

**Ecclesiastes No. 1 Introduction**  
**Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; 12:8-14**  
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There are few books of the Bible that are still today actually understood in diametrically different ways. I mean, there are only a few books that some interpret to be about one thing and others about something altogether different. That is, interpreters don't even agree about the subject of the book. But two such books – perhaps, besides Revelation, the only two such books in the Bible – are found in the “wisdom” section of the Old Testament: Ecclesiastes and The Song of Songs. Having finished Proverbs, I thought I should give some attention to the other principal volumes that belong to the wisdom literature of the ancient Scriptures: Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, and Job. I won't be preaching *through* the books, but considering their argument as a whole and dipping into the specifics of their teaching. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and the Song of Songs are all very obviously books of wisdom – books that train us in the skill of living rightly and well – and, as we shall see, they overlap each other's teaching in significant ways. But two of them in particular pose long-standing problems of interpretation.

I don't suppose any of us today would be tempted to agree with Origen's third century suggestion that Proverbs was for children, Ecclesiastes for adults, and the Song for the elderly, but it is an exercise in the history of interpretation of those books to consider how a man as well versed in the Scripture as Origen was ever came up with such an idea. [J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome*, 150] Obviously he saw the books in a very different way than we see them today. The fact that some Jewish rabbis and theologians of the New Testament era entertained doubts about the rightful place of both Ecclesiastes and the Song in the canon of Holy Scripture certainly proves that the teaching of these books has been a matter of confusion and controversy for a long time. What are they about? How they are to be understood? What is their purpose in the Bible? What good are we to get from them? Very different answers to those questions have been given through the ages and are given still today. Even in our Presbyterian Church in America today you will find utterly different sermons preached on these books by our ministers.

As wisdom books – the Hebrew noun “wisdom” is found some eighteen times in the twelve chapters of Ecclesiastes – it would seem obvious that they were intended to provide life-instruction for the people of God. More and more of believing biblical scholarship accepts that conclusion, so the question becomes: *what* instruction? As you know, both Ecclesiastes and The Song of Songs have through the Christian ages been understood allegorically. That is, one must find the true meaning of the sentences we read in those books lurking *beneath* the surface not *on* the surface. That meaning was invariably found to concern Jesus Christ and the future Christian church. Jerome's 4<sup>th</sup> century commentary on Ecclesiastes and George Burrowes 19<sup>th</sup> century commentary on the Song are both commentaries of this type. I think it is fair to say that both of them are worse than useless as guides to understanding the author's actual meaning, but both of

them are beautiful essays on Christian faith and life because they import into these books the teaching of the New Testament about Jesus and the Christian life. The fact that the biblical books themselves aren't about Jesus in that way was lost on those good men but, our knowledge of the meaning of the Hebrew Bible and of these books in particular having advanced as it has, we can no longer read them in such a way. Both books are wisdom; not prophecy or law or history; nor are they essays about the way of salvation. They are wisdom: instruction in living life according to the will of God. They concern the "how-to" of living in the same way Proverbs does. But each has its own particular subject or theme; each has to do with how to live life in a particular respect and they are both very important and very valuable for that reason. We can find the same message that we find in Ecclesiastes or Job or The Song of Songs elsewhere in the Bible, but here, in *these* books, that message gets its own day in the sun and is expounded in a particularly comprehensive, beautiful, powerful, thought provoking, and persuasive way.

We begin then with Ecclesiastes. As I said this book is understood in very different ways, so different that it is hard to believe that commentators are looking at the same text. And it remains so today.

One modern scholar I read thinks it's obvious that the book was written in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. by "a pessimistic nationalist...whose belief in a personal God had grown dim." [Kelly, *Jerome*, 151] Another describes the author as an embittered cynic, "a selfish and callous old man of the world who found at the end nothing but a dire disillusionment." [W.H. Elliot in Packer, *Knowing God*, 104] As I read Ecclesiastes I can't imagine anyone thinking of the book in that way. The author isn't pessimistic, he isn't a nationalist with disappointed hopes – that has absolutely nothing to do with the argument of the book – and there is nothing in the book that justifies a date so late in Israel's history.

