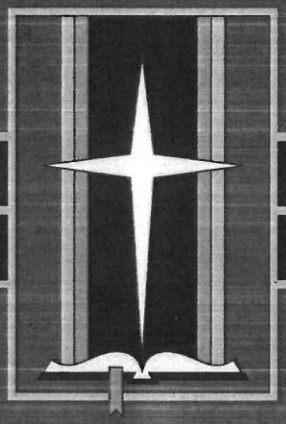
NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

THE NEW AMERICAN COMMENTARY



An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture

PROVERBS
ECCLESIASTES
SONG OF SONGS

VOL. 14

Duane A. Garrett

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Ecclesiastes

INTRODUCTION OUTLINE

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INTRODUCTION

Ecclesiastes is often looked upon as the Bible's resident alien. Other books may be considered perplexing (Job) or as superseded by New Testament revelation (Leviticus). Many read Ecclesiastes, however, with the distinct feeling that this book does not belong in the Bible. What other book immediately meets the reader with such pessimism and despair: "Everything is meaningless" (1:2)? What other book challenges the idea of afterlife (3:19-21)? The poetic power of 3:1-8 is evident to all, but the meaning of the words is far less clear. Furthermore, it is not helpful that almost every aspect of the book's origin and background is hotly debated. The authorship, date of composition, purpose, message, and even the original language of the book have all been disputed. In what sense can Ecclesiastes be called a word of God?

1. Authorship and Date of Composition

On the basis of Eccl 1:1, Christians and Jews have traditionally believed Solomon to have been the author of Ecclesiastes. This belief prevailed until the rise of historical criticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the notion of Solomonic authorship was widely challenged. By the beginning of the twentieth century, G. A. Barton could call the notion of Solomonic authorship "unthinkable,"[1] and the situation has changed little since. Today the belief that Ecclesiastes cannot be Solomonic, and indeed probably is a postexilic work, prevails among biblical scholars. What is the reason for this dramatic change?[2]

(1) Arguments for Non-Solomonic Authorship

LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE. The most important issue is the linguistic evidence. The language of Ecclesiastes is unusual. In fact, D. S. Margoliouth and F. C. Burkitt considered the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes to be so strange as to be foreign. F. Zimmermann proposed in 1945 that the book was originally written in Aramaic and then translated into Hebrew, and this proposal was supported by C. C. Torrey and H. L. Ginsberg.[3] The belief that Ecclesiastes was originally written in very late Hebrew or even in Aramaic arose partly because scholars found an unusually high number of apparent Aramaisms in the text.

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[1] G. A. Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912), 58-59.

[2] In his recent commentary J. L. Crenshaw (*Ecclesiastes* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987]) hardly considers the notion of Solomonic authorship worth mentioning. Crenshaw dates the book to 250–225 B.C.

[3] See the discussion in M. A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983), 17-18. A full presentation of F. Zimmermann's arguments is found in *The Inner World of Qohelet* (New York: KTAV, 1973), 98-122.

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Indeed, no scholar was more zealous in discovering Aramaisms in the text than the relatively conservative F. Delitzsch, who produced a list of ninety-six words he considered to be Aramaisms or of late origin.[4] In addition, he noted four linguistic peculiarities of the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes.[5] So convinced was he that the Aramaisms rendered Solomonic authorship impossible that he issued the famous judgment, "If the book of Koheleth were of old Solomonic origin, then there is no history of the Hebrew language."[6]

The language of Ecclesiastes has several other unusual features. C. Whitley notes that the article is often omitted but that there is a preponderance of particles.[7] Also many scholars note the frequent appearance of a less common and allegedly later form of the relative particle in Ecclesiastes.[8]

In addition to the Aramaisms, the presence of two apparently Persian words, *pardes* and *pitgam*, seems to make the case for a late date of Ecclesiastes beyond doubt.[9] To many it proves that the book was written in or after the rise of the Persian Empire.[10]

INTERNAL EVIDENCE. *Hints of Non-Solomonic Authorship.* Evidence in the text itself seems to indicate that it was not written by Solomon. Ecclesiastes 1:12 says, "I, the Teacher [Qoheleth], was king over Israel in Jerusalem." But Solomon remained king until the day he died. The use of the perfect tense is therefore odd.

Similarly, Delitzsch argues that Ecclesiastes is written as if by the spirit of the dead Solomon. He argues that the name *Qoheleth* [the Teacher], from the Hebrew root *qhl*, looks back to 1 Kgs 8:55-61, where it is said that Solomon spoke to the assembled[11] people of Israel.[12] Thus the actual author, aware of the description of Solomon as the one who assembled the congregation in 1 Kgs 8, gave his implied Solomonic author the name "the Teacher."

[4]F. Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 190-96.

[5]Ibid., 197-98. First, third a verbs are inflected like third h verbs. Second, only three instances of the imperfect waw-consecutive occur. Third, the personal pronoun is often used with finite verbs. Finally, Delitzsch asserted that the use of the pronoun hz, is similar to that found in the *Mishna*.

[6]Ibid., 190.

[7]C. F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979), 1. Especially frequent are גַּם, כִּי, and כַּאֲשֶׁר.

[8]The pronoun שֶׁ is generally used rather than אֲשֶׁר, which is more common elsewhere in the OT.

[9]The word פַּרְדֵּס ("park" or "garden") is found in 2:5, and פִּתְגָם ("decree") is found in 8:11.

[10]Cf. the conservative Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 19.

[11]קהל, "to assemble."

[12]Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 20-34.

A number of scholars contend that Ecclesiastes only maintains the so-called Solomon fiction through the first two chapters and then abandons all reference to him.[13] Childs asserts that the fiction of Solomonic authorship is discarded at 8:2-4; 10:16-17; 12:9-14. He claims that the Solomonic guise was taken on in the early part of the book to assure the reader that the thrust of Ecclesiastes was not to attack wisdom but to serve as an official corrective to its excesses.[14]

The Frame-Narrator. Eaton argues that Eccl 1:2; 7:27; 12:8 indicate that one man is reporting the wisdom material of another man. Eaton believes that the recurring phrase "says 'the Teacher' " reveals that the actual author is one who presents himself as an editor for the Teacher. Now it happens, Eaton contends, that the editor's reworking of the material is so thorough that the entire book is in his style, making him more of an author than an editor. Even so, the author-editor and the Teacher are two separate people. "Thus one style pervades the book; but two people, Qoheleth [i.e., the Teacher], the originator of the material, and an unnamed author-editor, lay behind it."[15] The author-editor makes his presence known by framing the work with brief narration that describes something of the life of the Teacher (1:1-2; 12:9-10); he is often called the "frame-narrator."[16]

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY ARGUMENTS. Scholars also present historical and theological lines of argument in favor of a post-Solomonic date for the book. Some urge that Ecclesiastes shows a dependence on Greek thought and literature. A common assertion is that Ecclesiastes betrays an awareness of Hesiod's *Works and Days*, an earthy, pessimistic work of Boeotian poetry written in the late eighth century B.C. Others compare Ecclesiastes to the cynic and stoic traditions in Greek philosophy. Whitley compares the Teacher's apparent skepticism (3:19-21) about an afterlife to Epicurean annihilationism and says that the Teacher's analogy to death as the breaking of the "golden bowl" (12:6) is like Lucretius's speaking of death as the shattering of a vessel.[17]

Some scholars have tried to pinpoint historical allusions in the Persian or Greek periods of Jewish history. Barton, for example, says that the "wise youth" of Eccl 4:13 probably was Ptolemy V, who came to the throne in 205 B.C.[18] If so, then Ecclesiastes was certainly written after

[13] See R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 200, and R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 4.

