

Ecclesiastes: The Philipians of the Old Testament

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Introduction to Ecclesiastes



*Set your shoulder joyously to the world's wheel:
you may spare yourself some unhappiness if, beforehand,
you slip the Book of Ecclesiastes beneath your arm.*

— Havelock Ellis, *The New Spirit* (New York: Houghton and Mifflin, 1926), 33

Reading Ecclesiastes on a Feast Day

Ecclesiastes is traditionally read in the Jewish synagogue on the third day of the Feast of Tabernacles (or, Booths, Sukkot) in late September or early October (15–21 Tishri). It is the time of the annual harvest festival recalling Israel's wilderness experience (Lev 23:33–43). The fact that it is read during a festival of great joy (cf. Neh 8:9) should be a clue that the tone of the book is not considered by Judaism, at least, as pessimistic.

Comparing the Wisdom Books

Derek Kidner compared the Old Testament's three major wisdom books to houses:¹

Proverbs—the seven-pillared house of Wisdom (9:1)

Job—the wrecked house struck by the wind (1:19)

Ecclesiastes—a great house in the grip decay (12:3–4).

Proverbs: **the practical path to wisdom.**

Ecclesiastes: **the reflective path to wisdom.**

Ecclesiastes' Contribution to Theology

The contributions Ecclesiastes makes to the doctrine of God is sufficient reason alone to reconsider the so-called pessimistic and worldly view that many attribute to Ecclesiastes. Compared to the character of God, man is clearly an exceedingly sinful and thankless being. Thus the summarizing exhortation of Ecclesiastes to “fear God” (5:7; 12:13; cf. 7:18; 8:12–13).

The word “God” occurs 40 times in Ecclesiastes. The following is a summary of the doctrine of God in Ecclesiastes:

¹ Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 116.

Theological Topic	References in Ecclesiastes
God's Sovereign Control over Man	1:13 (cf. 3:10); 2:26; 3:1 , 11, 14, 18 ; 5:18–20; 6:1–2; 7:14, 26; 8:15; 9:1, 7
God's Providential Grace	2:24–26 ; 3:13; 5:18–20; 8:15
God's Eternality	3:11, 14; 12:5, 7
God's Creatorship	3:11, 14; 7:29; 8:16–17; 11:5; 12:1 , 7
God's Perfection	3:14 ; 7:29; 8:16–17; 11:5
God's Justice and Holiness	2:24–26; 3:17 ; 5:4, 6; 7:26, 29; 8:2, 12–13; 11:9; 12:14
God's Abode	5:2
God's Omnipresence and Omniscience	5:2 , 6; 8:2, 16–17; 11:5 ; 12:14
God's Omnipotence	7:13 ; 11:5
God's Preservation of His Saints	7:26 ; 8:12–13
God's Requires Reverential Fear	3:14; 5:7 ; 7:18; 8:12–13; 12:1, 13
God's Requires Obedience before Sacrifice	5:1 , 4, 7; 8:2; 12:1, 13
God's Word	12:13

The doctrine of God is but one aspect of the teachings of this wisdom book. Within its verses is a wealth of doctrinal teaching contributing to the doctrines of man, salvation, and future judgment.

Vanity, Vanity

The word “vanity” (or “emptiness” or “enigma”) occurs 34 times in Ecclesiastes.

For one of my former teaching colleagues, Fred Brock, soap bubbles came to mind: “Soap bubble, soap bubbles, all is soap bubbles.”

Key Words in Ecclesiastes

Repeated terms tend more toward the positive rather than the negative.

Occurrences	Word or Phrase
52	<i>good</i>
52	<i>wisdom/wise</i>
40	<i>God</i>
40	<i>heart</i>
38	<i>vanity/emptiness</i>
37	<i>time</i>
33	<i>trouble</i>
30	<i>evil</i>
29	<i>under the sun</i>
26	<i>live/life</i>
17	<i>rejoice/joy</i>
12	<i>give/gift</i>
6	<i>eat and drink</i>

Purpose

What is the purpose and meaning of Ecclesiastes? The book's epilogue (12:9–14) should be allowed to speak for itself.

The primary purpose of Ecclesiastes is clearly to teach wisdom (cf. 2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:18–19; 8:1–9; 11:1–6). Its instructions emphasize obedience to God's commandments and the fear of God (3:17; 5:1–7; 8:12–13; 11:9; 12:7, 13–14). Cp. Deuteronomy 4:10; 5:29; 6:2, 13, 24; 8:6; 10:12, 20; 13:4; 14:23; 17:19; 28:58; 31:12–13; Leviticus 19:14, 52; 25:17, 36, 43; and Proverbs 1:7; 10:27; 13:14; 14:27; 19:23; 22:4.

