

Ecclesiastes - Introduction & Background

Title

The Hebrew title of the book, *qohelet*, is derived from how the writer repeatedly refers to himself throughout the work (1:1, 2; 7:27; 12:8, 9, 10). The fact that this designation is not a proper name is apparent from how it is employed as a feminine verb in 7:27 and is articular in 12:8. Rather, the word refers to the occupation or profession of a preacher. In fact, the word comes from the verb *qāhal*, which means “to assemble” or “to convoke an assembly.” Thus, *qohelet* refers to one who addresses an assembly or leads a gathering into pondering the divine meaning of life in the midst of daily adversities.

The LXX translated the Hebrew word *qohelet* with the Greek word *ekklesiastes*. This word was used since it bears a resemblance to *ekklesia*, which means “assembly,” “congregation,” or “church.” However, this word is not directly related to the NT church since the book concerns the covenant community of Israel and was written centuries before the church came into existence. *Ekklesiastes* is also similar to the English word ecclesiastical or ecclesiastic, which also means preacher. The Vulgate’s title *Liber Ecclesiastes* or the “Book of Ecclesiastes” is derived from the LXX title. The English Bible title “Ecclesiastes” was adopted from the Vulgate’s title.

Authorship

The book of Ecclesiastes is an anonymous work only alluding to its writer through the use of the word *Qohelet*. However, both Christian and Jewish Talmudic tradition (*Megilla* 7a, *Shabbath* 30) affirm Solomonic authorship of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Interestingly, the LXX title attributes the Book of Ecclesiastes to “Solomon, king in Jerusalem.” Multiple internal clues also argue that Solomon was the book’s writer.⁶ For example, the book’s opening verse describes its writer as “the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” Solomon is the only Davidic descendant that meets all of the other internal criteria. Moreover, the book describes its writer as king over Israel in Jerusalem (1:12). Solomon is the only Davidic descendant that ruled over Israel from the city of Jerusalem since he was the last king of the united kingdom. All subsequent kings ruled over Israel from the northern capital of Samaria.

Other Solomonic descriptive clues include the writer’s unsurpassed wisdom (1:16; 1 Kings 3:12; 4:29–30), unparalleled greatness in comparison to Jerusalem’s former kings (1:16), great wealth (2:9; 1 Kings 10:11–23), numerous servants (2:7; 1 Kings 9:20–23), participation in vast building projects (2:4–6; 1 Kings 9:1–19), understanding of nature and plants and birds (2:4–7; 1 Kings 4:33), opportunities to pursue pleasure (2:3), and the production of many proverbs (12:9; 1 Kings 4:32). Moreover, the writer uses similar

phraseology that is used by Solomon elsewhere such as “there is not a just man on the earth who does good and does not sin” (7:20; 1 Kings 8:46). The writer’s proverbial wisdom also bears a resemblance to Solomon’s other proverbial sayings (7; 10) and the familiar theme that the “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (12:13; Prov 1:7) is also found in other Solomonic material. The book’s seven references to *qohelet* evenly distributed throughout its corpus testify that it is a unified work attributable to a single writer.

Despite both the internal and external evidence for Solomonic authorship, many following Luther’s lead argue that someone using Solomon as a literary device wrote the book much later. Advocates of this view employ several arguments in an attempt to buttress their position. However, most of these arguments seem answerable. First, 1:12 indicates that Solomon was king in Jerusalem. This statement implies that the writer was no longer a king at the time of writing and therefore could not have been Solomon. However, the verse could just as easily be translated “I have been and am a king” since the verb conveys a state of action beginning in the past and continuing into the present.

Second, 1:16 teaches that many Jerusalem kings preceded the writer. Thus, the writer could not have been Solomon since the verse requires that he was someone who lived many generations after David who was Jerusalem’s first king. However, this position overlooks the fact that numerous kings preceded David’s reign over Jerusalem (Gen 14:18; Joshua 10:1). Third, it is contended that the book’s atypical linguistic characteristics, Aramaisms, and Persian words demand that it be assigned a post-exilic date. However, unusual linguistic features can be explained in terms of the book’s unusual genre and these characteristics are inconsistent with the Qumran material. These linguistic characteristics are consistent with what is known of pre-Solomonic Ugaritic material from the 14th century. Furthermore, Solomon would have obviously been influenced by the northern Phoenician dialect through his business relationships involving temple construction and from those that came from distant lands to seek his wisdom (1 Kings 10:1).

