**Ecclesiastes Introduction**

The bottom line up front about Ecclesiastes is that it is a difficult book to understand. If we don’t take a healthy interpretative approach, it is easy to read a message the author never intended. Therefore, before we dive in, let’s talk about it!

**Some Unhealthy Approaches**

One of the biggest common mistakes in Bible reading is making the Scripture say what you want it to say. Few come to the Bible with this agenda, but our biases make this inevitable to some extent. Here are some common takes on Ecclesiastes that have proved to be **inaccurate interpretations**:

* Life does not matter!
* The key to the Christian life is learning to be free of desire for physical things
* The only good in life is in physical pleasure
* Wisdom/fear of God will lead to an inevitably good/non-meaningless life

As you can see, some of these interpretations are exact opposites! So, let’s approach this book with an open mind to see what God might actually have to say to us.

**Author**

Who wrote this book is a tremendous topic of debate. The most common view is Solomon, but even this is unlikely if we fairly weigh the evidence. There are several passages that are distinctively not from a Solomonic point of view. Consider, for example, 5:8-9 and 8:1-9, which are written from the perspective of a subject under a ruler.

The view I (Scott) will take is that we don’t know who the author is. In fact, the author seems intent to *not* reveal his identity. The focus is not on the author, but on his message.

As you read Ecclesiastes, you will sometimes feel like you are hearing from different people. It seems that what is happening is that the author is taking on multiple personae to look at life from various different points of view. It’s as if he’s saying, “Now let’s look at life from the perspective of a king…Now, a servant.” By taking on these multiple personae, his overall message gains credibility.

**Speaker**

To muddy the waters more, Ecclesiastes contains an author and a speaker. We only hear from the author at the very beginning (1:1) and at the very end (12:9-14). The author is bringing us the words of the speaker because he thinks the speaker to be wise – we should listen to what he has to say (see 12:9-10).

Different translations call the speaker different things – Preacher, Teacher, etc. The Hebrew word behind this title is *qohelet*. The Greek rendering of this word gives us the English title of the book: *qohelet* (Hebrew) = *ekklesiastes* (Greek). A qohelet was a person who played some role in an assembly of people and an ekklesiastes had the role of speaking to a group of people. As we read Ecclesiastes, we join in the crowd and listen to the qohelet.

**The Purpose**

Why did the qohelet write this book? The first thing that must be said is that the qohelet is taking on an idea that we all think about: he is grappling with the world as he experiences it. As such, this is a complex book – reality is very complex! He is trying to make sense of the world with all its good and bad, tragedy and successes.

Knowing this, Ecclesiastes will not read like Proverbs. Proverbs reads more like “you do this, this will happen.” But a careful reading of all of wisdom literature (Proverbs-Song of Songs) will demonstrate that the world is not always this way. (A careful reading of Proverbs will demonstrate that that author knows this also.)

The qohelet is, instead, examining traditional wisdom, like that which we read in Proverbs. This is what the author says he is doing in 12:9:

Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. **He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs.**

The bolded part is key. The qohelet, and God speaking through him, invites us to consider the wisdom of Proverbs, but to do so in a world that is broken by sin. We would be blind to walk around thinking that the world is working as it ought to. Sin makes things messy and this book gives us permission to acknowledge that. Iain Provan says it well:

 [Qohelet] considers what proverbial wisdom has to say about the world, and he presses on to see how far it is true and which qualifications exist in respect of its individual statements. If, for example, there are proverbs that speak of the “profit” that comes from hard work…Qohelet still wishes to press the question whether in the end human beings have any “advantage” over the animals. In what sense do mortal beings know “profit” in life? Of what kind of profit are we speaking.

**The Message**

So, what is the message? Well, it is varied! But I will attempt a summary. Everything rests on what is said in 12:13-14:

Now all has been heard;
    here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
    for this is the duty of all mankind.
For God will bring every deed into judgment,
    including every hidden thing,
    whether it is good or evil.

The foundation of a well-lived life is found in reverence and obedience to God.

That said, there are both cheerful and gloomy parts of this book. The cheerful parts suggest that there are good things to enjoy, and given our foundation, we acknowledge that God made the world and has given us good things to enjoy. But the gloomy parts can be quite gloomy. What do we do with those? Again, I quote Provan:

The emphasis lies on the passing nature of existence and on its elusiveness and resistance to intellectual and physical human control. The main obstacle to living well in the world is that mortal beings consistently refuse to accept their mortality and finitude.

The repeated phrase *hevel* (often translated meaningless of vanity, see Bible project video) is meant to convey at least two senses:

1. Life is ephemeral, passing like the wind.
2. Life and the workings of God within it are, like the wind, beyond our grasp.

To live a life under a delusion otherwise is to live a life that misses lasting meaning. Death is the great reminder of this. Qohelet doesn’t have our view of the resurrection of Christ and the hope of heaven. The Old Testament thinkers had to take God’s goodness on extra faith when considering the unknown afterlife. But not knowing this, he looks at death and the *hevel* of life and encourages us to live in the present. One more Provan quote:

[Live] each moment of life joyfully before God rather than on the pursuit of wisdom, wealth, or any other human end that comes under the heading “chasing of the wind.” Death, after all, comes to everyone, whether the wise of foolish, rich or poor, good or bad…there is no way in which human beings can avoid it. It is best to give up any attempt to control destiny and simply to live life out before God.

**Ecclesiastes Today**

I hope the applicability of Ecclesiastes is evident after reading this last section. In a world that is desperate to control everything, we must acknowledge that this is impossible. This isn’t to say that we become dismissive of the happenings on Earth as if they don’t matter (we will see in the first study that they do!), but we must fundamentally accept what this book teaches us.

My hope is that this book will encourage you to let go and live a simple life of reverence and obedience to God. As you face the inevitable unraveling of your plans and hopes, we must remember that we are not God. Moreover, we have a fuller picture than the qohelet. We have the promise of restoration in the resurrection of Christ. In the face of difficulty, we can join the message of the qohelet, adding that we have a hope beyond this life.

**Resources**

* I will be using *The NIV Application Commentary: Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs* (Iain Provan) as my primary guide.
* Here is a good free online commentary: <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/ecclesiastes-1/>

***Note****: The preceding material is my summary (with some of my own thoughts) of Iain Provan’s introduction. If you would like to read the full text, I can send you a PDF.*