

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
Anchorage Grace Church
2016

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OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

If one had to design a cover for each of the three canonical wisdom books, drawn from their own contents, one might represent them by the various houses they describe. For Proverbs it could appropriately be the seven-pillared house of Wisdom, or better still that gracious, well-stocked home of the accomplished wife, whose virtues bring the book to its serene close. For Job, a very different picture: perhaps the wreckage in which his family perished when “a great wind came across the wilderness, and struck the four corners of the house;” or perhaps even the ash heap to which he banished himself. As for Ecclesiastes, its insistence on the transience of earthly glory could hardly find a better symbol than its own description of a great house (12:3-4) in the grip of slow, inexorable decay.

Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes* (Leicester, U.K.: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 116.

Ecclesiastes

I. Introduction

The book of Ecclesiastes has an interesting legacy. One commentator calls it “one of the most puzzling books of the Bible.”¹ Its contents and message have garnered both acclaim and criticism. On the one hand, its words are so persuasive and captivating that it has been immortalized in the lyrics of a famous 1950s folk song. On the other hand, it has been one of only a few OT books whose canonicity was briefly challenged. And yet, despite this, it remains one of the OT’s most enduring and timely books.

A. *Title*

The English title for the book is taken directly from the LXX title, which is a derivative of the Greek term *ecclesia*, which means “a gathering” or “a congregation.” The term is a translation of the Hebrew title *Qoheleth*, which variously translates as “preacher,” or “gatherer.” It indicates the words of someone who addresses to a congregation.

¹ J. Stafford Wright, “Ecclesiastes,” in *EBC*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 5:1137.

B. *Canonicity*

The actual canonicity of Ecclesiastes has never truly been in question. Despite a certain amount of scrutiny it endured, its divine inspiration has been recognized throughout OT and NT history.

Nevertheless, this scrutiny was the product of what some considered a book filled with seemingly “unorthodox statements” and “extreme pessimism.” The former sentiment references what appears to be a kind of *carpe diem* philosophy which has been likened both to endaemonism² as well as epicureanism.³ Its multiple refrains encouraging readers to enjoy life (2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:8-9) have even led some scholars to question the book’s contribution to theology. As for the latter statement, its repeated emphasis on the “vanity” of life and man’s toiling and the hopeless plight of the oppressed have contributed to what some consider an extremely pessimistic outlook on life.

For this reason, Ecclesiastes, along with Song of Songs and Esther, were challenged in the 1st century AD by a certain sect of Jewish scholars who questioned their canonicity. Ultimately, however, all three works were affirmed as books which “defiled the hands,” meaning that their holiness rendered the reader unclean if read without appropriate ceremonial washing.

In reality, all evidence suggests that Ecclesiastes was recognized from ancient times as a book of divine origin. It was quoted as early as 190 B.C. by the Jewish scholar Ben Sira. It was accepted by the early church fathers, was alluded to on numerous occasions by the NT writers (cf. Rom 3:10; 8:20; Jas 4:14), and fragments of the book were found at Qumran dating to the 2nd century B.C.

Canonicity is a difficult topic for Christians to comprehend, and there have been numerous proposed theories on the “criteria” used to determine which books were ultimately included in the OT canon. Ultimately, however these criteria contain serious weaknesses and none seem to recognize that “the only true test of canonicity is the testimony of God the Holy Spirit to the authority of His own Word.”⁴ The book itself contains an internal claim to divine inspiration (12:11), and the Bible makes clear that the OT is a product of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 12:10ff).

In light of this, the charge of “unorthodoxy” only stands if the statements in question are divorced from the larger literary context. As for the charge of “extreme pessimism,” the fact that the book was traditionally read during the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles—a joyful festival celebrating Israel’s redemption from Egypt and preservation through the wilderness (cf. Neh 8:9)—indicates that Judaism has not traditionally considered the book pes-

² A system of ethics that held “well-being” or “happiness” as the highest value and thus based ethical decisions on whatever led to happiness.

³ An ancient Greek school of philosophy which pleasure as the highest good and thus based ethical decisions on whatever led to pleasure.

⁴ Gleason L. Archer, *Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 85.

simistic. In fact, Barrick has dubbed the book the “Philippians of the Old Testament” because it instructs the reader in how to find joy in the midst of a sin-cursed world.

