

Introduction

In 1641, the father of modern philosophy, Rene Descartes, published his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. The *Meditations* trace Descartes' three-year quest to systematically doubt everything and set aside those things that could not be established with certainty. At the end of his philosophical journey, Descartes could only be certain of one thing: "Cogito ergo sum," which translates, "I think, therefore I am." From this premise, he reconstructed all meaning and value on the foundation of human reason. Much like the *Meditations*, Ecclesiastes grows out of a quest for meaning: "I, Qohelet, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 1.12-13a). Having heard from diverse perspectives on Wisdom in Proverbs and experienced God on trial in Job, we continue our study of "The Wise King" through the Qohelet's quest for meaning in Ecclesiastes.

What is Ecclesiastes?

People generally know that Ecclesiastes is about the "vanities" of human existence. More popularly, people have encountered Ecclesiastes through the classic song "Turn, Turn, Turn" made famous by the Byrds in 1965 (3.1-8) and the oft-quoted phrase, "a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (4.12). But what is Ecclesiastes, exactly?

The title "Ecclesiastes" comes from a transliteration of the Greek translation (LXX) of the Hebrew word Qohelet (קֹהֵלֵת) that appears in 1.1, 12; 7.27; 8.8-10: **Εκκλησιαστού** (literally, "Ecclesiastou"). The Hebrew word Qohelet derives from the Hebrew root (קָהַל) that encompasses ideas around people assembling or public gatherings. Qohelet has commonly been translated in English Bibles as "The Teacher" or "The Preacher" following Luther's German translation, "der Prediger." In this rendering, Ecclesiastes is considered a "sermon" or "teaching" delivered by a wise teacher. However, Qohelet could just as easily be translated "collector" or "gatherer," envisioning Ecclesiastes as a collection of meditations that have been edited together. Either way, Ecclesiastes presents itself to the reader as the reflections of a "king over Israel in Jerusalem" who has broad-ranging experiences and shares what he has discovered about life's meaning through those experiences. Like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes intends to be received as an authoritative meditation on human experience consid-

ered through the lens of wisdom and faithfulness before God.

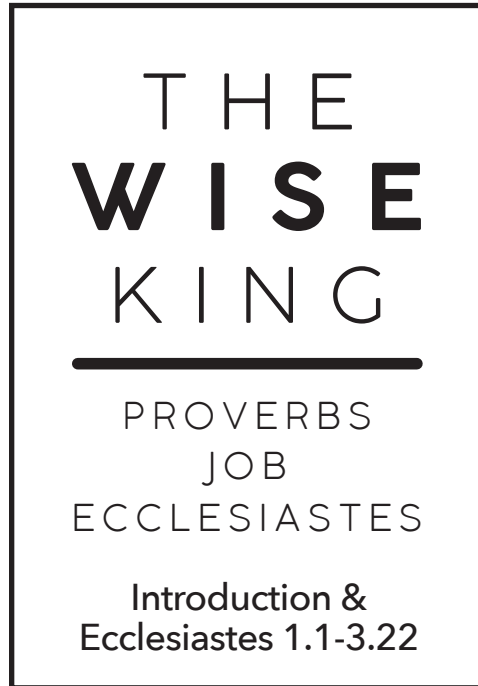
Who is the Narrator?

In 1.1 Qohelet is identified as "the son of David, king in Jerusalem." This title immediately points the reader to King Solomon, although he is never directly named throughout Ecclesiastes. 1.12 reinforces this identification when Qohelet is referred to as "king over Israel in Jerusalem," and 1.16 extends the attribution by the claim of the narrator that, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." 2.9 points to Solomon in its claim, "[s]o I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me," and in 2.12 in its question, "for what can the one do who comes after the king?" In the tradition of Israel's kings, Solomon was heralded for his wisdom, wealth and range of experience. His many wives were emblematic of the positive international relationships King Solomon enjoyed with leaders throughout the

region. And during his reign, Jerusalem was at the height of its power. While Ecclesiastes could be said to speak generically of the Davidic line of Kings in Jerusalem, who better to reflect on the breadth of human experience with wisdom than King Solomon?

While Solomon is clearly intended to be the narrator of Ecclesiastes, the Hebrew text recalls an era long past Solomon's reign. The social and economic landscape and the linguistic forms clearly reflect a time after Israel was released from Babylonian captivity and was living under Persian rule (c. 500 BCE). As we have noted previously, it is not unusual in the ancient world for a text to reflect authorship by a significant figure from the past in order to lend it credibility. While we may consider that "lying" from our modern, historical vantage point, the ancients simply believed that what they were writing had ultimate value and, in most cases, would have been affirmed by the figure named as author.

