

Introduction to Ecclesiastes

Where is it in the Bible?

Ecclesiastes is the twenty-first book in the Old Testament and is between Proverbs and Song of Solomon. In Hebrew Bibles, Ecclesiastes is the seventh book in the last section, the Writings or Kethuvim; it is between Lamentations and Esther. The book is sometimes called Qoheleth, a Hebrew word that is usually translated as “teacher” or “preacher”, although the meaning is unclear because it does not occur anywhere outside of this book.

Who wrote it?

The author is identified in 1:1 as Qoheleth or the Teacher, the son of David. He is traditionally identified as Solomon, but there is general agreement that the book was written at a later period. It is best to assume that the author is anonymous and was someone who was familiar with the wisdom traditions of Israel.

When was it written?

The language used in Ecclesiastes is a late form of Biblical Hebrew and indicates a date well after the end of the Babylonian exile. Most modern scholars feel it was written between 300 and 200 B.C.

What is it about?

The author of Ecclesiastes reflects on the journey of life, the quest for meaning, and the realities of living on earth under God.

How is it structured?

- I. Author and Theme (1:1-2)
- II. The Search for Meaning (1:3-2:26)
- III. A Time for Everything (3:1-22)
- IV. Earthly Matters (4:1-16)
- V. God and Humans (5:1-20)
- VI. Frustration of Desires (6:1-12)
- VII. Wisdom Sayings (7:1-14)
- VIII. Riddles of Life (7:15-29)
- IX. Limits of Human Power (8:1-17)
- X. How to Live Life (9:1-12:14)

What are some things to look for?

- **Positive or Pessimistic?** There have been many discussions of the tone of this book. “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).”¹
- **Vanity:** The Hebrew word *hevel* occurs over thirty-five times in Ecclesiastes. In English Bibles it is usually translated as “vanity”, but this does not really capture the sense of the word. Literally, it means “vapor”. A Jewish commentary on Ecclesiastes says it is “like steam from an oven.” The word is meant to convey a feeling of impermanence and futility.

¹ James Limburg at <http://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=41>