[14] B. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 584.

[15] Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 22; see pp. 21-24.

[16] See especially the discussion in M. V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, JSOTSup 71 (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 311-21.

[17] Whitley, *Koheleth*, 167-68.

[18] Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 120.

that date. Delitzsch, similarly, contends that Eccl 6:3 alludes to Artaxerxes II, Mnemon, and Artaxerxes III, Ochus. He also contends that 4:13-16 refers to the career of Cyrus and that 9:14-16 may allude to Themistocles of Athens.[19] More recently Whybray has argued that the general sense of security and prosperity in the book, together with its use of commercial terms like "profit," argue for the Ptolemaic period in Palestine as the setting of the book.[20]

QUESTIONS OF CANONICITY. The issue of the book's canonicity also enters here. The Mishnaic tractate *Yadayim* 3:5 mentions that there was some dispute in the early rabbinic circles about the canonical status of the book. Barton argues that the New Testament makes no clear reference to Ecclesiastes as Scripture since Rom 8:20 and Jas 4:14 are not ambiguous allusions.[21] He supports his argument by comparing Ecclesiastes to the Wisdom of Solomon and Ben Sira. Barton asserts that the Teacher was among the ungodly men whom the author of the Wisdom of Solomon set about to correct (Wis 2:1-9).[22] He further argues that Ben Sira knew and used a copy of Ecclesiastes that had not yet received its Hasidic (Jewish purists who fought Greek influence; the pious of Judah) glosses. Ben Sira was written ca. 180 B.C.; the latest date for Ecclesiastes can therefore be placed about twenty years before that, or about 200–195 B.C.[23] Barton also asserts that references to Ecclesiastes in the *Talmud* are inconclusive since the *Talmud* itself was written in the third to fifth centuries A.D. Stories in the *Talmud*, therefore, only prove that the rabbis of that period accepted the book.[24] The evidence that the book was late in being accorded canonical status, therefore, attests to its late date of composition.

Most scholars consider the late date for Ecclesiastes to be beyond dispute. Scott, for example, speaks for most in asserting the linguistic and historical evidence to indicate that Ecclesiastes was written in the late Persian or early Greek period. He bluntly states that claiming Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes is "like claiming that a book about Marxism in modern English idiom and spelling was written by Henry VIII."[25]

(2) Arguments for Solomonic Authorship

Conservatives have felt the weight of these arguments. The conservative Lutheran H. C. Leupold dated Ecclesiastes in the early postexilic

[19] Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 214-15.
[20] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 9-11.
[21] Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 4-5.
[22] Ibid., 2.
[23] Ibid., 59-60.
[24] Ibid., 3-4.
[25] Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 196.

period.[26] R. K. Harrison, an evangelical scholar, also considers the book to be post-Solomonic.[27] As Childs has written, "There is almost universal consensus, shared by extremely conservative scholars, that Solomon was not the author of the book."[28] But the critical arguments have not gone unchallenged.

LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE. The question of the language of Ecclesiastes has naturally received the most attention. In answer to Delitzsch's oft-quoted remark regarding Ecclesiastes and the history of the Hebrew language, one might note that our knowledge of the particulars of the history of Hebrew is quite limited. For Greek the history of the dialectical, orthographic, and lexical development of the language is well documented. Indisputable evidence concerning the history of the Hebrew language, however, is relatively scarce. Eaton remarks that "[t]he difficulty is that the linguistic data show that Ecclesiastes does not fit into any known section of the history of the Hebrew language."[29]

Nevertheless, linguistic evidence is sufficient at least to challenge the late date for the composition of Ecclesiastes. In a major study D. Fredericks argues that Ecclesiastes cannot come from the postexilic period.[30] His work, together with other recent studies, calls for a major reassessment of the date of the book.

Fredericks's study is too lengthy and detailed for more than a cursory summary here. He examines the language of Ecclesiastes from the standpoints of both grammar and lexicology in comparison to established features of early biblical Hebrew, late biblical Hebrew, Second Temple Hebrew, and Mishnaic Hebrew. Insofar as evidence permits, he also takes into account factors that tend to complicate such studies (differences due to genre, archaizing in late texts, dialectical differences, etc.).

Following this methodology, Fredericks contends, for example, that no grounds exist for asserting Mishnaic Hebrew influence. Fredericks found forty-six points in which the language of Ecclesiastes agrees exclusively or primarily with biblical Hebrew over against Mishnaic Hebrew. He found only two points at which Ecclesiastes was more like Mishnaic Hebrew (these two can be explained satisfactorily by genre or dialectical considerations).[31] In addition, Fredericks found six grammatical features

[26] H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), 8-17.

[27] R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 107-28.

[28] Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament*, 582.

[29] Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 19.

[30] D. C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1988).

[31] Ibid., 51-109. For example, Ecclesiastes uses ים rather than ין for the masculine plural ending of the participle (like biblical Hebrew, unlike Mishnaic Hebrew). The two exceptional traits are the infrequency of the waw consecutive imperfect and the use of זֹה as the feminine demonstrative.

of Ecclesiastes that appear to be dependent on early biblical Hebrew and none that are dependent on late biblical Hebrew.[32] He concludes that the language of Ecclesiastes is "fully in the realm of the preexilic language."[33] Although further work into this area needs to be done,[34] no longer can one confidently claim that the language of Ecclesiastes proves it to be late.

Certainly no convincing evidence has emerged that the book was first written in Aramaic. Whitley has shown that Zimmermann's argument for an Aramaic original behind the Hebrew text of Ecclesiastes is weak. More than that, he demonstrates that Zimmermann's retranslations are often inferior to the Hebrew source.[35] In addition, Gordis notes that certain wordplays that exist in the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes would be nonexistent in the Aramaic "original" that has been proposed. The pun in 7:1 ("a good name is better than good oil")[36] would not appear in Aramaic. The Hebrew of Ecclesiastes is also rhythmic and sometimes parallels other biblical passages. Ben Sira shows dependence on the Hebrew text of Ecclesiastes. Finally, the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes sometimes reflects authentic Canaanite vocabulary. All this makes the idea of an Aramaic *Urtext* (base text) unlikely.[37]

Delitzsch greatly exaggerated the amount of Aramaic influence detectable in the book. He asserted many words to be Aramaisms on the basis of the noun endings *ut*, *on*, and *an*, a basis Archer has shown to be inadequate.[38] E. Kautzsch contended that there are twenty-nine Aramaisms in the book,[39] but this figure also should be regarded as excessive. Fredericks examines forty-eight alleged Aramaisms and concludes that only seven terms are of Aramaic origin, of which four are attested elsewhere in early biblical Hebrew.[40] What Aramaisms do exist, however, by no means

[32] Ibid., 125-59. For example, the linking of singular and plural forms of the same noun (שְׂדֶה וְשָׂדוֹת; Eccl 2:8) is characteristically early. Fredericks does isolate one feature that is characteristic of late biblical Hebrew (the absence of the infinitive absolute plus cognate finite verb to emphasize the verb), but other considerations nullify the significance of this feature.