The influential notes of the Schofield Reference Bible, notes that shaped the way two generations of believers thought about the Word of God, explained Ecclesiastes as an account of the best man can do in reasoning about life *apart from the gospel*. The author of the book knows there is a God and that man must face divine judgment, but his conclusion based on those facts is legal – "fear God and keep the commandments – and, according to the notes of the Schofield Reference Bible, Ecclesiastes "does not anticipate the gospel." In other words, the book teaches us where we would be left if we didn't know Jesus Christ; its message is something like the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, "If Christ be not raised, eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die." It is, in other words, the dark backdrop against which light of later revelation shines the more brightly. One immediate problem with that interpretation is that Proverbs also teaches us to fear God and keep the commandments and, for that matter, so does the NT. Are those books also legal? Would we say of Proverbs, James, or 2 Corinthians, that its teaching is "apart from the Gospel"? Would we say that any of those books was written in a legal frame of mind and apart from the gospel? Of course not.

But there are many versions of *that* interpretation of the book, viz. that it gives us an account of a man trying to find meaning in life and failing because he doesn't yet know the good news. In such a view the speaker, styled as the "Teacher" in the NIV and the "Preacher" in the ESV, and often referred to in the scholarship of Ecclesiastes as *Qohelet*, which is the Hebrew word lying beneath both translations, is a skeptic. He can find no answers to the great questions of life. Of course, as you know, many have identified *Qohelet* with King Solomon, mostly because of the fact that *Qohelet* identifies himself as "the son of David, king in Jerusalem," because Solomon had a reputation for being very wise, and because the first section of the book *can be* read as virtually an autobiography of Solomon. But it is never said in the book that the Preacher *was* Solomon and many evangelical scholars have thought it unlikely, even such a staunch defender of the inerrancy of the Bible as the late E.J. Young of Westminster Seminary.

Why, for example, it is asked would Solomon use a pseudonym? If he were Solomon, why didn't he say so? We have his proverbs identified with his name in the book of Proverbs. The first part of the book, through 2:26, indeed could easily be taken as an account of Solomon's life, but in the rest of the book there is nothing more like that and later the author even speaks of the throne as if he were an outsider (8:2-6). 2:12 may suggest that the author is using Solomon's life as an example of his thesis, for, as he says, what more can Solomon's successor do than the great king himself did? Verse 12 of chapter 1 also does not seem to fit Solomon because there was never a time when he *had been* king but was no longer. [Young in Dillard and Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 250] Taken in this way the conclusion of the book indicates that Solomon or whoever *Qohelet* was had recovered his footing and finished a believer again. His period of skepticism had at last been overcome by his return to faith. If so, then we cannot take most of the book as true or orthodox teaching. It is an account of what *not* to believe and do, not of true biblical wisdom. Most of the book on this view trades in the viewpoint of a person who either has no faith or has lost it for a time. To believe the teaching we get in Ecclesiastes would be like trying to learn our theology from Job's comforters who obviously didn't know what they were talking about either since at the end of the book the Lord rebukes them for what they said to Job! Taken this way Ecclesiastes is a lengthy specimen of mostly bad theology. It isn't wisdom; it is un-wisdom!

A new form of this interpretation – viz. that *Qohelet* was a skeptic who didn't know what he was talking about – has been provided by Tremper Longman, until recently professor of OT at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia and who now holds an endowed chair in the biblical studies department at Westmont College in California. Longman is a formidable OT scholar and has written a number of important books on the teaching of the OT and on the wisdom literature of the OT. I found his commentary on the book of Proverbs very valuable as I preached on that book. Longman points out that the structure of the book has three parts: a short prologue (1:1-11), a long monologue by the Preacher (1:12-12:8), and a brief epilogue (12:8-14). The prologue and epilogue are differentiated from the body of the book by the fact that the Preacher is there and only there represented in the third person. Everywhere else *Qohelet* speaks in the first person.

Longman proposes that we see the book as a “framed autobiography” – a frame on the outside, the autobiography in the inside – with *Qohelet’s* comments on God, man, and human life being evaluated by the author of the book, the unnamed speaker in the prologue and epilogue, the narrator who is the only source of positive teaching in the book. So, according to this interpretation of Ecclesiastes as well we are not to believe what we read in the body of the book but are rather to accept the critique of *Qohelet’s* outlook that we are given in the frame, that is the beginning and especially the end of the book. So, Longman suggests, in 12:8 the narrator is giving us a final summary of the Preacher’s teaching: “Meaningless, Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!” He then compliments the Preacher as having been a wise man who worked hard at his task trying to teach others about life. But he offers faint praise when he says of the preacher that “he searched to find just the right words.” The fact is, he didn’t find the right words and the narrator counsels us to be wary of speculative, skeptical teaching. Rather, we are to stick with what we know, and what we know is what is said in the last two verses of the book, what Longman calls “the gospel in a nutshell.” [*Intro to OT*, 253-254] Again, in this interpretation, *most of the book is false teaching*, not true, something to be rejected not accepted, like the teaching of Job’s friends.

