Introduction

to

Ecclesiastes
Introduction to Ecclesiastes

Preliminary Observations:

I. Ecclesiastes is part of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. (Youngblood)

II. The book takes its name from the Greek word, ekklesiastes, which means “convener of an assembly” (Youngblood) and is, “the title of the book in the Septuagint.” (Smith)

III. Ecclesiastes’ Hebrew name, Qoheleth, (koheleth), means “Preacher” or “speaker.” (Youngblood)

Theme of Ecclesiastes:

I. Ecclesiastes deals with the meaning of life and contends that all human achievements are empty and disappointing when pursued as ends in themselves. (Youngblood)

II. Ecclesiastes appears to be pessimistic and depressing in many respects and shows that wisdom, pleasure, hard work, popularity, wealth, and fame fail to bring lasting satisfaction. (Youngblood)

III. The book ends on a high, positive note, the conclusion of all that is said in Ecclesiastes being, “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” (Youngblood)

IV. Bland wrote, “In Ecclesiastes, the journey leads to the search for meaning in life. Underlying . . . is the desire to manage the complexities of life and the “messes” that one encounters along the way. If individuals can find order or God or meaning in life, then they can navigate life’s rocky shoreline.”
V. Ecclesiastes, Bland further wrote, “questions conventional wisdom that says the righteous will live well and securely through all of life and the unrighteous will receive their just deserts.”

VI. The frequently used word *hebel*, literally breath, mist or vapor is used 38 times in the Book of Ecclesiastes, more than in the rest of the Old Testament put together and is usually translated *meaningless*. (Bland)

A. The word is variously translated vanity, emptiness, useless, brief. (See Bland)

1. Psalm 144:4, Man is like a breath; his days are like a fleeting shadow. (NIV)

2. Proverbs 31:30, Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. (NIV)

3. Proverbs 21:6, A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a deadly snare. (NIV)

4. Ecclesiastes 6:12, For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone? (NIV)

5. Ecclesiastes 11:10, So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are meaningless. (NIV)

B. Sometimes it carries the idea of being beyond human comprehension or beyond human control.
1. Ecclesiastes 8:14, There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless. (NIV)

2. Ecclesiastes 3:11, He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. (NIV)

VII. Ecclesiastes also contains numerous passages advising that life be enjoyed. (Bland)

A. Ecclesiastes 2:24-26, A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (NIV)

B. Ecclesiastes 3:12, 13, I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God. (NIV)

C. Ecclesiastes 3:22, So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him? (NIV)

D. Ecclesiastes 11:7-10, Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun. However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything to come is meaningless. (NIV)
VIII. Life has both the characteristics of meaningless brevity and incomprehensible perplexity, but, even so, life can be blessed with joy! (Bland)

A. These are not contradictory but different aspects of human earthly life. (Bland)

B. Humans are advised that human limitations are to be recognized and contentment learned. The rest is to be left in the province of the sovereign Lord. (Bland)

IX. Coffman, quoting Wright, accounts for the pessimistic and optimistic expressions in the book of Ecclesiastes which superficially may appear to be contradictory as simply being two sides of a logical argument, a rather common ancient literary technique.

A. Davidson wrote, “Hebrew, unlike English, makes no use of quotation marks, so there are places in the book where we are not sure whether we are listening to the writer’s own views or whether he is quoting and commenting on the views of others. What we think he is doing can make a great difference to the meaning of a passage.”

X. “The so-called contradictions within the book indicate that Koheleth was wrestling with the complexities of life.

A. “Some apparent contradictions can readily be resolved when one recognizes that the author often quoted material in order to refute it.” (Smith)

XI. Koheleth “speaks of the two types of passages found in the book – the negative and the positive – under the metaphors of ‘the goads’ and ‘the nails.’
A. The goads (the passages which view life negatively) are those which prod the reader to think, to evaluate.

B. The nails (the positive, God-centered passages) are the fixed points of reference in the quest for meaning.” (Smith)

XII. Smith’s chart lists “Ten Vanities” with references identified in the Book of Ecclesiastes:

A. Human Wisdom.

1. Ecclesiastes 2:15, 16, Then I thought in my heart, "The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?" I said in my heart, "This too is meaningless." For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die! (NIV)

B. Human Labor.

1. Ecclesiastes 2:19-21, And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. (NIV)

C. Human Purpose.

1. Ecclesiastes 2:26, To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to
hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (NIV)

D. Human Rivalry.

1. Ecclesiastes 4:4, And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (NIV)

E. Human Avarice, Greed for Money.

1. Ecclesiastes 4:6, 7, Better one handful with tranquillity than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind. Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: (NIV)

F. Human Fame.

1. Ecclesiastes 4:16, There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (NIV)

G. Human Insatiety, Not to be Satisfied.

1. Ecclesiastes 5:10, Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless. (NIV)

H. Human Coveting.

1. Ecclesiastes 6:9, Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (NIV)
I. Human Frivolity.

1. Ecclesiastes 7:6, Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless. (NIV)

J. Human Awards.

1. Ecclesiastes 8:10, 14, Then too, I saw the wicked buried—those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless. There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless. (NIV)

Note: Ecclesiastes 2:11, Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. (NIV)

Authorship and Date:

I. Solomon, a man of special wisdom, is the recognized author of Ecclesiastes.

A. Ecclesiastes 1:12, 13, I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! (Youngblood) (NIV)

B. “The traditional view of the synagogue is that Koheleth was a nickname for Solomon.” (Smith)
II. Solomon reigned from 970-931 B.C.