C. *Authorship*

The book has traditionally held to be written by Solomon, on account of the opening verse identifies the author as both “the son of David” and “king in Jerusalem” (1:1). This seems to narrow down the author to an kind of Judah. But the issue is further clarified in verse 12 when the author identifies himself as “king over Israel in Jerusalem.” Only four men ruled over a united Israel—Saul, David, Solomon, and Rehoboam. Of these, only the latter two could be called a “son of David,” and only Solomon seems to match the autobiographical descriptions in the text.

Solomonic authorship, in fact, was not questioned before A.D. 1644 (except for Luther). Nonetheless, by the height of Higher Criticism, the book came under liberal scrutiny and its date was placed somewhere late in the postexilic era. They claimed that the philosophical premises of the book were the product of Greek influence and could not be dated before the Babylonian exile. These challenges have since been soundly rebuffed.

Yet conservative scholars have also voiced certain skepticism toward Solomonic authorship. Some, like Luther, challenged the notion on moral grounds. Others, like Franz Delitzsch, pointed to the linguistic style of the book, claiming that “if the Book of Koheleth were of old Solomonic origin, then there is no history of the Hebrew language.” Still others have argued that the book does not reflect the state of Israel during Solomon’s reign. Instead, it is a time of misery (1:2-11), when the splendor of Solomon’s united kingdom had past (1:12-2:26).

Yet when we look at the internal testimony of the text, on which all the previous arguments are based, we find that the contents of the book are *inconclusive*. Wright’s warning is correct when he says, “Certainly it is not out of the realm of possibility that a later author is presenting the words and teachings of Qoheleth,”⁵ meaning that the book may be the product of a later author capturing the teachings of Solomon himself, which could account for the linguistic and stylistic differences.

Nonetheless, Barrick’s argument is persuasive: “No other king in all Israel fits the factors of wisdom, works, wealth, and words better than Solomon. These alone would seem to be adequate proof of Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes.”⁶ The author’s autobiographical sketch presents him as one who possessed unrivaled wisdom (1:16), explored carnal pleasure (2:1-3), achieved impressive accomplishments (2:4-6), and amassed unequaled wealth (2:7-9). When we compare these descriptions to Solomon, the likeness is immediately apparent:⁷

⁵ Wright, “Ecclesiastes,” 5:1141.

⁶ William D. Barrick, *Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament*, Focus on the Bible (Geanies House, Scotland, UK: Christian Focus, 2011), 21.

⁷ Chart adapted from Barrick, *Ecclesiastes*, 21-23.

Factor	Ecclesiastes	1 Kings
W I S D O M	‘I said to myself, “Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge.”’ (1:16)	‘behold, I have done according to your words. Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you.’”
W O R K S	‘I enlarged my works: I build houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees.’ (2:4-6)	‘Now King Solomon levied forced laborers from all Israel; and the forced laborers numbered 30,000 men.... Then the king commanded, and they quarried great stones, costly stones, to lay the foundation of the house ... and prepared the timbers and the stones to build the house.’ (5:13-18) ‘No Solomon was building his own house thirteen years, and he finished all his house. He built the house of the forest of Lebanon;... He also made a house like his hall for Pharaoh’s daughter, whom Solomon had married.’ (7:1-8) ‘So Solomon rebuilt Gezer and the lower Bethoron and Baalath and Tamar in the wilderness, in the land of Judah, and all the storage cities which Solomon had, even the cities for his chariots and the cities for his horsemen, and all that it pleased Solomon to build in Jerusalem, in Lebanon, and in all the land under his rule.’ (9:17-19)
W E A L T H	‘I bought male and female slaves and I had home-born slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female sings and the pleasures of men—many concubines. Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me.’ (2:7-9)	‘Now the weight of gold which came in to Solomon in one year was 666 talents of gold, besides <i>that</i> from the traders and the wares of the merchants and all the kings of the Arabs and the governors of the country. King Solomon made 200 large shields of beaten gold, using 600 <i>shekels</i> of gold on each large shield. <i>He made</i> 300 shields of beaten gold using three minas of gold on each shield,... Moreover, the king made a great throne of ivory and overlaid it with refined gold.... Nothing like it was made for any other kingdom. (10:14-20)
W O R D S	‘In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. The preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly.’ (12:9-10)	‘The also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005.’ (4:32)

II. Major Themes

Themes and messages of Ecclesiastes are well outlined in the numerous repeated phrases and words which the author employs. Some of them resound with the echoes of OT theology, while others are unique to the book.

