

LITERARY OVERVIEW

The truest of all books, – (Herman Melville, American author of *Moby Dick*)

The highest flower of poetry, eloquence, and truth. – (Thomas Wolfe, American author)

- **Title:** Ecclesiastes (Heb. תְּהִלָּה {qohelet} = speaker to an assembly, an assembler [1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8, 9, 10] - Gk. Ἐκκλησιαστής {ecclasiastays}). 12:9-12 gives us something of the function of the preacher (as he saw himself).
- **Author:** Identified as a son of David, king in Jerusalem – common view is Solomon (from evidence found in 1:16 2:4-8 12:9), though not without slight problems (1:12, 16). In the end, it is most likely Solomon.
- **Form/Genre:** Proverbial wisdom literature. It is a collection of proverbs, not disjointed (as in the book of Proverbs), but in clusters with a unifying plot known as a “**quest motif**” (Heb. מצא {matza} = to find/17x) w/narrative effect. It includes **recollections** (of past experiences), **reflections** (on the purpose of life), and **mood pieces** (intended to make the hearer feel either despair or hope). The book is full of **image, metaphor, and simile**.
- **Purpose:** The primary purpose is to persuade the reader that life without God is vanity and life in the fear of God gives hope and meaning. According to the Nelson Study Bible introduction, the book may actually be to a larger audience than just Israelites. This conclusion is drawn from that observations that the Law is not referred to, nor the covenant Name of God (LORD or YHWH/Jehovah).
- **Challenges:** To identify whether the writer is, at any moment, “seeing” life from an “under the sun” perspective or from the position of Godly reverence.

EXPLORING THE LITERARY FEATURES OF ECCLESIASTES

- There is a single narrator who shares his “quest” for satisfaction, meaning, and purpose in an obviously fallen world that is “not right.” Unlike the modern “seeker” who sets out with the presupposition that there is more virtue in remaining uncertain rather than finding answers (i.e. a chronic skeptic), the author ctually comes to a conclusion (12:13-14).
- It has a **dialectic structure** (a method of argument or exposition that systematically weighs contradictory facts or ideas with a view to the resolution of their real or apparent contradictions). This is not a series of sequential logical arguments, but in a common Hebraic approach of repeated cycles.
- The writer is setting out two worldviews, one which seeks to make sense of life without God, and the other from the position of loving and reverent obedience to God.
- The **first view** (and the bulk of the book) is viewing life “under the sun.” He takes the first view very seriously, and spins out the consequences of that perspective. This isn’t theoretical for him, but something that he actually tried. The frequent conclusion of this view is “vanity” (Heb. הֶבֶל {hebel} 33x = vapor, breath, i.e. something passing or transient).
- In the process, the writer shares in his **labyrinth of dead ends**, and continually returns to life with God.
- The failure of the first worldview is intended to create a **God-shaped vacuum**, and many tensions are not fully resolved until there is the Gospel answer and a future hope.
- There is a possibility that this is the “vanity” that Paul refers to in Romans 8:20, and the futility of mind of the unconverted in Ephesians 4:17 and the life of false teachers in 2Peter 2:18. These are the only places this word is used in NT (and LXX of Ecclesiastes).
- The **second view** is life in “the reverence of God.” In conclusion of his quest, he is trying to persuade the reader/hearer to make right choices, and not go down the path of vanity.
- We are intended to enter in, to **reflect**, to **meditate** on what is written. To feel the **despair**, to feel the **hope**.
- There is both an appeal to **reason**, but also a strong appeal to the **imagination**.
- It is one of the most prominent **philosophical works**, asking questions about metaphysics (what IS), epistemology (how do we KNOW), and ethics (how do we LIVE).
- There are **common themes** of how to make sense of life in a fallen world, the consequences of sin and death, work (both its joy and sorrow), creation (received as a good gift or used as an ends of itself) and the fear of God (as that which gives hope in such a world of vanity).
- The books is very “earthy” and practical.
Despite its brevity, the book covers virtually all of life: work, leisure, entertainment, time, worship, nature, money, death, sleep, eating, drinking, sex, farming, commerce, education, government. In covering all these areas, the book is perhaps the most modern in spirit of any book of the Bible, especially in its portrayal of an acquisitive and hedonistic lifestyle....Wisdom literature thus lets us know that the life of

faith does not whisk us away to some spiritual realm removed from everyday life. Instead, it is in the earthly routine that we live out the issues of faith. – Ryken's Bible Handbook

Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy....There was something we grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in the reality. – C.S. Lewis' Mere Christianity.

- This is known as the **law of “diminishing returns”** - the more you indulge in that which you seek pleasure, the less pleasure it gives and the more hunger it creates.
- Idolatry is not only in the form of idol worship, but anything sought as an ultimate purpose apart from God.
- The **overarching message** of the book is one of hope – hope generated by a worship of God in a fallen world.
- Assuming these events are real history, what might his life have looked like? He was well taught in the ways of God from His youth, and yet sought out vanity before he came to his senses (like the Prodigal Son).
- It is a sobering reality that many will pursue this path, but hope that the prodigal-hedonist that has been raised to know God can return – not without scars, but with the love of God ready to receive them.
- It is also a call to believers for a constant return to God when we have drifted and sought too much from life in this world, or seeking the good gifts apart from Jesus Christ.

OUTLINE¹

- I. **Introduction and Theme (1:1–3)**
- II. **First Catalog of “Vanities” (1:4–2:26)**
 - A. The “vanity” of the natural world (1:4–11)
 - B. The “vanity” of wisdom and knowledge (1:12–18)
 - C. The “vanity” of pleasures, possessions, and accomplishments (2:1–11)
 - D. More on the “vanity” of wisdom (2:12–17)
 - E. The “vanity” of labor (2:18–26)
- III. **Poem: A Time for Everything (3:1–8)**
- IV. **Fear God, the Sovereign One (3:9–15)**
- V. **Second Catalog of “Vanities” (3:16–4:16)**
 - A. The “vanity” of mortal life (3:16–4:3)
 - B. More on the “vanity” of labor (4:4–12)
 - C. More on the “vanity” of wisdom (4:13–16)
- VI. **Fear God, the Holy and Righteous One (5:1–7)**
- VII. **Life “Under the Sun” (5:8–7:24)**
 - A. Injustice (5:8–9)
 - B. Greed vs. contentment (5:10–6:9)
 - C. Wisdom for living “under the sun” (6:10–7:24)
- VIII. **The Heart of the Problem: Sin (7:25–29)**
- IX. **More on Life “Under the Sun” (8:1–12:7)**
 - A. Wisdom in dealing with foolish authorities (8:1–9)
 - B. The importance of fearing God (8:10–13)
 - C. The limits of human knowledge (8:14–17)
 - D. The unpredictability of life and certainty of death (9:1–6)
 - E. Finding enjoyment as circumstances allow (9:7–10)
 - F. More on the unpredictability of life (9:11–12)
 - G. The paths of wisdom and foolishness (9:13–11:6)
 1. The power of wisdom (9:13–18)
 2. Proverbs concerning wisdom and foolishness (10:1–20)
 3. Wise practices in light of the unpredictability of life (11:1–6)
 - H. Aging and the “vanity” of mortal life (11:7–12:7)
- X. **Final Conclusion and Epilogue (12:8–14)**

¹ From *ESV Study Bible*, Crossway Publishers.