

COMMENTARY ON THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

1.

AUTHORSHIP, DATE, THEME, AND STRUCTURE

AUTHORSHIP. Until the rise of skeptical “scholarship” in the last three hundred years, Solomon was universally recognized as the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Those who question the authorship of Solomon never seem to be able to identify another individual who could have written the book. They just surmise that some unknown person wrote it many years after Solomon’s death. So many have made that claim that some consideration needs to be given in support of the traditional view. Four outstanding reasons may be cited.

The claim of the book itself. The first words of the Book of Ecclesiastes claim to identify the writer. They say plainly,

1:1 The words of the Proclaimer, son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Taken in their literal meaning, those words can apply to only one person in history. That person was Solomon. Attempts to make those words refer to someone other than Solomon have been singularly unconvincing. However, attempts have been made on three accounts:

(1) Some have claimed that the statement does not mean Solomon because the writer calls himself “the Proclaimer.” They propose that Solomon would have spoken of himself as King, speaking with authority, not as a herald seeking to gain a hearing through convincing words. Apart from the impossibility of the commentator’s supposing that he has the ability to enter into another person’s inner thoughts and determine what that person would or would not say, the claim of the critics is weak for the following reason:

The word translated “Proclaimer” has also been translated “Teacher,” “Preacher,” “Speaker,” “Spokesman,” and sometimes transliterated from the Hebrew as “Koheleth.” It is related to the Hebrew word that means “congregation” or “assembly.” It seems to refer to a person who speaks to a group of people who have gathered to hear his message. The Hebrew word for “congregation” can refer to a religious gathering or a secular gathering, and the message delivered to it also can be either. The content of the Book of Ecclesiastes does not resemble a sermon declaring moral or spiritual truth and calling people to action for God. It also does not resemble a lesson presenting facts on a particular subject. Yet it contains more emotion than would be expressed by just an intellectual address. It has all the marks of a compassionate appeal from an elder gentleman, encrusted with the experiences of life, appealing to younger men to avoid the mistakes he made and urging them to grasp onto the one truth that make life meaningful.

Before the days of newspapers, communities had men who traveled about proclaiming the latest news and sometimes proclaiming their philosophies. The position was important to the

unity of a community of that time. It was a worthy and respected position. Those who held the position often were called “heralds.” The writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes seems to have seen himself filling that kind of service as he shared conclusions he had reached from his experiences in life. Therefore, “Herald” or “Proclaimer” may be the most accurate translation into English of the word the writer used to describe himself.

The question is, Could Solomon have cast himself into that role, appealing for people’s attention, rather than commanding their obedience? At one stage in Solomon’s life, the answer to that question would have been, “No.” However, near the end of Solomon’s life God’s displeasure with his unfaithfulness (1 Kings 11:11-13) and the rise of opposition to his oppressions (1 Kings 11:14-40) humbled him and made him realize the folly and eventual failure of autocracy and of all human effort. In his earliest years as king, Solomon had a genuine faith and an humble desire to rule well with justice and mercy. As his rule grew in success and power, he abandoned that spirit and began to glory in himself and his accomplishments. However, he lived long enough to see the folly of living in that way. It is highly likely, even almost to be expected, that as he drew near to the end of his long life he returned to his humble faith and wanted to warn others against making the mistakes he had made. To do so, he would need to step down from his throne and present himself as a teacher, advisor, and proclaimer of wisdom. Doing so, made his words avoid the flavor of arrogance and enabled them to become warm-hearted advice from a man whom life had humbled into reality. The writer’s calling himself a “Proclaimer” in no ways eliminates Solomon from being the writer.

(2) Others have said that the phrases “**son of David, king in Jerusalem**” do not necessarily apply to Solomon, because the Hebrews often used the word “son” to refer to any male descendant. They say the reference could be to any one of the descendants of David who ruled as king in Jerusalem. David had nineteen direct descendants who ruled in succession as kings in Jerusalem before the remnants of the nation were carried away into captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Used in its broadest sense, “**son of David, king in Jerusalem**” could refer to any one of David’s descendants who succeeded to the throne in Jerusalem. However, no descendant of David other than Solomon ever achieved the scope of accomplishments or the breadth of experience that the writer describes in this Book. We must conclude that the Book claims to have been written by Solomon. That claim is so clear that it must be accepted until it has been proven decisively to be false.

