

UNDERSTANDING AND PREACHING ECCLESIASTES

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Introduction:

While many interpreters take a negative view of Ecclesiastes, it is actually an extraordinarily important OT book. In fact, next to Proverbs itself, there is no OT book that's more important to daily life than Ecclesiastes. Therefore, it's critical that we study and apply Ecclesiastes in our personal quiet times, in our preaching, and in our counselling.

Negative perspectives on Ecclesiastes:

Ecclesiastes has been described as pessimistic, fatalistic, nihilistic, sceptical, and cynical.¹ Its counsel to eat, drink, and enjoy life seems, at best, sub-Christian. It says things that make you wonder if the Holy Spirit was asleep at the wheel when He inspired it.

Key point: More than any other book in the Bible, your understanding of the overall purpose of Ecclesiastes will determine how you interpret it.

Five approaches to interpreting Ecclesiastes:

1. The typical Jewish approach: Most Jewish interpreters assume that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes during his time of estrangement from God when his foreign wives turned his heart away from God.
2. The early Christian approach: The early Christian scholar, Jerome, believed Ecclesiastes was written to promote a monastic life in which you reject all worldly pleasures and pursuits.
3. The typical liberal approach: Those who deny Solomonic authorship often date the book very late, believing that the author was influenced by the Greek philosopher Epicurus (c. 300 BC).
4. Dialog with an opponent: This is a common ancient and modern approach to the book. Many commentators take the view that Solomon is dialoguing with an invisible opponent; therefore, the negative ideas are all really his sceptical opponent's point of view. That's a convenient stratagem: its weakness is that there's actually no evidence of such a debate. Not only is the opponent invisible, so is the supposed dialog (compare Malachi and Romans).
5. The evangelistic approach: Many modern interpreters, including Derek Kidner and Michael Eaton in their excellent commentaries, believe that the book of Ecclesiastes

¹ Walter Kaiser, *Total Life*, Everyman's Bible Commentary, 11.

is primarily evangelistic. It seems clear that Solomon expected the book to circulate beyond Israel, but J. Stafford Wright brings up a valid point when he says: "Strangely, there is no reference to repentance and forgiveness ... [Solomon] assumes that the readers know about [them]."²

Critique of the evangelistic view:

- Ecclesiastes gives no call to repentance.
- The primary purpose of biblical wisdom literature was never evangelistic. The wisdom books are addressed to believers; they assume faith, and go from there.

Summary: There are two problems with these approaches to interpreting Ecclesiastes.

- Several require the imposition of schemes that don't actually fit the content of the book (e.g., the dialog with an invisible opponent view and the evangelistic view).
- Others ignore large portions of the book, such as the strong statements about the fear of the Lord or about enjoying life as a gift from God.

Roland Murphy: *If there is one feature that is common to all periods of the history of the interpretation of Ecclesiastes it is that of selective emphasis.*³

Two principles for understanding Ecclesiastes rightly:

- 1) Understanding the purpose of biblical wisdom literature
- 2) Understanding the determinative influence of Genesis 1-3 (especially Genesis 3) on Ecclesiastes

1) To interpret Ecclesiastes you must understand the purpose of wisdom literature:

Song of Solomon:	how to live wisely in marriage
Job:	how to live wisely when unexpected calamities run over you
Wisdom psalms:	how to live wisely when it appears that crime does pay
Proverbs:	how to live wisely in all of life.

Ecclesiastes walks hand-in-hand with those wisdom books, especially in *purpose*. Derek Kidner says this on the relationship between Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes:

*Between them, the three books clearly cover three aspects of existence which no-one can afford to overlook. The demands of practical good management; the enigma of calamities that are beyond control or explanation; and the tantalizing hollowness and brevity of human life.*⁴

² Wright "Introduction to Ecclesiastes" in, *Reflecting with Solomon*, ed. Roy Zuck, 172.

³ Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, in the Word Biblical Commentary, lv.

⁴ Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes*, 116.

Question: If wise, skilful, peaceful living is the focus of the other wisdom books, might it be the focus of Ecclesiastes as well? How would we know? By searching Ecclesiastes to see if we find the themes of the fear of the Lord and peaceful, stable living.