A. Ecclesiastes may have been written toward the end of his reign (circa 977 B.C.) after having “come to himself” following his long years of apostasy and his restoration to faithful service to God. (Youngblood)

B. Clarke, on the other hand, found no record of Solomon’s return to righteousness and felt the book was written earlier in his career.

III. A minority of scholars holds that a person other than Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes because the book is said to contain words and phrases that belong to a much later period in Israel’s history. (Youngblood)

A. Davidson and the Pulpit Commentary are of this persuasion.

IV. An editor may well have been instrumental in compiling Ecclesiastes. (See Bland)

A. Ecclesiastes 1:1, The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: (NIV)

B. Ecclesiastes 7:27, "Look," says the Teacher, "this is what I have discovered: "Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things-(NIV)

C. Ecclesiastes12:9, 10, Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true. (NIV)

V. Smith wrote, “The Jewish tradition is that Solomon wrote the Song of Songs/Solomon in his youth, Proverbs in his maturity, and Ecclesiastes toward the end of his reign of forty years.”
A. 1 Kings 11:1, King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. (NIV)

B. Matthew Henry wrote that Ecclesiastes “is a penitential sermon . . . in which the preacher sadly laments his own folly in promising himself satisfaction in the things of this world. His recovery is a proof of the power of God’s grace, in bringing one back to God . . .”

C. Psalm 51:13, Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. (NIV)

D. Jewish tradition has an occasion questioned the orthodoxy of Ecclesiastes, but not its authorship. (See Pulpit Commentary)

VI. The Pulpit Commentary speaks of Koheleth as personified wisdom. (See Wright)

A. The Preacher/Koheleth is meant to designate the author “as one who by word of mouth instructed others, but one whose life and experience preached an emphatic lesson on the vanity of mundane things.” (Pulpit Commentary)

Theological Contributions:

I. “Great earthly accomplishments and the accumulation of riches will not bring lasting satisfaction, a lesson our society badly needs to learn well!” (Youngblood)

II. Life is to be enjoyed through grateful appreciation of God’s daily blessings. (Youngblood)
A. Ecclesiastes 3:12, 13, I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God. (NIV)

B. Ecclesiastes 2:24, 25, A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? (NIV)

C. Ecclesiastes 5:8, If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. (NIV)

D. Ecclesiastes 8:15, So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun. (NIV)

E. Ecclesiastes 9:7-10, Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom. (NIV)

III. Our life is to be balanced.
A. Ecclesiastes 12:1-7, Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them"-before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain; when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim; when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when men rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets. Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. (NIV) (Youngblood)

IV. Old age with its afflictions are soon coming and Koheleth counseled his audience, “Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, . . .” (Youngblood)

V. Smith wrote that there are “No direct quotes from Ecclesiastes in the New Testament although there may be allusions to it” as follows:

A. Romans 8:20, For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope. (NIV)

B. James 4:14, Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. (NIV)
VI. Bland noted that Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes never refers to God by the name Yahweh (Jehovah), but always as ElOhim.

A. God is described, Bland further noted, as active, transcendent, inscrutable, sovereign, determiner of the future, controller of history, mysterious who is to be feared and obeyed.

B. Bland wrote, “Divine sovereignty and human freedom stand in tension in Ecclesiastes.”

1. Proverbs 16:1-9, To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the LORD comes the reply of the tongue. All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD. Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed. The LORD works out everything for his own ends—even the wicked for a day of disaster. The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished. Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for; through the fear of the LORD a man avoids evil. When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him. Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice. In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps. (NIV)

2. Ecclesiastes 11:9, With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous escape. (NIV)

3. Ecclesiastes 12:14, For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. (NIV)
C. Bland observed that, even though Qoheleth observed life that involved oppression, greed, discontentment, futility, frustration, affliction and anger, it also was seen to contain joy.

1. Rather than being pessimistic, mankind is advised to “accept his lot and be happy in his work” because “this is a gift of God.” (Bland)

2. “Mortals have the responsibility to enjoy the life God has given them.” (Bland)

VII. Coffman wrote, Ecclesiastes is an exposition of the curse of the Fall (Genesis 3:17-19). If one leaves God out of his life, our sin-cursed world will for that man most certainly prove to be vanity of vanities; but, if one will “Remember the Creator” (12:1) and honor the duty that he owes to God, that vanity will find its resolution in the happiness of the redeemed.

