

# BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

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**Approximate date:** 900s B.C.E. (Right); 900s B.C.E. for composition of source material, 715-686 B.C.E. for redactions (conservative-moderate); 500s-300s B.C.E. (Left)

**Purpose:** to explain the common futility of human life

**Author:** Solomon (Right, some conservative-moderate); “Qohelet” (some conservative-moderate, Left)

**Location of author:** Land of Israel or Jerusalem (Right, conservative-moderate); Land of Israel, Jerusalem, and/or Babylon (Left)

**Target audience and their location:** people of Israel, later people of Judah (Right, conservative-moderate); Southern Kingdom returning or returned from Babylon (Left)

**People:**

Preacher/Teacher/Qohelet

**Places:**

Jerusalem

**Key Themes:**

the Preacher explains that everything is meaningless (or vanity) / there is nothing new “under the sun” (recurring) / the Preacher states that he was a king in Jerusalem / the Preacher explains how pleasures are meaningless / the Preacher took no benefit from learning wisdom / the Preacher says that he must leave his achievements to someone when he dies / the Preacher says that there is a “time” for everything / a man’s fate is the same as an animal’s / the Preacher speaks of the evil that is on the Earth / human beings must express great fear and awe for God / possessing riches can be meaningless / it is meaningless to have riches, wealth, and prosperity yet not be able to enjoy them / the Preacher speaks about the advantages of wisdom / human beings are to obey secular authorities (that punish criminals) / every human being, good or evil, is destined to physically die / the Preacher speaks of how wisdom is properly applied / the Preacher admonishes his listeners to remember their Creator

**Key Scriptures:** Ecclesiastes 1:1, 9-10, 16-17; 2:4-9, 10-11, 15-16, 17-18, 24-26; 3:1-8, 19-20; 4:13; 5:18-19; 6:12; 7:11-12, 20-22, 29; 9:7; 12:1, 13-14 / **Qohelet’s personal experience** (1:1-2:26); **Qohelet’s general observations** (3:1-5:20); **Qohelet’s practical counsel** (6:1-8:15); **Qohelet’s final conclusion** (8:16-12:14)

**Theological Summary:** The Book of Ecclesiastes is one of several important wisdom texts in the Hebrew Tanach. Its Hebrew title, *Qohelet* (קֹהֵלֵת), is derived from the term *qahal* (קָהָל) or assembly, with its author understood as some kind of officer of an assembly. Its Greek Septuagint title is *Ekklesiastēs* (ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΣΤΗΣ, derived from the equivalent *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) for *qahal*. The designated speaker in Ecclesiastes is Qohelet, which some prefer to render as “Teacher” (NIV, NRSV) or “Preacher” (NASU), because they are unsure what else to render it as.<sup>1</sup> Jerome interpreted it in his Latin Vulgate as *concionator*, a speaker before the assembly.<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes is placed among the Wisdom Books in Christian tradition, but in Jewish tradition is part of the five *Megillot* of the Writings.

Ecclesiastes is generally a text that is consulted when considering the frailties of human existence, and also the reality of death. There are mixed interpretations and views of Ecclesiastes from both Jewish and Christian readers. Some believe that it is an important text with an important message, and others consider it to be pessimistic and full of inconsistencies.

The text of Ecclesiastes is strictly anonymous from internal first person references, although there are several important propositions concerning its authorship—which notably conservatives are not agreed upon.

Jewish tradition widely espouses Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes,<sup>3</sup> although some Talmudic tradition indicates that Ecclesiastes was preserved by the men of Hezekiah (b.*Bava Batra* 14b-15a).<sup>4</sup>

Many presume that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes based on some internal remarks (1:1, 12, 16; 2:4-9; 7:26-29; 12:9), notably making light of the author’s wisdom, interest in proverbs, and building projects.<sup>5</sup> It is believed that Solomon is reflecting on the negative actions of his life in his twilight years. Those who accept Solomonic authorship date the text to sometime in the 900s B.C.E., perhaps 940 B.C.E.

A significant number of conservatives (including the author) seriously doubt Solomonic authorship. The writer is strictly known as Qohelet in Ecclesiastes<sup>6</sup> and Solomon is not at all mentioned by name. The same verses that are often used to point to Solomonic authorship are also used as being against it: “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem...I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem” (1:1, 12). Must we assume that “son of David” means that Qohelet is the immediate son of David, or could he also be his descendant? Note that Qohelet later says, “I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me” (1:16). If Qohelet is Solomon, then the “all” who were ruling Jerusalem before him were just David, and not a plural line of kings from the Davidic line as is implied.

