

# ECCLESIASTES

## I. Authorship

### A. Critical View: Multiple authorship

1. Objections against the unity of the book are made on the basis of
  - a. the separate collections of proverbs in the second half of the book
  - b. seeming internal contradictions
    1. Woman of 7:26,28 vs. wife of 9:9
    2. “Enjoy the labors of your hands” vs. “vanity of labor”
2. There are multiple authorship theories, but “...the simplest postulates three writers.... The original writer (Qoheleth, the Preacher) was a rebel against piety and held a pessimistic view of life in relation to God. His thoughts were toned down—or even contradicted—by an orthodox redactor who emended the text. He belonged to the Hasidim (“holy ones, saints”), who were forerunners of the Pharisees. Another writer of the regular Wisdom school, a חכם *hakam* (wise man), incorporated a series of traditional proverbs.” —Wright in *EBC*, p. 1138.

### B. “Qoheleth”

1. =the form of a feminine participle for one who convenes/presides over the קהל *qahal*, “assembly.” According to Bullock, the feminine gender may have been used to designate probably
  - a. The office (later the office bearer)
  - b. Or perhaps, since he speaks in behalf of wisdom (fem. gender), he calls himself the [wisdom] spokesman
2. The LXX translation for *qahal* is ἑκκλησία *ekklesia*. Hence, the Greek translation for Qoheleth which is Ecclesiastes, meaning “one who presides” or perhaps “preacher.”
3. The “speaker,” or, as Luther first suggested, the “Preacher,” fits well with the technical meaning of *qahal* and *ekklesia*.

### C. Solomon?

1. Indications
  - a. Internal
    - (1) Veiled claim in 1:1

1:1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

(2) Wisest of men, 1:16 cf. I Kgs. 4:29,30

1:16 "I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge."

(3) Description of experience of wealth and public works fits Solomon, 2:4-11; 2:9 hard to apply to any later than Solomon

2:9 So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.

(4) Solomonic Themes

(a) "Fear of the Lord" (3:14; 5:7; 8:12; 12:13) is consonant with theme of Proverbs collection

3:14 I know that whatever God does, It shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, And nothing taken from it. God does *it*, that men should fear before Him.

(b) Familiarity with scheming women, 7:26ff. cf. Prov. 6,7; I Kgs. 11:3

b. Jewish and Christian tradition

The pessimism and apparent contradictions of the book raised questions about its canonicity, but its close historical connection to Solomon secured its place in the canon.

2. Objections

a. Linguistic: "The language is later, Mishnaic Hebrew. This must date Ecclesiastes in the post-exilic period."

Even Leupold dates it in the mid-third century as a comfort for confused believers (p. 18).

b. Internal

(1) There may be allusions to Israel's misfortunes down through the period of the exile, e.g., 9:14-15; (Bullock, pp. 186-87)

9:14 There was a little city with few men in it; and a great king came against it, besieged it,...

(2) 1:12 - "I...was king over Israel in Jerusalem"

(3) 1:16 - "I...increased wisdom over each one who was before me over Jerusalem;" cf. 9:14-15

(4) Alleged antagonism to the royal throne, e.g., 4:13; 10:17

4: 13 Better a poor and wise youth Than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more.

- c. Luther may have been the first to doubt Solomonic authorship. He said it was "...a sort of Talmud, compiled from many books, probably from the library of King Ptolemy Euergetes of Egypt." Still, Luther may have allowed Solomonic authorship with editing by Hezekiah's men, according to Dr. Ron Allen.

#### D. Unknown 5th century author

##### 1. Indications

- a. The Hebrew appears to be post-exilic: Aramaisms and Persian loanwords ("paradise," 2:5; "decree," 8:11). Delitzsch insists, "If Eccl. is of Solomonic origin, then there is no history to the Hebrew language" (p. 190).
- b. Solomon's name does not appear. Bullock takes this as a good indication that a later sage might have cast the treatise in Solomonic terms under the unpretentious pen name, Qoheleth, without falling into the category of Pseudepigrapha.  
Bullock's scheme, like Archer's, depends on a novel literary genre, this one being called the "impersonation" genre (p. 185).