As will become clear in our brief journey through Ecclesiastes, the initial narrator is an unknown sage from the post-exilic period of Israel living under Persian rule. As his (likely) meditations were taken up into the cultural life of a



resettled Jerusalem, they become increasingly meaningful for hearers and readers and were eventually taken up into the literary tradition radiating from the second Temple out to the emergent synagogues across the Persian and then Greco-Roman empire. As the Hebrew canon took shape, Ecclesiastes found its final form through a skilled editor who sought to align these meditations more closely with the wisdom tradition reflected in Proverbs.

Beyond the tradition-history of the text of Ecclesiastes, Qohelet's meditations have remained part of the Hebrew Bible and the canon of the Christian tradition for centuries. People of faith and even secular philosophers in every age have found Ecclesiastes worthy of careful consideration and deep reflection as a witness to an substantial person's authentic reflections upon the pursuit of life's ultimate meaning.

What is Ecclesiastes About?

We have already indicated that Ecclesiastes is a report of Qohelet's quest for ultimate meaning and value. Several repeated phrases introduce us to a few of the insights Qohelet discovers on his journey.

"Everything is Vacuous"

The word הבל (hebel) occurs 78 times in the Old Testament and 38 of those occurrences are in Ecclesiastes. הבל is often translated "vanity," but to grasp the full range of its meaning I translate the word as "vacuous." Throughout Ecclesiastes Qohelet searches for something he can hold onto - something with integrity, substance, and solidity. He finds many things empty, without value, and unsubstantial, which is what I am calling "vacuous." While Descartes marked "uncertain" those things that failed him in his quest for truth, Qohelet calls "vacuous" everything he once thought held ultimate value and filled his existence with meaning.

"Under the Sun"

Qohelet uses this phrase to define the range of his inquiry. Qohelet is not doing biblical theology, where the witness of God's being and character in Scripture are assumed as the foundation for philosophical inquiry. Rather, Qohelet begins with and remains within the domain of human experience as he seeks meaning. "Under the sun" remains the realm of God's Creation, but it is the space in which Qohelet discovers both "vacuousness" and also the ground of meaning that he repeatedly returns to in Ecclesiastes.

"Striving After the Wind"

Qohelet repeatedly characterizes many forms of human activity as a "striving after the wind." The phrase bears an interesting parallel to "vacuous," since the words include the connotation of breath or wind. Both words are used to point to the absolutely fluid, unsubstantial nature of human existence. The more Qohelet explores his experience in an effort to ground meaning, the less he is able to grasp. Everything he believes to be solid and substantial is found to be ephemeral and ungraspable, akin to trying to capture the wind.

"Wisdom" and "Knowledge"

The words חכמה ("wisdom") and ידע ("knowledge") occur with great frequency in Qohelet (חכמה appears 28 times; ידע appears 36 times). The use of the term "wisdom" secures the place of Ecclesiastes alongside Proverbs and Job as wisdom literature. Like Job and Proverbs, Qohelet pursues his quest by (1) seeking wisdom and (2) proceeding wisely. As Job 28 affirms, wisdom is God's domain of understanding. Qohelet shares the confidence that any insight into the meaning and value of human existence will only be discovered by inquiring through God's wisdom into these questions. Proceeding "by wisdom" is also the wise way to pursue Qohelet's questions - for him, there aren't any alternatives. "Knowledge" is wisdom's companion on the quest, coming alongside as the confident results discovered during the quest. Qohelet "knows" what results from his pursuit of "wisdom." This knowledge is not absolute, but is what wisdom provides for Qohelet's consideration on the stages of his journey into deeper understanding.

An Overview of Ecclesiastes

Readers of Ecclesiastes quickly discover that Qohelet's exploration into life's meaning and purpose is more stream of consciousness than logically-structured. He introduces several areas for exploration in the opening verses and revisits them in seemingly circular fashion through the course of his exposition, moving between philosophical meditation to ethical reflection. Moving from one thread of exploration to the next as they unfold throughout Ecclesiastes would be the best approach to plumb its depths, but our current schedule only allows for a four week journey that we will pursue as follows:

- 1.1-3.22: Introduction and Initial Explorations
- 4.1-6.9: Living in the Light of Initial Findings
- 6.10-8.17: Additional Explorations
- 9.1-12.14: Wise Living in God's World and Epilogue

Qohelet is a worthwhile companion alongside of whom to plumb the depths of human experience in order to determine where genuine value and meaning lie. Ultimately, genuine value and meaning reside with God, but are also found in a life of contentment with one's circumstances.

