

**Ecclesiastes, I**

I want to share something with you that will help us keep our eyes fixed on why it is we are here and why we study the Bible. It has to do with my son, Taylor, who is now 18 years old. He was in Washington this weekend. He and I have been doing Evangelism Explosion this last semester and he was frustrated that we had not been getting into houses, so he had been praying that he would have a real opportunity to make use of what he is learning. He came home from Washington, very excited, having had the opportunity to go through the Gospel with a man he met in the park—while my son's girlfriend was looking on. The man was collecting money for the homeless; he went to church and knew the Bible, but as Taylor went through the Gospel, it became increasingly clear that the man did not understand at all about grace and about the real heart of the Gospel. Taylor said it was so exciting to watch his excitement mount as his eyes got bigger and bigger and his smile got wider and wider as he discovered that eternal life is a free gift—something that Christ purchased and offers to us, something we do not have to earn. The man responded positively to the Gospel and agreed to pray with Taylor. My son was very excited and I am excited when that happens in the life of an 18-year-old, because I think it will make an imprint on him in terms of what God can do through him in life. I am thankful for those who prayed with me that he would have an opportunity. This was not a staged visit but a spontaneous encounter; we might say it was a “divine appointment” where God brought these two together.

I want to offer praise for that and also remind us why it is we study the Bible. We need to keep the main thing as the main thing, and that is to be ambassadors of the good news. The Gospel is straightforward; it is profound. It is simple in many ways, but it is deep and profound. God wants us to develop our understanding, to spend our lives studying. If He had wanted us to remain on the level of milk and not move on to meat, He would not have given us this book that is so challenging. He could have given us a pamphlet of 10 pages or so, but He wants us to grow in wisdom and knowledge. As we do this, there is the danger that we will begin to value knowledge and wisdom for itself and forget why we are really here. We do not want to end our lives with regrets—as the writer of Ecclesiastes seems to be communicating—having perhaps pursued many good things, but having missed the main thing.

Shall we pray together and get started?

*Father, I do offer You praise for the way in which You are at work in this world. We recognize that we are very frail instruments and that we bring very little to the bargain in terms of the skills and abilities that we ourselves have. And yet we thank You that You have told us that Your strength is made perfect in weakness. We thank You for the way You encourage us that even an 18-year-old boy can communicate with a man in his twenties who did not fully understand the wonderful truths of the Gospel, and that You can use the words of an 18-year-old to communicate that to him. We thank You for responsiveness. We know that You are the one who works in hearts, to draw them to Yourself, and we pray that You would be drawing us ever closer to You. We pray that You would bring into our lives people whose spirits You are touching, by Your Spirit. Give us the words, the boldness, to speak to them, and may we so steep ourselves in Your Word that what we communicate would not be our thoughts or our words, but Yours. Lord, may Your Word become part of the fabric of our lives in a very real sense so that we would think in ways that You commend and command, and that we would live accordingly. Thank You for salvation in Christ. I pray that You would be with us now as we consider further this book of Ecclesiastes, a pre-Christian book, that we might learn its lessons well and find it relevant even in this day and age, for we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

In this lesson we are going to be looking mostly at the book of Ecclesiastes. Have you ever awakened on a Monday morning and asked yourself, “What is the point of it all?” Have you ever poured your energies into some project or into a relationship only to be disappointed in the end? If you have, you are not alone. In fact, the book of Ecclesiastes shows us clearly that God understands. It is God who has chosen to include this book in His word to us, and so we know that it has a message for us. In the book of Ecclesiastes we find the human quest for meaning in life, a quest that is beautifully and powerfully expressed. Even though this book was written 3000 years ago it still remains remarkably contemporary. It has been described as a thoroughly modern book. In fact, Herman Melville once called the book of Ecclesiastes the “truest of all books.” Thomas Wolfe, another novelist, described it as the “highest flower of poetry, eloquence, and truth, the greatest single piece of writing I have known.” There are probably some in this room who would say that the book of Ecclesiastes is their favorite book of the Old Testament. Some have told me that it is their favorite book in the Bible, not excising the Gospels, one that they are particularly drawn to. On the other hand, some commentators, such as conservative commentator Delitzsch from the Keil & Delitzsch commentary, take a rather dim view of the book of Ecclesiastes and regards it as the “low point of the Bible.” He says, “In the Book of Qoheleth [this is just another name for the book of Ecclesiastes] the old covenant digs for itself its own grave.” So on the one hand we have many who love this book, but on the other, we have those who think it is the low point of the Old Testament!