##### 2. Rebuttal against post-exilic date

- a. Regarding Bullock's thesis, it should be considered that his argument loses some force in view of the fact that if another later sage was trying to impersonate Solomon, how could he effectively draw his conclusions about the vanity of life if he never had opportunity (opulence, wisdom, harems, etc.) to experience first-hand what Solomon actually lived through and must have reflected upon.
- b. **Persian loan words** like "paradise" (2:5) and "official decree" (8:11) may not be Persian at all, but could be from classical Sanskrit (akin to Persian) during Solomon's commercial trade with India. Other anachronistic words, especially Aramaisms, are being discovered to have had ancient roots from before Solomon's time.
- c. 1:12 may be translated "I have been king..."
- d. 1:16, instead of requiring Qoheleth to be at the end of a long line of kings, should be taken as implying that this philosopher comes after some notable

wise men in Jerusalem (cf. I Kgs. 4:31).

This also addresses the observation that the author takes an anti-royal perspective. Cf. the philosopher-king, Marcus Aurelius (fl. 180), who after a long reign wrote his *Meditations* as his personal reflections and not as political propaganda.

- e. Archer's lonely thesis (*SOTI*; *ZPBE*, "Ecclesiastes"; "The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of Eccl." in *JETS*, XII, 1969; cf. Ronald Allen also in *EBC*), is that the book of Ecclesiastes fits a unique literary genre in all of OT and contemporary middle eastern literature. It is the wisdom genre of "philosophical discourse."

First impressions make his argument look contrived, based on circular reasoning (note Bullock's assessment, p. 186): if the literary style and vocabulary of Ecclesiastes resembles post-exilic Hebrew, it is because Solomon's particular style here was the horse that came before the cart of later Hebrew writings. It was the original pattern.

Still, Archer does offer a scholarly basis for his position. He posits much of his style/vocabulary arguments on comparative studies of ancient Phoenician literature from ca. 1300 b.c. Mitchell Dahood pioneered this study in 1952, suggesting that the post-exilic author had fled to the coast of Phoenicia after 587, and there was influenced by Canaanite/Phoenician literary style, grammar, and spelling when he penned Ecclesiastes.

Though we have no complete example of Canaanite philosophical discourse, Archer suggests that the cosmopolitan Solomon effected a Canaanite style that existed hundreds of years before him. He was, after all, on good terms with Hiram from whom he imported other craftsmen.

- f. Other theories on the kind of Hebrew used

- (1) The style of Hebrew was already contemporary to Solomon

"... the language of Ecclesiastes does not at present provide an adequate resource for dating. It is possible that a particular style was adopted for pessimism literature. The possibility that a northern dialect of Hebrew [akin to later Mishnaic Hebrew] was used must be left open. Equally it is possible that its dialect is Phoenicianizing. Certainly no other document possesses precisely the same characteristics, and no reliable date can be given this way." —J.H. Walton in *EBC*, p. 1143.

- (2) Solomon composed the book, but as the sages and scribes debated this popular treatise over the centuries, its final form was expressed in post-exilic language —Wright in *EBC*, 1143

- g. Tradition and historical context lend weight to Solomon's composition; it was the time when wisdom literature flourished, and Solomon was the master of that age.

The time of composition was probably in the days of Solomon. The final linguistic form may have developed over the centuries B.C. as wise men and scribes debated and restated the propositions of Ecclesiastes.

## OCCASION

The romantic conclusion that Song of Songs was the product of the younger lover, Proverbs the result of more mature contemplations (2:1-11; 11,12), and Ecclesiastes the reflections of the king in his declining years is not only popular, but is supported by tradition.

“Ecclesiastes presents itself as the matured and chastened wisdom of a king who has learned from experience the futility of living for any other purpose than the glory of God. He has come to realize what a poor bargain it is for a man to gain the whole world but to lose his own soul.” — Archer

This most philosophical of all OT books provides a counterbalance in the canon to the more practical wisdom of the Book of Proverbs. Allen (*EBC*) notes that Proverbs has a pro-active, affirmative view of living while Eccl. has an acceptive view of life; Proverbs calls for improving life, while Eccl. calls for an understanding of life by faith.