Ecclesiastes 1.1-3.22

1.1-11: All Human Striving is Vacuous

Ecclesiastes opens with a summary statement (1.1-11) by Qohelet who is clearly characterized as King Solomon even though his name is never directly mentioned. As noted in the introduction, the passages in Ecclesiastes that provide clues to the identity of the narrator (1.1, 12, 16; 2.9, 12) only point to the possibility of King Solomon. However, since Ecclesiastes simply cannot possibly derive from the era of King Solomon and the author/editor did not make a direct identification with King Solomon, we will address the narrator by the Hebrew name given, "Qohelet."

At the head of his report (1.2) Qohelet tells us the base finding of his exploration of human existence, and it is a very pessimistic and sobering judgment: When pursued to its depth, everything within the range of human experience is vacuous, empty, unsubstantial and without ultimate value. The burden of the remainder of Ecclesiastes is to substantiate this audacious claim and explore what it means to live in this reality.

His opening question explores what people gain from their work when considered in the scope of God's creation and human history. Creation operates in a cyclical fashion - the sun rises and sets, the winds blow to and fro, and rivers pass into seas - without consideration for human being and thriving (1.5-7). Based on surface observation, human effort has little impact on these base operations of the cosmos. Second, all that people have perceived during the span of human history demonstrates very little variation (1-8-11). Qohelet claims that from era to era people see, hear and experience the same things, which is something that in broad strokes can be quickly verified by reading primary sources from across human history. Of course, this insight makes the claim that something is "new" highly problematic (1.9b). To drive the point home, Qohelet reminds us that people come and go in the flow of time and, while remembered for a time, often fade into the flow of history. Based on these observations of human experience, Qohelet affirms that "all things are wearisome" and found wanting when it comes to their ultimate value.

1.12-2.11: All Human Pleasure and Even Wisdom Itself is Vacuous

Having set the stage in a way that might raise the objections of readers both ancient and modern, Qohelet revisits his credentials to establish his authority to make such audacious claims. As "king over Israel in Jerusalem" (1.12), one who has "acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me" (1.16), whose heart "has great experience of wisdom and knowledge" (1.16), and who "became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem" (2.9) he has a unique platform from which to make his observations. Again, Qohelet as narrator is clearly identified with King Solomon and, as such, has a unique standing in the history of Israel.

Qohelet builds upon his summative claim that all human striving "is vacuous, a chasing after the wind" (1.14), concluding in this section that the pursuit of knowledge through wisdom (1.17-18), human pleasures that come as a result of labor (2.1-3, 10), and great wealth (2.4-8) are also "vacuous and a chasing after the wind" (2.11) - a common refrain throughout Ecclesiastes. Gaining insight through wisdom is the engine that drives Qohelet's quest, so to claim that his effort to discern wisdom from "madness and folly" is "a striving after the wind" is surprising. (1.17) But even though "wisdom brings great frustration and increasing knowledge increases pain" (1.18), Qohelet ultimately discovers that "my wisdom remained with me" (2.9) and that "wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness" (2.13). While the knowledge gained from wisdom may not deliver Qohelet to the solidity he seeks, wisdom remains the proper means through which to navigate human inquiry into ultimate meaning and value.

2.12-26: Death and Providence - the Great Equalizers

Having reaffirmed the value of wisdom (2.13-14), Qohelet discerns that the value of being wise is relativized by death. That is, the ultimate end for the wise person and the fool are the same, so he "hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind" (2.17). He then despairs over the fact that all that he has worked for "with wisdom and knowledge and skill" (2.21) in the course of his life would be passed onto the next generation, which may not handle it with the same care. For Qohelet, this reality makes the hard and enduring work of work meaningless since the one who toils does not get to enjoy the fruit of his (or her) labors; they are enjoyed (and possibly exploited and squandered) by another.

This section closes with a claim that summarizes Qohelet's inquiry to this point: "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil"

(2.24). Qohelet perceives this as the way that God cares for God's creatures, "for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?" (2.25). So for God's creatures, meaning in life is found in the midst of hard work, in finding enjoyment in one's work, and the results of one's work realized in food and drink. Whether someone is wise or foolish, a lord or a laborer, wealthy or poor, she should find joy and pleasure in the midst of her circumstances because it is God who cares for her wherever she might be. While Qohelet's initial conclusion resonates positively with other moments in Scripture that suggest we ought to be content with God's care where we find ourselves, we should remember that Qohelet arrives at this affirmation from a point of deep pessimism, which we hear loudly in the closing verse of this chapter.