What do we make of a book that is so controversial? Duane Garrett points out in his commentary (a very good, accessible, recent commentary in the New American Commentary series, published by Broadman, that will probably retain its value for some years to come), that the book of Ecclesiastes is sometimes viewed as the “resident alien in the Bible.” What in the world is it doing there? It is certainly a controversial book in terms of its central intent and message, which people have trouble getting a handle on. It is also controversial in basic questions such as whether or not it is in unity, what kind of structure it has, and who the author was. Some, such as Leland Ryken, professor of English literature at Wheaton College, argues that the book is tightly structured and, far from being a problem, the theme of the book is a virtual summary of the biblical worldview. All of this is to say that there are people all over the board in terms of their assessment of the book of Ecclesiastes.

First, we will look briefly at this question of authorship. Then we will move on to the more important question of the unity, structure, and message of the book, looking specifically at certain aspects of the content and trying to make it as practical as we can. First we will talk about authorship, starting with the early Jewish and Christian viewpoint, which assumed Solomonic authorship. The modern consensus, including most conservative scholars, is that Solomon was not the author of the book. Then I want to reassess that modern consensus by citing a dissenting view represented by a number of people more recently and then draw some conclusions at the end.

The early Jewish and Christian viewpoint was that Solomon was the author. What was the evidence that they cited? First of all, there are some internal evidences. Ecclesiastes 1:1 says, “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.” Who was son of David and who was the king of Jerusalem? Solomon, of course. Now, “son” does not always mean immediate descendent. It can mean a descendent several generations removed, so it can be some other descendent of David. But still, it seems on the face of it to mean Solomon, though he is not named.

A second piece of evidence comes in Ecclesiastes 1:12 and following: “I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men.” Who was it among the kings of Israel that was most noted for his pursuit of wisdom?

Solomon. 1:16, “I thought to myself, ‘Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me. I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.’” Who was the wisdom teacher *par excellence* who exceeded others in wisdom? Solomon, of course.

Then we come to 2:4: “I undertook great projects, I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all types of fruit trees in them [...etc.]” Verse 7 says, “I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself and the treasure of kings in provinces. I acquired men and women singers and a harem as well...”—This is an understatement!—“I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.” Who was engaged in building projects and amassing gold and so forth? Solomon. So we can see much evidence of potential Solomonic authorship, at least.

The conclusion that this brings us to, this internal evidence, is that the first person speaker at least (perhaps not the author of the book), appears to be Solomon, or at least present himself as Solomon. The question that arises, however, is whether Solomon is in fact the speaker or author, in as much as he does not name himself. The name Solomon is never used. Or whether, as some people would say (I distance myself immediately from this view and do not even entertain it as a possibility), that this is a “pseud-epigraph”—written under a pseudonym. I do not think that is a very live option. Or more likely, whether the teacher is assuming Solomonic guise (like when your preacher says, “I am Abraham,” but means, “assume with me that I am Abraham and I will tell you about the experience of Abraham”). It is possible that the teacher is saying just that. However, the narrator/writer begins by saying, “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.” Derek Kidner does not really debate this point, which is probably wise because it is difficult to settle, ultimately. But on page 97 he says, “In 1:12 to 2:11 or 2:24, Qoheleth [that is the writer, the teacher] dons the mantle of Solomon, or rather of a “super Solomon,” for he pictures himself as a king who has surpassed all who were before him in Jerusalem.” Kidner is not convinced that Solomon is the author or even the speaker of the entire book, but he is saying the Teacher is donning Solomonic guise.