(3) Some have said that the writer of Ecclesiastes was someone who researched Solomon’s writings many years after Solomon’s death and recorded his ideas but used language prevalent in his day to state them. They propose by that means to explain how the book can be about Solomon and still contain language that supposedly was typical of a later time. In that case, the opening statement of the book is a falsehood. It does not say that the book contains the ideas of Solomon but that it is the words of Solomon. If the opening words of the book make a false claim to gain a hearing, no reason exists to trust anything else that is written in the book. An honest evaluation of book is that either Solomon wrote the book or it is a forgery. If it is a forgery, it was a colossal mistake to accept it as an inspired book that belongs in the Bible. That view turns out to be not only an indictment of the truthfulness of the first words in the book but also of the good judgment of Jewish and Christian believers who almost universally accepted it as divinely inspired over the span of 2,900 years. Rejecting Solomon as the writer of

Ecclesiastes is equivalent to rejecting the book as inspired truth. The Bible is clear that rejecting or changing the inspired words of God is an extremely dangerous and deadly exercise (Rev. 22:18-19).

Striking similarities between the claims of the writer and the career of Solomon. A second reason for accepting Solomon to be the writer of Ecclesiastes is the close resemblance between what the writer says about himself and what other Scriptures reveal about Solomon. Some recognize that the book claims to have been written by Solomon but go on to hold that the writer of the book was someone who only claimed to be Solomon to gain a wider hearing for what he had to say. Aside from the fact that such an attempt to steal another's identity would be dishonest and unworthy of being included in a book of revelations from God, no one can write of the experiences of a person's life as powerfully or as convincingly as the person himself. The descriptions that the writer of this Book gives about Solomon fit so perfectly all that is known about Solomon's life and accomplishments that they give evidence of being testimonies of personal experiences. The descriptions of the Book parallel the life of Solomon in at least five significant ways:

(1) The writer claimed to have wisdom beyond all who had preceded him in Jerusalem (Eccl. 1:16). Solomon was recognized by God and by other rulers as superior in wisdom by all other wise men of that day. Other renowned wise men of that day actually are named in Scripture with the claim that Solomon's wisdom was superior to theirs, show that his wisdom was not just hypothetical but universally recognized (1 Kings 3:10-13; 10:1-9).

(2) The writer claimed to have experienced the height of pleasures (Eccl. 2:1-3). Solomon enjoyed the pleasures of great power and authority (1 Kings 4:1-19; 9:15-23), servants waiting on his every need (1 Kings 2:7), entertainment from song and magnificent luxury (1 Kings 2:8b; 10:14-29), protection from his enemies (1 Kings 10:1-40), and even decadence with an unbelievable number of women (1 Kings 2:8c; 11:1-6). If a pleasure existed, good or bad, that Solomon did not experience, it is impossible to imagine what it could have been.

(3) The writer claimed to have achieved great construction projects in the city and in the countryside (Eccl. 2:4-6). Solomon's buildings transformed Jerusalem from a dull stone town into a glittering city of cedar, marble, and gold. His most magnificent construction project was the temple in Jerusalem, which made it one of the wonders of the ancient world (1 Kings 5:1-7:51).

(4) The writer claimed to have amassed great wealth (Eccl. 2:8a). Solomon's wealth dazzled the Queen of Sheba and was beyond compare even by today's standards (1 Kings 10:6-7:29).

(5) The writer claimed to have such a great breadth of experience that he could say he had seen everything in his days of breathing (7:15) and had investigated and tested it all by wisdom (7:23-25). He supported that claim by quoting two long series of proverbs, one a series of 18 proverbs about righteousness (Eccl. 7:1-22) and the other a series of 7 proverbs about wisdom (Eccl. 8:1-8). Solomon was recognized as having gained such a wide knowledge of the world and its life that intellectuals came from all over the world to learn from him. He even

wrote extensively of the knowledge he had gained, being credited with composing 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:29-34)

No other person known to Bible students or historians ever fitted the descriptions the writer of this book gave of himself as perfectly as King Solomon. Therefore, the most natural conclusion is that Solomon wrote this book and that in it he tells accurately of his magnificent achievements.

