

Old Testament Survey

The Book of Ecclesiastes

The Title of Ecclesiastes

The Hebrew title, *Qoholeth*, originally meant the “preacher’s office” and in time came to mean “the preacher.” The book itself is a sermon on the futility of life from the human perspective.

Purpose and Theme of Ecclesiastes

1. To convince men of the purposelessness of any world view which does not include God.
2. Happiness cannot be obtained by worldly pursuits, but only by seeing God for who he is.
3. The purpose of life is to know God.

An Outline of Ecclesiastes

- I. First Discourse - The Vanity of Human Wisdom - Ecclesiastes 1:1-2:26
 - A. Basic theme: the vanity of human effort and experience - Ecclesiastes 1:1-3
 - B. Demonstration of this theme - Ecclesiastes 1:4-2:26
 1. The meaningless cycle of human history - Ecclesiastes 1:4-11
 2. The ultimate uselessness of human wisdom and philosophy - Ecclesiastes 1:12-18
 3. The emptiness of worldly pleasures - Ecclesiastes 2:1-11
 4. Death, the ultimate conqueror - Ecclesiastes 2:12-17
 5. The futility of leaving wealth to others - Ecclesiastes 2:18-23
 6. The necessity of contentment with God’s providences - Ecclesiastes 2:24-26
- II. Second Discourse - Coming to Term With the Laws of Life - Ecclesiastes 3:1-5:20
 - A. The proper view of life in terms of death - Ecclesiastes 3:1-22
 1. Each thing has a proper time - Ecclesiastes 3:1-9
 2. God alone guarantees abiding values - Ecclesiastes 3:10-15
 3. God will punish the wicked - Ecclesiastes 3:16-18
 4. Man and animals share physical death - Ecclesiastes 3:19-20
 5. Unsure of the next life, man must make the most of this life - Ecclesiastes 3:21-22
 - B. The disappointments of earthly life - Ecclesiastes 4:1-16
 1. Cruelty and misery make life a dubious blessing - Ecclesiastes 4:1-3
 2. Disadvantages are cited for materialistic success, laziness, and covetousness - Ecclesiastes 4:4-8
 3. Life’s trials are better faced with someone else than alone - Ecclesiastes 4:9-12
 4. Political success is temporary and unstable - Ecclesiastes 4:13-16
 - C. Futility of the self-seeking life - Ecclesiastes 5:1-20
 1. Presenting God with false sacrifices and lies is folly - Ecclesiastes 5:1-7
 2. Retribution overtakes oppressors and disappointment is the lot of the covetous - Ecclesiastes 5:8-17
 3. Appreciation for God’s gifts bring contentment - Ecclesiastes 5:18-20
- III. Third Discourse - Earthly Treasures Bring No Satisfaction - Ecclesiastes 6:1-8:17
 - A. Inadequacy of attainments esteemed by the world - Ecclesiastes 6:1-12
 1. Wealth and large families cannot bring contentment - Ecclesiastes 6:1-6
 2. Both the wise and the foolish cannot obtain satisfaction - Ecclesiastes 6:7-9

3. Without God, man cannot discern the real reason for life - Ecclesiastes 6:10-12
- B. Counsels of prudence in this sin-filled world - Ecclesiastes 7:1-29
 1. True values are seen in light of sorrow and death - Ecclesiastes 7:1-4
 2. Cheap gaiety, dishonest gain, and a short temper are pitfalls - Ecclesiastes 7:5-9
 3. Wisdom is a greater asset than money in coping with life - Ecclesiastes 7:10-12
 4. God is the author of good fortune and ill - Ecclesiastes 7:13-14
 5. Self-righteousness and immorality lead to disaster - Ecclesiastes 7:15-18
 6. Wisdom has surpassing power, sin is universal - 7:19-20
 7. Be heedless of base malice towards yourself - Ecclesiastes 7:21-22
 8. Man's quest for wisdom cannot by itself attain spiritual truth - Ecclesiastes 7:23-25
 9. A wicked woman is the worst evil faced by a man - Ecclesiastes 7:26
 10. All humans, men and women, have fallen from original goodness - Ecclesiastes 7:27-29
- C. Coming to terms with an imperfect world - Ecclesiastes 8:1-17
 1. The wise man reverences the civil authorities - Ecclesiastes 8:1-5
 2. Divine law does operate despite apparent paradoxes - Ecclesiastes 8:6-9
 3. Though esteemed and unpunished, God will eventually judge the wicked - Ecclesiastes 8:10-13
 4. Injustices in this life encourage a false hedonism - Ecclesiastes 8:14-15
 5. God's ways are inscrutable to human wisdom - Ecclesiastes 8:16-17
- IV. Fourth Discourse - God Will Deal With the Injustices of This Life - Ecclesiastes 9:1-12:8
 - A. Death is inevitable - make the best use of this life - Ecclesiastes 9:1-18
 1. Death comes to all - Ecclesiastes 9:1-3
 2. Moral choice and the knowledge of this life is cut off in death - Ecclesiastes 9:4-6
 3. The godly should use every opportunity for good - Ecclesiastes 9:7-10
 4. Even to the worthy, success is uncertain and life unpredictable - Ecclesiastes 9:11-12
 5. Wisdom is much better than force - Ecclesiastes 9:13-18
 - B. The uncertainties of life and the baneful effects of folly - Ecclesiastes 10:1-20
 1. Even a little folly brings ruin - Ecclesiastes 10:1-4
 2. Life provides reversals in fortune and strokes of retribution - Ecclesiastes 10:5-11
 3. A fool is marked by empty talk and misdirected effort - Ecclesiastes 10:12-15
 4. The welfare of nations and individuals depends on accepting responsibility - Ecclesiastes 10:16-19
 5. Contempt of authority brings sure retribution - Ecclesiastes 10:20
 - C. How to invest a life - Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:8
 1. Kindness brings blessing to the benefactor - Ecclesiastes 11:1-2
 2. Man's wisdom cannot fathom God - Ecclesiastes 11:3-5
 3. The wisest course is lifelong diligence and hard work - Ecclesiastes 11:6-8
 4. A youth spent in seeking pleasure brings later retribution - Ecclesiastes 11:9-10
 5. Start living for God while young before senility comes - Ecclesiastes 12:1-8
- V. Conclusion - Life in the Light of Eternity - Ecclesiastes 12:9-14
 - A. Solomon's purpose was to teach men about life - Ecclesiastes 12:9-10
 - B. These admonitions are better than all literature - Ecclesiastes 12:11-12
 - C. Put God first for his judgment is final - Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