Early Jewish tradition concluded that Solomon was in fact the author, but Kidner’s viewpoint is the modern consensus, what most people now would say (I am not sure they are right). Why would people even dream of going against the traditional view that Solomon was the author? There are also some internal evidences in this regard, too. First, Solomon is never explicitly mentioned as he is in Proverbs, for example. This is a major argument against the notion that this is a pseudepigraphic writing, that it is written under a pseudonym; the pseudonym is never given, so it cannot be much of a pseudepigraph. Instead the term “Qoheleth” is used. This title seems to mean something like “preacher” or “teacher” because it has to do with the Hebrew word for assembly, one who calls together an assembly and then addresses the assembly.

A second bit of internal evidence is found in 1:12: “I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.” Commentators point out that there was never a time between Solomon’s rise to the throne of Israel and his death when he was not king. He was always king until the time he died. So how could he say “when I *was* king,” as if looking back on a time before his retirement, let us say.

Another piece of internal evidence is that when the writer, Qoheleth, speaks about or alludes to kings, he seems to view them from below, as one of the people suffering from their misrule—at least that is the opinion of many commentators.

The major piece of evidence that is cited against the possibility of Solomonic authorship is linguistic evidence. The claim is made that the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes shows marked affinities to much later Hebrew such as is found in the Mishnah, a later Jewish writing, as well as including various Aramaic words, words that would have gained in currency among the people of God at a later time period than Solomon. But we will soon hear that Aramaic was around at the time of Solomon and was the *lingua-franca*, the trade language, but was not necessarily well-known to the people of Israel themselves. It was not their native tongue, at least. There is even the argument that there are a couple of Persian loan words in the book, so that the conservative commentator Franz Delitzsch says, "If the book of Qoheleth were of Solomonic origin, then there is no history of the Hebrew language." So, if this does not tell us something then nothing ever will.

Thus the conclusion of most modern scholars, liberal and conservative, is that Solomon was not the author, nor does the book intend that he be seen as the author. Their argument is, as Kidner put it, the speaker, the writer, simply "dons Solomonic guise." It is as if he says, "Imagine with me that I am Solomon. Let me teach you a lesson from the life and work of Solomon."

Now, there is a dissenting view. Not everyone agrees with this. In fact, in recent years we have major works written by Dan Fredericks and Duane Garrett, who dissents from the consensus view that Solomon was not the author. For a long time, Gleason Archer, a very strong conservative, has supported at least the possibility that Solomon is indeed the author. We need to hear that evidence.

What evidence is there? First, the internal evidences that we already mentioned. It does seem that Solomon is the logical choice as the son of David, in Jerusalem, excelling in wisdom. It sounds more like Solomon than anyone else. Jewish tradition should also be given some weight. Most importantly, though, is the inconclusiveness of the linguistic evidence, as we now understand it. We should grant that the text of Ecclesiastes in Hebrew is quite different (as has been argued) from the Hebrew that we find in 10<sup>th</sup> century Hebrew documents in the Bible, quite different from that time period. On the other hand, what is sometimes overlooked is that it is quite different than the Hebrew that we know from *any* period. The Hebrew of Ecclesiastes is unique; it perhaps shows affinities with Phoenician or Aramaic sources. Something is going on there. We cannot necessarily tie the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes with a certain time period because it does not really line up with the Hebrew from any time period of which we have any evidence.