[33] Ibid., 267.

[34] Aspects of Fredericks's work have been criticized in a review by A. Hurvitz in *Hebrew Studies* 31 (1990): 144-54. These criticisms, while providing a corrective, do not invalidate Fredericks's thesis; but they do point to the need for further study.

[35] Whitley, *Koheleth*, 106-10.

[36] Hebrew: טוֹב שֵׁם מִשֶּׁמֶן טוֹב.

[37] R. Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 413-14.

[38] G. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1964), 139.

[39] E. Kautzsch, *Die Aramaismen im Alten Testament* (1902), 102, cited in Whitley, *Koheleth*, 1, n. 4.

[40] These are אִלּוּ (*if*), מְדִינָה (*province*), רְאוּת (*aspiration*), רַעְיוֹן (*striving*), חוֹץ מִן (*without*), כְּאֶחָד (*alike*), and תָּקַף (*to overpower*). The first four are found in early biblical Hebrew or Phoenician.

prove that Ecclesiastes is a late work. Aramaic itself existed from early times; and in the Bible, Aramaisms are especially likely to occur in wisdom and poetic texts.[41] Eaton remarks that "[The Aramaisms] are of comparatively little significance for dating."[42]

The presence of the two Persian words seems to be irrefutable proof of a late date for the book, but here too the matter is not as settled as it appears. Archer says the words could be of Sanskrit origin and that they may have entered the language during Solomon's period of extensive foreign trade.[43] That hypothesis is open to question, but it is noteworthy that Pope also expresses doubt about whether *pardes* and the related Greek word *paradeisos* are of Persian origin.[44] The word *pitgam* alone is slender evidence since we in fact have no idea when it entered the language. Fredericks notes that Persian influence and vocabulary spread through the ancient Near East long before the establishment of the Persian Empire and that the words need not have entered Hebrew via Aramaic, as is commonly assumed.[45]

The peculiar Hebrew of Ecclesiastes cannot be evidence for a late date since it does not fit anywhere in the known history of the language. In no way, for example, does it specifically resemble the Hebrew of Malachi, Esther, or of the Chronicler.[46]

A related question is whether or not Phoenician or Canaanite linguistic forms appear in the book. This approach was championed by M. Dahood, who argued extensively that the linguistic peculiarities of Ecclesiastes are best explained by assuming that the author, although a Hebrew, was immersed in a Phoenician-Canaanite linguistic environment and thus produced a work with many affinities to Phoenician.[47] The theory of a Phoe-

[41] See Fredericks, *Qoheleth*, 208-41, for the full discussion of the evidence.

[42] Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 17.

[43] Archer, *Survey*, 470.

[44] M. Pope, *Song of Songs*, AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 31. "The other alleged Persianism, פִּתְגָם, is slender evidence for establishing a date for the text since we have no idea when it entered the language."

[45] Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language*, 245.

[46] The frequently used relative שֶׁ is found in only one other book, Song of Songs, which also claims Solomonic authorship.

[47] M. J. Dahood, "Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth," *Bib* 33 (1952): 30-52, 191-221. Dahood continues his argument in "Qoheleth and Recent Discoveries," *Bib* 39 (1958): 302-18; "Qoheleth and Northwest Semitic Philology," *Bib* 43 (1962): 349-65; "Canaanite Words in Qoheleth 10,20," *Bib* 46 (1965): 210-12; and "The Phoenician Background of Qoheleth," *Bib* 47 (1966): 264-82. He contends for Phoenician influence on the grounds that many problems are best explained by assuming that Qoheleth was originally written without the *matres lectionis* (i.e., consonants used for indicating vowels). He further contends on the basis of grammatical and lexical features of Ecclesiastes such as the use of the third masculine plural pronoun suffix for a feminine antecedent, the feminine pronoun זוֹ, the emphatic לְ (9:4), the use of interrogatives as indefinites and of the infinitive absolute as a finite verb, and the enclitic מִ.

nician provenance for Ecclesiastes has been rejected by scholars who argue that the peculiar linguistic features of the text are best explained in the context of biblical Hebrew.[48] Although Dahood's thesis and a number of his arguments must be set aside, in individual cases his insights indicate that the difficulties of the Teacher's language can be explained as ancient tendencies in the languages of the Levant, that is, the eastern Mediterranean, rather than as late developments in Hebrew.

INTERNAL EVIDENCE. *Hints of Non-Solomonic Authorship.* Internal evidence cannot be said to demand non-Solomonic authorship of the book. The use of the perfect tense in 1:12 proves nothing; certainly it does not establish that we here have a later author writing in behalf of the now-dead Solomon. It may indicate that Ecclesiastes was written by an aged Solomon near the end of his life.[49] Throughout the book, in fact, the perspective seems to be that of an older man, as in the description of old age in 12:1-5. Nor is it clear that texts like 8:2-8; 10:16-17; 12:9-14 abandon Solomonic authorship. Certainly we cannot say that a king could not have reflected critically on a king's role and on appropriate behavior in the royal presence.

More than that, these reflections pose a special problem for those who support a postexilic date for the book. After the exile the Jewish people no longer were under their own local kings but were ruled by the distant emperors of Persia and the subsequent Seleucid and Ptolemaic monarchs. A few Jewish officials (e.g., Nehemiah) had personal dealings with these distant rulers, but these were the rare exceptions. Even the wealthy Jew of the postexilic period probably never saw a king in his life. Why then so much concern, in a book of Jewish wisdom, with how to deal with the king? The book must have been written for an audience that lived relatively near the seat of central government and could be expected, at least on occasion, to have to face the monarch. Nor can we say, simply because no further clear allusions to Solomon appear, that the idea of Solomonic authorship is dropped after chap. 2. With the exception of autobiography, very few books repeatedly refer to or mention their author from beginning to end.

No clear relationship has been established between Ecclesiastes and 1 Kgs 8 on the basis of the root *qhl*. The two passages do not resemble each other in either structure or content, and no literary link between the texts exists. It is doubtful that the author of Ecclesiastes was drawing on the portrait of Solomon in Kings.

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[48] See R. Gordis, "Was Koheleth a Phoenician?" *JBL* 74 (1955): 103-14; Whitley, *Koheleth*, 111-18; and Fredericks, *Qoheleth*, 18-23. See also Gordis, *Koheleth*, 416-17.