A. *The realities of Life*

Rooker writes, “The book of Ecclesiastes brings into focus the mystifying existence of mankind.”⁸ The reader is confronted with the finitude and seeming futility of man’s life. The author, through real life observation, points to man’s limited knowledge, man’s experiences, and man’s labors, as an indication of his limitations. He forces the reader to acknowledge that he is but man. In this way, the book is a companion to the Book of Job, whose message was on man’s necessity to “trust and surrender to God, not knowing where God may lead him.”

1. *Vanity*

The book of Ecclesiastes begins and ends with essentially the same phrase: “‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher, ‘Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.’” (1:2; 12:8). The term “vanity” translates the Hebrew word *hebel*, whose meaning differs depending on context. It appears 38x in the book, accounting for half of its occurrences in the OT. Barrick recalls the words of a former teaching colleague, who thought of the term as soap bubbles:

He used to recite, “Soap bubbles, soap bubbles, all is soap bubbles.” The bubbles are delightfully beautiful, multi-colored shimmering globes dancing in the air and gracefully changing their form until *poof!* they disappear in a brief shiny cascade of tiny droplets. Beautiful but insubstantial; delightful but ephemeral—just like life.⁹

Within the context of Ecclesiastes, the term takes on several concepts. At times, it denotes something that is utterly transitory. At other times it refers to the frustration of living life with unanswered questions (cf. 3:16-19), of not understanding the purpose of one’s toil (4:7-8), of not being able to enjoy the fruits of one’s labor (6:1-2), and the reality seeming inequality of life (8:14). Far from simply denoting “meaningless,” the term expresses “the inability of mankind to fully understand these realities of life. Such realities produce frustration, puzzlement, and vexation, but they do not make life meaningless.”¹⁰

In reality, Solomon’s opening phrase, “All is vanity” captures the essence of man’s life. The phrase is comprised of just two words, which in Hebrew differ by only one letter: *hakkol hebel*—“everything is nothing.” Barrick writes,

⁸ Mark. F. Rooker, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2011), 540.

⁹ Barrick, *Ecclesiastes*, 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

Life is just that way. The tiniest of deeds can cause one's entire existence to collapse like a house of cards. We cannot, at any time, make the mistake of thinking, "This decision or choice is insignificant—it's not going to affect anything." In one moment of selfishness or recklessness, or just plain inadvertence, our *everything* becomes *nothing*.¹¹

2. *Under the Sun*

The phrase "under the sun" is unique to the book of Ecclesiastes. Yet in other ANE writings, the phrase appears, describing man's existence on planet earth under the dominance of the sun. It refers to the idea of "in this life," or "on earth." The reoccurrence of the phrase (29x—1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1, 12; 8:9, 15, 17; 9:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10:5) is a consistent way for Solomon to remind us that we have but one life, and that life is lived out on the earth. Just as the sun is perhaps the most consistent reality of man's life, it reminds us that it is the created order that is permanent—not us. And so it points us, the readers, toward the One of created that order. When we dwell on life without consideration of God as Creator and Sovereign Lord, we can only lament. But if our thoughts dwell on Him, then we are led to "a more satisfying and happy existence 'under the sun.'"¹²

3. *Death*

Death is a constant reality in Ecclesiastes. Solomon references it 15x (2:14, 16, 18; 3:2, 19-20; 4:2; 5:15; 6:6, 12; 7:1; 8:8; 9:2-5, 10; 11:7-8; 12:7). In this, we are confronted with the finitude of life. Our plans ultimately do not come to fruition because the planner—man—dies! Nothing we do can last for eternity, and death becomes the ultimate reality check for everyone. It is the test for everything man attempts to do.

Death makes all of one's labors appear pointless, because he can't take it with him, and he ends up leaving it to someone else (2:18-23). The accumulation of wealth, in the end, cannot help someone after death (5:15). Even when one commits himself to what seems like the ultimate of virtues—wisdom—Solomon concludes that in the end, the wise man and the fool have the same end. Both will die (2:12-17).

All of this summons our meditations on the Fall of mankind. "Life under the sun continues with all of the baggage of Adam's disobedience."¹³ In fact, Genesis 3 is the soil in which Solomon works to grow his theology of life under the sun. It is the curse that has brought death upon man. "All came from the dust and all return to the dust" (3:20)" echoes God's words to Adam: "For you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19).

And yet man can learn and understand more by meditating on the reality of death. There is, in fact, great benefit to such an endeavor:¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., 33.

¹² Ibid., 36.

¹³ Ibid., 114.

¹⁴ Taken from Barrick, *Ecclesiastes*, 119-20.