Realism of the writer's disillusionment. A third reason for accepting Solomon as the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes is the realistic way it describes Solomon's disillusionment over his accomplishments. One reason some give for doubting that Solomon wrote the book is that the book speaks so disparagingly about the worth of Solomon's amazing accomplishments. They believe Solomon would not have spoken in such a depressing manner about his own spectacular achievements. However, it is really the person who looks at Solomon's life from the outside who is likely to miss depressing conclusions about his life. In terms of worldly success, Solomon was the most powerful and successful king who ever ruled Israel. An observer of Solomon would have been inclined to admire and praise his achievements, not disparage them. An outside observer would be inclined to surmise that Solomon felt some regret for his mistakes, as well as much satisfaction over his achievements. It is only when Solomon's experiences are observed from the viewpoint of what they did to him inwardly that a person can recognize the damage those successes did to him spiritually. The only person who could know genuinely about those spiritual consequences was Solomon himself. The writer's disappointment with the results of his great achievements is more natural coming from Solomon himself than from anyone else. It took Solomon to be able to proclaim that none of his accomplishments had any real value at all. Only he could see clearly that all of them were empty, worthless, vain, and useless, which is exactly what the writer of Ecclesiastes said about Solomon's life. The writer's rejection of the value of his many achievements does not contradict Solomon's authorship. It supports his authorship.

Truly from a spiritual point of view, Solomon's life was a huge disappointment. He began as a young man eager to please Jehovah. When he first became king, God spoke to him directly at the high altar in Gibeon and offered him whatever he wished. Solomon did not ask for long life or riches, but for wisdom to rule and judge with justice and mercy. God was enormously pleased with Solomon's request and promised to give him not only wisdom and understanding, but also riches and honor (1 Kings 3:1-15). However, years later, Solomon came to the end of his life as a man who had married an enormous number of foreign and pagan wives, built temples to honor their gods, and accompanied them to worship in those temples (1 Kings 11:1-10). Those departures from what God challenged him to be brought a stern rebuke to him from God and a promise from God that his kingdom was going to be broken up (1 Kings 11:11-13). It also aroused opposition from enemies both foreign and domestic, which he was able to control only with brute force (1 Kings 11:14-40). The result was the division of his kingdom after his death (1 Kings 11:41-24). Even more seriously, for his unfaithfulness to God, he was denied the honor of being included in the line of believers that led to Jesus (Luke 3:30). Who else could have felt the sting of his failures more keenly than Solomon himself? Who could have known so vividly how Solomon felt about his contrasting successes and failures other than Solomon himself? And who could have dared to write about his feelings so believably other

than Solomon himself? It is not remarkable, but realistic, that Solomon should have come to the end of his life disillusioned with his mad race after power and glory and willing to acknowledge that all of it was turning to dust in his hands. The gloomy view of the glory of human achievement that is expressed in this book supports the authorship of Solomon, rather than arguing against it.

Failure of theories that use vocabulary and style as arguments against Solomon's authorship. The evidence against Solomon's authorship that is most often cited is based on the claim that some words used in the book were not used in Solomon's time and styles of writing used in the book were not in vogue until many years after Solomon died. Though those arguments often are used by critics who doubt the truthfulness of Bible statements, those types of arguments have proven again and again to be flimsy and based on more imagination than reality. Counting the number of words used in a writing and comparing it with the number of times the same word is used in another writing proves nothing. Writers are extremely versatile in varying expressions according to the point they are making, and words that a writer uses vary widely according to the topic he is discussing. It is unrealistic to imagine that a writer must use the same words in every book he writes or that writers from the same period would use the same words. Furthermore, the history of the Hebrew language is too sparse to allow anyone to know which Hebrew words were in use or which styles of writing were in vogue at a particular time. Enormous disagreement exists among scholars about when a Hebrew word began to be used. Equal disagreement exists concerning whether or not a particular word was a loan word from a foreign language and concerning when a possible loan word might have been borrowed from another language. Every theory that has been based on that type of evidence has received as much scholarly evidence against it as for it. None of those theories applied to Ecclesiastes has been able to gain widespread support. Critics have wasted a lot of effort searching for linguistic evidence that does not exist. It is much wiser to read the book of Ecclesiastes to learn what vocabulary and style of writing Solomon employed than to use the vocabulary and style of writing in the book to try to determine whether or not Solomon wrote it.