Fourth, it is argued that the book’s pessimistic tone could only have been learned from Greek philosophy, which did not impact Canaan until the time of Alexander the Great. However, the Book of Ecclesiastes actually conveys an optimistic message (12:9-14). Moreover, Solomon was certainly acquainted with the general trials associated with covenant rebellion. Fifth, it is argued that canonicity cannot be used to argue for Solomonic authorship since the book was wrongly canonized on the erroneous assumption that Solomon was the work’s author. However, this notion is rebutted by the fact that other spurious works claiming Solomonic authorship were not canonized, both the Hillel and Qumran communities accepted the Book of Ecclesiastes as genuine, and no Christian objection to the book’s canonicity was ever raised until the fifth century.

Sixth, some contend that the book must have been written later since it does not reflect the prosperity of the Solomonic era. However, Solomon not only knew prosperity but also adversity as a result of his covenant rebellion. Seventh, it is contended that the switch from the first to the third person argues in favor of a later writer using Solomon as a literary device. However, writers depicting themselves in the third person was a common literary technique in the ancient Near East.

Eighth, some maintain that Solomon could not have been the book's author since the writer sometimes refers to himself as a mere citizen rather than a king (3:16). However, in these instances, Solomon could have been referring to his role as a philosopher. Ninth, some use the fact that the Hebrew canon does not list the Book of Ecclesiastes with Solomon's other writing as an argument against Solomonic authorship. However, this objection disappears upon the recognition that the Hebrew Bible follows a subject matter classification.

Tenth, still others maintain that apostate Solomon was spiritually unqualified to compose a biblical book. However, this view fails to consider his later repentance (12:13). Eleventh, many tout the theory of a later composer pretending to be Solomon. However, this view is rebutted by the fact that such a deceptive practice violates the book's high ethic (12:13).

Date

The view that one adheres to regarding authorship will also shape his view concerning when the book should be dated. If the previous conclusion regarding Solomonic authorship is accurate, then the book was likely written late in Solomon's reign (971–931 BC) subsequent to his participation in polygamy and apostasy (1 Kings 11:9). Most believe that while Solomon wrote the Song of Solomon during his young marital years and the Book of Ecclesiastes toward the end of his life, he probably wrote the Book of Proverbs toward the middle of his life. "The Book of Ecclesiastes, then, would have been written just before Solomon's death and subsequent division of his kingdom that occurred in 931 BC." All things considered, a date of 935 BC for the composition of the book would not be far from wrong.

Recipients

The book is addressed to Solomon's "son" (12:12). This expression could refer to Solomon's filial son Rehoboam or his philosophical son who was one of his pupils in the Solomonic school of wisdom. Because the writer is consistently referred to as *qohelet* throughout the book, its recipients likely were those that he preached to. Thus, the audience of the book would consist of an assembly of the covenant community as a whole. It is also likely that the writer had a trans-covenantal audience in mind when he penned his work. This view is favored by Israel's purpose in exporting truth to the Gentiles (Ex 19:5-6), Solomon's role as sage to the Gentile nations (1 Kings 10:1), the absences of references to Israel's history in the book, the way in which the book consistently uses the name Elohim

("exalted one") rather than the covenant name Yahweh, and the book's generic allusion to God as "creator" (12:1).

Setting and Place of Writing

Some have speculated that Alexandria Egypt represented the place where the events of the book transpired based upon the writer's description of the weather (1:5-7) and human anatomy (1:5; 12:1-7). However, this view is rebutted by the fact that these references are mere generalities and the book fails to evidence a Greek style. It seems more probable that Jerusalem represents the place where the book was written and its events occurred. The writer is consistently referred to as king in Jerusalem (1:1,12,16). Jerusalem was also the seat of power of the Solomonic empire (1 Kings 10). Other geographical descriptors also argue for the Jerusalem locale. Among them are the references to the temple and sacrifices (5:1; 9:2), the almond tree (12:5), wells and cisterns (12:6), change in wind (1:6; 11:4), and rainfall patterns (11:3; 12:2).

