

The Message of Ecclesiastes

Ken Wilson

This short summary will hopefully introduce the student of Ecclesiastes to the major issues that must be faced in interpreting and applying the book of Ecclesiastes. This is an extremely difficult book to deal with and it has a number of various interpretations. I will attempt to give recognition to the major points of view on most issues and then defend the particular approach which I feel is correct. I urge you to read through the book at least once sometime either before, during, or after you read this short summary. I am confident it will be much easier for you to understand the rest of the material which I have provided if you will read through the biblical material first.

The Name: Ecclesiastes or Qoheleth

Although this may not seem to be a major issue it may prove to be a bit confusing in reading the literature on this subject. The English name of the book is "Ecclesiastes" which comes from the Greek title of the book and means the *Preacher*. You may be familiar with the Greek word for church which is "ecclesia" – "church" and thus can see the connection that one who is a figure in the *ecclesia* would be and an *eclesiastes* – *preacher*.

Another name which the student will run across quite often is the name *Qoheleth* (pronounced "Ko-helleth"). This is the name taken from the Hebrew and it means something like *assembly* but we are not sure. You will also find in the literature that some people will refer to the book as *Qoheleth*, and sometimes they will refer to the author as *Qoheleth*, thus *Qohleth* says We don't know with complete certainty who *Qoheleth* is but it is likely Solomon whose quest for meaning is being presented by an unnamed narrator (1:1; 12:9-14).

The Genre: Wisdom Reflection

Although "genre" is a little known and infrequently used term in our daily lives, it is an important one. The term (pronounced "john-rah") refers to the literary type of the material. The most basic distinction is between prose and poetry. However, there are many more genres than this. For instance prophecy is also a genre. The genre that Ecclesiastes fits into what is called **Wisdom Literature**. Entire books have been written on the subject of the characteristics and origination of wisdom literature. A brief introduction will suffice here.

The subject of wisdom literature is practical everyday life. Other books in the Bible which fit into this category are Job, Song of Solomon and the most well known Proverbs. All of these books deal with day to day life related things. Song of Solomon = How to Love; Job = The proper response to suffering; Proverbs = How to Live a successful Life (*some parts of Ecclesiastes are exactly like Proverbs, cf. ch 10*). The question that Ecclesiastes answers is: What is the meaning of life or to catch the tone of the book a bit better "Is there a meaning to Life?"

It is best not to push Wisdom Literature into claiming anymore than it is saying. Although it is speaking about God and related issues, the focus of this genre is daily living. To extrapolate spiritual or theological conclusions is probably not what was meant by the original author.

One last note about wisdom literature. The Bible is not the only book to have wisdom literature. Many other sources had wisdom literature and much of it is quite similar to the Bible. One of the Kings of Egypt has a collection of Proverbs that is almost a reproduction of



many of the proverbs in the book of Proverbs. The question (which cannot be answered) then becomes which came first the book of Proverbs and then the Egyptians copied, or the Egyptian stuff and Solomon copied. Either way is an option and it does not really matter, the material in the Bible does not have to be original to be scripture it just has to be what the Holy Spirit wanted in the Canon.

Interpretations of Ecclesiastes

A wide range of interpretations can be found for this book. Some say the Qoheleth was a wicked man and his reflections on life show that he is a wicked man. They turn to the passages which say "*Eat, drink, and be merry*" and say that a spiritual man would not say these things.

Some say that this is Solomon after he wandered from the Lord and that the first half of the book represents his wanderings from the Lord and that the only things worthwhile in the book is the last few verses in which he sets for the advice to "*Fear God and keep His commandments*".

It seems best to me to take the entire book as a reflection upon the meaning of life. In the book we find that every human has a "quest" which cannot be avoided. The universal quest is to find the meaning of life. (1:12-13). This leads to a **question**. What will be the end of our work (1:3)? The **answer** is: Only God knows, we cannot know. The **conclusion**, therefore is "Life in Vanity", i.e. It seems that there is no real discernible purpose to life here on earth (1:2, 14 and throughout the book). Growing directly out of this conclusions is the **Advice** which is twofold. **1. Enjoy your life as a gift from God (3:12-13, 22 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9). 2. Fear God and keep His commandments. (12:13, cf. also 3:14, 5:7).** The first part is emphasized because it is repeated and the second part is emphasized because it is at the end of the book, but both parts are essential to the understanding of the book. Thus the book can be understood best by looking at the following points.

1. **The Quest:** to find the meaning of Life. (3:11)
2. **The Question:** What will be the end of our work (1:3, 12-13)
3. **The Answer:** Only God knows, we cannot know (8:16-17; 3:11-12).
4. **The Conclusion:** Life is vanity: There is no real purpose to life here on earth (1:2, 14 etc...)
5. **The Advice:**
 1. Enjoy your life as a gift from God (3:12-13, 22 5:18-19, 8:15; 9:7-9 et al)
 2. Fear God and keep His commandments (12:13, cf. also 3:14, 5:7)

Overview:

If I were to describe the flow of the book, I would say that in the first few verses he sets forth what he will do and say in the book (1:1-11). As a wise king he is well resources with wealth, time and wisdom to look for meaning in life. He shows us that he determines that we cannot know the answer fully and concludes that "Life in Vain" or "without point" (which is true – Life on this earth "under the sun" has no lasting value). The rest of the book is like walking down a hallway with many doors in it. The doors open up into rooms with possible meanings of life – but when it is opened Qoheleth says, "I have been in there and that is not where the meaning of life is". As the reader opens all the doors with Qoheleth as a guide, it leads to a repeated piece of advice. Do not give up your quest—you can't because God has "set eternity in your heart" meaning that you are always going to be looking for an eternal perspective on life. However, since you will never figure it all out fully, **Enjoy your life as a gift from God**. But this is balanced with the warning at the end of the book **Fear God**. Ultimately God will judge you for how you live (12:14) so the wise person will enjoy God's gifts and walk in reverential fear and obedience to Him.