- Understanding more clearly the ultimate result of the Fall.
- Giving proper consideration to the brevity of life, indeed, the transitory nature of our own existence.
- Being reminded that how we live does count—what have I done with my life thus far?
- Recommitting ourselves to live life in the light of eternity.
- Preparing to die.
- Learning the value of comfort and being comforted—the great benefit of the believing family and believing community.
- Knowing that no one lives to herself and no one dies to himself—a life, as well as a death, impacts the lives of others.

The curse has made every man a sinner, and thus every man faces the same ultimate fate: “Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards they go to the dead” (9:3). These words form the backdrop for Paul’s theology of the universality of human sinfulness (Rom 3:10-23).

Thus, Solomon urges his readers to “remember also your Creator in the days of your youth,” (12:1), before death comes, when “dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it” (12:7).

4. *Toil, Labor, Work*

Just as death is a constant reality in life, so also is work and labor. A considerable amount of Solomon’s focus is on the labor, toil, and work that man does under the sun. This concept recurs some 34x (cf. 1:3; 2:17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:9; 4:7-8; 8:16). This theme, too, finds its roots in the theology of Genesis. Rooker writes, “The fact that God has decreed that man must toil for food (Gen 3:17-19) is everywhere assumed in Ecclesiastes with its focus on human toil.”¹⁵ To some degree, Solomon presents life under the sun as a curse, the reason not the least being because of the futility of his many labors which seem to be for nothing. In the end, man’s toil points him to the reality of this cursed earth and to the Creator who subjected it to futility. In this, Paul’s words find more clarity:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now (Rom 8:20-22).

B. *The Enjoyment of Life*

In the midst of the reality of death, and the perpetuity of work and toil, Solomon urges his readers to enjoy life. In fact, it is a refrain that appears at the end of each major section (2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:8-9). Far from a hedonistic license, Solomon actually frees us from the drudger of our toils under the sun by allowing us to enjoy life as God’s gracious gift. While we may not possess limitless knowledge to understand

¹⁵ Rooker, “Ecclesiastes,” 544.

why life happens the way it does, we can still enjoy life while we live if we live in trust of its Author.

That is a key to the overarching theme of the book. There is a way for man to enjoy life. Though it may appear to be “vanity” and “striving after wind,” when viewed through the right lens, we can indeed enjoy our lives under the sun. “Life in the world,” notes Wright, “has significance only when man remembers his Creator (12:1).”¹⁶ This same concept of thankful enjoyment appears again in Paul’s letter to the Colossians: “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father” (3:17). He echoes these same thoughts in 1 Corinthians: “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (10:31).

C. *The Fear of God*

The imperative to “fear” or “revere” God appears repeatedly in Ecclesiastes (3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13; 12:13). It is the summarizing and all-encompassing lens through which life finds ultimate meaning. It is a concept whose roots penetrate deeply into OT theology and the covenant life of Israel. With all that life is, with its fleetness, uncertainty, pain, toil, and apparent futility, and with all that man is in the sinfulness of his heart, his only hope for enjoyment in life begins and ends with God. Man is left to trust that God has the answers he cannot attain, and controls the events and happenings of life which man cannot control. Yet he can enjoy life, but only under the premise that God “will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil” (12:14).

III. Purpose

Thus, the purpose of the book of Ecclesiastes is painted in the closing words of the book. Life may be soap bubbles. But man’s end is to fear God and obey his commandments. Only in this will he find joy in life. Archer writes that Solomon aims in the book “to convince men of the uselessness of any world view which does not rise above the horizon of man himself.”¹⁷

Concerning the message of Ecclesiastes, Barrick gives these summarizing thoughts:

Solomon develops three foundational spiritual truths in Ecclesiastes:

- (1) Mankind searches for happiness and enduring substance (2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:7-10). Ecclesiastes presents mankind with an invitation to enjoy life.
 - Unparalyzed by life’s uncertainties, enjoy life as God’s gift (11:1-6).
 - Undepressed by life’s shortness, enjoy life as God’s gift (11:9-10).
 - Showing reverence to and serving God in life, enjoy life as God’s gift (12:1-14).
- (2) Divine sovereignty and providence characterizes human existence on planet Earth (2:26; 3:14; 7:13-14; 8:16-9:1; 11:5).
 - We must believe that God is the Creator with whom we cannot trifle (5:2; 12:1).
 - We must accept that God’s world cannot be changed to our liking (3:1-8; 7:13).

¹⁶ Wright, “Ecclesiastes,” 5:1146.