In 2.26, Qohelet considers what he understands as God's economy (or God's way of caring for the world) to be "vacuous and a chasing after wind" because there is no distinction between the one who lives with prudence and the one who lives foolishly. In the case of Qohelet the "king" (2.12) his wisdom, knowledge and joy may be passed on to a fool in the end, and "losers" (2.26) who "gather" and "collect" (2.26, each term has the same meaning as Qohelet) pass what they gather to those God favors. So, Qohelet sees himself here as having no distinction from the fools in his conception of God's providence. His seeming affirmation about human thriving, then, doesn't find any solid ground.

3.1-15: Living With Heavy Determinism

This section contains what is probably the most recognizable portion of Ecclesiastes. And yet, as is often the case in these matters, the popular understanding of this passage slightly differs from the meaning of the text. Coming out of his dark and pessimistic assessment of God's care for God's creatures, Qohelet surmises that "for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (3.1). As the notes from the classic Byrds song rise up in our hearts and minds, the preamble sounds like a moment of resolve. Life is not vacuous, absurd or meaningless. Everything in human experience comes in seasons and times that are ordained by God. This seems to be the promise implicit in the preamble: God has a purpose in God's timing for all of the events in the course of human experience.

However, what Qohelet has in mind renders more as a complaint on the order of Job than a positive affirmation of God's concern for humanity. Qohelet stresses in 3.1 that "everything" and "every matter" has a predetermined and appointed time ("season") that falls outside of the range of human control. As winter moves into spring, spring to summer, summer to fall, and fall to winter (1.2-11) without

the need for human intervention, so the question raised in 3.1-8 is how ought humanity respond to the reality of God's determination of events that simply come upon us in the course of life? As C.L. Seow notes in his commentary on Ecclesiastes in the Anchor Bible Series, "The occasions [in 3.2-8] are not those that human beings plan, nor are they contingent on human decisions....There are occasions in which people find themselves, and they can only respond to them" (Seow, 171). The emphasis of Qohelet in the poem is upon God's determination of events and the inability of humanity to determine the course of their lives.

This reading of 3.1-8 is substantiated by the commentary Qohelet provides in 3.9-15. He returns to the question in light of the poem about the benefits of workers for their toil (3.9). People find themselves caught between the present moment in which they find themselves and a "sense of eternity in their hearts" (3.11). While humans have a "sense of eternity," they cannot access the broad catalog of God's activity across history (3.11). Thus, human experience is primarily characterized by its limits. Since humanity finds itself existing in the context of God's "eternal" activity (3.13) that they cannot affect, Qohelet reaffirms that the value of human being is in being happy and enjoying life to the full (3.12). In fact, Qohelet affirms it is God's gift to humanity to "eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil" (3.13). So, Qohelet perceives human being as extremely limited because while we bear a sense of the eternal within, God holds humanity within a highly deterministic scheme that binds their individual and collective will. The best they can do is enjoy life within its bounds.

3.16-22: Humanity as Mere Creatures

Qohelet's initial explorations draw to a close with two additional findings. First, he observes along with the Old Testament Prophets that in the courts righteousness and wickedness are inextricably intertwined (3.16). Since this is the case, human justice devolves into a pure power play that is no different than alpha males in the wild battling to the death to establish authority. There is no longer any qualitative distinction between God's human creatures and God's other living creatures (3.18). Human righteousness and justice is just mere windowdressing for the exertion of "power over" those deemed "unjust" or "unrighteous."

Secondly, Qohelet affirms that while human justice is tinged by wickedness, God's truly righteous judgment is not (3.17). Since humans are acting like animals, God treats them like animals such that "as one dies, so does the other" (3.19a). So, he surmises, "humans have no advantage over the animals" (3.19b) and any proposal that humans have some advantage over God's other living

creatures is found wanting (3.19b). Since there is no possibility of a human-animal distinction and we are "mere creatures," Qohelet surmises that "there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work" (3.22).

Summary

To this point, Qohelet has arrived at a terribly pessimistic assessment of human meaning and value "under the sun." What does life look like within this stark conception of being human in the God's world? Qohelet will speak to this question in 4.1-6.9.