

Ecclesiastes

“He has put eternity in their hearts,
yet so that no one can find out the work
that God does from beginning to end” (Eccl 3:11)

Pessimism, despair, self-destruction, resignation—what is the proper response for a human when life makes no sense. Much confusion over and misuse of the Book of Ecclesiastes has been produced by a complete misunderstanding of its message as perpetuated by the vast majority of commentators, teachers, and preachers. Contrary to popular opinion Qohelet is not writing about the meaninglessness of life lived apart from God. In fact, he is, as a wise man of God, writing about his reflections on life. Though frustrated by his inability to understand how all that he encounters in human existence (“life under the sun”) fits together, Qohelet makes a faith response to the inexplicableness of life, choosing to enjoy life as a good gift from the Creator and to live it responsibly in light of the accounting he must give at its conclusion.¹

Authorship

This book does not identify its author by name but rather by an occupational designation. The Hebrew word, transliterated as Qohelet, was translated as “preacher” by the Septuagint. However, it more correctly means an “assembler” of the people. The rest of the title identifies the author as a son of David and king in Jerusalem. Solomon most naturally comes to mind as a writer of wisdom literature and doer of great works (cf. 2:4-11). In 1 Kings 8 the root for Qohelet is used of Solomon gathering the people for the dedication of the temple. Many scholars question Solomonic authorship on the basis of certain internal considerations including the reference to all the kings in Jerusalem before him (1:16) and the shift to the third person in the epilogue (12:8-14). Confusion over the interpretation of Ecclesiastes also contributes to doubt over Solomonic authorship.² The objections to viewing Solomon as the author are not persuasive in view of the numerous indications within the book itself.³ With respect to the

¹ For a definitive statement of the proper interpretive approach see J. Stafford Wright, “The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes,” in *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, Roy B. Zuck editor (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 17-30 reprinted from *Evangelical Quarterly* 18 (1946): 18-34.

² For examples of denial of Solomonic authorship see Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 248-50 and C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979, 1988), 183-86.

³ See Walter C. Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, in Everyman's Bible Commentary series (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 24-29 for a defense of Solomonic authorship.

double epilogue, it is sufficient to note that “inspiration extends to the final product” and may include divinely directed commentary, as is apparent in this case.⁴

Date

If one accepts Solomonic authorship Ecclesiastes would have been written between 970 B.C. and 931 B.C. Many who accept Solomon as the author place the book at the end of his life and hypothesize that it represents a recovery from the apostasy recorded in 1 Kings 11.⁵

Historical Setting

No historical setting is given, which is understandable since this is a book for all seasons and all peoples as they live life under the sun. Incidental information points to Jerusalem as the place of writing.

Original Readers / Occasion

That a definite readership is in view is made plain by the epilogue (12:8-14). Israel was already the recipient of great wisdom teaching in various Psalms and in the Proverbs of Solomon. Thus, the readership can be assumed to be Israel as “called together” by the wisest of men, Solomon, their king. As he had been, and would be, called to account for his behavior, so would they and he wanted them to be instructed so as to be ready (cf. 12:13-14).

Special Issues

Literary form and Ancient Near Eastern parallels. One objection to Solomonic authorship is based on certain linguistic peculiarities. It has been suggested that this is due to the influence of a Phoenician model which the great king of Israel found suitable for his unique book.⁶ Similar influences are detectable in Proverbs. Given Solomon’s international reputation, the prevalence of ancient Near Eastern wisdom writing, and God’s desire that all nations come to faith through His priest nation, such a hypothesis is not unreasonable.

⁴ Ronald B. Allen, “Seize the Moment: Meaning in Qohelet,” unpublished paper presented to Northwest Section Meeting, Evangelical Theological Society, at Western Baptist Seminary, Portland Oregon, 1988.

⁵ For example Kaiser contends that “the book fits best into that period late in Solomon’s life, after he had recovered from his practices of idolatry and his outrageous violation of monogamous marriage. God was angry with His ‘son’ (see 2 Sam 7:14), when ‘his heart had turned away from the Lord’ (1 Kings 11:9). Consequently, Yahweh ‘appeared to him twice (1 Kings 11:9). The Lord also raised up against him adversaries (see 1 Kings 11:14, 23, 26), and used them as the rod of affliction to turn Solomon back from his backsliding. The Book of Ecclesiastes stands as a monument to Solomon’s recovery of faithfulness to the living God; he did repent and humble himself before the Lord.” (Walter C. Kaiser, edited by Ronald B. Allen, “Notes on the Book of Ecclesiastes” (Dallas Theological Seminary, n.d.), 8.

⁶ Allen, “Seize the Moment,” 7. See also Gleason L. Archer, “The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of Ecclesiastes,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 12 (1969): 167-81.