Authorship and Date of Ecclesiastes

Evidence For Solomonic Authorship

1. The writer identifies himself as the Son of David, king in Jerusalem (Ecclesiastes 1:1; 1:12).
2. The preacher's wisdom was unrivaled (Ecclesiastes 1:6), his wealth tremendous (Ecclesiastes 2:8), his servants numerous (Ecclesiastes 2:7), his building activities extensive (Ecclesiastes 2:4-6), and his ability to indulge in carnal pleasure unequaled (Ecclesiastes 2:3). This very closely fits what we know of Solomon.
3. Jewish tradition is explicit in its assertion that Solomon wrote this book although it allows for the fact that Hezekiah and his company edited the final version.

Critical Objections

1. Most modern liberal scholars do not even consider Solomonic authorship an option.
2. The language of Ecclesiastes is different than that used in other tenth-century B.C. works. In fact, it is different than the rest of the Old Testament with the exception of Song of Solomon.
 - a. Many apparent Aramaisms have been asserted to be present.
 - b. Grammatical structures are said to come from a later date.

In answer to this, the book of Ecclesiastes bears no resemblance to the language of any period of Israelite history. Fragments of Ecclesiastes from the Fourth Qumran Cave make a date in the second century B.C. impossible. Put succinctly, the language and grammar of Ecclesiastes does not fit any period known to modern scholarship.

Additionally, it is evident that the book of Ecclesiastes is linguistically unique because of its content and theme rather than the date of its composition.

3. The writer of Ecclesiastes appears to write from the standpoint of a third person. Additionally, it shows a somewhat cynical view of the king which does not fit the character of an author who is a king.

None of the passages critical of kings would preclude the author being a king. The book of Ecclesiastes is written from the viewpoint of a philosopher on life, and hence would be expected to be written from a third-person perspective.

4. Some argue that Ecclesiastes shows Greek influences. Some of the philosophies of life mirror that of Stoicism and Epicureanism.

In answer to this, it must be said that the differences between Stoics, Epicureans, and the book of Ecclesiastes are greater than the similarities.

5. Some have asserted that there are anachronisms in the book of Ecclesiastes. Examples are the claim of the preacher to be wiser than "all the kings who went before him," and the statement "I was king...in Jerusalem."

The answer to his objection is simple. Solomon is claiming that he was wiser than all the men that went before him, not necessarily the kings. The other phrase was shown to be commonly used by kings upon their death-bed who composed his last testament before death.

6. Some assert that the times spoken of in Ecclesiastes do not fit the prosperous times which were common in Solomon's reign.

There is no evidence that the cynical view of life is a description of the current state of affairs as to the time of the writing of Ecclesiastes, but that it is a general observation of life.

Ecclesiastes and Pessimism

Some have problems with the pessimistic view of life found in Ecclesiastes, even ascribing to the book an agnostic view of God. The following is offered in response to this:

1. The pessimistic view of life as found in Ecclesiastes reflects that of one who lives life only in the human realm and does not see beyond. From the human perspective, life is pessimistic.
2. Ecclesiastes asserts that it is in this life alone that one has opportunities for service and good. Once one dies, the opportunity for righteous deeds is over. That does not mean the person ceases to exist, but their righteous influence is over.
3. Without God, life is vanity and vexation of spirit.