

## Introduction to Ecclesiastes

“It is best to be frank from the outset:  
Ecclesiastes is a difficult book.”<sup>1</sup>

“Ecclesiastes is often looked upon  
as the Bible’s resident alien...  
Many read [it]...with the distinct feeling  
that this book does not belong in the Bible.”<sup>2</sup>

### Historical Context

*What does “Ecclesiastes” mean?*

In Hebrew, the title for the book is Qoheleth, which could be translated as teacher or convener. A qoheleth is one who teaches or gathers an assembly for teaching. The English title of the book is based on a nearly-equivalent Greek word, *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία), which means an assembly.<sup>3</sup> *Ekklesia*, a noun, is from *kaleo* (καλέω), a verb, which means “to call.” An *ekklesia* then is a group that is called together for a meeting. Thus an Ecclesiastes is one who calls together or speaks to the assembly of people. Given the didactic purpose of the book, the best translation of this title is probably “The Teacher.”<sup>4</sup>

*Who is the author?*

Traditionally the authorship of the book has been attributed to Solomon; this view held until the rise of historical criticism in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>5</sup> Today there are arguments both for and against Solomonic authorship.

**Evidence against:** There are a number of arguments against Solomonic authorship:

- Unlike other books written by Solomon (i.e., Proverbs and Song of Songs), this book does not specifically claim Solomonic authorship.

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<sup>1</sup> Provan, 23.

<sup>2</sup> Garrett, 254.

<sup>3</sup> In the NT writings *ekklesia* became a technical term for the church.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Moseley, OT 2 class notes, SEBTS, Spring 2007. In fact, NET, HCSB, and NIV translate it this way throughout the book.

<sup>5</sup> Garrett, 254.

- In 1:16 and 2:9 the author claims there were multiple rulers of Jerusalem before him. As David was the only Israelite king to have ruled Jerusalem before him, this makes it difficult for the author to be Solomon.
  - Counterargument: Perhaps Solomon was simply referring to the Jebusite kings who ruled before David conquered the city.
- In 1:12, the author says “I was king over Israel;”<sup>6</sup> the verb here is in the perfect tense. Although this can be translated “I have been king over Israel,”<sup>7</sup> it’s an odd tense to use if Solomon wrote it while he was king. Historically, once he became king, he was king until he died.
- Most biblical scholars today believe Ecclesiastes was written after the exile. They have observed that the language of the book is unusual and claimed that its grammar and style of writing was much later. As one example, some scholars have found a number of words that appear to be Aramaic in origin, which they believe points to a later date.
  - Counterargument: Conservative scholars have answered all of these types of claims and demonstrated that the evidence is not convincing.<sup>8</sup>
  - Counterargument: The claims of kingship in 8:2-8 and 10:16-17 imply that the book was written before the exile, when Israel still had a king.

**Evidence for:** There are also a number of arguments for Solomonic authorship:

- Although the introduction does not specifically claim Solomonic authorship, the introduction (1:1) is very similar in format to the introductions found in Proverbs and Song of Songs.
- The author is a son of David (1:1); a king in Jerusalem (1:1, 16); the possessor of great wisdom and knowledge (1:16); and a far wealthier man than all of his predecessors (2:4-9).
- Solomon convened Israel together and spoke to them (1 Ki 8:1-55).
- Solomon was identified as having great wisdom (1 Ki 3:12).
- Jewish tradition identifies Solomon as the author.

Over all, the arguments against Solomonic authorship are not strong. Because of Jewish tradition and the claim of 1:1, it is most likely that the author is Solomon.

*Who are the recipients? Where do the recipients live?*

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<sup>6</sup> As NKJV and NIV do.

<sup>7</sup> As NASB, NET, HCSB, ESV, and YLT do.

<sup>8</sup> Garrett, 254-259.

Because of literary and intellectual influence of Babylonian and Egyptian literature, Garrett believes "Ecclesiastes may have been written primarily for the intellectual elite of ancient Jerusalem."<sup>9</sup>

*What is the relationship between the author and the recipients?*

On one hand, Solomon is the king of Israel. On the other hand "the use of the name 'the Teacher' indicates that the author is distancing himself from his role as absolute monarch and taking on the mantle of the sage."<sup>10</sup> So Solomon is teaching his people as a sage, as one who has acquired much wisdom and knowledge (1:16), instead of issuing royal decrees as a king.

*When was the book written?*

If Solomon wrote Song of Songs early in his life, Proverbs at the peak of his life, then he probably wrote Ecclesiastes later in his life, after he had time to reflect on his life and (presumably) to repent from his apostasy from God. Solomon became king in 970 B.C. and reigned for 40 years, so the date of writing would be around 930 B.C.

*What historical situation occasioned this writing?*

It is not known for sure, but perhaps it was the impending death of Solomon himself which propelled him to write of what he had learned.

*What is the author's purpose?*

Biblical scholarship is not in agreement, but among conservative scholarship it is generally agreed that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes to demonstrate the futility of living this life without considering God and eternity. Even the most exciting life is meaningless without God, but with God even the most mundane life is extremely meaningful.<sup>11</sup> "Ecclesiastes therefore examines not only the specific question of life after death but also the vain attempts to gain genuine personal worth through wealth and pleasure, through accomplishments and power, and through knowledge"<sup>12</sup> "Qohelet...presents a true assessment of the world apart

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<sup>9</sup> Garrett, 266.

<sup>10</sup> Garrett, 264.

<sup>11</sup> Moore, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Garrett, 278.

from the light of God's redeeming love...his hopelessness is the result of the curse of the fall without recourse to God's redemption."<sup>13</sup>

*What genre of literature is this book?*

Longman identifies the book as a "framed wisdom autobiography," in which he gives wisdom advice based upon his personal experience.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Young calls it "pure philosophy written as a confessional autobiography," where he defines philosophy as man searching for God.<sup>15</sup>

## **Outline**

There is no uniform consensus on the structure of the book. Some find none whatsoever, some find merely a series of topics, some find a highly detailed structure. I have taken a middle ground, observing a broad structure with a variety of subjects within each section.

1. Introduction (1:1-11)
2. Autobiography (1:12-12:7)
  - a. Solomon's Personal Quest for the Meaning of Life (1:12-2:26)
  - b. Solomon's Observations about the Meaning of Life (3:1-6:9)
  - c. Solomon's Advice on the Meaning of Life (6:10-12:7)
3. Conclusion (12:8-14)

## **Theme**

In this book, Solomon asked one question: What is the meaning of life? Along the way he demonstrated many wrong answers, but he also arrived at the right one: Have fun and enjoy the life that God has given you, but do so while fearing and obeying him.

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<sup>13</sup> Longman, 39.

<sup>14</sup> Longman, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Young, 1-2.

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