Recently the scholars like Garrett, Fredericks, and Eaton (in his Tyndale Old Testament commentary) and others are beginning to suggest that maybe the language we have in the book of Ecclesiastes has more to do with dialectology than chronology, with a certain dialect than a certain time period. Gleason Archer points out that during Solomon's reign the political and commercial ties with both the Phoenician-speaking and the Aramaic peoples of the Syrian areas were closer than at any other period in Israel's history. We know from what we read about King Solomon's reign that he was engaged in trading. It was a very international time. People were coming to him to hear his wisdom. It is quite possible that he would have learned a particular kind of literature that he might then have used, and that bound to this type of literature there may have been a certain sort of expression, a certain kind of language. Gleason Archer says, "We perhaps are dealing with a conventional style, peculiar to a particular genre of literature." As with certain Greek literature, once a genre developed a sort of classical status, "the dialect and vocabulary type of the original practitioner who exalted his genre to a classical status would then prevail throughout the rest of the history of Greek literature." Let me simplify that. Why do many people still pray in King James English? Because a particular style of language became associated with prayer language. It would be wrong to listen to a prayer of someone using the "Thee" and "Thou" of King James English and try to locate that person in history ("He must have been born in

1611!"). Rather, you need to recognize that in that person's mind that language is associated with prayer and has achieved a classical status. It has become the language of piety. The same thing could be true of the linguistic traits in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Furthermore, as we think about the supposed indication that the author is not a king, that he seems to be viewing kingship from below—distanced from being a king—we need to recognize that a king can step back and function as a philosopher or a theologian or as one on a quest to discover meaning in life. I remember seeing some of the paintings of Winston Churchill, who is best known as a leader, politician, and prime minister in England, but he was also a fabulous oil painter and an historian who wrote massive volumes of history. In each of those capacities he could perhaps step back from the one capacity to pursue the other. We can also think of the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, where he is functioning more as a philosopher than as a ruler. So it is possible that though not explicitly identifying himself as a king, Solomon, as it were, assumes the role of the wise man. Rather than saying that the author, the wise man, assumes Solomonic guise, might it not be possible that Solomon assumes the guise of the wise teacher because that is how he wanted to write at that particular time?

Gleason Archer comes to this conclusion and there are others who are moving in this direction. After dismissing Greek influence and the supposed anachronisms (those things that seem to be from the wrong time) Archer concludes by saying that "we simply do not know enough to assert positively that Solomon could not have been the author of the book [...] In as much as the plain implication of the text is that he was indeed the composer and left his work as a final testament to his people, on the basis of his life's experience, it seems best to hold to the traditional view of the synagogue and the church, that this work is an authentic production of his pen." I can agree with him that we certainly cannot positively state (though some would do it) that Solomon could not have been the author of this book, but I am not sure that we should positively state that he was. So we are left rather embarrassingly straddling the fence. I think perhaps the direction of research will prove increasingly that Solomon is the likely author of the book, but I am going out on a limb to say that since it is by no means the consensus of conservative scholars right now.

In terms of how you should communicate and think about this book, whether or not Solomon is the author, it is clear at least that the inspired author is donning Solomonic guise in the early chapters. Can we learn anything about Solomon and his experience? Yes! Whatever the inspired author tells us was going on in the life of Solomon (even if Solomon was not the author), is going to be to the point and on target. We can learn about Solomon's bitter experiences with the pursuit of pleasure and wealth and so forth.

In conclusion, there are a number of different ways to look at the evidence. When you hear people say, "Solomon could not possibly have been the author of this book," at least you know now that maybe he was. On the other hand, if people say, "Unless you believe that Solomon was the author of this book, you just do not believe the Bible," you can respond that the Bible does not absolutely claim that, for Solomon is never mentioned; it is an inference from the text and it is quite possible that he was but the Bible leaves us in the dark. You do not want to deny the explicit teaching and claims of Scripture but you also do not want to go beyond them and force the Bible to say something it does not. So it is something that is interesting to talk about but not worth fighting about or holding up as a test for people.