## II. Thematic structure

A. Theme: probably not so much the search for the meaning of life, but rather the vanity of looking for life’s meaning in the wrong places. Mankind will not find life’s meaning in planes that do not transcend the level of the creature. Mere earthly ambitions and desires are futile. Living contentedly in our Maker is a major theme (e.g., 12:1).

B. Theological argument (based on Wright in *EBC*, 1145)

1. God created man perfect, but man introduced futility by his fall into sin (7:29). The lynch pin that seals man’s frustration is the reality of his mortality. Mortality is the climactic theme of 11:7–12:7.

7:29 Truly, this only I have found: That God made man upright, But they have sought out many schemes."

2. Mankind has a sense of eternal existence (3:11) that gives him a higher purpose, raising him above the frustrations of life

3:11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.



Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2000 featuring the distinctive scribble of prayer leader, Arthur Stace

3. To fit into God's grander scheme, men are to begin where they are, enjoying the good things that God has given  
This is the theme of the refrains of Eccl. (2:24-26; 3:12-13,22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; cf. I Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17; I Tim. 6:17).

E.g., 2:24 Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God.

4. "God has a proper time for each thing to be done (3:1-8), and recognizing this allows man to accept life as it comes (3:11a)."

This outlook calls for

1) discipline and self-denial until there arrives a proper time for indulgence, and 2) the transient discovery of God's works is part of His intended design to give joy and meaning to our lives

5. We do not need to do something extraordinary in order to do God's will.

"Qoheleth would most likely identify self-sacrifice as meaningless if it is motivated by any degree of self-satisfaction. We need to remember that the author is not trying to describe the life of faith or what our faith responsibilities are. Rather, he is contrasting a self-centered life style with a God-centered one." (Wright, p. 1145)

6. Mankind in pursuit of life is still accountable for how life is grasped and played out. Self-indulgence at the expense of others is wrong (8:8-9).

- C. The message does seem to shift between pessimism and contented resignation under the hand of the sovereign God. Still there is some progression from the message of "vanity" in the first half of the book to the value of wisdom in the second half.

"Vanity" is mentioned 26X in the first six chapters, but 12X in the last six chapters, while wisdom is treated 17X in the first six and 32X in the last six.

Another way of expressing the tension is Qoheleth's development of the futility of life as opposed to the answer of practical faith which waits upon God and enjoys the daily simple pleasures that He gives (3:12,13; I Tim. 6:17). See supplement from J.S. Wright in *NBD*, p. 331.

Also see Craig Bartholomew, "Qoheleth in the Canon?! Current Trends in the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes" in *Themelios*, May '99, 24:3:14-16.

Bartholomew develops the idea that the Qoheleth is pitting against each other two opposing epistemologies: rational empiricism vs. faith & revealed wisdom. The first approach that leads to existentialism, is a dead end always resulting in "vanity." The second approach unlocks the meaning of life and existence.

Ecclesiastes teaches that empty existential experience should bring us back to our Maker. Bartholomew summarizes with this thought from T.S. Eliot:

“We shall not cease from exploration  
and the end of all our exploring  
will be to arrive where we started  
and know the place for the first time.”

Ron Allen offers this apt summary of the book’s message:

“And life should be enjoyed, especially in the seizing of simple pleasures. How fitting it is that the book of Qohelet is read in the annual festival of Sukkot. This is the fall harvest festival, a traditional, trans-cultural time of rejoicing for people who have received the bounty of God’s earth and are now preparing for the winter’s cold and barren days. When the harvest is in, it is a time for a party. With stores safely in the barn, here is an appropriate time to relax, to sing, to eat and drink, and to consider meaning.” (1988 paper by Dr. Ronald Allen presented to the NW ETS, p. 13)

### EXCURSIS on ECCLESIASTES as COMMENTARY on the FIRST THREE CHAPTERS of GENESIS

See David Clemens’ treatment, “The Law of Sin and Death: Eccl. and Gen. 1-3,” in *Themelios* August ’94, pp. 5-8, and for a more narrow topic, William Anderson, “The Curse of Work in Qoheleth: An Exposé of Gen 3:17-19 in Eccl,” in *Evangelical Quarterly*, LXX:2, pp. 99-113.

