OVERVIEW OF ECCLESIASTES

By Ashby L. Camp

I. Introduction to Lesson

A. I think few would quarrel with J. Stafford Wright's description of Ecclesiastes as "one of the most puzzling books of the Bible." Part of the difficulty is that the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes is unusual in comparison to the other O.T. books. It is loaded with difficult words, grammar, and syntax, but the difficulty runs deeper than the language. It includes identifying the genre, structure, and ultimately the meaning of the book.

B. The bulk of the book is skeptical and pessimistic, a complaint about the apparent meaninglessness of life and the inability to perceive "rhyme or reason" in the world. It thus resonates with our present atheistic culture, though God's existence is not doubted in the book.

C. As one commentator (Longman) summed up the theological outlook of the central portion of the book (1:12 - 12:7), "Life is full of trouble and then you die." The most pressing issue is how such theology fits with the rest of Scripture. Just consider:

1. The speaker in the central portion of the book is a man who goes by the Hebrew nickname Qohelet. His most frequent refrain is "Meaningless, meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" He uses the term "meaningless" in well over thirty passages. His frustration was so great that he "hated life" (2:17). A world without meaning does indeed drive one to despair.

2. According to Qohelet, even wisdom is ultimately meaningless because both the fool and the wise man end up dead (2:14b-16). Indeed, he counsels in 7:15-16 that people *not be* "too good or too wise" because he has seen the good die young and the wicked live long. As he sees things, goodness and wisdom do not really matter, so one should not labor too hard in their pursuit. That's quite a contrast to how the pursuit of wisdom is portrayed in Proverbs and the pursuit of righteousness is portrayed throughout Scripture.

3. As far as Qohelet knew for certain, death was the end of the story.

a. As far as he could tell, the dead know nothing, have no reward, and are forgotten (9:5).

b. He writes (3:19-21): "Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath (spirit); man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust and to dust return. Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?"

c. To Qohelet, death is like a severed rope, a broken bowl, a shattered pitcher, and a ruined wheel (12:6). Life is valuable, but it is completely ruined at death. He has no hope (confidence) that things will be "put right" after death.

D. I pondered Ecclesiastes for years and read others who have pondered it far longer, but for a long time I never really felt like I was "getting it." In 1998, thanks largely to the work of Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman, I made what I believe was a significant advance in my understanding of the book. I wanted to share that perspective with you this morning. Of course, disagreements over how best to understand the book remain. I offer the following for your consideration.

II. Framework for Understanding Ecclesiastes

A. The title "Ecclesiastes" comes from the main speaker in the book, the man named Qohelet. It is a nickname that literally means "one who assembles or convenes (a group)." It is often translated into English as "the Teacher" or "the Preacher" on the assumption the person is called "the assembler or convenor" because he gathers people to teach or preach to them. The name was translated *Ekklēsiastēs* in Greek, then *Ecclesiastes* in Latin, and thus Ecclesiastes in English.

B. Though Qohelet is the main speaker in the book, he is not the book's author. The author or composer is an unidentified narrator. This person speaks in the prologue (1:1-11) and epilogue (12:8-14) and thus frames the lengthy first-person narration of Qohelet (1:12 - 12:7).

1. Notice that Qohelet is referred to in the third person in 1:1-2 and 12:8-10. Throughout 1:12 - 12:7 Qohelet speaks in first person, with the one interjection by the narrator in 7:27. Qohelet's story has been incorporated into the larger work of the author.

2. Longman has found that the first-person section (1:12 - 12: 7) follows the general pattern of a kind of ancient autobiography. This suggests it is a separate and complete literary unit. If that's correct, then Qohelet's work, his reflective autobiography, was known and used by the author or narrator of Ecclesiastes in composing his own work.

3. Longman suggests, and it answers a lot of questions for me, that Qohelet's lengthy autobiographical speech has been incorporated into Ecclesiastes by the book's author, no doubt himself a wisdom teacher, as a foil for his point that efforts to comprehend reality that are divorced from divine revelation are at best inadequate and at worst futile and dangerous. In other words, the point of Ecclesiastes, its normative or authoritative value, is derived from the author's (or "frame narrator's") negative judgment on the teaching of the skeptic which comprises most of the book.