Structure

The Book of Ecclesiastes is admittedly difficult to outline. One possible structural clue involves the repetition of the phrase "Nothing is better" or "it is good and fitting" "for one 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" (2:24-26; 5:18-20; 8:15). If this phrase marks a conclusion of a major section, then the following six-fold structure emerges: prologue (1:1-11), Solomon's search for meaning in wisdom and hedonism and labor (1:12-2:26), Solomon's search for meaning in business (3-5), Solomon's search for meaning in wealth (6:1-8:15), Solomon's search for meaning in various sources (8:16-12:7), and epilogue (12:8-14).

Message

Although from an anthropocentric or humanistic perspective ("under the sun") life's seemingly endless repetitions, inexplicability, brevity, and inconsistencies lead to hasty conclusions about its futility (3:11) and vanity, from a theocentric perspective life should be viewed as a gracious gift from God that is to be enjoyed to the fullest extent (2:24; 3:12-13,22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:7) by reverencing Him, keeping His commandments, and remaining mindful of His future judgment (12:13-14).

Purposes

Solomon likely had several purposes in mind when he composed his book. First, the book was written for the purpose of creating both wisdom and happiness in its readers seeking to live out their faith in a fallen world (Rom 8:20-21). The book seeks to accomplish this by sharing the divine perspective on life. Second, the book may have been created for liturgical purposes since it was one of the five books of the *Megilloth* ("writings" or "scrolls") to be read during special Jewish days. The Book of Ecclesiastes was read during the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths. Third, because of the book's trans-covenantal purpose

it was written in order to share divine wisdom with the Gentiles as well as the covenant community. Fourth, the book was written to provide a literary expression for Solomon's regrets concerning his own polygamy and apostasy. Fifth, the book was written to warn the young of the consequences of living life without God (11:9; 12:1; Prov 1:8).

Theological Themes

Several theological themes recur throughout the Book of Ecclesiastes. First, the book emphasizes the foolishness of seeking life's meaning without God and how such meaning can only be ascertained through a proper relationship to God. Second, the book reiterates enjoyment of life as a gracious gift from God. To this end, the noun "gladness" and the verb "to be glad" appear numerous times throughout the book.

Third, the word *hebel* appears consistently throughout the book. In fact, the Book of Ecclesiastes uses this word 38x while only 34 uses occur in the remainder of the OT. That this word forms the theme of the book is apparent since the Hebrew superlative (the noun followed by its genitive plural) forms an *inclusio* bracketing the entire work (1:2; 12:8). This word cannot be referring to vanity, meaninglessness, insignificance, or worthlessness of life since God Himself is life's author. Rather, the word refers to "vapor of vapors" or the "thinnest of vapors." This phrase refers to brevity not only in the length of life itself that is quickly passing away but also in capturing life's meaning absent the centrality of God. Fourth, the recurring phrase "under the sun" (29x) demonstrates that the book devotes a disproportionate amount of material toward discussing life from the humanistic or anthropocentric perspective. Fifth, the book reiterates the limits of both rationalism and empiricism at the expense of revelation toward ascertaining life's meaning. Sixth, the book emphasizes that the thirst created by man's eternal design (3:11) can only be satisfied in a relationship with his creator. Seventh, the book teaches the importance of fearing and respecting God (12:13). Eighth, the book teaches that man's earthly life ends in divine judgment that will be imposed upon both the righteous and unrighteous (3:17; 5:6; 8:12,13; 11:9; 12:7,14).

Unique Characteristics

The Book of Ecclesiastes boasts several outstanding characteristics. First, the book enjoys the distinction of being read regularly at the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles. Second, the book does not use God's covenant name Yahweh and instead opts to use the name Elohim. Third, conspicuously absent from the book are references to Israeli history or the Mosaic Covenant. Fourth, as explained earlier, the book has a trans-national and trans-covenantal focus.