#### First. Death is the dominant motif in Ecclesiastes

The introduction (1:1-11) parallels the book’s conclusion (11:7-12:14) in theme and key phrases that echo the words of Genesis 3

	<u>Ecclesiastes</u>		<u>Ecclesiastes</u>	
A. Author	1:1		12:9-14	Author A’
	1:1	words	12:10-11	
	1:1	preacher	12:9-10	
B. Conclusion	1:2		12:8	Conclusion B’
	1.2	vanity	12.8	
	1.2	says	12.8	
	1.2	preacher	12.8	
C. Death	1:3-11		11:7–12:7	Death C’
	1.3; 5.9	sun	11.7; 12.2	
	1.4,6,7	go, etc.	11.9; 12.5	
	1.4,5	come, set, etc.	11.8,9; 12.1	
	1.4	earth	12.7	
	1.4	[for]ever, eternal	12.5	
	1.5-7	to, toward, into	12.5-7	
	1.6	turning, go about	12.5	
	1.6,7	returns, again	12.2,7	
	1.6	wind, spirit	12.7	
	1.11	remembrance, remember	11.8; 12.1	

If the introduction (where death is not explicit) is read in the light of the book’s parallel conclusion, it becomes apparent that the introduction and whole book deals not merely with life’s endless cycles, but with creation’s most unrelenting cycle—death.

Note echoes of Genesis 3 (esp. Gen. 3.19) in Eccl. 1.4, 3:20, and 12:7

#### Second. Common themes

Toil: 1.3,13; 2.3; 3.9-10 see Gen. 3.6, 17-18

Knowledge:

- “I saw” is used 24X in Eccl.
- Human eyes are unfulfilled (Eccl. 1:8; 2:13,14;11:7,8; 12:2,3)

–knowledge of good

Eccl. 2:3 I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives.

Eccl. 12:14 For God will bring every work into judgment, Including every secret thing, Whether good or evil.

–knowledge of evil

Sin: 7:29; 9:18b

Serpent of 10:8,11

Vanity (לְבַלְבָלָהּ): the effects of the fall are swiftly manifested in the tragic death of הַבֵּל (Abel) in Gen. 4. Abel’s example provides the nexus of “toil, sin, folly” introduced by the fall.

Third. Clemens draws this conclusion (p. 8), “Thus, it is not possible to return to Eden (cf. 2:4-11). However, it is possible to return to the commands given in Eden, and this is the intent of 2:24-26 and its parallels: God has already approved our eating and work (9.7), because they were prescribed in Eden; our only sure knowledge derives, not from independent evaluation of good and evil, but from the revealed will of God. More fundamentally, it is possible to return to the God who created Eden—to remember him after forgetfulness.”

End Excursus

D. Audience

1. Perhaps addressed to the “self-sufficient intellectual” —Archer
2. Perhaps addressed to aristocratic youth as disciples of the sage, 12:12 “my son”
3. Made to appeal to the Gentile mind (Kaiser)

In the light of its connections to the theology of Genesis 1-3, it appears Ecclesiastes is addressed to ALL the sons of Adam.



## E. Further Interpretation

### 1. Secondary suggestions

- a. The thoughtful man's effort to reconcile his faith with the realities of life
- b. The author is deliberately pessimistic, laying aside revealed truth. His negative message is designed to cause dissatisfaction so that men will not be smugly satisfied with the tinsel of this world.

A variant of this view is that found in the Old Scofield Bible. Acknowledging the inspiration of the text, it is still maintained that these are but the accurate musings of a rationalist: "...the conclusions and reasonings are, after all, [the natural] man's."

