

Introduction to Ecclesiastes

Meaning of title: *Ecclesiastes* = Greek translation of the Hebrew Title: *Qoheleth* (Lit. “one who gathers and addresses an assembly” or “the Preacher”)

Author: Tradition of Jews: Solomon

Internal evidence (1:1, 12, 16; 2:9; 12:9)

Similar to Proverbs (12:9), but more gloomy and pessimistic

Key terms:

Vanity [“emptiness”] of vanities, all is vanity (31 times)

“Grasping for the wind” (9 times)

Under the sun (28 times)

Background:

1 Kings 11:1-8 Solomon departed from God

Testimony of Solomon’s backsliding after his return (see ch.12)

Purpose?

To atone for his mistakes by warning others not to go the same way as he went.

A report of the results of Solomon’s Great Experiment (i.e., to try everything to find what what is the chief good of man, or what will bring a man satisfaction “under the sun”) — interspersed with practical advice

“Ecclesiastes is an inspired confession of failure and pessimism when God is excluded, when man lives ‘under the sun’ and forgets the larger part, which is always ‘over the sun’—the eternal and abiding things. If you want to know what a man of great privilege and of great learning and great wisdom can come to, read this record of a man who has put God out of account in his actual life.” —G. Campbell Morgan

Solomon’s case for cynicism and pessimism:

1. Everything is repetitious and directionless (1:4-10)
2. More knowledge (1:17-18)
3. Mirth and indulgence are unsatisfying madness (2:3-11)
4. Death is the common destiny of all (2:14-23/ 3:19 / 7:2)
5. The wise man leaves his accomplishments to one who may be a fool (2:18-19)
6. Oppression and corruption in high places (3:16; 4:1; 8:14)
7. Even wealth deprives its possessor of peace of mind (5:10-17)
8. Women cannot be trusted (7:26-29)
9. Man’s fate and rewards come by chance, not merit (9:11)
10. Men more esteemed for social position than for virtue and wisdom (9:13-16)

Statements that are not completely true:

1:9 There’s nothing new?

1:15 That which is crooked cannot be straightened?

2:16 The wise man dies just as the fool, and is remembered no more than the fool?

2:24 There is nothing better than to eat and drink and enjoy this life? (3:12f / 8:15)

7:16 Don’t be too righteous or overly wise?

9:5 The dead know nothing at all?

Seeming Contradictions:

2:16 / 7:12 Does wisdom preserve life or not?

3:21 / 12:7 Where does the spirit of man go?

4:2 / 9:4-6 Who is better off—the living or the dead?

7:26-29 / 9:9 Women can’t be trusted but enjoy a good wife!

3:9 / 5:18 Labor and its fruits are emptiness, but enjoy fruits of labor!

9:5 / 12:14 Is there a reckoning after death, or not?