¹⁷ Archer, *Old Testament Introduction*, 475.

- We cannot extrapolate the future on the basis of the present, because the pattern keeps changing in accord with God’s plan (7:14; 8:17).
 - We must believe that God is the Judge and will bring all wickedness into judgment (3:17; 5:6; 8:12-13; 11:9; 12:7, 14).
- (3) The way of wisdom for human conduct requires the avoidance of excess.
- Be content with the present (7:10).
 - Be conciliatory (10:12-14).
 - Be cautious (8:1-9; 10:8-11; cf. 7:8-9).¹⁸

Barrick then goes on to make this statement:

One might encapsulate these three truths in the following exhortation: *Live without reserve; die without regret.* From a worldly, under-the-sun perspective void of biblical values, that sounds a lot like the philosophy of Aristotle (eudaemonism—happiness results from an active, rational life, and the morality of actions is determined by their capacity to produce happiness) or Epicurus (epicureanism—sensuous pleasure is the highest good since an afterlife and the influence of the divine upon this life are non-existent). From a biblical and heavenly perspective, however, the same exhortation applies, because the divine Creator gives life and He will judge any abuse of His gift. At the time of our death God will usher us into His presence as we transition from this life into the afterlife. Then we shall be held accountable for how we lived—how we invested the gift of life He gave us (cf. Heb. 9:27; Matt 25:14-30). As we stand before Him, will we regret having squandered the opportunities of this life?¹⁹

With that said, we may summarize the purpose of the book in the following statement: *In spite of the seeming futility involved in man’s existence, the wise man should fear God and enjoy life as the gift from God.*

IV. Literary Structure

The structure of Ecclesiastes remains one of the great challenges of this book. Rooker comments that “no analysis of its design has gained widespread scholarly support. It seems that determining where a unit begins and ends is open to debate throughout the contents of the book. If one examines the commentaries and other aids, it is clear that no common consensus has emerged.”²⁰

Thus, Rooker suggests a simple outline as follows:

- I. Superscription (1:1)
- II. Theme (1:2-11)
- III. Question for the Meaning of Life (1:12-6:9)
 - A. Everything is Temporary (1:12-4:16)
 - B. Coping with Uncertainty (5:1-6:9)
- IV. Wisdom Admonitions (6:10-12:8)

¹⁸ Barrick, *Ecclesiastes*, 24-25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

²⁰ Rooker, “Ecclesiastes,” 541.

- A. Earthly Goods Do Not Satisfy (6:10-8:17)
- B. God Will Deal with Injustices (9:1-12:8)

V. Epilogues (12:9-14)

That being said, Barrick observes that the first three of four major sections concludes with a common refrain, while the final major section offers a very different kind of statement:

Section	Refrain
1:1-2:26	2:24 – “There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God.”
3:1-5:20	5:18 – “Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one’s labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward.”
6:1-8:15	8:15 – “So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to merry, and this will stand by him in his toils throughout the days of his life which God has given him under the sun.”
8:16-12:14	12:13-14 – “The conclusion, when all has been heard is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act of judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.”

Thus, Barrick offers a slightly more annotated outline that provides a more applicational approach to the book.²¹

- I. From **experience**, the Preacher **learned that man is powerless** (1:1-2:26)
 - *Refrain: 2:24-26* > There is no inherent good in man.
> Enjoy God’s gift of life.
- II. II. From **observation**, the Preacher **learned that God has a design for all things** (3:1-5:20)
 - *Refrain: 5:18-20* > Life is to be enjoyed.
> Life is a gift from God to be lived—not to be analyzed endlessly
- III. III. By **application**, the Preacher **found the explanation for apparent inequalities in divine providence** (6:1-8:15).
 - A. The evaluation of man’s outward fortunes (6:1-7:15)
 - B. The evaluation of man’s character (7:16-29)
 - C. The effects of righteous government (8:1-14)
 - *Refrain: 8:15* > Enjoy life.

²¹ Barrick, *Ecclesiastes*, 26-27.

IV. IV. In **conclusion**, the Preacher **determined to fear God, obey God, and enjoy life** (8:16-12:14).

- A. What we cannot know (mystery) must not affect our enjoyment of life (8:16-9:9).
 - B. What we cannot know (mystery) must not affect our work (9:10-11:6).
 - C. The daily reminder of our short life and soon entrance into our Creator's presence should infect our God-given joy and work (11:7-12:8).
- *Epilogue*: 12:9-14 > Fear God with obedience