A. Genesis 3:17-19, To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." (NIV)

B. Ecclesiastes 12:1, Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them"- (NIV)
VIII. Smith wrote, The so-called negative sections of the book amount to an expose of the very things which dominate modern cultures: sex, work, education, fame, drink.”

A. “The writer creates a rogue’s gallery of satirical portraits of the:

1. hedonist, one who lives for pleasure, self-indulgence.

   a. Ecclesiastes 2:1-11, I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. "Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?" I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives. I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was
meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. (NIV)

2. workaholic.

a. Ecclesiastes 2:18-23, I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless. (NIV)

3. plutocrat, a wealthy person of power.

a. Ecclesiastes 5:8-17, If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields. Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless. As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them? The sleep of
a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep. I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner, or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him. Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand. This too is a grievous evil: As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind? All his days he eats in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger. (NIV)

4. fool.

a. Ecclesiastes 7:1-8, A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure. It is better to heed a wise man's rebuke than to listen to the song of fools. Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless. Extortion turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart. The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride. (NIV)

5. unfaithful woman.
a. Ecclesiastes 7:26-29, I find more bitter than death
the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and
whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God
will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare.
"Look," says the Teacher, "this is what I have
discovered: "Adding one thing to another to
discover the scheme of things— while I was still
searching but not finding— I found one upright
man among a thousand, but not one upright woman
among them all. This only have I found: God made
mankind upright, but men have gone in search of
many schemes."

B. “Ecclesiastes stands as the ultimate critique of secular
humanism,” Smith well wrote.

IX. Jamieson, Fausset and Brown concluded, “Solomon shows the
vanity of all human things to satisfy the soul, and that heavenly wisdom
alone is the chief good.”
References


Questions

Introduction to Ecclesiastes

1. How did Ecclesiastes get its name? __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

2. What Old Testament books constitute the Wisdom Literature category?
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

3. Why is this group of books known as Wisdom Literature? __________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

4. “__________ deals with the ___________ of ___________ and contends that all ____________
   ____________ are ____________ and ____________ when pursued as ____________ in ____________.”
   (Youngblood)

5. Why is Ecclesiastes regarded by some as a pessimistic, depressing book?
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
6. Do you agree with this view? Why or why not? _______________

7. Bland wrote, “In Ecclesiastes, the ____________ leads to the ____________ for ____________ in _____________. Underlying . . . is the desire to manage the ____________ of ____________ and the ‘ ____________’ that one ____________ along the way. It ____________ can find ____________ or ____________ or ____________ in _____________, then they can ____________ ____________’s ____________ _____________.

8. ____________ “questions ____________ ____________ that says the ____________ will ____________ ____________ and ____________ through all of ____________ and the ____________ will receive their ____________ ____________.” (Bland)

9. What does hebel mean and how is it used in Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes? ________________

10. Does Ecclesiastes’ advise to enjoy life mean that it shares the Epicurean philosophy? Explain your answer. ________________
11. “_____________ has both the _____________ of _______________ _____________ __ _______________, but, even so, life can be blessed with joy! (Bland)

12. Does Ecclesiastes advocate a stoic philosophy? ________________

13. Are the pessimistic and optimistic expressions in Ecclesiastes contradictory? Explain your answer. ____________________________

14. What problem does the absence of quotation marks in the Hebrew language produce for students of Ecclesiastes? ________________________________

15. What does the reference to **goads** and **nails** teach? ______________
16. List ten vanities mentioned in Ecclesiastes, define each and specify what is meaningless about each. (See Smith)

17. Who wrote Ecclesiastes? Give reasons for your answer?

18. What is the minority opinion in regard to authorship? What evidence supports this view?

19. When was Ecclesiastes written? Give evidence to support your answer.
20. Youngblood wrote, “Great ___________ and the ___________ of ___________ will not bring lasting ___________, a lesson over ___________ badly needs to learn well.”

21. How does Ecclesiastes teach that life is to be enjoyed? ___________

22. How can you bring more balance to your life? ___________

23. What is the main point made by Ecclesiastes? ___________

24. What is said in the New Testament reflecting what is said in Ecclesiastes? ___________
25. How is God described in Ecclesiastes? (See Bland) ____________

26. How are “divine sovereignty and human freedom (shown to) stand in tension in Ecclesiastes?” Give examples. (See Bland) ____________

27. How does man’s fall (Genesis 3:17-19) relate to what is said in Ecclesiastes? ____________________________________________

28. Smith wrote that “______________ stands as the ________________
___________ of ________________ ______________.”

29. Smith further wrote that “The ___________ creates a __________
___________ of ________________ ______________ of the
_____________,’_________________,’_________________.’
and____________________________.” Define each of these. (1) ___
(2) ________________________________
30. “____________ shows the ______________ of all ______________ to ______________ the ______________, and that ______________ ______ _________ alone is the ______________ ______________.” (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown)