

“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” For centuries, those words have haunted mankind as he goes through life under our sun. Ever-repeating cycles of life, nothing new to be found, dissatisfaction at every turn – what are we to make of this life of vanity? We are embarking today on a journey through the book of Ecclesiastes. As we follow “the Preacher” on his search for meaning and satisfaction, we will uncover themes that run through the book like cords through a tapestry, dig gems out of mines that were formerly obscure and dark, bask in the glow of verses that encourage and strengthen, and even walk away from passages with a realization that we are very small and often incapable of fully comprehending the truth of an infinite God. Before we set out on this adventure together, we need to look at the map – right side up. This first lesson will cover background information as an introduction to the book of Ecclesiastes.

AUTHORSHIP

The book calls its author “the Preacher.” This is from the Hebrew word “to gather or assemble” and is used six times to refer to the main speaker of Ecclesiastes [1.1, 2, 12; 7.27; 12.9, 10]. No personal name is given to this “Preacher.” His outreach was not at all like today’s pastoral preaching ministry. He was one who addressed an assembly, but in the context of a philosophical lecture of wisdom rather than a sermon.

Solomon: the _____ view

1. Support

- He is called “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” [1.1]
- Solomon’s unique position allowed him to truly _____ the searching of 1.12-2.17.
- “We ought to take Solomon’s reputation for _____ equally seriously and see his court as the center that drew _____ men from all quarters to discuss _____ of living in a difficult world (1 Kings. 4:34)” (J. Stafford Wright).

2. Difficulties

- _____ in 1.12: “I the Preacher **was** king over Israel in Jerusalem.”
Solomon was king till his death: how could he see his reign as a past event?
Better understood as “I the Preacher _____ king over Israel...” (See Jonah 3.3)
- Confusing _____ in 1.16 “I ... have gotten more wisdom than all *they* that have been **before me in Jerusalem.**”

Only David was king of Israel in Jerusalem – that’s not much of a comparison.

The verse does not say “all the _____.” In context, it means “all the _____” or “all the _____.”

- _____ perspective in 4.1-3; 5.8-9 and 10.20

Why would Solomon be speaking of the king as if he weren’t king? Why would he bemoan oppression – shouldn’t he have been able to deal with the problem?

This implies that the king is someone whose vengeful wrath must be feared!

These passages would have struck a chord with readers in nations other than _____ – this would give the book a broader _____ appeal.

Conclusion

If “the Preacher” is Solomon, why doesn’t he just say so? It appears that Solomon is deliberately distancing himself from his kingly position in order to emphasize the wisdom of his message: “not Solomon the Sovereign, but Solomon the Sage” (Layton Talbert). In this way, it is understandable that he would speak in a way that would catch the attention of both ruler and peasant. The lack of historical references and details complements well the timeless truths of Ecclesiastes. If Ecclesiastes was not written by Solomon, Scripture describes no other person who matches this author’s persona.

TONE: DIVINE REVELATION OR HUMAN REASONING?

Evidences of divergent views

- “Inspiration sets down accurately what passes, but the conclusions and reasonings are, after all, man’s. ... the best that man apart from redemption can do, and does not anticipate the Gospel.” (*Scofield Reference Bible*, Introduction to Ecclesiastes)
- “Verse 10 is no more a divine revelation ... than any other conclusion of ‘the Preacher’ (Eccl. 1:1) is such a revelation. ... These reasonings of man apart from divine revelation are set down by inspiration just as the words of Satan (Gen. 3:4; Job 2:4, 5, etc.) are so set down.” (*Scofield Reference Bible*, note on Eccl. 9.10)
- “[T]he philosophy [this book] sets forth, which makes no claim to revelation but which inspiration records for our instruction, represents the world-view of one of the wisest men.” (*New Scofield Reference Bible*)
- This book “contains many of man’s most serious reflections. These are not necessarily God’s truth, but they stimulate the minds and hearts of men...” (R.W. DeHaan, *The Art of Staying off of Dead End Streets*)

- “Does the Bible really teach that ‘a man has no pre-eminence above a beast’? No! The Bible only records that the book of Ecclesiastes says it. ... Can it possibly be called inspired by God when it makes such ‘under the sun’ pronouncements, some partially true, others entirely false?” (*Amplified Bible*, note on Eccl. 3.19)

Arguments for such views

- 1) Scripture accurately records _____ in other passages (Gen. 3.4-5; Mt. 16.22; I Tim. 4.3; etc.).