Fifth, by devoting more space to the human perspective on life rather than the divine perspective, the book is the most philosophical in the entire biblical canon. Sixth, because of its humanistic perspective, many of its statements represent theological error (1:15; 2:24; 3:19-20; 7:16-17; 8:15; 9:25; 10:19; 11:19). Seventh, the book's loose structure makes

outlining it difficult. Eighth, the book is one of the few that refers to God as the "creator" (12:1). Ninth, the book makes a direct claim to be the product of inerrant inspiration (12:9-11).

Genre

One third of the book is poetic. The book also includes narrative sections.

Christ in Ecclesiastes

Perhaps Solomon's wisdom exemplified at the end of the book typifies Christ. Such typology may explain why Christ referred to Himself as greater than Solomon (Luke 11:31). Moreover, because man is fashioned for eternity (3:11), his thirst for significance can only be satiated in a relationship to Christ, who is the one shepherd (12:11).

Outline

I. Prologue (Eccl 1:1-11)

- (1) Author (1:1)
- (2) Thesis: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (1:2)
- (3) Vanity illustrated in daily life (1:3-11)
 - (A) Impersonal, natural, trans-generational cycles (1:3-7)
 - (B) Nothing is new to man's experience (1:8-11)

II. Solomon's search for meaning in wisdom, hedonism, prudent living, and labor (Eccl 1:12—2:26)

- (1) Pursuit of wisdom (1:12-18)
 - (A) Search for wisdom in worldly activities (1:12-13a)
 - (B) Futility of worldly activities (1:13b-14)
 - (C) Paradoxes cause the futility of worldly activities (1:15)
 - (D) Futility of Solomon's search for wisdom (1:16-18)
- (2) Pursuit of hedonism (2:1-11)
 - (A) Preacher determines to seek pleasure (2:1a)
 - (B) Vanity of hedonism (2:1b-2)
 - (C) How the preacher sought hedonism (2:3-9)
 - (a) Intoxication (2:3)
 - (b) Works (2:4-6)
 - (c) Possessions (2:7-8)
 - (d) Fame (2:9)
 - (D) Vanity of hedonism (2:10-11)
- (3) Pursuit of wise living (2:12-17)
 - (A) Preacher compares wise and foolish living (2:12)
 - (B) Conclusion (2:13-17)
 - (a) Wise living is superior to foolish living (2:13)
 - (b) Universality of death strips wise living of its advantage (2:14-15)

- (c) Neither the fool or wise are remembered (2:16)
 - (d) Preacher hates life (2:17)
- (4) Pursuit of labor (2:18-26)
 - (A) Foolishness of leaving the fruit of one's labor to someone unknown (2:18-19)
 - (B) Foolishness of leaving the fruit of one's labor to someone who did not earn it (2:20-22)
 - (C) Foolishness of work without play (2:23)
 - (D) Conclusion: laborer should enjoy the work of his hands (2:24-26)
- III. Solomon's search for meaning in business (Eccl 3:1—5:20)
 - (1) Search determined by divine ordinances (3:1-15)
 - (A) All things good and bad have their time (3:1-8)
 - (B) Man's labor in God's time (3:9-11)
 - (C) Enjoying the fruit of one's labor is God's gift (3:12-13)
 - (D) God works inscrutably (3:14-15)
 - (2) Frustration of the quest (Eccl 3:16—4:8)
 - (A) Universality of death canceling the distinction between the righteous and the wicked (3:16-22)
 - (B) Search frustrated by injustices (4:1-3)
 - (C) Search frustrated by rivalries (4:4-6)
 - (D) Search frustrated by laboring without an heir (4:7-8)
 - (3) A superior way (Eccl 4:9—5:17)
 - (A) Cooperation (4:9-12)
 - (B) Political success through wisdom (4:13-16)
 - (C) Proper worship (5:1-7)
 - (a) Avoid empty religion (5:1-3)
 - (b) Make good on vows and fear God (5:4-7)
 - (D) Avoid unjust use of wealth (5:8-17)
 - (a) Corruption (5:8-9)
 - (b) Hoarding (5:10-17)
 - (4) Conclusion: laborer should enjoy the work of his hands (5:18-20)
- IV. Solomon's search for meaning in wealth (Eccl 6:1—8:15)
 - (1) Quest for wealth (6:1-12)
 - (A) Futility of God-given assets without the ability to enjoy them (6:1-2)
 - (B) Futility of a long unsatisfying life (6:3-6)
 - (C) Futility of constant dissatisfaction (6:7-9)
 - (D) Futility of seeking to know the future without God (6:10-12)
 - (2) Proverbial wisdom (Eccl 7:1—8:15)
 - (A) Enjoyment of life while learning from adversity (7:1-14)