Skepticism? Pessimism?

Though many commentators have tagged Ecclesiastes with the label of skepticism, As Gleason Archer put it, Ecclesiastes was written “to convince men of the uselessness of any world view which does not rise above the horizon of man himself.”² As a result of the writer's careful examination of man's environment, it “leaves us hungry to know God.”³

Walter Kaiser suggests that Ecclesiastes should be viewed as a missionary outreach to Gentile peoples through the channel of wisdom.⁴ Therefore, the book could be entitled *Euangelistes* (the Evangelist).

Title

The English Bible adopted the title of the book from that employed by the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint: *Ecclesiastes*. The Hebrew title is *Qoheleth*. The meaning of *Qoheleth* might be “Preacher” “Gatherer.” English versions normally understand *Qoheleth* to mean “Preacher” (cf. 1 Kgs 8:1, 55–61).

Canonicity

As early as 190 B.C., Ben Sirach quoted from the Book of Ecclesiastes. In the first century B.C. the apocryphal book entitled *The Wisdom of Solomon* took exception to the Book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is not quoted anywhere in the New Testament although there are possible allusions in Romans 8:20 and James 4:14. In the Midrash (*Shir Hashirim Rabba* 1:1, section 10), the claim is made that Solomon wrote the Song of Songs in his youth, Proverbs in his maturity, and Ecclesiastes in his old age.

At Qumran four fragments of Ecclesiastes have been discovered in the fourth cave. These fragments include 5:13–17; 6:3–8; 7:1–2, 7–9, and 19–20. It appears that the manuscript from which these fragments have come dates to the middle of the second century B.C.

Ultimately, the canonicity of the book is determined by its own apparent claim to divine inspiration in 12:11—“The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, **given by one Shepherd**” (emphasis added).

² Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 475.

³ Stuart Olyott, *A Life Worth Living and A Lord Worth Loving*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1983), 13–14.

⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, Everyman's Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 32–33.

Authorship and Date

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. (*Ecclesiastes 1:1*)

In 1644 Hugo Grotius suggested that Ecclesiastes had not been written by Solomon. That was the first time in the Christian church that anyone had made such a suggestion. Martin Luther identified the author as Jesus ben Sirach. Many evangelical scholars insist that the author is unknown.

It must be noted that Ecclesiastes specifies that the author of that book is both “the son of David” (1:1) and “king over Israel” (1:12)—exactly the same information provided about Solomon in Proverbs 1:1.

Linguistic Evidence. Ecclesiastes provides evidence of a fair amount of foreign influence including Egyptian, Greek, and Babylonian. The book’s vocabulary includes 77 words occurring 5 times or less in the Old Testament. Of those 77, 57.1% are also employed in the Jewish Talmud.⁵ However, the vocabulary of the book is not a firm indication of date. As the wisest man of his time Solomon probably possessed an immense and broad vocabulary.

Internal and Contextual Evidence. There were only four kings who ruled over Israel (as opposed to Judah) in Jerusalem: Saul, David, Solomon, and Rehoboam. Another description compares the author to “all who were over Jerusalem before me” (1:16; 2:7). Three non-Israelite kings in Jerusalem might fit this description: Melchizedek (Gen 14:18), Adonizedek (Josh 10:1), and Araunah (2 Sam 24:23).

The evidence presented in the following chart favors Solomonic authorship. No other king in all Israel fits the factors of wisdom, works, and wealth better than Solomon.

WISDOM	Ecclesiastes 1:16	1 Kings 3:12
WORKS	Ecclesiastes 2:4–6	1 Kings 5:13–18; 7:1–8; 9:17–19
WEALTH	Ecclesiastes 2:7–9	1 Kings 10:14–20
WORDS	Ecclesiastes 12:9–10	1 Kings 4:32

Accepting Solomon’s authorship of Ecclesiastes provides a date for the book of approximately 940–932 B.C.

Literary Description

The book of Ecclesiastes may be classified as wisdom literature. Extrabiblical examples of similar literature are to be found in Egypt (“The Instruction of Amen-em-het,” 1995–1968 B.C.) and Babylonia (“A Pessimistic Dialogue between Master and Servant” and “A Dialogue about Human Misery,” 15th or 14th century B.C.).

Each section of Ecclesiastes generally concludes with one of the following concepts:

- the weakness or transience of man’s accomplishments
- the uncertainty of man’s fate
- the impossibility of attaining true knowledge in this world
- the need to enjoy life

⁵ Robert Dick Wilson, *A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), 109.