The most convincing conclusion is that the Book of Ecclesiastes is what it claims to be and that it was written by Solomon in his old age to share what his enormously successful life had taught him about the disappointments and emptiness of all human accomplishments. It is best to see Ecclesiastes as a book that Solomon wrote to urge others to find something more satisfying to be the foundation on which to build their lives than success and wealth and fame.

DATE. The date when an Old Testament book was written depends on the chronology that is used by the student. Views have varied considerably concerning the dates of Solomon's reign; however, in recent years researchers have come to much greater agreement concerning those dates. Though it must be acknowledged that some historians doubt that Solomon ever existed at all, that view is becoming increasingly rejected; and researchers have come much closer to agreeing on the dates for his reign.

The date for the completion of Solomon's temple is now considered to be one of the most firmly established dates in Old Testament history. It is most often cited as 960 B.C. 1 Kings 6:38 says that it took seven years to build Solomon's temple and that it was completed in the eleventh year of Solomon's reign. First Kings 11:42 says Solomon reigned for 40 years. If 960

B.C. is the correct date for the completion of the temple, Solomon's reign was from 949 B.C. to 909 B.C. Because Ecclesiastes reviews the many accomplishments of Solomon's reign and tells how they left him disillusioned, the book must have been written near the end of his reign, probably one to five years before his death. Thus the date of its writing was between 915 B.C. and 910 B.C.

THEME. The Book of Ecclesiastes not only identifies its writer but also clearly states its theme in the beginning of the book. The writer proclaims,

^{1:2} "Vanity of vanities," says the Proclaimer; "vanity of vanities. All is vanity."

Those words identify the theme of the book. The word translated "vanity" is a noun that means "air," "breath," or "vapor." It has often been translated as "vanity," "futility," "emptiness," and even as an adjective "vain" or "futile" or "meaningless." It had an impact similar to our expression, "It is all a bunch of hot air." In verse 2, it is used first in the superlative degree, which in Hebrew was indicated by doubling the noun. Thus, literally translated the words are "air of airs" or "vapor of vapors." In English we turn the noun into an adjective and translate it "most vaporous" or "completely vaporous." Slightly freer translations are "absolutely futile," "completely empty," and "totally vain." It means "absolutely useless" or "totally futile" or "no good at all." The translation that is used in this volume is the most literal rendering that is possible in English, "vanity of vanities."

Those words aptly describe how Solomon felt about his life when he saw that all his great accomplishments earned him the displeasure of God and rejection by the people. It was a valid evaluation. Solomon had wasted his great opportunities by using them to put himself ahead of God and his achievements ahead of God's blessings. That evaluation was so real and so important that writing about it was a book that needed to be written. To Solomon's credit, he had the faith and courage to write down those insights before he died. He left it for the benefit of all future generations. It is a lesson and a warning that every generation and every person needs to heed.

When a person comes near the end of life, he just naturally wants to leave behind something that will have lasting value. He soon realizes that what he can leave behind that has lasting value cannot be found in the works he has performed. A researcher might dig around and record some of his works for the sake of history, but otherwise no one will care and no one will remember. So he begins to look around for something more lasting than his human accomplishments. Solomon was going through just that kind of soul searching when he wrote the Book of Ecclesiastes. The result was depressing, because he realized he had spent most of his energies on activities that soon would decay and lose their value. As he faced the end of his life, he was honest enough to tell how he felt about it all. In the Introduction to his book, he dove right into the subject and stated it honestly. He declared that all human knowledge and accomplishment is vanity and only trusting and obey God will last.

The theme of the book of Ecclesiastes is that every human work is empty unless it is done for God and in His will. Solomon returned to being wise when he was willing to write down those insights for our benefit.