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<sup>1</sup> James L. Crenshaw, “Ecclesiastes, Book of,” in *ABD*, 2:271-272.

<sup>2</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1072.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Machinist, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1605.

<sup>4</sup> “Hezekiah and his colleagues wrote Isaiah, Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Qohelet” (b.*Bava Batra* 14b-15a; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Edward McComiskey, “Ecclesiastes,” in *NIDB*, 290; J. Stafford Wright, “Ecclesiastes,” in *EXP*, 5:1140.

<sup>6</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 1074-1075; Dillard and Longman, 249.

Conservatives who doubt Solomonic authorship often do so because “so much profound and godly wisdom originates with a man who eventually apostasized” (Dillard and Longman),<sup>7</sup> as Solomon is not often an example of great piety to consider in Scripture. Many conservatives instead advocate that a later monarch of the Southern Kingdom—yet of the Davidic line—was responsible for Ecclesiastes.<sup>8</sup> Note that the time represented throughout Ecclesiastes does not conform well to Solomon’s reign as it is replete with hardship and difficulty for Israel.<sup>9</sup> But this does not mean that much of Ecclesiastes’ valid wisdom is not Solomonic in origin, having been passed down in the royal court of Judah.<sup>10</sup> Some would suggest that the second wise man seen in Ecclesiastes is the actual author.<sup>11</sup>

Those who doubt Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes also point to a later and more refined style of Hebrew that is used in its composition,<sup>12</sup> one that is replete with Aramaisms<sup>13</sup> and borrowed Persian words.<sup>14</sup> There is, however, renewed debate over whether or not the Hebrew style is really that late, with some proposing that Solomon employed a scribe with a unique style to write his treatise.<sup>15</sup> Even though there are many conservatives who doubt Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes, they do not doubt the importance of the text.

Liberal theologians deny any Solomonic involvement whatsoever with Ecclesiastes. They propose that Ecclesiastes was written sometime around the Maccabean era of the 200s B.C.E., considering its author to be a Jewish sage “schooled in the wisdom tradition and affected by the spirit...of Greek philosophy” (*IDB*).<sup>16</sup> Liberals assume that the author speaks as a pseudonym for Solomon, but nothing more. Some Jewish liberals are a little more reserved, preferring to date Ecclesiastes to the Sixth to Fourth Centuries B.C.E.,<sup>17</sup> with a few conservatives concurring with this assessment.<sup>18</sup> Liberals are unsure as to whether Ecclesiastes is a single work, or is a product of several authors.<sup>19</sup> Some go as far as suggesting that Ecclesiastes was originally an Aramaic secular work religiously adopted and updated with a form of late Hebrew.

Comparison with Ancient Near Eastern literature supports an earlier dating of Ecclesiastes,<sup>20</sup> likewise realized by the fact that the author of Ecclesiastes demonstrates no familiarity with Greek literature or composition. The default position of either conservatives or liberals is to refer to Ecclesiastes’ author as simply Qohelet.

<sup>7</sup> Dillard and Longman, 248.

<sup>8</sup> McComiskey, “Ecclesiastes,” in *NIDB*, 290.

<sup>9</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1074.

<sup>10</sup> W.J. Beecher and C.E. Amerding, “Ecclesiastes,” in *ISBE*, 2:13.

<sup>11</sup> Dillard and Longman, 250.

<sup>12</sup> Harrison, pp 1074-1075; Beecher and Amerding, “Ecclesiastes,” in *ISBE*, 2:13; Wright, in *EXP*, 5:1141.

<sup>13</sup> Crenshaw, “Ecclesiastes, Book of,” in *ABD*, 2:274-275.

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Farmer, “Ecclesiastes, Book of,” in *EDB*, 367.

<sup>15</sup> Wright, in *EXP*, 5:1142.

<sup>16</sup> S.H. Blank, “Ecclesiastes,” in *IDB*, 2:7; cf. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 1075-1076.

<sup>17</sup> Machinist, in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1605.

<sup>18</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1077.

<sup>19</sup> Crenshaw, “Ecclesiastes, Book of,” in *ABD*, 2:272.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, in *EXP*, 5:11476-11447; Dillard and Longman, pp 251-252.

The Hebrew text of Ecclesiastes is in generally good condition, with its Greek Septuagint translation being quite formal.<sup>21</sup>

The theological focus of Ecclesiastes is the usage of human wisdom. Some postulate that Solomon is reflecting on his wanton life and cannot see beyond the visible world. Others see a more general attitude in mind with the people of Israel being addressed by a court servant. The common themes seen in Ecclesiastes are that human life is “meaningless” (1:2, NIV) and that one must “fear God and keep His commandments” (12:13). However, many have considered Ecclesiastes to be hedonistic because of Qohelet’s remark, “There is nothing better for a man *than* to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good” (2:24). “[T]he majority of interpreters judge him to be a consummate pessimist who despairs finding any good in life” (*New Interpreter’s Study Bible*),<sup>22</sup> but some actually consider him to be an optimist because of his pessimism.