### 2. The book does have **one unified message** and is not merely a string of disjointed texts. J. Stafford Wright, ("The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes" in *Classical Evangelical Essays in OT Interp*), suggests three things that will tell a lot about any book:

- a. The preface: "vanity of vanities," a Semitism for "complete futility"
- b. the conclusion: "All is vanity, [but] this is the conclusion of the matter: ...fear God and keep His commandments..." for the day of reckoning is coming to see how we lived from day to day (12:8; vv. 13,14; cf. Mt. 19:17).

Mt. 19:17 So He said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one *is* good but One, *that is*, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments."

### c. Any recurring refrains

- (1) Vanity refrain
- (2) "Under the sun;" ephemeral nature of life
- (3) Personal experience: "I perceived; I said in my heart"
- (4) In light of the transitoriness of this earthly life, "there is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good in his labor." (2:24; 3:12,13, 22; 5:18,19; 8:15; 9:7-9)

This latter refrain is illuminating. In light of the major theme of the emptiness of life, this is not the Epicurean philosophy of *carpe diem*, living life only for its existential pleasures. Rather, this book views each day of life as a gift to be cherished or abused.

Combining together the threads of the preface, the conclusion, and this key refrain of responsibly (11:9; 9:10) enjoying the simple pleasures of life, one discovers the unified message of **simply living every day to its fullest before the God of heaven**. “And in this daily service of God, we may find pleasure, because we are fulfilling the purpose for which God made us” —Wright, p. 150. (Note WSC #1)

Simply stated, read the end of the book first to see “the conclusion of the whole matter.” The preface is the verdict of life, but the conclusion is the counsel in view of that verdict of fallen human experience.

J.I. Packer summarizes three imperatives of Ecclesiastes, a book he claims helped bring balance to his Christian worldview:

1. Revere God (3.14;5.7; 7.18; 8.12-13; 12.13)
2. Recognize and enjoy God’s good gifts (2.24-26; 5.18-19; 8.15; 9.7-9)
3. Remember that God judges our deeds (3.17; 5.6; 7.29; 8.13; 11.9; 12.14)

### III. Early Christian use

A. Before and after the Christian era, Ecclesiastes was numbered among the five Megilloth (short Bible “scrolls” read at appointed festivals), and was read annually at the Feast of Tabernacles, the fall feast of harvest celebration

#### B. Possible NT usage

Two NT refrs. are more allusions than quotations

1. Rom. 8:20 picks up the theme of all creation being subject to “vanity” (same Grk. word in LXX of Eccl). Paul may have had the whole book of Ecclesiastes in mind as he developed the transitory nature of suffering in this life against the backdrop that God is sovereign in disposing the affairs of men (8:28 cf. Eccl. 8:12; 9:11).

Rom. 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. 19 For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God.

20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope;

2. Some see the message of accountability in Eccl. 12:14 in Jesus’ parable about the rich fool (Lk. 12:16-20,21).

Luke 12:20 "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?'

3. James 4:13-14 alludes to life being a vapor

James 4:14 For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.

- C. The Apostolic fathers and Ante-Nicene fathers made extensive use of Ecclesiastes (see Bullock, p. 188).

IV. Outline (per Geisler in *Popular Survey of OT*) and highlights

- A. The Problem stated: no lasting satisfaction — 1:1-11

- B. The Problem studied: no satisfaction in the world alone — 1:12- 12:8

1. Life's varied experiences don't satisfy — 1:12-2:26

from wisdom to wit to wine to works to wealth to women to worldly recognition and pleasures

2. Life's wisdom and philosophies cannot satisfy — 3-12:8

- C. The Problem solved:

satisfaction is found, not under the sun, but beyond the sun — 12:9-14

Note vs. 12:11 The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd.

There is an apparent chiasm in 11:3-12:2 which spans the chapter division (Fredericks in *JSOT*, 52:101, Dec.'91):

11:3	A	Clouds and Rain
11:7	B	Light and Sun
11:8	C	Consider the days of Darkness
	D	All that comes is but breath
11:9	E	Enjoy your Youth
	F	<i>KNOW . . . the judgment of God</i>

11:10 E' Enjoy your Youth  
D' All of Youth is but breath  
12:1 C' Consider God before the days of darkness/evil  
12:2 B' Sun and Light  
A' Clouds and Rain