[49] אֲנִי קֹהֶלֶת הָיִיתִי מֶלֶךְ might better be translated, "I have been king" rather than "*was* king." The former can indicate an ongoing situation, as in "I have been in this job a long time." The latter would more likely be taken to imply a former, terminated status. The perfect can even be translated as a present. See P. Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, rev., T. Muraoka, ed. (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1991), III.i.

The Question of a "Frame-Narrator" and the Three Levels of Discourse. The argument that references to the Teacher in the third person prove the author/editor to be someone other than the Teacher is inconclusive. The text of Ecclesiastes calls for a more sensitive approach than a mere redaction-historical separation between the Teacher and the one who edited his words, even if that editor is thought to have been so thorough as to produce an essentially original work.

Third person frame narratives are known from the ancient world, especially from Egypt.[50] Most of these simply serve to identify the name and circumstances of the author (whether actual or fictional), and none achieve the literary sophistication of Ecclesiastes. Most "frame narratives" simply introduce or conclude a wisdom work with a few remarks about the apparent author (contrast Eccl 7:27).[51]

In Ecclesiastes, moreover, we have not just the two discourse levels of the frame narrator and the Teacher but *three* levels of discourse. The first level, that of the frame-narrator, is found where the Teacher is referred to in the third person (e.g., 1:1-2; 12:8-10). At this level the reader learns something about the character and background of the Teacher. More importantly, the biographical details of this level place the Teacher in the realm of history and set a degree of objectivity and distance between the reader and the Teacher, a distance that would not exist if the entire book were written in the first person. The frame-narrator thus lifts the book above the level of personal reflection and presents the Teacher as an authority whose words ought to be heard.

The second level of discourse is the wisdom level, at which we are not in the realm of biography and history (level one), but neither are we in

[50]Fox (*Qohelet*, 312-14) lists a number of works with a "frame narrative."

[51]A more ambitious attempt to tie Ecclesiastes to an ancient genre is T. Longman III, "Comparative Methods in Old Testament Studies: Ecclesiastes Reconsidered," *TSF Bulletin* 7 (1984): 5-9. He argues that Ecclesiastes is of the genre of (fictional) didactic autobiography and compares it to the Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin, an Akkadian text that in its oldest form goes back to about 1800 B.C. Longman's analysis is not persuasive. His assertion that in 1:13–6:12 Qoheleth "recounts his experiences" while 7:1–12:7 "is composed mostly of advice" (p. 7) is patently untrue. Ecclesiastes (including the latter half of the book) contains many examples of what may be called "observations" but little that could be accurately described as "experiences." Even 2:4-11 does not describe "experiences"; it merely asserts that Qoheleth was fabulously wealthy but found his wealth unsatisfying. Certainly there is nothing comparable to the detailed quasihistorical war account found in the Naram-Sin legend. Autobiography should (as the Naram-Sin account does) tell some kind of story and involve more characters than the author alone. Merely to assert that one is in a position to speak intelligently on issues of wealth and wisdom and to recall ethical observations is not to write an autobiography, fictional or otherwise. Similarly, "advice" is found throughout the book (not only in the latter half). The comparison to the Naram-Sin material is forced. In particular it maintains the impossible division of the text between the skeptic Qoheleth and the pious author of the epilogue.

the realm of the Teacher's personal musings. Rather, the nature of reality is described in terms that are universal and didactic. Wisdom is speaking. Here the text frequently employs a poetic or aphoristic style associated with the Book of Proverbs in order either to describe the nature of the world (1:3-11; 3:1-8) or to give direction or insight (2:14a; 4:5-6,9,12; 5:3,10-12,15; 6:7-9; 7:1-12,19-21; 9:17–10:4; 10:8–12:7; 12:11-14).[52] At this level the book speaks with authority, and the reader is to accept its teachings as corresponding to reality. Second level discourse sometimes forms the basis for the Teacher's personal reflections.

The third level of discourse is first person recollections and meditations (1:12-14,16-17; 2:1-13,14b-26; 3:9-14; 3:16–4:4; 4:7-8; 5:13-14; 5:16–6:6; 7:15-18,23-29; 8:9-10; 8:14–9:1; 10:5-7). Here the Teacher invites the reader both to learn from the Teacher's experiences and to join him in confronting life's lessons, however brutal they may be at times. The first level thus gives us something of the external world and person of the Teacher, the second level gives us the wisdom teachings that make up the framework of his intellectual world, and the third level gives us his personal meditations.

These three are seamlessly joined. A number of texts, particularly those that give direct advice to the reader, mix second level and third level discourse or could be assigned to either (e.g., 5:1-6; 8:2-8; 9:7-16). The first and third levels can be juxtaposed (1:12; 7:27); proverbial teaching (second level) can be inserted into third level discourse (1:15; 9:4b); first person comments can flow out of what begins as a second level discourse (4:13-16, which begins with a proverb). The "better saying," a characteristic of wisdom literature, is also used in the context of third level discourse.[53] What is important to grasp here, however, is that *all the levels of narration are a matter of literary technique and are not indications of redaction history.* The reason they all flow together so well is that they are all part of the single perspective of a single author. The frame-narrator, wisdom, and the Teacher are all masks behind which we hear the one voice of the author.[54]

The Teacher (Qoheleth) is obviously a pseudonym; there is no reason to suppose that the author who writes "the Teacher says" (the frame-narrator) and the author who gives us the bulk of the book (the Teacher) are two different people. Otherwise we would expect the frame-narrator

[52]Cf. Fox, *Qohelet*, 312.

[53]Cf. S. Ogden, "The 'Better' Proverb (Tob-Spruch), Rhetorical Criticism, and Qoheleth," *JBL* 96 (1977): 489-505. "For Qoheleth the T-S [*Tob-Spruch*] has become a literary device in the presentation of a highly individual viewpoint" (p. 496).

[54]The use of several levels of discourse within a single work is found elsewhere in literature. A recent example is R. M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York: Bantam, 1975).

to have given us the Teacher's actual name. When he says, "I, the Teacher" (1:12), any notion that the Teacher and the frame-narrator (or "author/editor") are actually two separate individuals must be abandoned as a fancy of biblical criticism.

Can such an understanding of the nature of the text coexist with the idea of Solomonic authorship? I believe it can. The use of the name "the Teacher" indicates that the author is distancing himself from his role as absolute monarch and taking on the mantle of the sage. Both the name "the Teacher" and the use of third person (frame-narrator) allow him to do this. The device is certainly a literary success. What emerges from Ecclesiastes is not a royal pronouncement but the reflection of a wise man who "has been" king. As we read the book, we are more and more absorbed in the words not of "King Solomon" but of "Solomon-become-'the-Teacher.' "

LITERARY AND HISTORICAL EVIDENCE. Evidence fails to support the view that Ecclesiastes reflects Greek influence. Many scholars have abandoned the search for Greek philosophy in Ecclesiastes, though some have continued to maintain that a Greek spirit is evident. Some recent scholars hesitate to isolate specific cases of allusion to Greek philosophic texts. Nevertheless, they urge that Ecclesiastes betrays a knowledge of the general tenets of Greek thinking (such as any third-century Jerusalemite would have possessed[55]), or they claim that Ecclesiastes reflects the "Greek cult of the individual."[56]

The pessimism found in Ecclesiastes, however, is evident in the ancient Near East from the third millennium onward; there is no need to suppose it is Hellenistic.[57] Even many scholars who hold to a late date concur here.[58] While similarities naturally exist among various examples of pessimistic literature, no certain case of literary dependence has been demonstrated. It is pointless to try to make a case for Greek influence with nebulous concepts like a Hellenistic "spirit" or Greek "individualism."