4. Qohelet's road is one of despair because he restricts his inquiry to a perspective "under the sun," a phrase he employs 26 times in the book. This phrase is analogous to the phrases "under heaven" (1:13, 2:3, 3:1) and "on earth" (5:2, 8:14, 8:16, 11:2) which he also uses multiple times. Qohelet is trying to perceive reality from "down here," by resort to his intellect, observation, and experience, without factoring in or relying on revelation from above, the word of God entering into the world from heaven. This is so much the road of our world. It insists on viewing this world without regard to the revelation of God, on interpreting reality from scratch so to speak.

5. The structure of Ecclesiastes is somewhat like the Book of Job. The arguments of Job's friends and even Job regarding his suffering reflect an inadequate understanding of God's relationship to Job's situation. Not that everything that they say is wrong, but much is out of keeping with the divine perspective revealed in the Yahweh speeches at the end of the book. "We need to read [Qohelet's] comments in the light of the evaluation of the second wise man [the author or frame narrator] in much the same way we read the speeches of Job's three friends in the light of the Yahweh speeches at the end of the book of Job" (Longman, CBC, p. 257).

C. Qohelet has traditionally been considered to be Solomon, who was king in Jerusalem after David in the 10th century B.C., but there is good reason to believe Qohelet simply was adopting the *literary persona* of Solomon as a vehicle for presenting his skeptical theology.

1. He did so because Solomon was the ideal historical person to make his point that the best efforts to find satisfaction and meaning in life fail. If Solomon could not find satisfaction and meaning through wisdom, wealth, women, and building projects, no one can.

2. The readers of Qohelet's day would have understood what he was doing and would not have taken the allusions to Solomon as a claim that Qohelet was actually Solomon. They apparently were familiar with this genre of writing, what Longman calls "fictional (or pseudonymous) autobiography." These works were written years, often centuries, after the noted historical figure died and were identifiable by the subject and form of the writing.

3. If someone in 2015 wrote a critique of today's civil rights movement implying in various ways that he was Martin Luther King, Jr., everyone would understand that the modern author was linking himself to Dr. King as a way of reinforcing the insightfulness of his critique. If anyone would be in a position to recognize failings in today's civil-rights movement it would be the man historically identified with civil-rights politics. We as readers would understand that the writer was not trying to pass himself off as MLK – who has, after all, been dead for almost 50 years – but was associating himself with King for rhetorical or literary purposes.

4. In addition to the form of 1:12 - 12:7, which is consistent with ancient writing known as pseudonymous autobiography, there are some clues in the book that Solomon was a literary persona.

a. Rather than explicitly identify himself as Solomon, the skeptic only does so indirectly. The nickname Qohelet ("one who assembles") may well be an allusion to Solomon's assembling of the people for the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8. The verbal root *qhl* occurs quite often in that section. If Solomon himself was the author, there does not seem to be any reason for his adopting such a name. It is more likely that the nickname was adopted to associate the actual writer with Solomon while retaining his distance from the actual person. It is a way of indicating that the Solomonic persona is being adopted for literary and communicative purposes.

b. Ecclesiastes 1:12 says, "I, Qohelet, was king over Israel in Jerusalem." There was never a time that the real Solomon could have written such a thing because he died while ruling Israel (1 Kings 11). He never "used to be" king over Israel. It is a signal that the author is

harking back to an historical figure and writing as if that figure were alive in his day. He *was* king back in the 10th century B.C.

c. Ecclesiastes 1:16a says, "I said to myself, 'I have surpassed in wisdom everyone who ruled Jerusalem before me.'" David was the only Israelite king in Jerusalem before Solomon. This again is a signal that the section was written by someone adopting the persona of Solomon rather than by Solomon himself. The association with Solomon is presented in an obviously loose way.

d. The association between Qohelet and Solomon is adopted only during the search for meaning (1:13 - 6:9), and even after the first three chapters the distance between Qohelet and Solomon widens. In 4:1-3 Qohelet bemoans the oppression he sees and the fact the oppressed were powerless against their oppressors, but certainly the king would be in a position to do something about that situation. Moreover, Solomon is said in 1 Kings 12:4 to have placed a heavy yoke of hard service on the northern tribes which is at odds with the sentiment expressed by Qohelet. In 5:8-9 Qohelet says it is the king who profits from oppression of the poor field workers thus putting quite a gap between himself and the king.