- (a) Wise should learn from death's inevitability, rebuke, and evil days (7:1-10)
- (b) Wise should use prosperity and wisdom for purposes of self protection (7:11-12)
- (c) Wise should accept God's sovereign ways and be happy when He bestows prosperity (7:13-14)
- (B) Pragmatism (7:15-29)
 - (a) Wise should be moderate in their righteousness (7:15-18)
 - (b) Wise should recognize the fallenness of man and consequently temper his judgment toward others (7:19-22)
 - (c) Preacher admits the reality of life's mysteries (7:23-24)
 - (d) After investigating the folly associated with evil living the preacher discovers that there are a few righteous (7:25-29)
- (C) Wise should skillfully seek a pleasurable life (8:1-15)
 - (a) Wisdom is the wise man's resource (8:1)
 - (b) Wise avoid the king's wrath (8:2-9)
 - (c) Unpredictability of earthly punishment and reward (8:10-14)
 - (d) Conclusion: the wise should seek a pleasurable life (8:15)

V. Conclusion regarding Solomon's search for the ultimate meaning in various sources (Eccl 8:16—12:7)

- (1) Where ultimate meaning is not found (Eccl 8:16—10:20)
 - (A) Wisdom (Eccl 8:16—9:6)
 - (a) Limits of acquiring wisdom (Eccl 8:16—9:1)
 - (b) Only the living have hope since death awaits all (9:2-6)
 - (B) Enjoying life's pleasures given life's brevity (9:7-12)
 - (C) Wise living (Eccl 9:13—10:20)
 - (a) Wise living sometimes goes unrewarded (9:13-16)
 - (b) Wisdom is better than strength (9:17-18a)
 - (c) Foolishness destroys wisdom (9:18b—10:1)
 - (d) Wise living can fail (10:2-7)
 - (e) Wise living can be nullified through carelessness and bad timing (10:8-11)
 - (f) Wise speech (10:12-20)
 - (i) Foolishness of many words (10:12-15)
 - (ii) Foolishness of criticizing profligate rulers since your words will be discovered (10:16-20)
- (2) Where ultimate meaning is found (Eccl 11:1—12:7)
 - (A) Wise use of this present life: work diligently despite the unknowable future (11:1-6)
 - (B) The pleasantries of life should be enjoyed given the reality of death (11:7-8)

- (C) The young should enjoy life remembering that God will judge them (11:9-10)
- (D) Remember your creator in the days of your youth (12:1-7)

VI. Epilogue (12:8-14)

- (1) Repetition of thesis: "Vanities of vanities, all is vanity" (12:8)
 - (2) Solomon's reflection of his literary composition (12:9-12)
 - (A) Composition described (12:9-10)
 - (B) Proper and improper uses of his composition (12:11-12)
 - (3) Conclusion of the book (12:13-14)
 - (A) Fear God and keep His commandments (12:13)
 - (B) Live mindfully of God's future judgment (12:14)
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Ps 90:12 - So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

Introduction

"Vanity of vanities," lamented Solomon, "all is vanity!" Solomon liked that word, "vanity"; he used it 38x in Ecclesiastes as he wrote about life "under the sun." The word means "emptiness, futility; a vapor that vanishes quickly and leaves nothing behind." From the human point of view, life ("under the sun") does appear futile; and it is easy for us to get pessimistic.

The Jewish writer Sholom Aleichem once described life as "a blister on top of a tumor, and a boil on top of that." You can almost feel that definition! The American poet Carl Sandburg compared life to "an onion—you peel it off one layer at a time, and sometimes you weep." And British playwright George Bernard Shaw said that life was "a series of inspired follies." Dr. Edward Teller once suggested to me: "A pessimist is one who is right, but doesn't enjoy it. An optimist is one who thinks that life is uncertain." Then, he admonished, "It's our duty to be an optimist, because then we, at least, try!" (It has also been quipped that a pessimist is simply the one who has more information...)

