

Ecclesiastes

1. Name – The name “Ecclesiastes” derives from the Greek translation of the Hebrew title “Qohelet.” Qohelet is often translated “Preacher” in 1:1. The term actually means “assembler.” The Greek word for church (ekklesia) literally means “assembly.” The translation “Preacher” in 1:1 is often used as a result of guessing at the implied purpose of the assembling.
2. Author and date – The issue of authorship is important and difficult. Tradition (both Christian and Jewish) attributes the book to Solomon. A simple reading of 1:1 (“the son of David, king in Jerusalem”) and 1:16 (“I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me”) seem to point to Solomon as Qohelet. In this view, Ecclesiastes expresses Solomon’s reflections and repentance after having tried to live with wisdom apart from the fear of God. However, many conservative scholars have questioned this equation. First, they point to 1:12, in which he says “I was king.” But Solomon was a king until his death. Furthermore, the time described in Ecclesiastes does not appear to fit the golden age of Solomon, with misery and vanity, injustice, and tyranny. Furthermore, they point out that the statement in 1:16 would not mean much if only David and Saul had ruled in Jerusalem before Qohelet. The allusion to Solomon’s wisdom and experience in 1:12-2:26 was employing Solomon’s identity as a pseudonym, a common literary device in the ancient Near East. Why, they ask, would Solomon himself need to hide his identity by referring to himself as Qohelet? Finally, it appears that there are two voices in the book, the narrator in the prologue (1:1-11) and epilogue (12:8-14) and the autobiographical body (1:12–12:8).

In response to these arguments, traditionalists note that Solomon was the son of David and king in Jerusalem. No other king could claim to have “acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me” if he were after Solomon. 1 Kings 3:12 says concerning Solomon, “Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that *none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you.*” “I was king” does not mean that he is no longer king but merely that he was a king during the experience he records. Even “golden ages” in this fallen world have their share of misery, vanity, injustice, and tyranny; finding meaning apart from God is just as impossible in a golden age as at any other time. The claim of superior wisdom over all who were before him may mean those in his presence—his circle of wise men—rather than previous kings. The claim that another author spoke with Solomon’s persona without clearly indicating this seems dishonest, even if it was commonly used as a literary device. Solomon’s use of a title may be intended to describe rather than obscure his identity. Finally, the use of a prologue and an epilogue in the third person helps underscore the change of perspective, whether these are provided by Solomon himself or by a final editor summarizing Solomon’s conclusions.

3. Message – The book is difficult to interpret in detail. Qohelet expresses his thought in a stream of consciousness, sometimes repeating himself and even seemingly contradicting himself at times. He wants us to draw the same conclusion as Proverbs—that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. But he does that in a very different fashion from Proverbs. Rather than beginning as a wise man he begins as a fool. He shows us the end result of seeking wisdom without the fear of the Lord. Thus, oftentimes he adopts a perspective that leads over and over to meaninglessness, and the statements along the way must be interpreted in light of this broader purpose. Along the way, he arrives at many insightful conclusions, but it is sometimes difficult to discern whether a particular conclusion has direct value or only points up the flaw of using wisdom without the fear of God.

The great value of Ecclesiastes is that we get to see how far a man can go to find meaning and purpose in his own wisdom apart from the fear of God. Most of us will never have the opportunities with wealth and sensuality and mental acumen to do this kind of experiment; Qohelet has done it for us and spared us the pain and frustration if we will only heed his message. The wisest man who ever lived tried and failed completely to find meaning without God; these ultimate questions can only be answered from outside ourselves through the fear of the Lord.

Reference:

An Introduction to the Old Testament, R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, Zondervan, 1994.