That is certainly *not* the way I take the book, or the way many others take the book, and in my view the objections to Longman’s approach are insurmountable. It is not the view of the book that our Prof. Jack Collins takes whose judgments of such matters I regard as virtually infallible – we’ll find that it’s not completely infallible when we come to The Song of Songs, but it is *almost* infallible – it is not the view of the book you find in J.I. Packer’s masterpiece, *Knowing God* (104-107), and it is not the view you find in a number of new studies of the book. But, as you see, one’s general view of the argument of the book is the main issue. You can’t interpret any particular statement in the book until you know the overall purpose and nature of the book. You can’t take any statement as teaching until you know whether you are supposed to consider the statement true or false, orthodox teaching or false teaching! As we make our way through Ecclesiastes are we reading true and helpful observations about life that will help us to live skillfully, or are we reading the mistaken impressions of a foolish and unbelieving man?

Longman’s basic argument for his view of Ecclesiastes is that there is so much in the book that cannot be harmonized with the teaching of the rest of the OT. He finds in the book a radical skepticism and pessimism that is incompatible with OT faith. To be sure, I suppose those of us who have read the book with some care and attention have wondered if that were not the case. What *are* we to do with “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” Or, as the NIV has it, “Meaningless, meaningless; all is meaningless.” Can a man or woman of faith say *that*? Don’t we believe that everything has meaning in God’s world? And what are we to do with many statements in the book that seem to reflect something considerably less than the joy of our salvation? Think, for example, of all the proverbs we read when we were considering the book of Proverbs in which the fate of the fool and the wise person were contrasted. The fool

would get this punishment and the wise would get this reward. Again and again we read such statements in Proverbs. But then consider Ecclesiastes 2:15-17:

“Then I said in my heart, ‘What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?’ And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and striving after wind.”

Wow! That’s depressing. Is there no purpose to our lives, is there no reward in trusting the Lord. *That* doesn’t sound like Proverbs! It is not so difficult to understand where Prof. Longman is coming from. He says that if we read what this man actually says we will find him someone who has lost touch with the gospel. And so the narrator shows us his depressing worldview and then corrects it for us at the end.

But there are huge problems with this take on the book. First and foremost the lion’s share of the *Qohelet’s* teaching is not only perfectly true but obviously true. The wise man and the fool both die and they are both forgotten. How many people in the world still remember your great-grandfather by name? Whether he was a fool or righteous, how many are there who have any remembrance whatsoever that he was ever even in the world? *That* is a fact we must come to terms with. Righteous people are often poor, wicked people often rich. Is that not so? Is there not a great deal in this life that defies our explanation even as believers in God? Of course there is. Is it not also true, as first Pete Seeger and then *The Byrds* reminded us in the sixties, with their musical versions of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, that “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven”? Ought we not, as we are warned to do in 5:1-7, “guard our steps when we go into the house of God,” “pay what we vow,” and “fear God”? And who has read the account of old age in the chapter 12 and not appreciated the candor of that description of the trials of later life and its moral: viz. “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth...”? That is, make the most of your powers while you still have them!

More than this, throughout the book *Qohelet* often expresses a sturdy, even beautiful faith in God, in both God’s justice and goodness, and celebrates the blessing that God grants to those who trust in him. Think of texts such as these of which there are a great many in Ecclesiastes:

1. “A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment.” [2:24-25]
2. “I perceive that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.” [3:14]
3. “Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and

prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God...but it will not be well with the wicked...because he does not fear God.” [8:11-13]

4. “I said in my heart, ‘God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work.’” [3:17]
5. “In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other...” [7:14]

None of *that* sounds like skepticism or unbelief; it sounds rather like a robust and biblically realistic faith in God!