Also, do you remember anything in the book of Proverbs about Solomonic material that was clearly Solomonic but not enscripturated by Solomon? Proverbs 25:1 speaks of Solomonic material that was transcribed, copied, by the men of Hezekiah. There we have Solomonic traditional material that was preserved and then enscripturated at a later time, according to the explicit testimony of Scripture. It is

possible that something like this is going on in Ecclesiastes. We could have Solomonic reflections that are taken by the inspired author and then enscripturated at a later date—that might explain some of the later linguistic features (if in fact any of them prove to be later, but we have seen that that itself is up for grabs). Given Solomon's considerable commerce with foreign wives, he would likely have been exposed to all kinds of linguistic features.

Duane Garrett encouragingly comments that this could quite likely be Solomon reflecting back over his life and over the ways in which he had sought to pursue meaningful existence, only to find it empty and discouraging in the end.

The last 6 verses are the so-called “epilogue” (some would include verse 8 in this). There are two possibilities: it could be a frame narrator who speaks of Qoheleth in the third person rather than the first person and starts and ends the book by drawing the threads together. It is also possible that Solomon (if he is the author) is at one point reflecting back on his experiences and thus uses the first person, but when he uses the third person he is trying to give us a sense of distance to show there is a time lapse between him and us; so he is kind of objectifying, saying, “The Teacher says this...” and then talks about his past experiences as the Teacher.

The language does not line up closely with any style of writing vocabulary of which we are aware. Now there are some affinities between Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs, which is interesting, but there was much made of some supposed “late” features in this book, as demonstrating the “lateness” of the language. But then Dan Fredericks' book shows that, for the couple of features that seem late, there are many features that are atypical in later Hebrew but are typical in earlier Hebrew. He has amassed a number of features that push it earlier rather than later. It depends on what you are looking for.

Now we will move on to the unity, structure, and message of the book of Ecclesiastes. The unity is increasingly recognized. There have been many who have questioned it in the past, saying that given the general tone of the book, the pious glances heavenward seem out of place and must be the work of a pious scribe going through and trying to “fix” the text that seemed too depressing and pessimistic. I do not think that is the way to look at the book; we need to deal with it as it stands. Its unity is rightly being increasingly recognized. Brevard Childs, in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* points this out: “People are returning to a position of seeing the book as a basically unified composition. The earlier theories of multiple authorship or extensive interpolation [that means insertion of things into the book] have not been sustained. There may be some editorial work in the prologue and epilogue.”

What has led people to this more positive appraisal of the unity of the book? For one thing, we have more comparative Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) literature than we had before. It is clear from this comparative literature that this style of reflection (though we do not have a book exactly like it), which combines “conventional wisdom teaching” and unconventional wisdom teaching, is quite common in the ANE where you embed traditional proverbs in what is otherwise original material. You state the known thing and then balance it with the other side of the coin. Moreover, it is quite possible that Qoheleth would sometimes quote material in order to refute it—that is one theory. I would not like to say “refute it” as much as balance it, show the other side. Look at 4:5-6: “The fool folds his hand and ruins himself.” That could be a traditional proverb, like so many others (“a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest and poverty will come upon you like an armed bandit”—the types of things that wise parents might say to their slothful children). This would be a typical proverb, but then the writer of this book comes back with “Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.” Lest the more traditional proverb be understood as a mandate to workaholicism, the writer says, better to live life—to stop and smell the roses occasionally—than to

simply work, work, work. There is the possibility that in these passages, which may seem contradictory, a corrector has come through and altered them—and some have said that. This is not the case; that is the dynamic of the text. The writer himself is bringing this balance to bear.

Another argument in favor of the unity of the book is that if it were necessary for some writer to come through and correct objectionable material, why did he bother? What was his motive? Why bother trying to fix something if it is that badly broken? Why not simply suppress the whole book or the objectionable passages, simply take them out, rather than state the one thing and then balance it? Again, I would think this is not the work of multiple authors trying to correct themselves, but a single author who has a certain approach to the subject matter. It is quite possible that the title and epilogue could be from a third person, a disciple, but it is also possible that the writer could simply be trying to create a sense of distance by referring to himself as “the Teacher.”