The fear of the Lord:

Ecc 2:25 3:13-14 5:7, 20 8:12 12:13-14

The fear of the Lord principle links the purpose of Ecclesiastes to the overall purpose of the other wisdom books. (Note: Many interpreters consider these verses to be insertions by a later scribe, desperately trying to sanitise Ecclesiastes. There is no manuscript evidence for that. These verses are original.)

J. Stafford Wright's summary: *The world does not contain the key to itself. It can be found only in God. Roughly speaking, this is the theme of chapters 1-6.*⁵

Wise, stable living:

Ecclesiastes' motto: *Vanity of vanity, all is vanity. Hebel: vanity empty, meaningless, purposeless, mysterious, dissatisfying, frustrating.*

How do you live in this world? Ecc 2:25

- Ecclesiastes' goal is to teach you to live skillfully, calmly, and stably in a world full of frustration.
- Ecclesiastes teaches you how to handle life, not *when* things go wrong, but in a world that *is* wrong.

2) To interpret Ecclesiastes, you must understand the determinative influence of Genesis 1-3 (especially Genesis 3) on Ecclesiastes.

The role of the early chapters of Genesis in Ecclesiastes:

Duane Garrett:

*One other aspect of the theology of Ecclesiastes ... is its theological and literary dependence on the early chapters of Genesis Ecclesiastes can also be called a collection of reflections on creation and the fall, or even reflections on the continuing significance of creation and the fall.*⁶

Michael Eaton:

*It would seem then that the Preacher is drawing on the themes of these Genesis chapters and is pressing home their implications.*⁷

⁵ Wright, "Introduction to Ecclesiastes," 172.

⁶ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, in *The New American Commentary*, 278-79.

⁷ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, in *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, 46.

Ardel Caneday:

*The difficulty of interpreting this book is proportionally related to one's own readiness to adopt [Solomon's] presupposition—that everything about this world is marred by the tyranny of the curse which the Lord God placed upon all creation. If one fails to recognize that this is a foundational presupposition from which Ecclesiastes operates, then one will fail to comprehend the message of the book, and bewilderment will continue.*⁸

Ecclesiastes is a wisdom book primarily designed to bring believers to grips with the reality of the Fall and the Curse, and to teach them how wise, godly people reduce the frustration of living in such a world. Luther summed it up this way: *Solomon wants to put us at peace and to give us a quiet mind in the everyday affairs and business of this life, so that we may live contentedly in the present without care and yearning about the future.*⁹

Themes from the early chapters of Genesis developed in Ecclesiastes:

Key text: Gen 3:17-19 Ecc 2:14-17; 5:15-16; 6:6; 9:2-3; 3:18-21; 7:1-4; 12:1-7 death

Key name: Adam Ecc 1:13 *beni hadam* "sons of the Adam/man"

Results of the Fall: Ecc 3:9 toil and suffering
 Ecc 2:11,17-20 futility of labour
 Ecc 2:24; 3:12 (Hebrew: *nothing good in a man*)¹⁰
 Ecc 7:29 original sin
 Ecc 7:20 universal depravity
 Ecc 4:4 rivalry (Cain and Abel)
 Ecc 4:9-12 benefits of companionship
 Ecc 6:10 the naming of creation (Gen 2:19)

Ecclesiastes is, at its heart, an applicational commentary on Genesis 3. Therefore, Solomon's "cynicism" is not cynicism; it's realism in a world still labouring under the Curse (Ecc 1:14-15). Is how things are in this world the way they should be? No.

Ecc 12:13-14

Judgement means that things are not now as they should be: what is, is *wrong*.

According to Solomon, wise living under the Fall includes grappling with the dissatisfaction, frustration, and meaninglessness of it all, so that you long for God to fix it. Is that such a sub-Christian view of things?

⁸ Caneday, "Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage," in *Reflecting with Solomon*, ed. Roy Zuck, 81.

⁹ Martin Luther, quoted in Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, in the Word Biblical Commentary, lii.

