 11). Sadly the biblical record indicates Solomon ended his life an apostate.

Clearly Solomon is in view as the famous example behind the book of Ecclesiastes. Yet it does not weaken our view of the authority of Scripture to doubt that Solomon is the author of Ecclesiastes; rather it might mean we are more honest students of what the text really says. I do not think it is possible to determine who wrote this book. There are a number of other Old Testament books, and the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, of which we do not know the human author. But, following the example of God the Son and affirming the witness of God the Spirit, I believe Ecclesiastes is fully the Word of God in the words of men.

A Strange Book by an Unknown Author...what for??

Because this unique book has a Divine Author, its message is crisp and relevant in our 21st century. ‘The Searcher’ narrates the human quest throughout the centuries. He asks the questions philosophers have long pondered. Unlike most of the Old Testament, it is not a ‘Jewish’ book. God is never called by His Covenant name “Yahweh,” but rather as “Elohim“ (Creator God). As with the book of Job, we find no references to Old Testament heroes like Abraham or Moses. Neither do we find references to the Law of Moses, the Temple of God, the Aaronic priesthood, or blood sacrifices. Qohelet writes for the whole world, all peoples who live “under the sun” or “under heaven” (similar phrases used more than thirty times in the book).

This 'Global' book has a 'missionary' dimension. God, the Creator of all peoples and places, is "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). He called Abraham that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3). And He consecrated the nation of Israel to be "a light for the Gentiles" (Isaiah 42:6). Their praises were to be mission-focused as they "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples" (Psalm 96:3). Sadly, there are not many noble examples of Jewish 'missionaries' in the Old Testament. Like Jonah, most thought their blessings were deserved, and not to be shared with pagan Gentiles.

King Solomon, in his best days, was an example of God's concern for all people. We are told, "Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom" (1 Kings 4:34). Perhaps some of the very themes of Ecclesiastes come from these royal 'evangelistic' talks. This purpose of the book – reflecting the heart of God for all peoples to be saved – makes me eager to preach it. The people with whom we spend our days are 'searchers' under the Beijing sun. May God help each of us to use this book to tell them "now one greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:42).

So, How Can We Understand This Book?

I think the final product of this book is a critique of the words of Qohelet by an unknown editor. So there are two human authors of Ecclesiastes. Or, perhaps, there was one human author writing from two perspectives. The words of Qohelet are divinely recorded from 1.12 through 12.8 and form the heart of this book. An honest reading of Qohelet's thoughts provides another confirmation that these are not the words of a Spirit-filled believer.

"A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work."

Ecclesiastes 2:24

"So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?"

Ecclesiastes 3:22

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Everything is meaningless!" Ecclesiastes 12:8

Commentators who say these are words of a reformed Solomon engage in extreme exegetical gymnastics to bend these ideas into conformity with biblical truth. Is it really true that all we can do is eat, drink, and work because all of life is meaningless? This does not convey the hope and purpose expressed by the people of God throughout the Scriptures. Rather, this portrays the ultimate hopelessness of those who do not know God. These thoughts are the best someone "under the sun" can come up with. They are 'true' as far as they go, but they do not go far enough. They do not factor in the more complete knowledge of God we have through saving faith and a

knowledge of the Scriptures.

By contrast the Apostle Paul writes, "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'" (1 Corinthians 15:32). Paul writes from 'beyond the Sun' by faith in the Risen Son. By the grace of God in Christ, the dead will be raised with Him; therefore we have more to look forward to than eating, drinking, and dying.

So Qohelet is a kind of foil to present the best the world can offer, and the final editor brings us to the conclusion that it is not good enough. A natural reading of the book reveals both authors.

"The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem" Ecclesiastes 1:1

"I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem." Ecclesiastes 1:12

"Look," says the Teacher, "this is what I have discovered" Ecclesiastes 7:27

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Everything is meaningless!" Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true." Ecclesiastes 12:8-10

Either Qohelet was a pompous braggart or someone else was recording his words and adding their commentary.

Perhaps we'll better understand the authorship of Ecclesiastes by considering the book of Job. Throughout much of that book three 'friends' of Job's make long accusatory speeches which fall short of accurately describing the reason for his malady. One of the harshest 'friendly encouragements' Job received was "How then can a man be righteous before God?...man, who is but a maggot - a son of man, who is only a worm!" (Job 25:4,6). Scripture provides an accurate record of their speeches, but their message was not 'true.' Despite the opinion of some frustrated wives, men are more than maggots and worms! We know this from the end of Job; because God speaks finally and silences their foolishness. Even Job, whose words are more correct than his 'friends,' is left humbly holding his hand over his mouth. So the speeches in Job are foils; samples of the world's ideas. But the book concludes by showing that ultimate truth must come from outside this world through God's revelation.

The Apostle Paul makes brief use of such 'worldly wisdom' in his teaching. We have already seen one example, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Corinthians 15:32). He tells the Corinthians we can do better than mere survival because Jesus rose. He has some bad news for a church leader named Titus about the people on the island he inhabits, "Even one of their own prophets has said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.' This testimony is true."!

(Titus 1:12-13). And in a speech to Athenians Paul affirms the wisdom of a pagan poet, “For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring” (Acts 17:28). We learn from Paul that all truth is God’s truth.

The message of Qohelet can be summarized, ‘Life is full of troubles and then you die!’ But we must read the words of Qohelet in the context of the whole book and in the larger context of the whole Bible. Just as we cannot isolate the incorrect claims of Job’s friends and claim they are fully true, neither can we claim that Qohelet sees the complete picture.

<p>1.1-11 Qohelet’s Viewpoint Introduced</p>	<p>1.12 – 12.8 Words of Qohelet Searcher ‘under the sun’</p>	<p>12.9-14 Summary and Critique <i>Look to The Son</i></p>
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Qohelet’s words are bracketed by a God-knowing editor who provides a concluding commentary to the message of Qohelet:

“Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true. The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails-given by one Shepherd. Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wears the body. 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. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:9-14).

Qohelet is given respectful praise for his wise words. Indeed his learning is broad, but it is not deep. It does not plumb the depths of true wisdom, “the fear of the Lord” (Proverbs 1.7).

I close this paper with a quote from my seminary Old Testament professor, to whom I am indebted for this perspective on the book of Ecclesiastes: *“From this point, he (the righteous narrator) proceeds with his evaluation, which begins with praise, and then moves to doubt and finally to criticism...(Qohelet’s) speeches are torn down and demolished in the end...In a masterfully succinct manner, then, the book ends with three phrases that point away from skeptical thinking and toward a theology consonant with the rest of the OT: wisdom, law, and prophets.”*

Tremper Longman III

The Book of Ecclesiastes: The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, 1998

May the Lord guide us through this book of Holy Scripture; that in it we might hear His voice and gain His heart for a world that is lost without The Son.