Absence of the Divine Name *Yahweh*. Throughout the book Solomon refers to God by the Hebrew word “Elohim” rather than “Yahweh,” His covenantal name. This may be due to two factors. First, Solomon is looking at life “under the sun,” that is, the experience of life which is readily observable simply by being alive. Elohim is the name more suited to referring to the exalted God of creation. Secondly, it may be that he was writing Ecclesiastes “as a tract for all nations.”⁷ Since “Elohim” could be used of the gods of the other nations, it was appropriate to indicate that the Elohim of Israel was the true God who alone held the secrets of life but who could still be known and worshipped in the midst of an often frustrating existence.

Theme Statement

Frustrated in his exhaustive efforts to understand God’s Providential design as it impacts our earthly experience, Qohelet concludes that one must still enjoy life as a gift from God, all the while living it responsibly by trusting in the One to Whom he must ultimately give an account.

Outline

- I. Prologue: Qohelet introduces his quest for discerning God’s Providential design.1:1-11
 - A. Superscription: Words of Qohelet, son of David, king in Jerusalem.1:1
 - B. Theme—life is “vaporous”: Life, as lived from day to day, is tenuous and fleeting and all effort to decipher its many imponderables yields no sure result.1:2-3
 - C. Illustrative Poem on the cycles of life.....1:4-11
 1. Generations come and go yet nature continues endlessly with no apparent “notice.”1:4-7
 2. All things are full of labor yet nothing new is added and nothing of importance is remembered.1:8-11
- II. The Search for an understanding of God’s Providential design is undertaken by wisdom and pleasure.1:12–2:26
 - A. The search by wisdom does not yield the key.1:12-18
Attaining wisdom did not result in understanding the interrelationship of all work under the sun; things are amiss and missing, and wise analysis of these things just produces grief and sorrow.
 - B. The search by pleasure does not yield the key.2:1-11
The exploration of pleasure, while making his works enjoyable, did not yield any lasting benefit in grasping the whole of what he had accomplished.

⁷ Ibid., 8. Kaiser continues: “As the Queen of Sheba had come with her many questions (1 Kings 10:1), so other gentiles needed to have their thinking, living, acting and values straightened out if they were ever going to come to the light.”

- C. Wisdom and pleasure's common end leads to hatred of labor.....2:12-23
 While wisdom excels folly, the fact that both the wise man and the fool are soon forgotten along with the fact that the results of one's labor may just as likely be left to a fool as to another wise person caused Qohelet to hate his labor.
- D. Refrain—God gives various gifts so enjoy the good: In light of the tenuous uncertainty of life, the best council is to enjoy the benefit of labor as a gift from God who alone is the source of wisdom and knowledge.2:24-26
- III. The search for an understanding of God's Providential design with respect to God's causal designs is frustrated.3:1-15
- A. God establishes a time for everything.3:1-8
- B. The God-given quest to know cause and effect is frustrated.3:9-11a
- C. Refrain: God reserves the cause-effect key for himself so enjoy the good.3:11b-13
- D. God so orders life that men might fear Him though he does not know how things will turn out.....3:14-21
- E. Refrain—God does not reveal the future so rejoice in present works.3:22
- IV. The search for an understanding of God's Providential design is frustrated over the existence of oppression and rivalries.4:1-5:20
- A. Oppression makes death or non-existence appear preferable to life.4:1-3
- B. Lack of satisfaction in the produce of one's toil is frustrating.....4:4-8
- C. Wise living is still a valid response.....4:9-5:9
1. There are benefits in cooperative companionship.4:9-12
 2. Poverty and wisdom are preferable to proud power.4:13-16
 3. Prudent and sincere worship avoids God's discipline.5:1-7
 4. Recognize that all authority is accountable.5:8-9
- D. Strife and anxiety over the pursuit of abundance frustrates contentment.....5:10-17
- E. Refrain—God gives the power to receive a heritage and to rejoice in labor so enjoy it and rejoice over it.5:18-20
- V. The search for an understanding of God's Providential design is frustrated over the seemingly inequitable ends of various individuals.6:1-8:15
- A. The enjoyment of one's possessions is not forthcoming.6:1-7:14
1. The foreigner consumes them.....6:1-2
 2. Satisfaction does not follow labor.6:3-9
 3. Though God's designs are frustrating, there are many worthwhile things to pursue.6:10-7:14
 - a. Since God is sovereign and inscrutable the best course for the future cannot be known.6:10-12
 - b. Some things are always better to do in life than others.7:1-10
 - c. Wisdom gives life.7:11-12
 - d. God appoints the days of prosperity and adversity in such a way that man cannot predict what will come after him.7:13-14
- B. The just and the wicked receive each other's due.7:15-8:14
1. The wicked and just receive each other's due.7:15
 2. Good advice for the meantime.7:16-22
 3. Wisdom is still the best course to follow.....7:23-8:1