No one has shown convincingly that Ecclesiastes alludes to any historical event. Although earlier scholars, such as Barton and Delitzsch, felt great freedom to assert that certain passages referred to various kings and events of the Hellenistic age, that practice has been rightly discontinued. Although Crenshaw adopts a third-century date for the book, he comments that the "so-called historical references in 4:13-16; 8:2-4; 9:13-15; and 10:16-17 invited use because of their typicality. Therefore they offer no real assistance in dating the book or in locating its cultural setting."[59]

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[55] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 51.
[56] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 6.
[57] Cf. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 20-21.
[58] Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 197, and Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 582.
[59] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 49.

Even Whybray's more general effort to relate Ecclesiastes to the Ptolemaic era in Palestine[60] has little concrete evidence to support it.

By contrast, strong evidence supports linking Ecclesiastes to the literary and intellectual world of the ancient Near East. Ecclesiastes is in many ways conceptually and structurally similar to examples from ancient Egyptian literature. Egyptian words comparable to Ecclesiastes include *Instruction of Ptahhotep*, which describes how to deal with inferiors and superiors; *Instruction of Duauf*, which praises the occupation of government official; *Instruction of King Amenemhet*, which recalls Eccl 12; *Instruction for King Merikare*, which combines political, moral, and religious advice; and the *Teaching of Amenemope*, which strongly resembles Prov 22:17–23:14. Parallels to Ecclesiastes also are found in several pessimistic works, including *The Man Tired of Life*, *The Admonitions of a Prophet*, and *The Song of the Harper* (fourteenth cent. B.C.).

The Song of the Harper contains conspicuous parallels to Ecclesiastes. Compare the following excerpt to Eccl 3:22 and 9:7-9:

> Follow thy desire, as long as thou shalt live
> Put Myrrh upon thy head and clothing of fine linen upon thee,
> Being anointed with the genuine marvels of the god's property.
> Set an increase to thy good things;
> Let not thy heart flag.
> Follow thy desire and thy good.
> Fulfill thy needs upon earth, after the command of thy heart,
> Until there come for thee that day of mourning.[61]

Babylonian literature also contains several examples of literature of the same type as Ecclesiastes. *The Pessimistic Dialogue of a Master and Slave* and the *Complaint of a Sage over the Injustice of the World* are comparable to Ecclesiastes. The latter has been called the "Babylonian Koheleth."[62]

Perhaps the most striking parallel of all is with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Compare Eccl 9:7-9 to this section from *Gilgamesh* in the old Babylonian version:

> Gilgamesh, whither rovest thou?
> The life thou pursuest thou shalt not find.
> When the gods created mankind,
> Death for mankind they set aside,
> Life in their own hands retaining.
> Thou, Gilgamesh, let full be thy belly,
> Make thou merry by day and by night,

[60] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 6-12.
[61] ANET, 467.
[62] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 12.

Of each day make thou a feast of rejoicing,
Day and night dance thou and play!
Let thy garments be sparkling fresh,
Thy head be washed; bathe thou in water.
Pay heed to the little one that holds on to thy hand,
Let thy spouse delight in thy bosom!
For this is the task of [humankind]!"[63]

The Teacher likely knew the story of Gilgamesh. The importance of this evidence should not be underestimated since it provides invaluable information regarding both the date of composition and setting of Ecclesiastes. Tradition ascribes Ecclesiastes to Solomon, and this evidence supports the reasonableness of that view. Furthermore, Scripture presents Solomon as one who had access to the wealth of Egyptian and Babylonian literature and who was renowned for wide literary and intellectual interests. It is much less likely that someone in the postexilic period would have had acquaintance with these texts.

More than that, these passages indicate that Ecclesiastes may have been written primarily for the intellectual elite of ancient Jerusalem. The court of Solomon, like the king himself, certainly knew of the reflective literature of the great centers of civilization. The Teacher spoke to that audience about issues with which they were familiar.

CANONICITY. Matters concerning the book's canonicity (the book's status as Scripture) are equally indecisive for determining the date of its composition. Certainly it was generally regarded as canonical by the first century A.D. Josephus[64] mentions that the book "contains hymns to God" along with Psalms, Proverbs, and Canticles. Fragments of Ecclesiastes were found at Qumran. Although neither Josephus nor Qumran proves its canonicity, Ecclesiastes was accepted as being canonical in the mishnaic tractate *Baba Bathra* (14b-15a).

The council of Jamnia (A.D. 90), often regarded as the council that closed the Hebrew canon, did not admit new books to the canon but only examined those that were already in it, with the result that some books in the "canon" of Alexandrian Judaism (LXX) and apocalyptic works cherished at Qumran were excluded. Even Ezekiel, a book that must have been canonized long before A.D. 90, was debated there.[65] Ancient rabbinical debate no more invalidates the canonicity of the book than does modern scholarly debate.

Among Christians, Melito of Sardis, Epiphanium, Origen, and Jerome explicitly call it canonical. The argument is groundless that the failure of

[63] Tablet 10, section 3. ANET, 90.
[64] *Against Apion* 1.37-43.
[65] Harrison, *Introduction*, 278.

the New Testament writers to mention Ecclesiastes proves that they did not accept it. The subject matter of Ecclesiastes makes it unlikely that the New Testament authors would have had occasion to mention it. The New Testament viewpoint would be significant only if it rejected Ecclesiastes.

Finally, Barton's argument is highly doubtful that Ben Sira used an early edition of Ecclesiastes that had not yet been revised by the hypothetical "Hasid" glossator[66] (see discussion under "Unity of the Text"). Even if such interpolations to the text of Ecclesiastes are allowed, the data in the two books are not complete enough to allow for such a precise redaction history.

2. Text, Structure, and Style

(1) Text-Critical Problems

The text of Ecclesiastes is generally well preserved, and disputed passages are rare. Four pieces of an Ecclesiastes manuscript were found at Qumran in 1954. These contained portions of Eccl 5–7. Besides orthographic differences, variants from the MT were few and insignificant.[67]

(2) Unity of the Text

The unity of the book and its freedom from interpolations can be maintained with a high degree of confidence. At the beginning of the twentieth century, A. H. McNeile in England, G. A. Barton in America, and E. Podechard in France claimed to find many interpolations in Ecclesiastes. They believed that various passages were added by a "wise man" and other editors and especially that a pious "Hasid" added pious sentiments to bring the text into agreement with orthodoxy.[68]

Recent scholars have turned away from this position, and most scholars believe that most, if not all, of the book is from a single author. Childs, for example, says that the work is basically a unified composition, although the prologue and epilogue may be additions.[69] M. Fox observes that material scholars omit as late is stylistically identical to alleged original material, that the alleged additions do not remove the sting of the Teacher's "skeptical" outlook, that it would have been easier to suppress Ecclesiastes outright, and that no consistent original Ecclesiastes can be produced by eliminating parts of the text.[70] Eaton, too, has observed that

[66] Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 59-60.

