

Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes is a profound book recording an intense search by the Preacher (traditionally understood to be Solomon) for meaning and satisfaction in life - despite the inequities, inconsistencies, and seeming absurdities of life on earth.

The key word in Ecclesiastes is vanity, the futile emptiness of trying to make sense out of life apart from God. The pursuits of life, when viewed “under the sun” (8:17), only lead to frustration. Nothing can fill the God-shaped void in man’s life except God Himself. When life is viewed from God’s perspective, life becomes meaningful and fulfilling. Skepticism and despair melt away when each day is seen as a gift from God.

INTRODUCTION

The key word in Ecclesiastes is vanity, the futile emptiness of trying to be happy apart from God. The Preacher (traditionally taken to be Solomon, was the wisest, richest, most influential king in Israel’s history) looks at “life under the sun” and, from the human perspective, declares it all to be empty. Power, popularity, prestige, pleasure - nothing can fill the God-shaped void in man’s life! But once seen from God’s perspective, life takes on meaning and purpose, causing Solomon to exclaim, “Eat...drink...rejoice...do good...live joyfully...fear God...keep His commandments!”

The Hebrew title *Qoheleth* is a rare term, found only in Ecclesiastes (see 1:1-2, 12; 7:27; 12:8-10). It comes from the word *qahal*, “to call together an assembly, to assemble.” Thus, it means “one who addresses an assembly, a preacher.” The Septuagint used the Greek word *Ekklesiastes* as its title for this book. Derived from the word *ekklesia*, “assembly, congregation, church,” it simply means “preacher.”

AUTHOR

Jewish tradition attributes the book to Solomon but suggests that Hezekiah’s scribes may have edited the text (see Prov. 25:1). Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes is the standard Christian position, although some scholars, along with the Talmud, believe the work was later edited during the time of Hezekiah or possibly Ezra.

The author calls himself “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1, 12). Solomon was the best qualified Davidic descendant for the quest in this book. He was the wisest man who ever taught in Jerusalem (see 1:16; 1 Kin. 4:29-30). The descriptions of exploration of pleasure (2:1-3), impressive accomplishments (2:4-6), and unparalleled wealth (2:7-10) were fulfilled only by King Solomon. The proverbs in this book are like those in the Book of Proverbs (e.g., 7; 10). According to chapter 12, verse 9, *Qoheleth* collected and arranged many proverbs.

DATE & SETTING

The phrase “all who were before me in Jerusalem” (1:16) has been used to suggest a date after Solomon’s time, but there were many kings and wise men in Jerusalem before the time of Solomon. However, Solomon was the only son of David who reigned over Israel from Jerusalem (1:12).

Ecclesiastes was probably written late in Solomon’s life, about 935 b.c. If this is so, the great glory that Solomon ushered in early in his reign was already beginning to fade; and the disruption of Israel into two kingdoms would soon take place. Jewish tradition asserts that Solomon wrote Song of Solomon in his youthful years, Proverbs in his middle years, and Ecclesiastes in his last years. This book may be expressing his regret for his folly and wasted time due to carnality and idolatry (cf. 1 Kin. 11).

There are no references to historical events other than to personal aspects of *Qoheleth*’s life. The location was Jerusalem (1:1, 12, 16), the seat of Israel’s rule and authority.