4.	The king's commandment is still to be obeyed.....	8:2-9
5.	Despite appearances, wickedness is not the best course.....	8:10-14
C.	Refrain—God gives labor so enjoyment is commended.	8:15
VI.	Conclusion regarding the search for an understanding of God's Providential design.	8:16–9:12
A.	Summary statement: No matter how tireless the effort or wise the man, the search for an understanding of how all of life fits together into an integrated whole is futile.....	8:16-17
B.	Summary demonstration: The righteous, the wise and their works are in the hand of God so that nothing is known by what was before us and furthermore death guarantees that the answer is not available to us there either.	9:1-6
C.	Summary conclusion: Joyful living, while God gives breath, is the proper response to man's uncertain time upon the earth.	9:7-12
VII.	Instruction for living life in the absence of an understanding of God's Providential design as it impacts our earthly experience	9:13–12:8
A.	Live wisely because it excels folly in the short term.	9:13–10:15
B.	Live gratefully when the king rules well.....	10:16-20
C.	Live in delight and be diligent in labor.	11:1-8
D.	Live joyfully from youth knowing that all must give an account.....	11:9–12:7
E.	One last reminder: it is all so vaporous.....	12:8
VIII.	Epilogue.	12:9-14
A.	Qohelet has delivered the goads and nails of the Shepherd.	12:9-11
B.	The conclusion of the whole matter is to fear God.	12:12-14

Theme Statement

Frustrated in his exhaustive efforts to understand God's Providential design as it impacts our earthly experience, Qohelet concludes that one must still enjoy life as a gift from God, all the while living it responsibly by trusting in the One to Whom he must ultimately give an account.

Theme Development

Key interpretive clues lie in the meaning of the Hebrew word *hebel* (usually translated “futility,” “vanity,” or “meaningless,” the last of which is completely wrong), the sense of the phrase “under the sun,” and the refrain on the enjoyment of life (2:24; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18, 19; 8:15; 9:7-9). *Hebel* has the basic idea of vaporous and hence conveys the idea of something that is insubstantial or impossible to grasp. Not being able to comprehend or explain certain facets and events of life does not equate with meaninglessness. Qohelet is simply stating the obvious: when it comes to the integrative key to life every possible avenue of discovery results only in grasping the wind. Thus, “life under the sun” is the life that we live in the body on this earth with all of its mystery and “inexplicabilities.” This is not the same as saying “life lived apart from

God,” for not even the Christian has an explanation for how everything fits into His plan. The refrain on enjoyment fits into this quest. Since no one can discover how it all fits together, the proper response is enjoyment of life as God’s gift, rather than despair, resignation, or debauchery. However, this is a responsible enjoyment of life in view of the fact that God will take account of whether that life has been lived in His service unto His honor and glory.

I. Prologue: Qohelet introduces his quest for discerning the integrating key to life (1:1-11).

Like the opening theme of a great symphony, Qohelet declares that all is like vapor, inviting the reader to discover what it is about life that is so fleeting and illusive (1:1-2). The answer begins with yet another question—What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?—introducing a poem on man’s inability to break into the ongoing cycles of his existence in a way that fully satisfies his innate curiosity (1:3-11).

II. The Search for an understanding of Providence is undertaken by wisdom and pleasure (1:12–2:26).

As he proceeds to unpack his thesis, Qohelet bemoans the grievous task that God gives to man respecting the searching out of all that is done under heaven (1:12-15). The wisest of men only ends up grasping at vapor in his pursuit of understanding “all the works that are done under the sun”—1:14 (1:12-18). Testing the very structure of life by pleasure yields similarly disappointing results (2:1-11). When it is observed that the end of the wise and fool are exactly the same with respect to one’s earthly works, Qohelet tasted the bitterness of personal accomplishments because they are not conservable (2:12-23). Since work is ultimately unprofitable for accomplishing his goal of understanding, Qohelet, as an act of faith, positively embraces his labor, purposing to fully enjoy life as a good gift of God (2:24-26).

III. The search for an understanding of Providence with respect to God’s causal designs is frustrated (3:1-15).

From observation Qohelet determines that there are appropriate times for contrasting events and actions (3:1-8). However, the ultimate task over which man is troubled (3:10, cf. 1:13) has to do with trying to figure out why each thing happens when and how it does. This is the sense of “He has placed eternity in their hearts, except (yet so) that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end” (3:11). Thus, the “grievous task” introduced in 1:13 is now

fully defined.⁸ There are more “whys?” in our experience of life than we can ever hope to find answers for, not merely apart from God but even in the closest of relationships with Him. The correct response to this vexation is to do good and enjoy the good in our labor because God acts in His sovereignty, without explanations, so that we should respect and honor Him (3:12-14). Hence, all of life, in its vagaries and seeming contradictions, is designed to bring us into humble, submissive trust in Him and His ways (3:15-22).