[67] Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 15.

[68] Ibid., 38-39. For a defense of the idea of the pious glossator, see Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 43-46.

[69] Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 582.

[70] Fox, *Qohelet*, 23-25.

it is odd that a pious editor would issue a work with which he extensively disagrees: "No wisdom document exists in two recensions with opposite theologies; it is doubtful if one ever did."[71] He notes that it is strange that the editor adds contradictory ideas to the original text without removing lines he considered offensive.[72]

The case for the overall unity of Ecclesiastes is strong. The matter of the "Epilogue" and its relation to the rest of the book will be taken up in the exegetical section.

(3) Structure

The question of the structure of Ecclesiastes has received considerable attention in recent years. Following F. Delitzsch, scholars have considered it to have virtually no structure whatsoever;[73] but later studies have attempted to demonstrate various kinds of elaborate, complex patterns in the book.[74] Perhaps the most complicated venture of this kind was made by A. D. G. Wright, whose analysis attempts to provide intricate numerical patterns within the book.[75] Fox has correctly observed that the content of individual units, both in phrases used and in topics of discussion, does not correspond well to the boundaries Wright attempts to mark off.[76]

Another attempt to demonstrate logical structure within Ecclesiastes was made by H. L. Ginsberg, who divides the text into four parts.

A: the vanity of life mitigated only by the use of one's goods (1:2–2:26)
B: all is foreordained but not foreseeable (3:1–4:3)
A′: a pendant to A (4:4–6:9)
B′: a pendant to B (6:10–12:8)[77]

This outline has not been widely accepted either,[78] and it is but one example of many attempts to structure the book according to a chiastic or parallel framework.[79]

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[71] Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 41.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Cf. Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 185-88.

[74] For a good survey and critique of recent positions and alternatives, see Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 34-49. Crenshaw's own conclusion is that all the elaborate efforts to discover the structure of the book have "failed to resolve a single issue" (p. 47).

[75] See A. D. G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 30 (1968): 313-34, and "The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 42 (1980): 35-51.

[76] Fox, *Qohelet*, 156-57. See also Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 41-42.

[77] H. L. Ginsberg, "The Structure and Contents of the Book of Koheleth," in *Wisdom in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Noth and Thomas, *VTS* 3M (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 138-49. The chart above is a simplified summary of Ginsberg's chart on p. 138.

[78] Cf. J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet, BZAW* 152 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979), 7-8.

[79] Cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 38-47.

The debate between those who see Ecclesiastes as unstructured verbal meanderings and those who maintain that a logical structure is present thus continues.[80] A more moderate position is that of Childs. He accepts that the book is a collection of wisdom sayings, with the qualification that "the present form of the book reflects far more inner coherence than the advocates of the collection theory admit."[81] It may be, however, that a more precise explanation is available.

THE STRUCTURE OF ECCLESIASTES IN LIGHT OF ANCIENT PARALLELS. The conspicuous parallels between Ecclesiastes and other ancient Near Eastern wisdom texts, described above, have implications regarding the structure of the text. Based on this evidence, it is possible that Ecclesiastes was modeled after Egyptian instructional literature (with a fair amount of influence also coming from Babylonian and other sources).

In this literature the authors give advice on a whole range of subjects. For example, one author tells his reader how to deal with superiors, subordinates, wife, and friends (*Ptahhotep*, 120ff., 280ff., 325ff.). The importance of justice and the evil of oppression receive a great deal of attention (e.g., *Merikare* 45ff.). In addition, an author may give advice regarding religion and service to the gods (*Aniy* 7.12) or warn his reader on the use of the tongue and the use of wealth (*Amenemhet* 3.2). An author, moreover, can move back and forth among several topics in an apparently random fashion. The hierarchical outline employed in modern essays is not employed. Nevertheless, as the book moves to and fro among its several topics, it moves steadily toward its final conclusion.

The *Instructions of Aniy* are a particularly good example. It moves about among the topics of family matters (e.g., the choice of a good wife, avoidance of harlots, duties to one's parents), religious duty (e.g., the observation of feasts, propriety in worship), social graces (e.g., behavior in another's home, avoidance of public drunkenness, respect for superiors, dealing with brawlers), choosing good companions, personal discretion, and financial advice. It concludes this with a dialogue between father and son that challenges the reader to consider seeking the way of wisdom. Like Ecclesiastes, *Aniy* does not follow any hierarchical outline, but it has structure nevertheless.

An outline of Ecclesiastes, as seen in this historical and literary context, may be set forth in the following form:

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

1. Introduction (1:1-2)
2. On Time and the World (1:3-11)

[80] See Loader, *Polar Structures*, 4-9.
[81] Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 582-83.

3. On Wisdom (1:12-18)
4. On Wealth (2:1-11)
5. On Wisdom (2:12-17)
6. On Wealth (2:18-26)
7. On Time and the World (3:1-15b)
8. On Politics (3:15c-17)
9. On Death (3:18-22)
10. On Politics (4:1-3)
11. On Wealth (4:4-8)
12. On Friendship (4:9-12)
13. On Politics (4:13-16)
14. On Religion (5:1-7)
15. On Politics (5:8-9)
16. On Wealth (5:10–6:6)
17. Transition (6:7-9)
18. On Wisdom and Death (6:10–7:4)
19. Transition (7:5-6)
20. On Wisdom and Politics (7:7-9)
21. Transition (7:10)
22. On Wisdom and Wealth (7:11-14)
23. On Wisdom and Religion (7:15-29)
24. Transition (8:1)
25. On Politics (8:2-6)
26. Transition (8:7-8)
27. On Theodicy (8:9–9:1)
28. Transition (9:2)
29. On Death and Contentment (9:3-10)
30. Transition (9:11-12)
31. On Politics (9:13–10:17)
32. Transition (10:18-20)
33. On Wealth (11:1-6)
34. On Death and Contentment (11:7–12:7)
35. Conclusion (12:8-14)

The structure of Ecclesiastes is thus not a hierarchical outline but a kind of wandering among several topics.[82] Contrary to some, therefore, it is not utterly without structure; but contrary to others, it follows no elaborate or symmetrical scheme. Even so its "wandering" is not purposeless but moves steadily toward a final destination.

[82]Fox, *Qohelet*, 157-58, notes that Wittgenstein had a somewhat random, criss-cross approach to writing his *Philosophical Investigations* as well.

(4) Stylistic and Literary Devices

Perhaps due to a testimony to the stylistic complexity of Ecclesiastes, scholars are not even able to agree on whether the book is predominately prose or poetry. Loader surveys recent opinions and argues that the book is poetry by trying to demonstrate scansion in some of the most prosaic passages.[83] It is perhaps better to say that, like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes is poetic but is not a poem. A few passages, however, properly might be called poems (e.g., 3:2-8).