5. In 1:1 the author or frame narrator takes Qohelet's identification with Solomon at face value. That need not mean he is affirming that Qohelet is in fact Solomon. On the contrary, I think it likely the author simply is presenting Qohelet's work on its own terms without addressing whether the identification with Solomon is intended to be taken literally. That it should not be taken literally is indicated by some of Qohelet's own statements as I just noted, but for purposes of the author's critique the literary packaging is not important. The author is going to assess Qohelet's message as written, on its substance not its literary form. Now if you think that is an unreasonable view of 1:1, you will conclude that Qohelet is indeed Solomon, which raises its own issues.

6. But note that even if one believes Qohelet was Solomon, it would not make Solomon the author of Ecclesiastes. Remember, the "author" is the narrator who incorporates the work of Qohelet into his own composition. The traditional view that sees the third-person references to Qohelet as changes between the young and old Solomon seems quite strained. Why would the older Solomon refer to himself as a young man using the third person? Further, the third-person reference in 7:27 seems clearly to mark the presence of a narrator who is distinct from Qohelet.

D. If Qohelet was not Solomon, who was he?

1. We know little about him, but the author or frame narrator provides some information in 12:9. Longman translates 12:9 as: "Furthermore, Qohelet was a wise man. He also taught the people knowledge." The narrator simply tells us that Qohelet was a "wise man" by profession and that in that capacity he also taught people. This is not an endorsement of all Qohelet has to say. There are, after all, examples in the Bible of bad "wise men," e.g., Jonadab (2 Sam. 13:3; unofficial wise man) and Ahithophel (2 Sam. 16:15 - 17:29). (This is not to claim Qohelet was evil or shrewd like those men; it is to say only that labeling him a "wise man" is not an endorsement of all he says.)

2. I think, with Longman, that Qohelet can be described as a confused wise man. Longman writes (CBC, 254):

> He is someone who knows the wisdom teaching of Israel well but has set out to understand life on his own and is frustrated and confused by life's incongruities and mysteries. This being the case, it is not surprising that in some cases we see the Teacher [Qohelet] contradicting himself, as he turns sometimes to his knowledge of traditional wisdom for answers and at other times to his own anecdotal observations of life (e.g., 3:16-22; 7:3-9; 11:9).

E. About the author or frame narrator, we can only surmise that he was also a wisdom teacher, one who speaks as an insider when he critiques Qohelet (12:8-12).

III. Some Issues Raised By This Framework

A. The key to how one should read Qohelet's words, whether cautiously and critically as one would read the words of Job's friends or as inspired truth as one would read the Book of Proverbs, is how one understands the author's appraisal of Qohelet in 12:8-12. Opinions vary on that score, but it makes more sense to me, following Longman, to understand them as a respectful distancing from or an implicit critique of Qohelet's teaching. That does not mean everything Qohelet says is wrong, any more than everything Job's friends say is wrong. Rather, it means his "under the sun" perspective is inadequate and pulls him to an improper and even dangerous skepticism and pessimism. I will give Longman's quite literal translation of each of these verses and then comment briefly.

1. Verse 8: *"Completely meaningless," Qohelet said. "Everything is meaningless."* In 1:2 the author gave this same summary of Qohelet's pessimistic teaching as an introduction to what would be presented in Qohelet's reflective autobiography given in 1:12-12:7. He repeats it here after having presented Qohelet's words. That is Qohelet's bottom line.

2. Verse 9: *Furthermore, Qohelet was a wise man. He also taught the people knowledge. He heard, investigated, and put in good order many proverbs.*

a. As I said earlier, labeling Qohelet a wise man does not mean the author is endorsing everything he said. It could be, and here I think is, a statement that Qohelet was a "wise man" by profession; he functioned in that role or capacity. That need not mean he was pious or spiritually attuned to God in all his theology and counsel.

b. Qohelet did indeed teach the people knowledge as far as it goes. He made keen observations about life viewed "under the sun," but by restricting his view to that perspective he was driven to warped conclusions.

c. Indeed, instead of praising Qohelet for having insight into life the author gives a neutral statement; he simply reports the mechanical actions Qohelet performed: he analyzed and classified many proverbs. It is like damning him with faint praise. He is shown some respect, but he is not honored for his contribution.