As one PCA OT professor points out, to find Longman’s interpretation of Ecclesiastes persuasive you must accept that the Preacher’s beautiful orthodox statements – and the book is full of them – are only so many slips in his reasoning, not the heartfelt confessions of faith they seem to be. We must also accept that all of *Qohelet’s* confusion and misunderstanding of life was thought worthy of massive citation by some frame narrator. [Dan Fredericks, *JETS* 43/2 (June 2000) 322.] After all, we get chapter after chapter of what Longman says is heresy, and, even according to his understanding of the epilogue, just two verses of correction at the end. And if those verses are in fact a corrective to the message of the whole book, they are a very tepid and understated corrective. They are hardly a ringing contradiction of all that has been said so far. In fact, few readers of the Bible have ever thought of those verses in such terms, as the undoing of everything that had been said so far. Reading them over again this evening I confess that I simply don’t hear in those verses what Prof. Longman hears in them.

But if the book is orthodox and if it teaches us true wisdom, if what we read is true and so to be believed and obeyed by us, what *are* we to do with “vanity” and “meaninglessness.” This is obviously the key thought of the book. It opens with it in 1:2 and closes with it in 12:8. It is a classic instance of *inclusio*, the repetition of a thought at the beginning and end of a piece of writing by which the theme of the entire piece – all the material in between – is identified. But what is the author saying when he says that everything is vanity or meaningless?

Two insights will help us here. The Hebrew word translated “vanity” or “meaningless” is *hebel* (הבל). It is obviously the key term of the book, not only because of its place in the *inclusio*, but because it occurs some 32 times in the 12 chapters. Its basic meaning is “vapor” or “breath” but it is obviously being used figuratively in Ecclesiastes. Different translations have been proposed: vanity is retained in the ESV from the KJV; the NIV has “meaningless,” and scholars have suggested “absurd” or “senseless.” But that still doesn’t answer the question: what does this author *mean* by his use of the term? Well consider what he actually says and then says over and over again in different ways. In Ecclesiastes the term seems to be used to mean one of two things: either that something is vacuous or insubstantial like a breath (elsewhere in the OT idols are described as *hebel*) or senseless, that is, beyond figuring out. In the first instance we have a text such as this one:

“I also thought, ‘As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Man’s fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: as one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is *hebel*.’” That is man’s life is but a breath. Here today; gone tomorrow. The Bible says that more than once.

But much more often the term *hebel* seems to refer to senselessness or meaninglessness in the sense of the impenetrable mystery of life. That is things are meaningless not objectively, but subjectively. They may have a meaning, but *we cannot discover what that meaning is*. Our perspective is too limited. We do not see what God sees.

Consider these texts and this theme that runs throughout the book:

1. “What does the worker gain from his toil? [i.e. this is another of those meaningless statements] I have seen the burden God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” [3:9-11]
2. “So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him? [3:22]
3. “Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things – which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found.” [7:27]
4. “When times are good be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future. In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these...” [8:14-15]
5. There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless. ... When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man’s labor on earth...then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.” [8:14-17]
6. “As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.” [11:5]

That is what *Qohelet* means primarily by “vanity” or “absurdity” or “meaninglessness” or “senselessness.” Ecclesiastes is virtually a commentary on two texts from Isaiah.

1. “Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel.” [45:15]
2. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” [55:9]

What we *know* about life and about the meaning of things is, in fact, very little. What we do not know is immense. This is a caution hardly unique to Ecclesiastes. In fact a number of writers have pointed out the connection between, the similarities between Ecclesiastes and the argument of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8 and then in Romans 9-11. If you remember Paul says the same thing in a different way at the end of Romans 11:

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out.”

Paul had been talking about the deep mysteries of life and the mysteries of the history of redemption and of salvation in the world in these chapters of Romans 8-11, and that was his conclusion too: God’s ways are far beyond, high above our ways and we can’t figure them out. None of us knows what God is doing in the world except in the most general way.

Ecclesiastes is making the same point in greater detail and with respect to more life issues. At this point and at that everything seems so senseless: a few years back the little boy of a devout Christian family I know was accidentally backed over and killed by his father in the driveway of his own home! We heard a few weeks ago of the teen-aged daughter of one of our RUF campus ministers being killed in a traffic accident on a snowy street in Calgary and not so long before that of an MTW missionary killed in an accident as he rode his motorbike in Haiti (or was it some other Caribbean country?). Young people as well as old find they have cancer. A righteous man dies young of a heart attack leaving a grieving widow and young children behind to pick up the pieces, but a genuinely evil man lives a long life doing harm to others for many years. Fire or famine wipes out the hard-won gains of responsible people and some lay-about wins the lottery. And on and on it goes. *There is a great deal in life that seems utterly senseless.* We think to ourselves a hundred times: If we were God, we wouldn’t have allowed that to happen. Surely you have thought this. Much as life can be indescribably wonderful as Ecclesiastes reminds us it can be, so it can be equally as dark, forbidding, hopeless, and crushing. Remember C.S. Lewis’ comment in his *Letters*:

“Actually it seems to me that one can hardly say anything either bad enough or good enough about life.”