Vanity or Victory?

What a relief to turn from these pessimistic views and hear Jesus Christ say in John 10:10 - I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly...

Or to read Paul's majestic declaration in 1 Cor 15:58: Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

- Life is "not in vain" if it is lived according to the will of God, and that is what Solomon teaches in this neglected and often misunderstood book.

Hermeneutic Approach

Ecclesiastes is unlike any other OT book, and has no parallel in other literature of the Biblical world. Ecclesiastes is a philosophical discourse. But it is more. Ecclesiastes makes no claim to bring man a word from God. Instead the writer specifically states that he includes only what he can determine by his own reason, and limits himself to data that is available "under the sun." (The doctrine of inspiration, however, assures us that this book conveys the message that God intended that we should receive but, as we will see, it does not guarantee that all Solomon's statements are true!)

Different kinds of Biblical literature must be understood within the framework of their purpose and form. Poetic expression, for instance, should not be taken in the same way as a carefully reasoned teaching paragraph in a NT epistle. In order to understand any passage of Scripture, it is important to define its purpose and frame of reference. We need to remember this when we approach the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes is different from any other book of the Bible. While it is included in the category of "wisdom literature" (with Job and Proverbs), it remains unique. "Wisdom literature" is universal in its scope; it does not dwell on the covenant, the election of Israel, redemption, prophecy, sacred history, or the temple. Its focus is on man the creature, his life on earth, and the inscrutability of God and His ways.

Ecclesiastes goes beyond the other wisdom literature to emphasize the fact that human life and human goals, as ends in themselves and apart from God, are futile and meaningless.

The Author

Nowhere in this book did the author give his name, but the descriptions he gave of himself and his experiences would indicate that the writer was King Solomon. (There have been critics to attack this assumption, but they have been largely discredited).

He called himself "son of David" and "king in Jerusalem" (1:1,12), and he claimed to have great wealth and wisdom (2:1-11, and 1:13; Cf. 1 Kings 4:20-34 and 10:1ff). In response to Solomon's humble prayer, God promised him both wisdom and wealth (1 Kings 3:3-15); and He kept His promise.

Twelve times in Ecclesiastes the author mentioned "the king," and he made frequent references to the problems of "official bureaucracy" (Eccl 4:1-3; 5:8; 8:11; 10:6-7). Keep in mind that Solomon ruled over a great nation that required a large standing army and extensive government agencies. He carried on many costly building projects and lived in luxury at court (1 Kings 9:10-28; 10:1ff; 2 Chr 1:13-17). Somebody had to manage all this national splendor, and somebody had to pay for it!

Solomon solved the problem by ignoring the original boundaries of the twelve tribes of Israel and dividing the nation into twelve "tax districts," each one managed by an overseer (1 Kings 4:7-19). In time, the whole system became oppressive and corrupt; after Solomon died, the people begged for relief (2 Chr 10). As you study Ecclesiastes, you will sense this background of exploitation and oppression.

Background

King Solomon began his reign as a humble servant of the Lord, seeking God's wisdom and help (1 Kings 3:5-15). But Solomon's strength was also his weakness. Solomon tended to trust in his wisdom rather than in the guidelines given in God's Word. As he grew older, his heart turned away from Jehovah to the false gods of the many wives he had taken from foreign lands (1 Kings 11:1ff). In fact, many of the things Solomon did that seemed to bring glory to Israel were actually contrary to the Word of God.

Deut 17:14-20 looked ahead to the future monarchy and said: ...the king moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them. ...He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

David had followed these injunctions. He did take several wives, but nothing like Solomon's multiplication (700 wives and 300 concubines!). These marriages were motivated primarily by politics, not love, as Solomon sought alliances with the nations around Israel. (David had established a policy of cutting the tendons of enemy war horses so they could not be used in battle, and refused to build a chariot-based military establishment.)

But Solomon reasoned that these were prudent policies. He failed to see the danger in each—that foreign wives might entice him from wholly following God, and that by becoming a military superpower he might trust his might rather than God. No amount of money or authority could stop the silent ripening of divine judgment. The famous Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte said, ...the secret worm...was gnawing all the time in the royal staff upon which Solomon leaned.