The book sticks strictly to that one theme from beginning to end. Because Solomon wished to emphasize that all areas of life were futile without God, he covered a wide range of topics. In fact, he touched on just about every aspect of life that it is possible to imagine. He was comprehensive, because he wanted future generations to know that what he had to say was not limited in its application. It applied to everything a person can know and experience in life. Therefore, Solomon repeated the same theme over and over again concerning one aspect of life after another from the beginning of his book to the end. In the last analysis, he found it all to be vanity.

A close examination of Solomon's words shows that he was not saying the various aspects of life he mentioned had no usefulness at all, but that they are useless if trusted by themselves without relating them to God. Several times in the Book he emphasized that a person should employ everything in life sparingly for a good purpose, and he assured his readers they could find satisfaction in doing so (Eccl. 2:13; 3:1-8,12-13; 4:5-6,9-12; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:4-6; 11:4-6). For that reason, "meaningless" is not a good translation of the Hebrew word Solomon used to describe his conclusions concerning the value of the works to which he had devoted his life. Solomon was not saying that what he had done was not worth doing. Neither was he saying that human effort and learning have no meaning at all. They often have a good purpose and real value to the person who performs them. They may be necessary for continuing the person's existence and enabling him to have a measure of comfort in life. They also may be important for protecting and preserving the world over which God gave people dominion. Solomon did not advocate inactivity, lack of ambition, or laziness. He was simply saying that in the end everything a person does and accomplishes vanishes away and is forgotten. If he wants to leave behind something of truly lasting value, he will have to find it in something more than human effort.

The greatest example of the truthfulness of Solomon's words is the magnificent temple he built in Jerusalem. It was an architectural marvel, an unequaled display of wealth, and a seemingly unassailable fortress. Furthermore, it was built to the glory and praise of the one true God Almighty and Eternal. But over the years of its existence, it was robbed of its beauty and splendor several times, it was neglected and allowed to deteriorate into shambles more than once, and in the end it was torn down stone by stone and even the stones carried away until only a few stones from one side of the foundation remain today to form an unceasing place of mourning for the Jewish people. Solomon's greatest accomplishment has become the greatest source of sorrow for the most persecuted people in the history of the world. The reason Solomon's temple was so completely destroyed was that, while Solomon was building it, he was neglecting the only treasure that will last forever and in doing so set an example that eventually caused his whole nation to put other gods ahead of the true God. However, near the end of Solomon's life, long before the temple was neglected or destroyed, God showed him that it was just one example that all human achievements are temporary and vanish away like the wind.

Solomon's emphasis in the Book of Ecclesiastes was that in the end everything a person does in life accomplishes nothing that is lasting. All his efforts are like a vapor no one can catch or hold onto. Human achievements come for a time but soon vanish away. Every experience and every accomplishment in a person's life ultimately is disappointing and empty without God. Anything not used for God becomes only a responsibility to carry, even a burden to bear. It is

just a yesterday memory or an object to behold that has lost its luster. Therefore, the one action that can give meaning to any and all aspects of life is to trust and obey God.

No doubt, making that emphasis was the reason Solomon called himself “the Proclaimer.” He was not asking people to listen to his words on the basis of his position, power, authority, learning, achievements, wealth, or honor, but on the basis of what experience had taught him about what gives real value to a person’s life. The insights that came from his experiences, not his worldly accomplishments, made his words worth hearing. He spoke as a proclaimer of truth, not as a king or a dispenser of justice. Indeed, he was right at last. He had come to realize that knowing and obeying God were the only values that would last beyond a person’s life. He wrote down those insights, and they above everything else Solomon accomplished have remained to instruct and inspire the world from that day until this. Solomon finally declares that abiding truth at the end of his book by saying, “

12:13 One last word [now that] all has been heard. Fear God, and keep His commandments, for this is the all in all for the man.

12:14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden one, whether [it was] good or bad.

STRUCTURE. The structure of the Book of Ecclesiastes is uniform throughout. Solomon takes up one aspect of life after another and one by one declares each and every one to be futile. He gives reasons why each aspect becomes a vanity without God, and he varies his reasons as they apply to each aspect separately. The constant repetition of the same theme does not become monotonous, because Solomon shows intimate acquaintance with each aspect of life and presents living, realistic reasons why each one brought him disappointment without being repetitious or tedious. In doing so, he covers a vast array of topics and a wide breadth of experiences, but he never strays from his theme that each one fades into vanity without God.