¹⁰ See Kaiser, *Total Life*, 58 and C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, in The Anchor Bible, 139, for others who believe we should translate these two verses as the Masoretic text reads, rather than assuming that the comparative word/letter *mem* has dropped out of the Hebrew (as the key English versions assume, translating *better than*).

NT support for this view of Ecclesiastes:

Romans 8:18-21 1 Tim 6:17 (cp. Ecc 5:18-20, etc.) 1 Cor 10:31

Conclusion:

The purpose of the wisdom books of the OT is primarily to teach believers how to live wisely. Ecclesiastes' role in the triad of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes is to teach you to live wisely in a Genesis 3, fallen world.

Outline of Ecclesiastes:

Bishop Robert Lowth's warning in 1815 still holds true: *Scarcely any two commentators have agreed concerning the plan of the work, and accurate division of it into parts or sections.*¹¹

An attempt at outlining Ecclesiastes:

Ecclesiastes 1 Introduction

Author (1:1), motto (1:2), opening poem detailing the weariness of life in a world (1:3-11), the grievous task God has given the sons of *the Adam*, Solomon's research methods.

Ecclesiastes 2-6 Wise counsel for reducing frustration in a Genesis 3 world

In these chapters, Solomon addresses eleven things that bring frustration to life:

- 1) 2:1-26 seeking meaning, purpose, and contentment in the wrong place
- 2) 3:1-15 a wrong view of God's sovereignty
- 3) 3:16-17 injustice
- 4) 3:18-22 a wrong view of man and death
- 5) 4:1-3 oppression
- 6) 4:4-6 work (rivalry, laziness, and over work)
- 7) 4:7-12 a lack of companionship
- 8) 4:13-16 the fleeting nature of popularity
- 9) 5:1-7 foolish religion
- 10) 5:8-9 political corruption
- 11) 5:10-20 wrong views of money

6:1-12 summarises the lessons of chapters 1-5

Ecclesiastes 7-11:6 Wise warnings about the misuse of wisdom

¹¹ Quoted in Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary, liii.

These chapters are designed to rebuke those who idolised wisdom, thinking (as Job's friends did) that if you live wisely or righteously enough, you can exercise sovereign control over whether you receive blessing or calamity from God (as such, it is a powerful polemic against today's Word-Faith movement—there is nothing new under the sun!).

7:1-14	what's good for a man: facing death realistically, self-restraint, satisfaction with the present, wisdom above money, acknowledging that it is impossible to know God's daily future plan for your life
7:15-18	warning about misusing wisdom to manipulate God
7:19-29	wisdom's enemy: man and his sinfulness
8:1-6	wisdom on submitting to authority
8:7-17	false wisdom vs. true wisdom: against formulas for controlling what you get from God
9:1-12	death and wisdom
9:13-10:20	wisdom's value, wisdom's vulnerability
11:1-6	wisdom for living worry free (a replacement of formulas for controlling God)

Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:14 Conclusion

11:7-12:7	wisdom for youth, old age, and death
12:8-14	what is, is wrong; trust God to fix it

Study tools

The most helpful piece ever written on Ecclesiastes is an article by J. Stafford Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," originally printed in the *Evangelical Quarterly* in 1946. It has been reprinted in *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, edited by Roy Zuck, and can also be found at the following website: <http://rediscoveringthebible.com/InterpretationOfEcclesiastes.html>

Roy Zuck's *Reflecting with Solomon* has many helpful chapters and is worth owning as an introduction. Walter Kaiser's *Total Life* (Everymans) is very good at following the flow of Solomon's thought, but by the nature of the series, lacks technical detail. Michael Eaton (Tyndale) has produced a very helpful, highly usable commentary. Derek Kidner's *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (The Bible Speaks Today) is full of insight and is highly quotable; Kidner understands wisdom literature as well or better than anyone. Duane Garret (New American Commentary) is worth owning, but is not quite so helpful as Eaton. Roland Murphy (Word Biblical Commentary) moves you into the more technical commentaries, and is helpful with the Hebrew. Keil and Delitzsch is heavy on details, but not so helpful on the overall picture. C. L. Seow (Anchor) is helpful in places, but is not a priority purchase.