The king's latter years were miserable because God removed His hand of blessing (1 Kings 11) and maintained Solomon's throne only because of His promise to David:

1 Kings 11:9-13:

9 And the LORD was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned from the LORD God of Israel, which had appeared unto him twice,

10 And had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods: but he kept not that which the LORD commanded.

11 Wherefore the LORD said unto Solomon, Forasmuch as this is done of thee, and thou hast not kept my covenant and my statutes, which I have commanded thee, I will surely rend the kingdom from thee, and will give it to thy servant.

12 Notwithstanding in thy days I will not do it for David thy father's sake: but I will rend it out of the hand of thy son.

13 Howbeit I will not rend away all the kingdom; but will give one tribe to thy son for David my servant's sake, and for Jerusalem's sake which I have chosen.

After Solomon's death, the nation divided and the house of David was left with but two tribes, Judah and Benjamin. It is interesting to contrast the reigns of David and Solomon:

David could be viewed critically: his adultery and murder (and indeed, the sword never left his house). Yet God consistently, throughout the entire Bible, extols David above all others. "He was a man after God's own heart."

Solomon would seem to be an ideal—from man's perspective. However, notice that NT allusions to Solomon were always somewhat derisive (Cf. Matt 6:29; 12:42; Luke 11:31; 12:27).

Solomon probably wrote Proverbs (Prov 1:1; 1 Kings 4:32) and the Song of Solomon (1:1) during the years he faithfully walked with God;

Prov 3:5-6:

5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;

6 in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.

He wrote Proverbs from the viewpoint of a wise teacher (Prov 1:1-6), and Song of Solomon from the viewpoint of a royal lover (Song 3:7-11); but when he wrote Ecclesiastes, he called himself "the Preacher" (Eccl 1:1-2,12; 7:27; 12:8-10). Near the end of his life, he wrote Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes appears to be the kind of book a person would write near the close of life, reflecting on life's experiences and the painful lessons learned.

There is no record whether King Solomon ever repented and turned to the Lord, but from his message in Ecclesiastes it would seem that he did.

The Title

The Hebrew word is *Koheleth* and is the title given to an official speaker who calls an assembly (see 1 Kings 8:1). The Greek word for "assembly" is *ekklesia*, and thus the LXX gives us the English title of the book, Ecclesiastes.

But the Preacher did more than call an assembly and give an oration. The word *Koheleth* carries with it the idea of debating, not so much with the listeners as with himself. He would present a topic, discuss it from many viewpoints, and then come to a practical conclusion. Ecclesiastes may appear to be a random collection of miscellaneous ideas about a variety of topics, but Solomon assures us that what he wrote was orderly (Eccl 12:9).

Relevance for Today?

Among other things, Solomon saw:

- Injustice to the poor (Eccl 4:1-3)
- Crooked politics (Eccl 5:8)
- Incompetent leaders (Eccl 10:6-7)
- Guilty people allowed to commit more crime (Eccl 8:11)
- Materialism (Eccl 5:10)
- A desire for "the good old days" (Eccl 7:10)

It sounds relevant for us, too, doesn't it?

Solomon has put the key to Ecclesiastes right at the front door (Eccl 1:2-3):

2 Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

3 What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun?

Just in case we missed it, he also put the same key at the back door (Eccl 12:8). But don't assume he is cynical or pessimistic: that would miss his real point! Whether he considers his wealth, his works, his wisdom, or his world, Solomon comes to the same sad appraisal: all is "vanity and vexation of spirit" (Eccl 2:11). However, this is not his final conclusion, nor is it the only message that he has for his readers. We will discover more about that later.

Vocabulary

"Vanity of vanities" - we have already noted that Solomon used the word "vanity" 38x in this book. It is the Hebrew word *hevel*, meaning "emptiness, futility, vapor." Whatever disappears quickly, leaves nothing behind and does not satisfy is *hevel*, vanity.