Carpe diem statements occur as a refrain:

1:1–2:26	2:24 – “Nothing is better for a man <i>than</i> that he should eat and drink, and <i>that</i> his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God.”
3:1–5:20	5:18 – “Here is what I have seen: <i>It is</i> good and fitting <i>for one</i> to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for <i>it is</i> his heritage.”
6:1–8:15	8:15 – “So I commended enjoyment, because a man has nothing better under the sun than to eat, drink, and be merry; for this will remain with him in his labor <i>all</i> the days of his life which God gives him under the sun.”

The final section (8:16–12:14) concludes the entire book with a different kind of statement: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (12:13–14).

The author develops three foundational spiritual truths in the book:⁶

- (1) Mankind searches for happiness and enduring substance (2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7–9; 11:7–10). Ecclesiastes presents mankind with an invitation to enjoy life.
 - Unparalyzed by life’s uncertainties, enjoy life as God’s gift (11:1–6).
 - Undepressed by life’s shortness, enjoy life as God’s gift (11:9–10).
 - Showing reverence to and serving God in life, enjoy life as God’s gift (12:1–14).
- (2) Divine sovereignty and providence characterize human existence on planet Earth (2:26; 3:14; 7:13–14; 8:16–9:1; 11:5).
 - We must believe that God is the Creator with whom we cannot trifle (5:2; 12:1).
 - We must accept that God’s world cannot be changed to our liking (3:1–8; 7:13).
 - We cannot extrapolate the future on the basis of the present, because the pattern keeps changing in accord with God’s plan (7:14; 8:17).
 - We must believe that God is the Judge and will bring all wickedness into judgment (3:17; 5:6; 8:12–13; 11:9; 12:7, 14).
- (3) The golden mean of human conduct is a wise path to follow: Avoid excess; follow moderation.
 - Be content with the present (7:10).
 - Be conciliatory (10:12–14).
 - Be cautious (8:1–9; 10:8–11; cf. 7:8–9).

Live without reserve; die without regret. This statement encapsulates Ecclesiastes’ three truths. From a worldly, under-the-sun perspective void of biblical values, that

⁶ Cf. C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books: The Wisdom and Songs of Israel* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 193.

sounds a lot like the philosophy of Aristotle (eudaemonism—happiness results from an active, rational life and the morality of actions is determined by their capacity to produce happiness) or Epicurus (epicureanism—sensuous pleasure is the highest good since an afterlife and the influence of the divine upon this life are non-existent). From a biblical and heavenly perspective, however, the same exhortation applies because this life is a gift from the divine Creator Who will judge any abuse of His gift.

In addition to these three foundational truths, Ecclesiastes describes three problems faced by people in this life:

- (1) **The uncertainty of time and chance** (9:11–12) demonstrate that man is not sovereign. It appears that individuals do not control their own destiny.
- (2) **The endemic and incurable nature of wickedness** (3:16; 4:1; 5:8; 7:7, 20; 9:3) demonstrates that man is not inherently good.
- (3) That **death has the final word in any human enterprise** (2:14–16; 3:18–22; 6:3–12; 8:8, 10; 12:1–7) is proof that mankind is not immortal.

With these various themes and truths in mind, a basic outline of the contents of the book of Ecclesiastes can be presented.

Outline of Ecclesiastes

- I. From **experience**, the Preacher **learned that man is powerless** (1:1–2:26).
 - *Refrain:* 2:24–26 > There is no inherent good in man.
> God alone is the Giver of good.
- II. From **observation**, the Preacher **learned that God has a design for all things** (3:1–5:20).
 - *Refrain:* 5:18–20 > Life is to be enjoyed.
> Life is a gift from God to be lived
— not to be analyzed endlessly.
- III. By **application**, the Preacher **found the explanation for apparent inequalities in divine providence** (6:1–8:15).
 - A. The evaluation of man's outward fortunes (6:1–7:15)
 - B. The evaluation of man's character (7:16–29)
 - C. The effect of righteous government (8:1–14)
 - *Refrain:* 8:15 > Enjoy life.
- IV. In **conclusion**, the Preacher **determined to fear God, obey God, and enjoy life** (8:16–12:14)
 - A. What we cannot know (mystery) must not affect our enjoyment of life (8:16–9:9).
 - B. What we cannot know (mystery) must not affect our work (9:10–11:6).
 - C. The daily reminder of our short life and soon entrance into our Creator's presence should infect our God-given joy and work (11:7–12:8).
 - *Epilogue:* 12:9–14 > Fear God with obedience.