So how are we to consider all of this from the vantage point of faith? *That* is the lesson of Ecclesiastes and an important lesson it is!

This insight is confirmed, I think, by the repetition throughout the book of the phrase “under the sun.” You have it first in 1:3:

“What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils *under the sun*?”

This key phrase occurs thirty times in the book! It identifies the perspective of the author as earth-bound, temporal, and limited to the present. He’s looking at the way things appear from the

perspective of time not eternity, this world not the world to come. As we saw was the case in the book of Proverbs, there is here too virtually no reference in the book to God's covenant with Israel, to the Law of God (apart from 12:13), to the forgiveness of sins, or to communion with God. This author, as do the authors of Proverbs, takes his standpoint – as Paul did in Acts 17 speaking to the philosophers in Athens – not on the truths of divine revelation but on the universals of human experience.

Christian believers are not supposed to be Pollyannas, the sort of Norman Vincent Peale/Robert Schuller style positive-thinking types. Still less are they to be people who can have no true sympathy for others because they don't face in any seriously honest way the disappointments, tragedies, and dark mysteries of human life. The Bible everywhere teaches us to be realists – it is the Bible that calls this world a “vale of tears” – and reminds us in a hundred ways how little we understand of what God is doing and the meaning of what is happening in the world. You will hear evangelicals tell you all the time what God is doing. It is utterly unwittingly and unintentional on their part, I know that, but it comes very near to blasphemy because they don't have the foggiest idea what God is doing. They don't know what is going to happen tomorrow or the next day and they don't know why what happened today happened as it did. Ecclesiastes is a summons to take off our rose-colored glasses and take a close hard look at what we see when we observe this world. We will elaborate the message of the book as we consider it over the next several Lord's Day evenings. But we are going to say that there is nothing in Ecclesiastes that you cannot find elsewhere in the teaching of the Bible and there is nothing in the book of Ecclesiastes that you haven't thought yourself if you are old enough to have had some measure of the experiences of human life. The fact that this teaching is given in the stark, unqualified manner characteristic of Hebrew thinking and writing, is, I think, what confuses us; not the teaching itself, which is true and obviously true.

Tonight let me finish this introduction to Ecclesiastes with two citations that together provide something of a summary of the book. They come from a study of Ecclesiastes in the earlier part of the twentieth century by the British scholar G. Stafford Wright.

“Events happen to us from time to time, but God has given us a longing to know the eternity of things, the whole scheme [That's the meaning of the statement in chapter 3 that God has put eternity in our hearts, we can't help but want to know the scheme of things.]; but, try as we will, we cannot see it, though we can declare by faith that each event plays its part in the beauty of the plan.”

“The world is not weighted in our favor [at least so far as we can see things from the perspective of “under the sun”]. But the same things which break the man of the world, can make the Christian, if he takes them from the hand of God. Go looking for the key that will unify the whole of life. You must look for it; God has made you like that, sore travail though it be. But you will not find it in the world; you will not find it in life; in revelation you will find the outskirts of God's ways; in Christ your fingertips touch the

key, but no one has closed his fingers on it yet. No philosophy of life can satisfy if it leaves out Christ. Yet even the finest Christian philosophy must [admit] itself baffled. But do not despair. There is a life to be lived day by day. And in the succession of apparently unrelated events God may be served and God may be glorified. And in this daily service of God, we may find pleasure, because we are fulfilling the purpose for which God made us. That was Koheleth's philosophy of life. Was he wrong? ["The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," in *Classical Evangelical Essays in OT Interpretation*, 141, 149-150]

It is a crucial part of true biblical wisdom to know how little you know; it was the great lesson that Job had learn: to live your life modestly, without assuming that you understand more than you do, without pretending to an understanding you do not have, and cheerfully to embrace your limitations as one of God's creatures, a mere human being, a tiny piece of a very great puzzle. Ecclesiastes will help you do that.