IV. The search for an understanding of Providence is frustrated over the existence of oppression and rivalries (4:1–5:20).

Perhaps, since man is the image of God, life’s integrative key is to be found in the outworking of personal relationships. Yet here too Qohelet is disappointed. The oppressed have no comforter (4:1-3), labor cannot replace relationships (4:4-8), and there is ceaseless anxiety and strife accompanying the accumulation of riches (5:10-17). To be sure, wise living is still the better course to follow (4:9–5:9) yet there are situations in which wisdom does not receive its just recompense (cf. 4:16). What can be affirmed is that every person to whom God has granted riches has the right and responsibility to enjoy such as God’s gift (5:18-20).

V. The search for an understanding of Providence is frustrated over the seemingly inequitable ends of various individuals (6:1–8:15).

However, just when one sets out to enjoy his riches, they may be taken from him and given to another (6:1-2). This indeed is vaporous and “an evil affliction” (6:2). In some cases labor does not result in a satisfying experience and this too is, mysteriously, from the hand of God (6:3-9). Qohelet’s conclusion to this is that man cannot really know, in every case, what is good in life (6:10-12). However, that does not mean that he is without direction because there are many things that are always right to do and always worth pursuing (7:1-10). Generally speaking wisdom results in life; this reflects the dominant perspective of Proverbs (7:11-12). However, it is God alone who knows why a man experiences prosperity one day and adversity the next even when he is pursuing the way of wisdom (7:13-14). In fact one of the most troublesome facts of life is that the just and the wicked often receive each other’s due (7:15–8:14). So then Qohelet commends the enjoyment of life since this will remain with him no matter what (8:15).

⁸ Wright puts it like this: “God has given us a sore travail. Events happen to us from time to time, but God has given us a longing to know the eternity of things, the whole scheme; but try as we will, we cannot see it, though we can declare by faith that each event plays its part in the beauty of the plan.” (“Ecclesiastes,” 23).

VI. Conclusion regarding the search for an understanding of Providence (8:16–9:6).

In a restatement of 3:10-11, the author concludes that no matter how tireless the effort or wise the man, the search for an understanding of how all of life fits together into an integrated whole is utterly futile (8:16-17). The demonstration of this is that the wise and the righteous come to the same end as all living beings, thus ending their opportunity for knowing and serving God in the body (9:1-6).⁹ The godly response is to enjoy life because God has already accepted the works done in respect to Him as the giver of life (9:7-8), to enjoy one's mate (9:9), and to do with all one's might the things that the Lord has enabled (9:10) because no one knows how much time he or she will be granted (9:11-12).

VII. Instruction for living life in the absence of an understanding of Providence (9:13–12:8).

Qohelet is a teacher of wisdom. Throughout the book he has incorporated biblical wisdom instruction into his search for an understanding of the whole. It is thus fitting that he concludes with a didactic section on how to live in the absence of any integrating key. He extols wisdom over folly in general and specific terms (9:13–10:15) and comments on the effect of a king on his country (10:16-20). Labor, so much in view in his quest, comes in for one last treatment as he promotes a positive work ethic, even in the face of uncertain outcomes (11:1-8). Qohelet's counsel is anything but self-indulgent Epicureanism. From one's youth joyful living is prescribed, not in the absence of standards, but rather because God Himself has set the standard for the responsible enjoyment of life and will call everyone to give an accounting of how it has been lived (11:9–12:7). This is despite the fact that from one perspective the whole pursuit is so vaporous (12:8).

VIII. Epilogue (12:9-14).

A double epilogue has been added by a later hand, perhaps in anticipation that Qohelet's message would be misinterpreted (or perhaps it already had been). Therefore, he (or they) assure the reader that the goads and nails of the Shepherd have been successfully delivered to the people (12:9-11) to the end that they might fear God, keep His commandments, and thus be prepared for the day of reckoning (12:12-14).

⁹ For a discussion of death in Qohelet in relation to faith and service see *ibid.*, 27-28.

Conclusion

Wisdom does not always lead to success and longevity. Life does not always work according to the rules. And though God will not give man the key to understanding how everything fits together, life can still be enjoyed and lived to the fullest. In a day of ungodly speculation, unbridled hedonism, and rampant despair the Book of Ecclesiastes stands ready to ignite the joy of living and to instill faith in the Giver of every good gift.

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