

Ecclesiastes

Purpose: To show that the meaning of life is found in God alone.

Outline: I. Introduction (1:1-11)

II. Limitations of Work and Wisdom (1:12-3:8)

III. Work in Fear Before God Whose Work Endures (3:9-6:12)

IV. Wisdom is Better than Folly Because it is of God (7:1-10:20)

V. Enjoy this Life that God has Given (11:1-12:7)

VI. Conclusion (12:8-14)

(Purpose and Outline are from Dan Ledford)

Author: Solomon is traditionally understood to be the “Teacher” but the author is unknown. See additional notes below.

Date: Sometime between the time of Solomon (10th century BC) and after the Babylonian exile (6th century BC).

Highlights:

The teaching of Ecclesiastes comes from a person who is called (in Hebrew) the “Qoheleth” or “Kohelet” which is commonly translated “Teacher” or “Preacher” in English. The word Qoheleth is from the same word roots as qahal translated “assembly.” So it would seem that the Qoheleth is the teacher/preacher of the assembly.

The title of the book “Ecclesiastes” is the Greek translation of the Hebrew “Qoheleth.” Ecclesiastes, from which we get the words ecclesiastical or ecclesiology – relating to “the church”

Traditionally, Qoheleth has been identified as King Solomon, but no name is indicated in the text itself. The form and structure of the Hebrew language in the book suggests a later date. It is possible that King Solomon is the Qoheleth, who was the teacher of these themes; and that the author of the written material is a later student of Solomon’s teachings and wrote the book as we now have it.

While the Bible is often repetitious, it is not vain repetition. Sometime key truths are repeated word for word, but most often the key truth is nuanced for fuller interpretation and application. This is especially the case with the wisdom literature.

Job is particular to suffering and the sovereignty of God.

The Psalms offer a multitude of prayers for various life situations.

The Proverbs are “principles not promises” with broad brush truths.

Ecclesiastes nuances the black and white truths of the Proverbs.

Song of Songs considers sexual wisdom within the covenant of marriage.

Vanity, or meaningless, is the often repeated word (38 times) in Ecclesiastes. The Hebrew word “hebel” more literally means “vapor, breath” and suggests fleeting emptiness. In Romans 8:20 the Greek form of the word (mataistes) is used where Paul writes, “For the creation was subjected to frustration/futility...”

Vanity, meaninglessness, futility, frustration is a result of the fall and Ecclesiastes may have been in Paul’s mind while he wrote this part of Romans 8.

As such Ecclesiastes is not pure pessimism, but speaks to the reality of the fall with a hopefulness toward God’s redemptive work, and thus we should fear/revere God. The meaning of life cannot be found in the fallen world, but is found in God who created, redeemed, and will restore all of creation.

There are many literary genres in the book: allegories, sayings, metaphors, proverbs. Also the book jumps back and forth between poetry and prose.

The book begins with an introduction of the author (1:1), the theme (1:2), introductory remarks about the meaninglessness of everything “under the sun.”

The next section of the book (1:12-2:23) demonstrates that fulfillment cannot be found in anything “under the sun.”

The heart of Ecclesiastes is found in 2:24-25. This “enjoy life” philosophy – with the lack of talk about faith, piety, discipline, repentance, etc. – has worried some Christians over the years. We need to keep in mind that the book of Ecclesiastes is not a systematic theology. Moreover, it is not simply an “enjoy life” philosophy; rather the book proclaims that we are to “enjoy life and fear God” as we will see later.

The 1st question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism is “What is the chief end of man?” (i.e. what is our meaning in life). The answer is “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”

It has been suggested that the answer might also be “Man’s chief end is to glorify God *by enjoying* him forever.”

The first 8 verses of chapter 3 are the most well-known in Ecclesiastes (makes you want to sing “Turn, Turn, Turn” by The Byrds).

The next section (3:9-6:12) demonstrates the frustrations in this life are unavoidable; and the eternal God is still God.

A frequently read passage in marriage ceremonies is 4:9-12.

Compare Ecclesiastes 5:15 with Luke 12:14-21. Compare Ecclesiastes 5:19 with 6:2.

The next section (7:1-10:20) gives us similar guidelines to what we find in the Proverbs.

“The Retribution Principle” Revisited. The Principle – which states that ultimately the righteous will prosper while the wicked will suffer – is accepted by Qoheleth in theory, but states his inability to predict how it might be applied in life or a specific situation. This can especially be seen in 7:13-18.

The next section (11:1-12:7) give us a two-fold directive: be cautious, but not to the point of paralysis; and enjoy this life, but not to the point of disobeying God’s commandments.

The conclusion repeats the theme (12:8) and tells us what does have meaning (12:13-14).