



Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

ECCLESIASTES

Background File

The book of Ecclesiastes is one of the latest books in the Old Testament to be written—possibly only three or four hundred years before the birth of Jesus. Its story is told from the perspective of an old king or wise person, identified in the book as “the Teacher.” Traditionally, this teacher was identified as Solomon, the wisest of Israel’s kings.

What’s the Story?

Ecclesiastes is written as a personal memoir, a story of one’s personal experience. The teacher looks back over his life and shares with his readers the many things he has learned. He has found that striving after riches, pleasure, success, and even wisdom is like chasing after the wind. Such striving brings frustration rather than fulfillment or meaning.

The teacher shares both advice and reflections about life. He often repeats key phrases such as “all is vanity and a chasing after wind” (1:14), references to deeds, toiling, and nothing new “under the sun” (1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17) and “eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil” (5:18). Ecclesiastes includes two stirring poems (3:1-8; 12:1-8). After the first, “For everything there is a season,” the teacher laments that though there is a time for everything, we humans cannot know when they are. The second poem uses many metaphors to describe what it feels like to be old. The book ends with a concluding speech that tells everyone to fear God and keep the commandments.

Ecclesiastes is read in the Jewish community during the feast of Sukkoth—also called the Festival of Booths, or Tabernacles, or Ingathering (see Lev 23:39-43; Num 29:12-39; Deut 16:13-15). This festival occurs in the fall of the year and celebrates God’s care for the people of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness. The festival celebrates God’s care and the joy that can be found in life, even life that is fragile and unpredictable.

What's the Message?

The teacher's reflections include a number of themes:

Becoming very rich or very smart or having fun all the time does not lead to a meaningful life.

We are all going to die, so no one is finally better than anyone else.

We cannot know what God has in store for the future, and this is very frustrating when we want to make plans.

The world is not fair; the good do not always get rewarded and the bad do not always get punished.

We should all find times to enjoy the work and life God has given to us.

Like Job, the teacher is skeptical about traditional answers.

The book helps us understand that realism and skepticism are an important part of faith. Some readers think the book is cynical and depressing, reflecting a crisis of faith. But Ecclesiastes can be read as uplifting. The teacher concludes that once people discover that they cannot find meaning on their own, then they can leave such matters to God and learn to find pleasure in the simple living of life.

Martin Luther said Ecclesiastes was “a very beautiful and useful book... which on many counts deserves to be in everyone’s hands and to be familiar to everyone” (*LW* 15:4, 7). For Luther the purpose and aim of the book was clear—that we be content with the word and work of God, take pleasure in the gifts God has given, and not strive for that which one cannot have. Luther understood the book to describe accurately the sin of always wanting more than we can have or need, of wanting to control everything, and finally of not trusting God.

Reflections of a Royal Philosopher



1:1 the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem:

The teacher is *Qoheleth*, the Hebrew name of the book. It perhaps means someone who speaks to the assembly, so Luther translated this as “the Preacher.” Though connected with Solomon, it is likely the book was written long after his time (see introduction).



1:2 Vanity:

In Ecclesiastes the word *vanity* is repeated thirty-eight times. It means “meaninglessness” or “emptiness.” The Hebrew word *hebel* [HE-bel] is literally “vapor” or “mist,” suggesting something that has little substance and disappears quickly.

- 1 The words of the Teacher,^a the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
- 2 Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,^a
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
- 3 What do people gain from all the toil
at which they toil under the sun?
- 4 A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.
- 5 The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hurries to the place where it rises.
- 6 The wind blows to the south,
and goes around to the north;
round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.

^a Heb *Qoheleth*, traditionally rendered *Preacher*