Ecclesiastes employs many of the devices employed by other wisdom writings (as discussed in the Introduction to Proverbs). These include the "better saying" (4:3,6,9), the metaphor (7:26), the example story (9:14-15), the comparison (11:5), the rhetorical question (2:19,25), the autobiographical narrative (2:1-11), the woe-saying and benediction (10:16-17), and the admonition (7:9).[84] Loader has also pointed out that the book uses a number of minor rhetorical devices, including *figura etymologica* (a wordplay turning on the repetition of a root, 8:17[85]), anaphora (deliberate repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of a verse, 3:1-8), hyperbole (6:3,6), and rhyme (10:11[86]).[87]

3. Theology and Purpose

Ecclesiastes has been subjected to a bewildering array of interpretations.[88] Conservative Christians have generally assumed that the purpose of Ecclesiastes is to show the futility of the world over against eternity;[89] that is, the book is evangelistic. This was the view of the Reformers and Puritans (Whitaker, Pemble, Cocceius, Matthew Poole, Matthew Henry), and John Wesley. In like manner, Ralph Wardlaw used Ecclesiastes to point to the cross.[90] Today, however, the interpretation of this book is anything but unified.

[83] Loader, *Polar Structures*, 16-18.

[84] Ibid., 19-27, and Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 29-31.

[85] The phrase is אֶת־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה.

[86] Rhyme occurs in הַנָּחָשׁ בְּלוֹא־לָחַשׁ and יִתְרוֹן לְבַעַל הַלָּשׁוֹן.

[87] Loader, *Polar Structures*, 14-15.

[88] One recent interpretation of Ecclesiastes is exceedingly strange. Zimmermann (*Inner World of Qohelet*, 1-97) argues that Qoheleth was a highly neurotic, impotent bureaucrat with homosexual tendencies. His reading is, to say the least, arbitrary.

[89] For a brief survey of interpretations from G. Thaumaturgus to Luther, see R. E. Murphy, "Qohelet Interpreted: The Bearing of the Past on the Present," *VT* 32 (1982): 331-37, which has been expanded in his commentary (*Ecclesiastes*, xlviii-lvi). For a survey of early interpretation in the LXX, the Syr, and Jerome, see S. Holm-Nielsen, "On the Interpretation of Qoheleth in Early Christianity," *VT* 24 (1974): 168-87.

[90] R. Wardlaw, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (1868; reprint, Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1982).

(1) A Pessimistic Skeptic?

In recent years scholars have emphasized the pessimism and apparent skepticism of the book. Scott describes the message of Ecclesiastes under the following points: (1) The endless motion that we see brings about no real change and no real profit. (2) Everything that happens seems to be predetermined, but no one can comprehend what will happen to him. Hence life is an enigma and a waiting on fate. (3) The theory that retribution always overtakes wickedness is contradicted by experience. (4) Death is the universal negation of all values. In the same way, misfortune can overcome every kind of virtue.[91] Crenshaw, too, argues that the Teacher rejects the ways of the traditional sages as futile; that he regards God as distant, inscrutable, and capricious; and that, since death cancels every gain in life, one should at least enjoy a woman, wine, and food while health allows.[92]

Delitzsch also adopted a negative view of Ecclesiastes. He urged that Ecclesiastes on the whole shows that the Old Testament was inadequate and incomplete. The book is in many ways dark and pessimistic and points out the need for a New Testament. Delitzsch explained that the fear of death evident in the book is a result of its outlook being pre-Christ and asserted that its notion of the fear of God is not balanced by understanding of the love of God.[93] He implied that Ecclesiastes is the low point of the Bible: "In the Book of Koheleth the Old Covenant digs for itself its own grave."[94]

Although all of the points made by the above scholars could be supported with ample citations from the text, they do not tell the full story and in fact misconstrue its message. The Teacher's faith in the justice of God and the goodness of his commands runs far deeper than these analyses imply (e.g., 8:12-13; 11:9).[95] Even where the Teacher does not know and cannot explain, his response is a response of faith (e.g., 3:16-17 [see commentary]). His recommendations that the reader enjoy life, moreover, arise not from a skeptic's despair but from a profound understanding of human mortality.

Finally, Ecclesiastes is not the inferior piece of theology that Delitzsch asserts it to be. It should not be looked upon as dark and inferior just because it is pre-Christ and therefore does not reflect the fullness of the revelation of God. The entire Old Testament would suffer from such an evaluation.

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[91] Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 202-3.
[92] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 23-28.
[93] Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 182-84.
[94] Ibid., 182.
[95] Cf. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 27.

(2) The Preacher of Joy?

R. N. Whybray contends that seven pessimistic sections within Ecclesiastes each have, usually toward the end, an exhortation to rejoice. His division of the text is described in the following chart:

Text	Problem Described	Exhortation to Rejoice
1:12–2:26	Pleasure does not satisfy	2:24-26
3:1-15	Ignorance of the future	3:12
3:16-22	Injustice	3:22
5:9-19	Wealth does not satisfy	5:17
8:10-15	Injustice	8:15
9:1-10	God inscrutable; death certain	9:7-9
11:7–12:7	Old age and death	11:9-10; 12:1

Thus the text would seem to be saying that the best thing one can do is to rejoice in the face of life's unresolved problems. For Whybray, therefore, the Teacher is not the teacher of dour pessimism but the preacher of joy.[96] To this Fox replies that true joy (i.e., "intense happiness") is not so much an option for the Teacher as mere pleasure and that even pleasure is not wholeheartedly endorsed.[97] Indeed, it seems excessive to call the Teacher a "preacher of joy"; his distress is too great for that. Also the term implies that the goal of Ecclesiastes is to drive the reader toward joy, and this emphasis obscures the theological dimension of the book.[98] Its aim is to drive the reader to God. Whybray has, however, provided a good counterbalance to those who emphasize the negative in Ecclesiastes.

(3) A Thinker Caught in the Tensions of Life?

Loader attempts to demonstrate that the Teacher everywhere draws together opposing realities in life (wisdom and folly, power and powerlessness, talk and silence, etc.). These "polar opposites" bring about tensions that the book openly acknowledges but does not always resolve. Or, to put it more precisely, the only resolution is that life is devoid of security or

[96] R. N. Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *JSOT* 23 (1982): 87-98. The above chart does not appear within Whybray's article. It is my summation of his argument. Whybray also argues that texts that look very pessimistic (e.g., 4:2-3) need to be read in context. However, compare his more recent commentary (*Ecclesiastes*, NCB [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 17-31).

[97] Fox, *Qohelet*, 70; cf. p. 62.

[98] Whybray himself appears to shy away from calling the Teacher a "preacher of joy" in his later (1989) commentary on Ecclesiastes. He instead speaks of him as a realist and also gives a good deal of attention to the Teacher's theological emphasis (*Ecclesiastes*, 24-28). At the same time, Whybray's general approach is unchanged. For example, on 3:12 he comments that "Qoheleth's intention here is to lay emphasis on man's possibility of happiness" (*Ecclesiastes*, 74).

meaning. Following this method, Loader argues that every passage in the book except the prologue and 7:8-10 has the polar pattern.

