

Ecclesiastes

1A. Authorship

Not Solomon (IOT 249-250). Why not? Some basic reasons can be given with a key reason.

1) The perspective is that of one who was king and now looks back, 1:12; 4:15 (Solomon's son who showed this conduct after Solomon's death). It's as if Solomon were commenting on these events which transpired beyond his own time; hence a literary device is at work.

2) The social setting does not accord with Solomon's day, 4:1-3. (dead happier than the living under oppression; though some of this pertained to Solomon's work draft).

3) The words of the close of the book cannot be identified with the words of the preacher, the "son of David." There is another wise man who has put this book together instead of Solomon.

How show this? There is more than one voice in the book. We have the preacher and we have the narrator as shown by the shift from third to first to third person in the progress of the book: the teacher (3rd, 1:1), I, the teacher (1st, 1:12), and he (3rd, 12:8-10).

So, we do not know the author and date of the book.

Still, we will discuss the book of Ecclesiastes in relation to the United Kingdom period because of the allusions to Solomon.

2A. Literary Analysis

Allusions to Solomon are a literary device employed by a skeptical sage (who is different from the narrator/author). He is called the preacher or teacher. The Hebrew for teacher here is Qohelet (sometimes translated, the preacher, the speaker at an assembly). "Preacher" might reflect too positive a connotation. He expounds and teaches a skeptical view. He "in effect pretends to be Solomon (at least in the first two chapters) as he considers wealth, pleasure, and philanthropy as sources of meaning" (IOT 249). While reading, remember the layers: a narrator (the author of the entire book) in effect quotes the skeptic, Qohelet, who in turn pretends at times to be Solomon.

1B. Genre

Framed autobiography of the preacher, Qohelet. The autobiography itself is cast in the form of a pseudonym in which "a skeptical wise man...pretends he is Solomon" (IOT 249). Thus it is a framed pseudonymic and skeptical autobiography. The narrator puts the autobiographical material into this structure to display true wisdom; hence, we have framed wisdom autobiography.

2B. Structure (Dillard's outline)

Prologue, 3rd person, 1:1-11

Autobiographical monologue, 1st person, 1:12-12:7

Epilogue, 3rd person, 12:8-14

The prologue introduces the major themes. The monologue rambles without order. The epilogue focuses the true message of the book against the backdrop of the wrong perspective of Qohelet.

3B. Theme

The theme is instruction in reverent and satisfying obedience to God in contrast to meaninglessness.

The book is concerned with skepticism, with skeptical wisdom (meaninglessness). The narrator uses the wrong perspective of the preacher, his skeptical wisdom, as a foil, a teaching device by which to instruct his son (12:12) and call him to reverent obedience to God in light of the reality of judgment (12:13-14).

3A. Does the framed monologue hold up?

1B. What about 11:7-12:8 where the reader is called to remember the Creator? How can this be construed as the skeptics point of view? Especially 12:1?

The skeptic is not an atheist but one who acknowledges God but without hope and meaning. Thus, 1) remember the Creator equals remember that you are from dust and to it you will return and the spirit to God (ie, the life is gone forever; hence the hopelessness by putting 7-8 together).

2) Remember God is like remember the days of darkness (11:8) that is tied to enjoyment and happiness following the ways of your heart (11:8-9). He is expressing an ambivalence about life and happiness, sarcastically: "be happy, sure, indulge, banish anxiety from your heart." It is sarcastic because "youth and vigor are meaningless"

(11:10); so none of it is real; it is mere chasing after the wind. Find what joy you can in your youth but it is really worthless and empty.

Thus when he says remember your Creator in the days of your youth, we think at first that he means something pious and hopeful: while you are young and can enjoy life, remember God. Instead, he is saying that even recalling God in the time when we could have maximal happiness does no good; we cannot have maximal happiness; it is all meaningless. The very recollection of God in our youth destroys hope by reminding of his judgment: aging and death!

2B. 2:24-25?

How skeptical and negative? 24 has 23; 25, enjoy has 26, meaningless. From work nothing is gained, 2:11.

Thus there is a wisdom, knowledge, satisfaction, enjoyment, and happiness that is granted by God; but it is all fleeting, chasing the wind, and under the cloud of ultimate meaninglessness.

"Pleasure vanishes quickly, while time eventually erodes human achievements and obliterates all memory of great men and women. Knowledge, too, bestows only relative advantage, enabling people to see the fate that encounters them. Unfortunately, a common end unfolds for the wise and the fool," so, "After a lifetime of toil, no profit remains, and the sum of things resembles one mighty act of breathing" (Crenshaw, OTW 129). The skeptics view, presented by the narrator (1:1-11) is that life just goes in a circle (1:4-7) and is wearisome (1:8); meaningless (1:2). In the skeptics own words, life is chasing the wind (1:14) where nothing is gained (2:11). So he says, "I hated life" (2:17).

