Author, Title, and Date

The traditional English title comes from the book’s heading in the Latin Vulgate translation (Liber Ecclesiastes) and is an anglicized version of the Greek and Latin renderings of the speaker’s designation in Ecclesiastes 1:1 (Gk. ekklēsiastēs; Hb. Qoheleth). The Hebrew word is related to the term for “assembly” (Hb. qahal) and may be a title for someone who addresses an assembly (hence it is often translated “Preacher”). It could also refer to someone who possesses some other leadership role within an assembly. Scholars have debated whether Qoheleth is best understood as a personal name or a title, though the latter seems more likely in view of 12:8, where the definite article (“the”) precedes the word.

Strictly speaking, then, the book is anonymous, given that no personal name is attached to it. Nevertheless, traditional Jewish and Christian scholarship has often ascribed authorship to Solomon (10th century B.C.), since the book describes the Preacher as the “son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1) and as someone who was surpassingly wise (1:16) and had a very prosperous reign (2:1–9; cf. 1 Kings 3–4).

However, such arguments for Solomonic authorship have been called into question on several grounds... On the other hand, other proposals also have difficulties, for it is difficult to find any later “king in Jerusalem” (1:1) who is a better candidate than Solomon for being able to claim that he had “acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me” (1:16), or that he had great possessions, “more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem” (2:7)...

Regardless, the book claims that its wisdom ultimately comes from the “one Shepherd” (12:11), i.e., from God (Gen. 48:15; Ps. 23:1; 28:9; 80:1). [Thus it is God’s inspired word regardless of who He used to write]

Theme and Interpretation of Ecclesiastes

The theme of Ecclesiastes is the necessity of fearing God in a fallen, and therefore frequently confusing and frustrating, world. The unique character of the book, however, has led to its being interpreted in widely diverse ways: as a statement of pessimism, optimism, religious and philosophical skepticism (either the Preacher’s own or a skepticism assumed for the purpose of demonstrating the futility of an irreligious point of view), faithful belief, heterodoxy, and orthodoxy, to name only a few. ... According to the basic interpretative approach adopted here, the Preacher is not to be viewed as some kind of skeptical iconoclast but rather as a teacher of
orthodoxy, whose musings on God and human existence present a consistent message that is to be viewed as standing within the broad stream of the biblical wisdom tradition...

One can see the Preacher’s most distinctive contribution from the way he uses the term “find out” (see 3:11). Every human being wants to find out and understand all the ways of God in the world, but he cannot, because he is not God. And yet the faithful do not despair but cling to God, who deserves their trust; they can leave it to him to make sense of it all, while they seek to learn what it means to “fear God and keep his commandments,” even when they cannot see what God is doing. This is true wisdom.

Key Themes

1. The tragic reality of the fall. The Preacher is painfully aware that the creation has been “subjected to futility” and is “groaning ... in the pains of childbirth” (Rom. 8:20, 22), and his more troubled musings are to be viewed as the cry of the heart of one who likewise is “groaning inwardly” as he eagerly awaits the resurrection age (see Rom. 8:23)... The emphasis on the fall and its disastrous effects is closely related to the book’s other key themes described below.

2. The “vanity” of life. The book begins and ends with the exclamation, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Eccles. 1:2; 12:8). While “vanity” is obviously a key word throughout the book (its 38 occurrences account for more than half of its total usage in the OT), it is notoriously difficult to translate. Literally the word means “vapor” (see ESV footnote on 1:2) and conjures up a picture of something fleeting, ephemeral, and elusive, with different nuances to be ascertained from each context. When applied to human undertakings or the pleasures and joys of earthly life, it indicates that “the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31); applied to the darker realities of living in a fallen world (e.g., death), it expresses frustration, anger, or sorrow; applied to the Preacher’s search for understanding of all things, it indicates something that remained incomprehensible or inscrutable to him (e.g., Eccles. 1:14–15). This last-mentioned usage is particularly significant, as the book presents itself as primarily a quest to “figure out” all of life (see esp. 1:12–18).

3. Sin and death. Human beings forfeited the righteousness they originally possessed before God (7:29), and thus all people are sinners (7:20). The opening chapters of Genesis make it clear that death was a result of the fall (Gen. 2:16–17; 3:19), and the Preacher is only too aware of this dreadful reality that affects everyone (e.g., Eccles. 2:14–17; 3:18–21; 6:6).
4. The joy and the frustration of work. God gave Adam work to accomplish prior to the fall (Gen. 2:15), but part of the punishment of his sin was that it would become painful toil (Gen. 3:17–19). Both realities are borne out in the Preacher’s experience, as he finds his work to be both satisfying (Eccles. 2:10, 24; 3:22; 5:18–20; 9:9–10) as well as aggravating (2:18–23; 4:4ff.).

5. The grateful enjoyment of God’s good gifts. The Preacher spends a great deal of time commenting on the twisted realities of a fallen world, but this does not blind him to the beauty of the world God created (3:11) or cause him to despise God’s good gifts of human relationships, food, drink, and satisfying labor (2:24–26; 3:12–13; 5:18–20; 7:14; 8:15; 9:7, 9). These are to be received humbly and enjoyed fully as blessings from God.

6. The fear of God. The fact that “all is vanity” should drive people to take refuge in God, whose work endures forever (3:14) and who is a “rock” for those who take shelter in him (e.g., Ps. 18:2; 62:8; 94:22). In other words, it summons people to “fear” or “revere” God (see notes on Eccles. 3:14; 5:7; 12:13–14; cf. also 7:18 and 8:12–13).

Literary Features

Although Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature, it does not read like a typical collection of proverbs. The proverbs are molded into clusters, and furthermore there is a unifying plot line that organizes the units together. The units fall into the three categories of recollections, reflections, and mood pieces. All of these are expressed by a narrator who in effect tells the story of his quest to find satisfaction in life. This quest is reconstructed from the vantage point of someone whose quest ended satisfactorily. The transitions between units often keep the quest in view: “so I turned to consider,” “again I saw,” “then I saw,” etc. As the quest unfolds, one is continuously aware of the discrepancy between the narrator’s present outlook and his futile search undertaken in the past. In effect, the speaker recalls the labyrinth of dead ends that he pursued, recreating his restless past with full vividness but not representing it as his mature outlook. Along with the narrative thread, the observational format of much of the material gives the book a meditative cast.

This mini-anthology is strongly unified by recurrent words and motifs. The phrase “under the sun” or its equivalent occurs more than 30 times. The Hebrew words translated “vanity” (hebel; see Key Themes, point 2) and “find” (matsa’; see Theme and Interpretation of Ecclesiastes) appear throughout the book and suggest the fleetingness of any human being’s grasp of the full meaning of events. To keep the reader rooted in the real world, the author repeatedly uses the imagery of eating, drinking, toil, sleep, death, and the cycles of nature.
The proverb is the basic building block of the book. While all wisdom literature tends to make use of the resources of poetry, including the verse form of parallelism, the book of Ecclesiastes flaunts its poetic medium much more than ordinary wisdom literature does. The author is a master of image, metaphor, and simile. The book is partly observational and descriptive in format; one should approach such passages in a meditative way, reflecting on experience of the phenomena that the author describes. The book is also very affective, so the reader needs to be receptive of the moods that it seeks to instill.

(Abridged from “Introduction to Ecclesiastes” in English Standard Version Study Bible). For Crossroads Church use only. Do not circulate.