

Getting to Know the Bible: Background Info for Ecclesiastes

How should we understand the book?

Ecclesiastes is a controversial book. In its pages are a number of honest, contradictory, difficult sayings. As a result, many people through the 2,000 plus years of the book's existence have proposed different ways to interpret the book. The two most commonly pursued options today are:

1. Ecclesiastes is a book primarily containing the voice of a cynical, skeptical wisdom teacher, and is presented as a negative example to learn from (particularly in 1:12-12:7). As such, we should not look for positive teaching points from the majority of the book. This would be similar to the situation in the biblical book of Job: the speeches of Job's three friends, Elihu, and Job himself are often lacking in proper perspective and truth, yet they are included in the Bible as negative examples to learn from.¹

2. Ecclesiastes contains the voice of a brutally honest teacher who is not afraid to ask tough questions about life if it were lived apart from God. As such, we can and should look for positive teaching points from the majority of the book.²

In trying to decide which option to take, the following should be considered. (Note: most scholars on both sides would agree to what follows)

Authorship:

The majority of scholars (Christian and non-Christian alike) recognize the presence of two "voices" or "authors" in the book. There is the primary voice of 1:12 (or 1:2)- 12:7. And there is another voice in 1:1-11 (or just 1:1) and 12:8-14, sometimes called the "frame narrator." The identification of the "teacher" in a third person voice at 1:1 and 12:9 are typically given to support this. Further literary comparison to other similar literature of the time confirms that this is likely as well.³ The question is, then: Does the "frame narrator" understand the book as primarily being negative, or does he see it primarily being positive?

It should be noted here that the tradition view that help King Solomon of Israel as the primary author is not necessarily correct. Both conservative-Christian and non-Christian scholars stand by this, and see the author as adopting a "Solomonic persona" as a literary device in order to better make his point ("even if I were like Solomon, the riches king in our history... life would still be discovered to be meaningless"). Note that the name "Solomon" does *not* appear at all in the book.

Some points in support of this view:

¹ Scholars who hold this position today include Tremper Longman III in *NICOT's Ecclesiastes*, and Douglas Stuart and Gordon Fee in *Reading the Bible for All Its Worth*.

² Scholars who hold this position today include Derek Kidner in *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, and Ian Provan in NIVAC's *Ecclesiastes*.

³ Longman, pp.15-22.

- Ecclesiastes 1:12 notes that the "teacher"⁴ was (past tense) king over Israel. But the 1 Kings 11 describes Solomon as dying while he was king.

- In Ecclesiastes 1:16 the author says that he has "surpasses in wisdom everyone who ruled Jerusalem before me." But there was only one king prior to Solomon, and so that seems like a strange statement.

- The association of the "teacher" and Solomon only lasts through the first three chapters. After that, there are a number of places where the rule of kings are mentioned. But they are statements where it would be strange that a king, especially one like Solomon, would say (eg.- Ecc. 4:1-3)

- Further comparison to similar literature of the time suggests that this sort of genre utilized fictional autobiographies.

- Finally, it should be noted that the traditional evangelical trust in the Bible can and should be retained in light of this view.⁵

Key Words:

"*Meaningless*" (used 37 times here, only 32 times elsewhere in the whole OT)

The word translated "meaningless" (NIV) is the Hebrew word *hebel*. This word literally means "breath, breeze, vapor." As such, some (not all) who hold to view #2 emphasize this, and say that the book is primarily about the transitory, temporary nature of our world.⁶ In other words, it is an amoral word that does not necessarily assign value to what it is describing.

While the word is used this way in the Bible (eg. Ps. 39:5-6), the majority of ways it is used reflects the more "moral" understanding. Consider the fact that 13 usages are in passages referring to idolatry (eg- Deut 32:21, 2 Ki 17:15, Ps 31:6, 57:13, Jer. 2:5, 8:19, 10:8, 15). Also, some passages use negative parallel terms (Jer. 16:19, Zech 10:2). Again, even if one adopts the view that *hebel* should be understood as a negative term, view #2 are not necessarily affected.

"*Under Heaven*" (used only in this book, occurs 29 times)

This phrase confines the scope of the book. The author's exploration will view life on earth aside from the care and intervention of the God of the Bible.

Conclusion:

Christians through the centuries have had difficulty interpreting and understanding Ecclesiastes. Despite the differences, all would agree that the main point of the book does come at the closing section of the book, 12:8-14. In our course of study, we will attempt to weigh each passage with both views.

⁴ (the word in the original language for teacher is *qohélet*, which literally means "one who assembles." It is interesting to note that 1 Kings 8 describes Solomon "assembling" Israel (same root word used). However, note above. Perhaps the ambiguity is there to create association yet not fully equate the two.

⁵ For more, please visit <http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>, or talk with Pastor Yucan.

⁶ Note especially Ian Provan in *Ecclesiastes*, NIVAC.