In each of those cases, the author writes about _____ error – there is no example of an author recording _____ errant thoughts as Scripture.

- 2) “The Preacher” describes his own pursuit of _____ without disclaimer (2.3, 8).

He never recommends that we _____ that example. On the contrary, his conclusions expose the vanity of such pursuits – he _____ to pursuing his own desires, but without gratuitous detail and with a proper _____ tone.

- 3) Some verses seem to contain _____ error (9.5, 10).

Are we going to discard every passage that could be twisted by a heretic? Certainly not! Just because a passage _____ be taken out of context doesn't mean that there's anything _____ with the passage itself.

- Compare Eccl. 9.5 to Ps. 6.5; 88.10; and 115.17.
- Compare Eccl. 9.7-10 to I Cor. 10.31; Col. 3.17, 23.

Scripture's answer: Ecclesiastes 12.9-12

Ecclesiastes does contain some very difficult passages – ones that require much longer and more detailed explanations than the examples cited here – it is no exegetical “walk in the park!” However, we must approach the difficulties of Ecclesiastes the same way we approach the difficulties of Leviticus, Job, Amos, John or Romans: with diligent study, patient prayer for understanding, and an unshakeable confidence in God’s promise that His Word is perfect (whether we can wrap our imperfect little minds around that perfection or not!).

We’ll begin our first study in the text of Ecclesiastes near the very end of the book. In 12.9-12, we find a ten-fold description of Solomon’s intention in writing the book.

1. _____ : skillful
 Ex. 35.30-33: _____; II Sam. 13.3: _____;
 II Sam. 14.2: _____; II Sam. 20.16, 22: _____;
 Ps. 58.4-5: _____; Isa. 10.13: _____;
 Isa. 40.20: _____; Jer. 4.22: _____;
 Jer. 9.17-18: _____; Ezek. 27.8-9: _____
 - *Wisdom, biblically defined, is skill, practical ability, proficiency, expertise.*
2. _____ : insight gained through the _____, through experience
*In Ecclesiastes, this word is used six other times – always parallel to “_____.” Solomon uses “knowledge” in this book to accent the idea of skill – **something learned and practiced to a level of expertise.***
3. Arranging the wisdom & knowledge
 - a. _____ : to weigh, consider
This word carries the idea of _____, comparing the words to a standard and being satisfied only with that which measures up.
 - b. _____
A deliberate search, not just accidentally running across good things to repeat.
 - c. _____ : to line up
This word describes organization, _____ and orderliness. The Preacher’s words were not cast together helter-skelter or chaotically; he thought through what he wrote and put it on paper in a way that _____.
4. _____
 This is “a portable saying in poetic form expressing a general observation conditioned by a biblical worldview” (Layton Talbert).
5. _____ words: words of delight
 - Literary quality
 - Topics under consideration
 - Conclusions and exhortations of the book
6. _____ : straight, honest
This word is not an adjective (a description of the things written); it is an adverb (a

description of the writing process). What Solomon wrote, he wrote _____; he frankly discusses the disappointments of life under the sun. Ecclesiastes displays a candidness and open-mindedness about the _____ of life on earth.

7. Words of _____: faithfulness, reliability

The same word describes _____ (Ps. 57.10). It refers to something that proves true – it accurately meets the expectations (I Ki. 10.6).

8. _____: motivators, pushing and prodding in the right direction

9. _____: stabilizers, holding in place and supporting

Note: both goads and nails are sharp – they _____!

10. Given from one _____: the source of the Preacher's words is God

Conclusion

This is perhaps the clearest statement of inspiration that any book of Scripture makes specifically about itself (with the possible exception of "Thus saith the LORD"). It lays the responsibility for the book's content squarely at the feet of Yahweh – the protecting and providing Shepherd of Israel. We may wonder why a book with such a clear claim to inspiration seems so hard to understand and interpret. Perhaps this difficulty is precisely why God put such an obvious stamp of authenticity upon Ecclesiastes. By God's own affirmation, Ecclesiastes is a book of integrity, profit, doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction! As we work our way through the simple passages and the difficult ones, we will continually look for interpretation and understanding that fit the divine source of this book.