In Ecclesiastes we see that human wisdom has its limits (1:13, 16-18; 7:24; 8:16), and that human beings cannot achieve anything of endless endurance. One’s experience often comes with disappointment. Much of Ecclesiastes has a negative tone, forcing the reader to turn to God and not his or her own strength for support.<sup>23</sup>

It should be noted that Ecclesiastes was a controversial text in the Jewish canon<sup>24</sup> and that its status was seriously questioned.<sup>25</sup> The Pharisaical School of Hillel considered Ecclesiastes to be a text that soils the hands.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, “The book’s relative skepticism made it an offense to some of the conservative school (Shammai) within Judaism” (*ISBE*).<sup>27</sup> The more progressive School of Hillel ultimately accepted it, but Jewish unhappiness toward Ecclesiastes continued well into the Fourth Century C.E. The controversy surrounding Ecclesiastes primarily concerned the Pharisees’ thought that Ecclesiastes did not uphold the doctrine of resurrection. **Any Messianic interpretation of Ecclesiastes needs to be tempered by this same skepticism.**

The Christian theological tradition has likewise been suspect of Ecclesiastes, mostly because of its negative and soulish tone. But this has been changing in recent years, with some interpreters leaning toward the position that “Qoheleth is addressing the general public whose view is bounded by the horizons of this world; he meets them on their own ground, and proceeds to convict them of its inherent vanity” (*NBCR*).<sup>28</sup> This would require the author to speak in more secular terms, and for us to understand his Earth-bound perspective. “[A]lthough there is little developed sense of the hereafter, Qoheleth has no doubt that God, who rules over all, will some day or in some manner bring every act to judgment, whether

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<sup>21</sup> Wright, in *EXP*, 5:1149.

<sup>22</sup> Eunny P. Lee, “Ecclesiastes,” in *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, 929; cf. J.F. Priest, “Ecclesiastes,” in *IDBSup*, 249.

<sup>23</sup> Priest, “Ecclesiastes,” in *IDBSup*, 250.

<sup>24</sup> G.S. Hendry, “Ecclesiastes,” in *NBCR*, 570; Machinist, in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1605.

<sup>25</sup> Wright, in *EXP*, 5:1137.

<sup>26</sup> Blank, “Ecclesiastes,” in *IDB*, 2:7.

<sup>27</sup> Beecher and Amerding, “Ecclesiastes,” in *ISBE*, 3:14; cf. Wright, in *EXP*, 5:1148-1149.

<sup>28</sup> Hendry, in *NBCR*, 570.

good or evil (12:14)” (*ISBE*).<sup>29</sup> The inclusion of Ecclesiastes in the Christian canon also found some skepticism, but was assured given Paul’s reference to the book in Romans 8:20.

Ecclesiastes is a common text from the Tanach read in today’s Messianic community. It is commonly read during the season of *Sukkot* or the Feast of Tabernacles, a tradition going back to the Eleventh Century C.E.<sup>30</sup> Most Messianic readers, however, are unfamiliar with the controversies surrounding it in both Jewish and Christian history. Few are aware that Solomon was probably not the author of Ecclesiastes. Likewise, a significant theological weakness among some Messianics is that Ecclesiastes is often given more weight than the Gospels or Apostolic letters in examining some issues, notably those of death and the afterlife. We have the strong responsibility to not treat Ecclesiastes in isolation from the rest of the Bible,<sup>31</sup> while respecting its unique message and the presentation style of Qohelet.

### **Bibliography**

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## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON ECCLESIASTES:

**1. How easy, or difficult, is it to read and interpret Ecclesiastes?**

**2. Who do you believe the Teacher/Preacher or Qohelet is, or might be? How might this affect your interpretation and application of the text?**

**3. How much theological weight do you believe Ecclesiastes should be given in the scope of the larger Biblical canon? (Be honest if you have never considered this before.)**

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<sup>29</sup> Beecher and Amerding, “Ecclesiastes,” in *ISBE*, 2:12.

<sup>30</sup> Blank, “Ecclesiastes,” in *IDB*, 3:8.

<sup>31</sup> Wright, in *EXP*, 5:1137.

**4. What important lessons might today's Messianic community learn by listening to the message of Ecclesiastes?**

REFLECTION ON ECCLESIASTES' PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

*Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Book of Ecclesiastes:*