

ECCLESIASTES – SHORT VERSION

Introduction. Ecclesiastes, the title given to this book, is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Qoheleth meaning “teacher,” “preacher,” and “one who presides at an assembly.” Scholars believe Ecclesiastes was written in the post-exilic era around 300 B.C.

Qoheleth, the author’s literary name, was a wisdom teacher who lived in Jerusalem. He may have been quite well off, and now, as an old man, is looking back over the meaning of life or the lack of meaning in life; hence, his most famous phrase: “*Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!*”

The theme of the book of Ecclesiastes—the vanity of all things—is pursued relentlessly. In his introduction to the book, Fr. Peter Ellis, C.S.S.R., writes:

All man’s labors are vain (1:4-11), wisdom itself only leads to greater perplexity (1:12-18), pleasure brings no enduring satisfaction (2:1-12), the wise man as well as the fool ends up in the grave (2:13-17), the pursuit of wealth is a chase after the wind (2:18-26), the unchanging order of events impresses upon life a lamentable monotony (3:1-13), and the uncertainty of the future places a pall over the present (3:14-22). Thus it goes to the end of the book....

The book, therefore, cries out for the revelation of the future life given to the Jews only in the last two centuries before Christ in the books of Daniel (12:2-3), 2 Maccabees (6-7), Wisdom (2-5), and the Gospels. Ignorant of the solution to his insoluble dilemma and his insatiable yearnings, he is forced to satisfy himself with the act of faith contained in the epilogue of his book: “The last word, when all is heard: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is man’s all” (12:3)....

It is to the lasting glory of Qoheleth that he sensed and expressed with unforgettable clarity the yearnings of man’s heart for the mansions of heaven long before God made them a subject of divine revelation. Indeed, his unflinching appraisal of the hard and inescapable realities of life prepared his readers to answer a resounding “Nothing!” to the question of Christ (Matthew 16:26): “What does it profit a man if he gained the whole world and suffers the loss of his soul?” (The Men & Message of the Old Testament, pp 514-515)

Commenting on Ecclesiastes, Diane Bergant writes: *Qoheleth described himself as a man who had the opportunity and the means to pursue all of the pleasures that life had to offer, and he was successful in his pursuits (Eccl 1:12-2:17). Still he was dissatisfied. Where then was one to find satisfaction? The answer to this question is found in those passages that some have misinterpreted as hedonistic; satisfaction is to be found in the very act of living itself. Qoheleth’s message reveals a profound appreciation of the fact that life is primarily for living. Every human endeavor, regardless of its own intrinsic value, holds a secondary place to this. All toil, all progress, all organization have merit to the extent that they promote and enhance living. This is a religious message for Qoheleth, who maintains that the creator has implanted the capacity for happiness in each and every human heart, has made living and exciting venture, and wills that every person be afforded the opportunity to find pleasure in living. (Israel’s Story—Part Two, p.83)*

Another scripture scholar, Robert Davidson, writes a final introductory comment:

The author of the book was well aware, as we shall see, of the traditional faith and religious teaching that had shaped his people’s life. Such things, however, no longer seem to ring bells for him. Somewhere along the line the answers he had been taught no longer satisfied him. He takes a long cool look at life and experience as it comes to him, and reaches very different conclusions. Some of his comments are so sharp and provocative that many scholars believe that what he wrote has been toned down and made more acceptable to more conventional religious minds by the addition of verses like 12:13: “Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man”... Certainly this is a man who puts a large question mark against many things that others believed. In this he is, perhaps, close to many people today who are brought up in the Church, brought up to accept traditional Christian teaching, yet who find that neither the Church nor that teaching any longer make much sense to them. (The Daily Study Bible Series —Ecclesiastes and the Son of Solomon, pp 5-6)

Division of Chapters

Introduction (1:1-11)

Part 1: Qoheleth's Investigation of Life (1:12-6:9)

Part 2: Qoheleth's Conclusions (6:10-12:8)

Epilogue (12:9-13)

CHAPTER 2: The pursuit of pleasure, wealth, wisdom and other things

"I said to myself, 'Come, now, let me try you with pleasure and the enjoyment of good things.' But behold, this too was vanity." (v.1)

"Nothing that my eyes desired did I deny them, nor did I deprive myself of any joy, but my heart rejoiced in the fruit of all my toil." (v.10)

"I went on to the consideration of wisdom, madness and folly. I saw that wisdom has the advantage over folly as much as light has the advantage over darkness." (vv 12-13)

"There is nothing for man than to eat, drink and provide himself with good things by his labors. Even this, I realized is from the hand of God. For who can eat or drink apart from him?" (vv 24-25).

Verses 1-12—Study of pleasure-seeking. Qoheleth felt that maybe the meaning of life is to be found in wine, women and song, in the pursuit of all the good things that life has to offer. Soon he finds out that pleasure by its nature is transitory. Even though he seems to have no regrets for his pursuit of pleasure, he also discovers that it does not give meaning to life. It is *"all vanity, a chase after the wind"* (v.11).

As for material riches, these in the end will be left to others. We are reminded of the rich young man who built big barns to accumulate and store more wealth, but did not live to enjoy it.

CHAPTER 3: The seasons in a person's life

Verses 1-15—Seasons. Now we come to some of the best known verses not only in this book but in the whole Bible and in all sacred books that deal with the seasons in a person's life. The text lists fourteen pairs of opposites, e.g., to be born and to die, to kill and to heal, to love and to hate, and so on. Some of the

seasons might scandalize us, such as "a time to kill" and "a time to hate."

The season's text has been likened to a large tapestry finely put together with many colored threads. We look at it (at our lives) and try to understand it. What is the divine purpose in it all? We may die wondering. The well-known piece called "The Weaver" speaks to this question.

*My life is but a weaving
between my Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colors
He worketh steadily.
Offtimes He weaveth sorrow,
and I in foolish pride
forget He sees the upper,
and I, the underside.
Not till the loom is silent
and the shuttles cease to fly,
shall God unroll the canvas
and explain the reason why
the dark threads are as needful
in the Weavers' skillful hand
as the threads of gold and silver
in the pattern He has planned.
(Author Unknown)*

CHAPTER 9: Happy and gloomy words

"Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart, because it is now that God favors your works.

"At all times let your garments be white, and spare not the perfume for your head.

"Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of the fleeting life that is granted you under the sun. This is your lot in life for the toil of your labors under the sun.

"Anything you can turn your hand to, do with what power you have; for there will be no work, nor reason, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the nether world where you are going." (vv 7-10)

"Though I said wisdom is better than force, yet the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words go unheeded." (v.16)

Some have wrongly called Qoheleth a hedonist because he so frequently encourages us to eat, drink and be merry, as he does once again in this chapter. But he has never told us to get drunk or be promiscuous. Qoheleth is essentially a man of faith. All good comes from God and even though many

things in life vex Qoheleth, he says all we can do is to enjoy our life, celebrate, dress up, wear perfume, and enjoy our spouse.

CHAPTER 11:9-12:8: Poem on youth and old age

The *Collegeville Bible Commentary* states:

The final hymn is to life. This is one of the most hauntingly beautiful poems in all of literature. The impact is achieved by a careful conjuring up of images and balancing of structure.

We can see the sun shining, the clouds gathering, the dawn and the sunset, the birds in the trees, the village well. Yet these images are also carefully balanced against opposites. Light and darkness, the nothingness of death and the life breath jostle one another. The strong stand but they are bent; the mill still grinds, but slowly; the birds sit in the trees, but do not sing; the well is full of water, but no one is around, and as one looks, the rope breaks and the bucket falls into the depths.