

## A Primer on *Ecclesiastes*



Page of *Ecclesiastes* from Qumran, ~ 150 BCE

### **Author & Date**

The book of *Ecclesiastes* tells us several things about the author: 1) he is a “son of David”; 2) he is “king in Israel in Jerusalem”; 3) his name is “Qoheleth”; 4) he is a sage, wiseman, or scribe. The name Qoheleth is unable to be translated. The name possibly comes from the word “to gather” so often translations will substitute “Teacher” or “Wiseman.” Some translations leave it untranslated as simply “Qoheleth.”

Traditions dating to the rabbinic period (150 CE) have named King Solomon as the author (others name Hezekiah). However, almost all scholars do not subscribe to the Solomonic view

based on several factors: 1) nowhere in the Hebrew Bible do we find Solomon named in this way, nor do we find other kings inheriting this title; 2) other than the first chapter, the book does not reflect the point of view of a king; rather it reflects that of a courtier serving a king; 3) the specific language used in *Ecclesiastes* reflects a later authorship; it includes Persian and Aramaic loan words incorporated into the Hebrew language 500 years after Solomon’s reign; 4) the issues described in the text – loss of land, unfair labor practices – don’t fit with Solomon’s time, but do match up well with post-Exilic writings like Ezra and Nehemiah.

So how do we interpret the passages that claim kingship and place them within the larger context of the book? It was common in this period to include a pseudonymous name such as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE *Wisdom of Solomon*. By doing so an author would add gravitas and authority to his teaching. The attribution of the book to Solomon is possibly one of the reasons it was included in the Hebrew canon (although in reality we don’t know for sure).

Dating the book exactly is difficult, with proposals ranging from 5<sup>th</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> century. However, the timeline can be shortened somewhat. The earliest extant (partial) scroll of *Ecclesiastes* was found with the Dead Sea Scrolls. It has been dated to around 150 BCE. *Ecclesiastes* is also quoted in *Wisdom of Ben Sira* which is dated to about 180 BCE. Given the lack of references to contemporary issues from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE that we find in other sources (1<sup>st</sup> Maccabees, etc.), *Ecclesiastes* does not seem to be informed by the religious tensions of the period or the Jewish rebellion of 175 BCE. A general timeframe of 350-250 BCE is suggested by most scholars, with some holding to 450-350 BCE.

## ***Genre of Ecclesiastes***

*Ecclesiastes* fits within a specific genre of literature within the Hebrew Bible called “wisdom literature.” Other examples include *Proverbs*, *Job*, some of the *Psalms*, as well as a host of other contemporary literature not included in the canon. Wisdom literature was written all over the Ancient Near East by the scribal class in order to teach lessons concerning royal court life. Wisdom literature argues that being wise stems from understanding how God has created the world to function and acting in harmony with this knowledge (sometimes revealed by a personified Wisdom such as in *Proverbs*). The passing on of this experiential knowledge formed the basis of the social mores, upholding the pillars of society as designed by God.

Contrary to the theology found in *Deuteronomy* and its related books (blessings for good, curses for bad), wisdom literature often disputes that bad fortune is explicitly linked with unfaithfulness to God. As in *Job*, bad things happen to good people. This view reflects a post-exile perspective gained by the Hebrew populace as they tried to understand the Babylonian (and other) persecution. *Ecclesiastes* fits this mold, exploring the limits of wisdom and understanding its relationship to the problems of the world.

## ***Themes of Ecclesiastes***

*The limits of wisdom* – wisdom has value for understanding the world, but it is a double-edged sword because wisdom also reveals that which cannot be understood – it is “vanity” (Heb. *hebel* – occurs 38 times); Qoheleth does dispute wisdom’s value as a supreme

*Sovereignty of God* – despite the seeming inequities of the world, God remains in control and sovereign over life. He has made both the good times and the bad times. As such, humanity should rejoice in the pleasures provided by God when possible

*Rhythms of life* – God has created the world with cycles that are unavoidable; seasons come and go, the wise and the foolish die and are both forgotten; the when and how of these occurrences is unknowable by humanity

## ***Structure of Ecclesiastes***

Title (1:1)

Royal Poem (1:2 – 11)

Qoheleth’s Investigation of Life (1:12 – 6:9)

Qoheleth’s Conclusions (6:10 – 11:6)

Concluding Poem (11:7 – 12:8)

Epilogue (12:9 – 14)