In terms of the unity and structure of the book, many regard it as more or less a notebook. Derek Kidner does not attempt an outline of the book but instead hits on some thematic issues. He says, “While any framework must sit ill on this book of ever-shifting patterns and preoccupations, we can at least group together for convenience some of its main concerns.” These include truths about God as Creator, Disposer, and unsearchable Judge of all to be revered and obeyed; truths about life; pointers to despair and mitigations of that despair; the simple joys; the common sense; the enterprise; and the point of rest. That is the thought world of the book of Ecclesiastes, but can the book be outlined? Does it have any structure? Many would rest content with saying it is a notebook, a daybook, of philosophical and theological reflections that do not necessarily have a logical progression that we can follow. That is a possibility.

Secondly, regarding the structure of the book of Ecclesiastes, there are two common views. The first is that there is no unified order or logical structure of thought. The second is that there is an overarching unity in the work with some progression of thought that can be studied and outlined. One of the most valiant attempts to do this is by A.G. Wright, who outlined the book in two articles. His first article keys in on certain semantic aspects of the text—the content and the meaning—particularly of the closing refrains: “Vanity, vanity, all is vanity and a chasing after the wind.” He believed that these refrains marked the ends of certain sections. Then about 12 years later he wrote a second article called “The Riddle of the Sphinx,” which addressed the number of verses and some very clever things about the numeric value of the word “vanity” and many other things. He approached it from an entirely different standpoint than the first article, a numbers system rather than a content system, and came to very similar conclusions. That convergence is interesting; I am not fully convinced yet, nor are most scholars, but it is curious. There is more going on sometimes in these wisdom books than we imagine. We know they have alphabetic acrostics (A to Z), which is not something we would normally do but maybe they would have. We need to be alert to them and continue to pursue this. Whether or not his system is correct, in basic terms I think he does have the book rightly divided.

Notice there is a certain symmetry in the book. Chapter 1:1 is the title (the prologue), mirrored at the end of the book in the epilogue. Inside those framing elements we have two poems. The rest of chapter one has the poem about vain toil and then at the end of the book we have the poems about youth and old age. Then there are the two main sections inside that. The first half of the book, 1:12-6:9, deals with critical investigations of human life (these are A.G. Wright’s terms) and the overriding tenor of this section is that “all is vanity and a striving after the wind.” (There is a higher frequency of “vanity, vanity, all is vanity” in the first half of book.) The second half of the book deals with the consequences of that fact. Wright divides that second half into two parts: one, man cannot discover what is good for him to do; and two, man does not know what will come after him. So the first half is the crisis of work and finding

meaning in work—what is the sense of all this toil? The second half is the epistemological crisis, the mystery of life—how can we know anything? God has put eternity in the heart of men but they cannot figure out, or fathom, what comes after them.

Wright's outline does make good sense. I will simplify it a bit to make it easier to remember. We can make it into a rough chiasm (A, B, C, C, B, A). The first is 1:1, the title of the book, and the last is 12:9-14, the epilogue. Inside of that we have the two poems, the poem on toil and the poem on aging. Chapter 1:12-6:9 could be called "the vanity of human undertakings," with the chief question being, "what do we gain from all this work we are doing?—what is the point of it all?" Chapter 6:10-11:6 could be called "the vanity of human understanding"—what can we know? How can we know about what will come after us? How can we know that all we are working for will not be swept away by some simple circumstance or problem we did not anticipate? How can we know what God's purposes are for us?" Those kinds of questions are questions we still have.

In terms of where to come down on the question of structure, Brevard Childs prefers a mediating position that there may not be a tightly organized structure; perhaps A.G. Wright goes too far. The truth may lie between the two extremes. The whole book *is* more or less a notebook, it *does* have inner coherence and there *is* some progression of thought. I am hopeful that further study may show that there is even greater complexity and genius to the structuring of this book than we have seen. But the message of the book is still perceptible whether or not we are able to sort that out; but we can still gain from its message.