Some writers fail to follow the clue that Solomon gave in the beginning of his book about the theme that ties all of his observations into one unified whole. Those writers see each various topic as an independent emphasis and, therefore, miss the marvelous unity of the whole book. Most writers tend to outline the book as a series of disjointed thoughts on a host of topics that have no real relationship to each other. Many go so far as to collect seemingly similar statements throughout the book and to present them as keys to the purpose and views of the writer. They end up with a confusing array of unrelated bits of advice that have no clear, compelling message. Sadly, they miss one of the most gripping messages of the Bible, written by the one person in history who was most capable of declaring it. For Solomon’s breathtaking revelation of what alone has real value in life, they substitute a disjointed array of scattered thoughts of their own making.

The outline of the Book that is suggested and used throughout this commentary shows that, far from being a collection of unconnected proverbial statements, the Book of Ecclesiastes is a powerful commentary on how making the wrong emphasis in life destroys all the good that a person accomplishes. In a striking and effective way, Solomon related a vast array of knowledge to that one unifying theme. The outline of the book that is followed throughout this commentary clarifies how all the parts of the Book fit into that one unwavering emphasis.

In the Book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon examines eleven important aspects of life and explains the reasons why each one is empty when enjoyed by itself apart from God. Solomon's comments on those eleven aspects of life form eleven major sections of the Book. Those eleven sections are preceded by a brief Introduction and followed by a brief but vital Conclusion. That outline of the Book is followed in the chapters in the commentary. Sub-topics in each chapter show that Solomon developed his discussion of each topic in an orderly way with one goal in mind. The discussions of each chapter demonstrate that Solomon never strayed from the major theme of the book and related every verse to the overall whole.

To emphasize the overall unity of the Book, this commentary contains the writer's translation of the Book. The translation seeks to be as literal as possible and to transfer the original words of Solomon as closely as is possible in modern English. The writer's purpose is to allow Solomon's words to speak for themselves and to prevent this translator from inserting his own ideas into the text. To this writer, faithfulness to the words God actually inspired is more important than smoothness of diction according to modern English standards. Smoothing out the words into well-turned English phrases often dulls the sharp edges of a message that is intended to cut through the hard shell that is encrusted over human hearts. When a translator adjusts the original wording of a difficult passage in an attempt to make the passage easy to read, he often misses the original writer's point completely. Sometimes it is possible for the reader to understand a difficult passage better than the translator if only the translator will accurately communicate to him what the original actually says. It is best for a translator to allow the Holy Spirit to speak through the original words He inspired. On that premise, this translator seeks to allow Solomon to speak to the reader for himself without the translator's serving as an interpreter. If any words must be added to make sense in English, those words are indicated by enclosing them in brackets. The reader can omit those words to see if he feels the translator has changed Solomon's meaning in any way.

The translations are arranged in outline form in order to show, not only the overall unity of the message, but also the well-organized relationship of each individual statement to the overall theme. The outlines show that each phrase has its own significance and is worthy of close examination but that each reveals its true meaning only as it is related to the overall theme it is illustrating. By outlining the thoughts in groups as they relate to each other, the outline itself becomes an exposition of the Book that illuminates Solomon's message. If any sub-topics are added to show how the ideas relate to each other in groups, those sub-topics are indicated by enclosing them in brackets. The reader can omit those sub-topics to see if they make any difference in the meaning of the text.

The comments that follow each section of the outline seek to further clarify the meaning and significance of that section. Read them with discernment to determine if they illuminate Solomon's intentions or miss his point. Hopefully those comments will do more than help readers understand Solomon's message. Their purpose is to help the reader apply Solomon's message to his own life. The goal of this commentary is to help you the reader avoid vanities in your life and instead fill your life with hope and joy by surrendering each aspect of your life to God. It is written with a prayer that when you have completed studying Solomon's words all the way through you will be left with absolute assurance that Solomon's final conclusion is eternally right, which is that the one who trusts and obeys God has everything.