The Book of Ecclesiastes

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**Ecclesiastes = Greek translation of the Hebrew Word “Qoheleth” which means “Teacher”**

**Date and Author:**

Historically ascribed to Solomon but Scholars have agreed that this is not written by Solomon. The type of Hebrew used more closely resembles the language at 300-200 b.c.e. (Solomon lived in the mid 900’s b.c.e.) There are also the presence of Persian loaned words that indicate that the time of writing was well after the release from Exile in 539 b.c.e.

The Author (Qoheleth) takes the view point of subject rather than king in several places (4:13, 8:2, 9:14-16, 10:16-17) but also claims to have “wisdom surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me.” Which would be a bold claim if he were not royalty. Authorship unknown.

**Summary:**

The author is unable to find meaning in life, philosophy, or pleasure. All of his efforts result in emptiness or “Vanity.”

In response to life’s vanity, Qoheleth asks what then is good for humans? While recognizing that life has no ultimate or lasting “gain”, Qoheleth makes two points about the good. The first is summarized in the epilogue: “Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.” (12:13). The second is this: since humans are not masters of the universe, but afflicted by vanity in all its forms, their good is simply to enjoy life – both work and play – as God’s gift and the lot for which they are responsible. (Harper Collins Study Bible: Raymond C. Van Leeuwen. Pg 988)

**Outline:**

1:1 – Superscription

1:2 -12:8 – Wisdom of the Teacher

1:2 – **Vanity of vanities says the teacher; all is vanity.**

1:3 – 2:26 – Illustrations on the Theme of Absurdity

3:1-15 – Reflections on the meaning of time

3:16-4:8 – Reflections on Justice and Death

4:9-6:12 – Aphorisms

7:1-8:17 – 1st Miscellany: good things, common sense, Instructions, Retribution is absurdity

9:1-12 – Time and Chance Befall All

9:13-11:6 – 2nd Miscellany: Wisdom, Folly, Kings, Fools, Certainty of Cause and Effect

11:7-12:7 – Instructions for a young person

12:8 – **Vanity of vanities says the teacher; all is vanity.**

12:9-14 – Epilogue

**Introductory Issues: (from www.enterthebible.org)**

**Bonhoeffer on Ecclesiastes.** Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who was executed under the Nazis, made extensive use of Ecclesiastes. In interpreting Ecclesiastes 3, as an example, he writes: "But, to put it plainly, for a man in his wife's arms to be hankering after the other world is, in mild terms, a piece of bad taste, and not God's will. We ought to find and love God in what he actually gives us; if it pleases him to allow us to enjoy some overwhelming earthly happiness, we mustn't try to be more pious than God himself….'For everything there is a season'" (Letters and Papers from Prison [New York: Macmillan, 1971] 168-169).

**Ecclesiastes and Solomon.** While references in the book to "the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1) and "king over Israel" both suggest a king as the author, with Solomon as the likely candidate, there are problems with identifying the author as Solomon. That king is never named in the book. The "king" association is dropped after chapter 2. "All who were before me in Jerusalem" does not fit with Solomon, who was only the second king of Israel in Jerusalem. Most important, the language of the book is clearly that of a time later than Solomon. There are at least two Persian loan words in the book (translated "parks" in 2:5 and "sentence" in 8:11), which point to a time during Persian rule, after 539 B.C.E.

**Hevel("vanity," NRSV).**Since the word occurs thirty-seven times in this book, it is important to get its sense. The literal meaning is "breath" (Isaiah 57:13; JPS translates as "breeze" here), vapor, or cloud of steam. This thematic word runs like a pedal point on an organ throughout the entire book. Interestingly, hevel is translated as "Abel," the son of Adam and Eve, in Genesis 4. Already at the beginning of the Bible there is an allusion to the transitory nature of the human being in the name "Abel/hevel."

**Jewish use of the book.** In Judaism, the book is the text for the celebration of the fall festival of Sukkoth, or booths. Deuteronomy 16:1-17 lists the three ancient festivals (passover, weeks, booths), and vv. 13-15 tell how to celebrate booths. Jews today continue to celebrate the festival in the fall by building a small structure where they will eat and drink and visit with friends. The keynote of the festival is joy. This calls to attention the theme of rejoicing that runs through the book.

**Luther on Ecclesiastes.** Martin Luther's commentary on Ecclesiastes remains a classic that is still useful for our own understanding of the book. Note, for example, what Luther says about 5:20: "This statement is the interpreter of the entire book: Solomon intends to forbid vain anxieties, so that we may happily enjoy the things that are present and not care at all about the things that are in the future, lest we permit the present moment, our moment, to slip away" (Luther's Works15:93).

**Tone of the book.** Does Ecclesiastes mark the "low-water mark" of Old Testament thought, as some have suggested? Is it really an especially gloomy essay? The book does indeed recognize life's problems, including death. But the central message of the book is expressed in those passages that call for celebration of life together with family and friends and appreciation of the everyday good gifts that God provides (see 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:8-12:1).

**Theological Issues:**

**Enjoy the gifts of God.**"It is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun….This is the gift of God" (5:18-19). The Teacher counsels enjoying the good days (7:14; 3:22) and the good things, because they are gifts "from the hand of God" (2:24-26; 3:12-13). Eat, drink, and enjoy the days that God gives you (8:15)! Enjoy good wine, the man or woman you love, throw yourself into your work, because God approves of all these things (9:7-10).

**God at a distance.**"God is in heaven…," says 5:2. Isaiah spoke of the Lord as "high and lofty" and "holy" which means separate or distant (Isaiah 6:1-3). Jesus taught his followers to recognize God's transcendence in praying, "Our Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:9). All should be in awe of God (Ecclesiastes 3:14) and worship God in humility and reverence (5:1-2, 7; 12:13).

**God cares.** God is the maker of everything on earth (3:11; 7:13). God gives humans their lives (5:18; 8:15); God is their maker and creator (7:29; 12:1) and takes life back to God when the creature dies (12:7).

**Human beings--creatures of the earth.** "And you upon earth…"--humans are addressed in 5:2. On earth there are problems of injustice and evil (3:16-17), oppression (4:1-3; 5:8-9), greed (5:8-17), unfairness (7:15-18; 8:14; 9:11-12), and finally death (2:14-17; 3:19-21; 6:3-6; 7:2; 12:1-8).

**What is God doing?**"So you do not know the work of God," says 11:5 (see also 3:10-11 and 8:16-17). For Ecclesiastes, there appears to be a gulf between God in heaven and people on earth.

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