"Under the sun" (29x) - with it the phrase "under heaven" (Eccl 1:13; 2:3; 3:1). It defines the outlook of the writer as he looks at life from a human perspective and nothing from beyond this space-time universe is considered. He applies his own wisdom and experience to the complex human situation and tries to make some sense out of life.

Solomon wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Eccl 12:10-11; 2 Tim 3:16), so what he wrote was what God wanted His people to have. But as we study, we must keep Solomon's viewpoint in mind: he is examining life "under the sun."

In his *Unfolding Message of the Bible*, G. Campbell Morgan perfectly summarizes Solomon's outlook: This man had been living through all these experiences under the sun, concerned with nothing above the sun...until there came a moment in which he had seen the whole of life. And there was something over the sun. It is only as a man takes account of that which is over the sun as well as that which is under the sun that things under the sun are seen in their true light. [1]

Another related key phrase appears 7x and reflects the same limitation: Solomon said, "I thought in my heart" or "thought to myself" in reaching his conclusions. His methodology was empirical, but the data he gathered was evaluated by the standard of his own intelligence.

Profit - the Hebrew word *yithrown*, usually translated "profit" is used 10x in Ecclesiastes (1:3; 2:11,13 [excelleth]; 3:9; 5:9,16; 7:12 [excellency]; 10:10-11 [better]). It may be translated "surplus, advantage, gain." The word "profit" is just the opposite of "vanity." Solomon asks, "In the light of all the puzzles and problems of life, what is the advantage of living? Is there any gain?"

Labor - at least 11 different Hebrew words are translated "labor" in our Authorized Version, and this one is *'amal*, used 23x in Ecclesiastes. It means "to toil to the point of exhaustion and yet experience little or no fulfillment in your work." It carries with it the ideas of grief, misery, frustration, and weariness. Looked at only "under the sun" a person's daily work might seem to be futile and burdensome, but the Christian believer can always claim 1 Cor 15:58 and labor gladly in the will of God, knowing his labor is "not in vain in the Lord."

Man - this is the familiar Hebrew word '*adam*' (Gen 1:26; 2:7,19) and refers to man as made from the ground *adamah* in the Hebrew: Gen 2:7; 3:19). Of course, man is made in the image of God but he came from the earth and returns to the earth after death. Solomon used the word 49x as he examined "man under the sun."

These are the basic words found in the opening verses of Ecclesiastes, but there are a few more key words that we need to consider.

Evil - this word is used 31x and in the KJV is also translated "sore" (1:13; 4:8), "hurt" (5:13; 8:9), "mischievous" (10:13), "grievous" (2:17), "adversity" (7:14), "wickedness" (7:15), and "misery" (8:6). It is the opposite of "good" and covers a multitude of things: pain, sorrow, hard circumstances, and distress. It is one of King Solomon's favorite words for describing life as he sees it "under the sun."

Joy - in spite of his painful encounters with the world and its problems, Solomon does not recommend either pessimism or cynicism. Rather, he admonishes us to be realistic about life, accept God's gifts and enjoy them (2:24; 3:12-15,22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:9-10). After all, God gives to us "richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim 6:17). Words related to joy (enjoy, rejoice, etc.) are used at least 17x in Ecclesiastes. Solomon does not say, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die!" Instead, he advises us to trust God and enjoy what we do have rather than complain about what we don't have. Life is short and life is difficult, so make the most of it while you can.

Wisdom - Since it is one of the OT "wisdom books," Ecclesiastes would have something to say about both wisdom and folly. There are at least 32 references to "fools" and "folly" and at least 54 to "wisdom." King Solomon was the wisest of men (1 Kings 4:31) and he applied this wisdom as he sought to understand the purpose of life "under the sun." The Preacher sought to be a philosopher, but in the end, he had to conclude, "Fear God, and keep His commandments" (12:13).

God - Solomon mentions God 40x and always uses *Elohim* and never *Yehovah* or *YHWH*. *Elohim* ("God" in the English Bible) is the Mighty God, the glorious God of creation who exercises sovereign power. *YHWH* ("LORD" in the English Bible) is the God of the covenant, the God of revelation who is eternally self-existent and yet graciously relates Himself to sinful man. Since Solomon is dealing exclusively with what he sees "under the sun," he uses *Elohim*.