3. Verse 10: *Qohelet sought to find words of delight and to write honestly words of truth.* The author says that, as is true of most wise men, Qohelet's *goal or intention* was to bring delight through the presentation of the truth, but he does not say he achieved that goal. In fact, he implies the contrary by saying Qohelet *sought* to do those things. Seeking and finding are two different things. Qohelet admits that he sought to find many things but was constantly frustrated (7:24-29; 8:17). His entire life was spent seeking and coming up empty. The implication is that this is but another of his failures, at least when it comes to ultimate meaning.

4. Verse 11: *The words of the wise are like goads, and like firmly implanted nails are the masters of collections. They are given by a shepherd.*

a. "Masters of collections" refers to the group of sages who belonged to the guild responsible for gathering and transmitting wisdom teaching. A goad is a sharp-pointed stick used to direct animals. The two clauses of 11a are parallel, which implies that the nails mentioned are firmly implanted in a stick that is used to prod animals.

b. The last words of v. 11b commonly are translated "one shepherd," and shepherd is sometimes capitalized as though it is a reference to God. But the word "one" can function as an indefinite article as in Longman's translation, and I think that reflects the better understanding.

c. The point of the verse, as I see it, is that the teaching of those in the "wisdom profession" is very influential, like the sharp or nail-studded sticks a shepherd uses to move the sheep in the direction he wants. They were analogous in that regard to modern-day scholars (in fact, the NKJV translates "master of collections" as "words of scholars"). This is good or bad depending on the teacher's insight, depending on whether the shepherd does in fact know the right way. If the wise man is off base, as is Qohelet in significant particulars, the influence can be harmful.

5. Verse 12: *Furthermore, of these, my son, be warned! There is no end to the making of many books, and much study wearies the body.*

a. Most translations take the opening words to mean "And in addition to them" which has the author warning his son of anything *beyond* or *in addition to* the wisdom writings to which he just referred. Other Hebrew scholars, however, like Longman and Michael Fox, take the opening words as "Furthermore, *of these*." In that case, the author or frame narrator is telling the recipient of his work, his son (which may mean a disciple), to approach wisdom writings like Qohelet's with caution.

b He adds that there is an endless stream of books written by people purporting to provide true insight, but we are limited by our bodies in how much we can study and absorb. That means we must be judicious in the use of our study time and select our study material wisely. And as the next verses (12:13-14) indicate, we need to major in the inspired word of God.

B. There are a number of passages (2:24-26, 3:12-14, 3:22, 5:18-20, 8:15, and 9:7-10) in which Qohelet urges one to find contentment in eating, drinking, and labor, but in doing so he expresses resignation rather than affirmation. In the darkness of a life that has no ultimate meaning, the best one can do is to enjoy the temporal pleasures that lighten the burden. But since the ability to enjoy these things also is dispensed by God in accordance with his will, which to Qohelet seems like whim, Qohelet considers even this a chasing after the wind. He apparently did not consider himself a person so blessed by God (see, 5:18 - 6:12).

C. Isolated from the context of the book, some of Qohelet's statements about God are quite positive. For example, he says God is a giver of all good gifts (2:26), is sovereign over everything (7:13-14), is our Creator (12:1), and is the one to whom we owe our very existence (12:7). But in context, many commentators characterize Qohelet's view of God as distant, occasionally indifferent, and sometimes cruel.

1. James Crenshaw identified Qohelet as a prime representative of skepticism in Israel. He argued that "Israel's skeptics severed the vital nerve at two distinct junctures. They denied God's goodness if not his very existence, and they portrayed men and women as powerless to acquire essential truth."

2. Qohelet refers to God solely by the generic *elohim*, never by God's personal, covenantal name Yahweh.

3. God's sovereignty is affirmed by Qohelet, but this sovereignty actually calls into question God's concern for his people. From Qohelet's perspective, we are largely in the dark and things seem unpredictable and chaotic. He sees evil, injustice, and oppression, and nothing gives him any confidence God will set it all right.

4. Even 5:1-7 is a note of caution in dealing with the God who is so distant, perhaps even indifferent. He is to be "feared" in the sense of being afraid before such a powerful and dangerous being, not in the sense of respect or awe for a mighty and compassionate deity.