4A. Read looking for Ambivalence

Sections like this one in the book are similarly ambivalent. Thus we should read for ambivalence and notions that balance each other off. Where it sounds like Qohelet is positive (has joy, etc) we must note how he factors in the under current of emptiness and despair.

5A. Compound emptiness

Note on 1:2 (LaSor 590 where meaninglessness is compounded:

1) x of x (vanity of vanities) is a superlative expressing the vainest vanity, the most futile futility.

2) The repetition is for emphasis: vanity of vanities, says the teacher, vanity of vanities.

3) The blanket conclusion gives final emphasis: all is vanity.

The point is made, emphasized and accented in the most sweeping way possible!

Within this perspective, there are claims that appear to compromise the despair but they must be read as fleeting and carrying their own cruel hooks hidden beneath the enticing bait.

So don't get too enthused about anything (don't be overly wicked or overly righteous; 7:16-17); just hang out there and make the most of it. You may salvage some of life but it is really grasping at a straw.

Live with a gusto but also with somber undertones: "enjoy what you can through your empty days granted to you in your vain life!" (Crenshaw 42).

6A. Why ultimately vain?

1) Man is evil and there is no hope for relationship with God.

2) God's gifts (2:26; 5:19) are not tokens of His goodness and love but of man's limits and helplessness. Righteous and wicked are in God's hands and destined to the same end (9:1-2).

The famous "times" passage (3:2-8) must be seasoned by 9:11-12 ("time and chance happen to them all" in the race of life).

There is definitely no sense of being loved by God in the treacher's view. There is crookedness that cannot be straightened (7:13; 20).

3) Death

There is a relative sense of being righteous verses wicked (8:12). Still they come to the same end (9:2-3). Death, of course, is the key enemy that renders everything meaningless.

7A. The Point of the book

The *narrator's message* is that Qohelet is correct in his unorthodoxy in that he gives "a true assessment of the world apart from the light of God's redeeming love" (IOT 255). Under the sun, on this plane without a sense of God's covenant faithfulness there is hopelessness and covenant curse (cf. IOT 255).

Work, designed to be definitive of man's life in history, does not lead to dignity and rest but to despair and turmoil.

The treacherer is exactly right: without God life is meaningless (IOT 255).

Thus, *with God*, in covenant faith, there is meaning, that is, with God who promises rest with him at the end of work and toil week by week. At the end of history on earth there is significance to our work that is found in the presence of God with us as we rest with Him in eternal Sabbath rest.

Epilogue

The epilogue has the theology of the OT as its context.

The teacher's view is summarized (12:8). He was smart and covered a lot of ground; his conclusions afflict the soul (12:9-11).

But be warned with regard to this weariness; guard your heart against this despair and hopelessness (v. 12; this is a commentary on Qohelet).

Here is the true lesson (13-14). Here is a summary of man's whole duty as we wrestle with despair, vanity, and meaninglessness: Fear God and keep his commandments knowing that he will judge every deed.

8A. The message for us

1) Fear, true and wise fear, is reverent worship of God for who He is; the one who brings us to His commands by redeeming us from the curse of the fall (the curse of work), from bondage in Egypt, and from sin.

He is faithful to his promise from the very beginning: He will bring man, his image male and female, through history to rest with Himself; to fellowship, joy and glory! A wisdom and glory is in store for us that far surpasses the knowledge and splendor of Solomon! Again, the lilies out shine Solomon, and your glory purposed by God will out shine the lilies!

2) Keep his commandments. *Commandment keeping is basic to human significance, dignity and value.* The answer to the great existence questions is found in this duty.

The 10 commandments protect and guide as honey that nourishes and a lamp that lights our pathway in this morally dark world.

With a worshipping and awe inspired heart, take up the specifics of duty before God's holy law. You know that He will be your judge; He will right all wrongs; He is your promise keeper who protects you in the judgment by His true wisdom revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord!

3) Gospel

So we have Gospel in a nutshell (IOT 253-254). Jesus restores meaning in all the areas questioned (by His commands, we find wisdom for each area, and thus value, meaning, dignity, and purpose).

He conquered the biggest fear and greatest disturbance for Qohelet, death. Thus, your labor is not in vain in the Lord (I Co 15:58).

4) Communion Remembering (In hints at least, what lesson can we draw from the narrator's perspective in the book of Ecclesiastes for communion remembering?)

When the skeptical preacher's remembering is put in the right perspective by the narrator, we learn about remembering our Creator in terms of covenant redemption instead of covenant alienation. In summary, we may say to ourselves, "while I live, while I have life and breath, while I have eyes to see the sun, moon, and stars, while I have eyes, ears, hair, and teeth that function properly, before the dust that I am returns to dust, and before my spirit returns to God (Ecc 12.1-7), I will focus my mind in a special way, communion service by communion service, on my Creator and redeemer, Jesus Christ the Lord of glory so that I may live for Him by His commandments (Ecc 12.13; Jn 14.15) day by day with reverence, joy, and love."