Thus, for example, in the tension between wisdom and folly, wisdom is found to be relatively superior. But in the tension between wisdom and the realities of life, wisdom is found to be worthless since life often contradicts the teachings of wisdom, and the wise share the fate of fools anyway.[99] Loader describes the tensions in a simple diagram.

Thought:	Generally accepted wisdom
Counterthought:	Folly
Tension:	*Relative* priority of wisdom
and	
Thought:	Generally accepted wisdom
Counterthought:	Life's happenstances
Tension:	Worthlessness of wisdom[100]

Loader's analysis here is illuminating.[101] Even so, his approach has a number of problems, not the least of which is that his presentation is often quite confusing.[102] It is significant that he begins his analysis with 3:1-9, which does contain a list of polar opposites,[103] and then goes on to find polar opposites everywhere. In short, 3:1-9 has been made programmatic for the entire book. He often forces the notion of polar opposites on passages where it does not belong.

For example, he examines 11:1-6 under the heading "risk and assurance" and argues that the tension of the passage is that there is no security in life.[104] While it is true that these concepts play a part in this text, it is artificial to claim that Ecclesiastes is concerned with maintaining a polar opposition here. Instead, it is simply telling the reader how to obtain a measure of financial security by minimizing risk (see commentary). Loader's analysis is questionable in other areas as well; he wrongly concludes, for example, that the Teacher rejects the notion of retribution altogether.[105]

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[99] Loader, *Polar Structures*, 35-66.

[100] J. A. Loader, *Ecclesiastes: A Practical Commentary*, trans. J. Vriend, TI (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 33. I have here cited the simpler form of the diagram as it appears in his commentary rather than the more technical form found in the monograph.

[101] But cf. Fox, *Qohelet*, 32-33.

[102] Ibid., 115, n. 38.

[103] Even here, however, the text does not establish the kind of polar tension Loader claims to see, that humanity is trapped between forces of life and death and is in a state of insecurity (*Polar Structures*, 29-33). Rather it teaches the reader what it means to be mortal and urges acceptance of the fact of mortality.

[104] Ibid., 66-69. Loader is able to maintain his polar opposite only by some peculiar exegesis of vv. 1-2. His analysis makes the Teacher in effect a champion of antiwisdom in which prudence and imprudence in the final analysis are equals.

[105] Ibid., 96-105. Loader's conclusion is strange since he also contends that the tension posed by the problem of retribution is maintained. But if the doctrine is simply rejected, in what sense does a tension exist?

Ecclesiastes contains a great deal of tension, and many ambiguities are left unresolved; however, to say that the book is preoccupied with the idea of polar opposites or even uses the concept as a primary method of analysis is a considerable exaggeration. At the same time, Loader has forced us to reckon with the tension of unresolved contradiction in Ecclesiastes. Life, in short, has many unanswered questions.

(4) An Apologetic Work?

Eaton attempts to interpret Ecclesiastes as essentially an apologetic work. He observes that much of the book does not take God into account and is characterized by gloom and pessimism. He argues that when God is introduced, however, the "under-the-sun" terminology drops out and the Teacher speaks of the joy of man (2:25; 3:12; 5:18,20; 9:7; 11:7-9) and the generosity of God (2:26; 3:13; 5:19).[106] Like earlier Protestant scholars, he asserts the book to be evangelistic and apologetic: "What, then, is the purpose of Ecclesiastes? It is an essay in apologetics. It defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative."[107]

On the other hand, if Ecclesiastes is an apologetic work, it is surely unlike any other defense of the faith we know. It raises more questions than it answers. It is also doubtful whether we can legitimately separate two viewpoints within Ecclesiastes—the one being the worldly, under-the-sun perspective and the other being the true, evangelistic heart of the Teacher. As noted earlier, those who read Ecclesiastes as pessimism and skepticism do not do so without substantial support from the text. Also, one would not expect in an apology such a frank *carpe diem* ("seize the day," a statement of the brevity of life) as in 11:10. While Eaton has correctly observed that the Teacher believes both in God and in his goodness and generosity, we cannot say that Ecclesiastes is evangelizing *in the conventional sense.* The Teacher's words are unlike those of the prophets and apostles. Nevertheless, he does drive the reader to God (see below).

(5) The Original Existentialist?

Scholars have long noted the similarities—at times superficial and at times profound—between Ecclesiastes and existentialist philosophy.[108] M. Fox has recently exploited these similarities to the full. Drawing heavily upon *The Myth of Sisyphus* by A. Camus, he paints a picture of the Teacher as a man wrestling with the absurdity of the world.

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[106] Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 45.
[107] Ibid., 44.
[108] Cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 112-21.

He argues that the Teacher's main concern is the "*rationality of existence.* This rationality [the Teacher] denies, calling everything *hebel*" although rationality itself remains an "irreducible value."[109] Fox further contends that the Teacher does not so much challenge wisdom as bemoan the fact that wisdom is not rewarded. Fox concludes that the Teacher, having faced the absurdity of life, "affirms the grasping of *inner experience*, emotional and intellectual, as the one domain of human freedom."[110]

Although acutely aware of the negative side of wisdom, the Teacher is himself committed to it. He has a "compulsion for knowledge." He is a Sisyphus whose triumph comes at the moment when he has pushed the rock of inquiry up to the very peak, to the point of lucidity, even though the knowledge gained by that struggle may be painful and the rock inevitably rolls back down the hill before full illumination is attained.[111]

Fox is correct that the rationality of existence is for the Teacher a more fundamental problem than mere matters of material wealth and pleasure. Nevertheless, these too are a part of his quest to understand what makes life worth living. He does not deal in abstractions. Similarly, the Teacher's challenge to the intellectual quest is far more fundamental than grief over the wise not being adequately compensated. More significantly, he doubts whether it is possible for the wise to find the answers to their questions at all (7:23-24).

Fox has correctly observed that other sages were also aware of the limitations of wisdom,[112] and he is also correct in noting that the Teacher does not attack traditional wisdom but rather grieves over the "inevitability of ignorance."[113] Nevertheless, the Teacher looks upon the intellectual quest—what Fox calls the "wisdom imperative"—as a road with no destination. He will not play the part of the scholar who walks the road simply for the sake of being on the journey. If there is no goal, if "truth" can never be attained, what is the point? He will not (and here is Fox's fundamental error) play the part of Sisyphus and forever be pushing the rock up the hill just to see it roll down again. He abandons the intellectual quest not because of a collapse of nerve but out of conviction that it was a manifest failure. It had been for him what the quest for righteousness had been for Saul of Tarsus. In Ecclesiastes he turns away resolutely from the search for truth through reason although rejecting neither the validity of reason itself nor the moral insight of traditional wisdom.

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[109]Fox, *Qohelet*, 10. It is here possible to give only a brief summary of Fox's conclusions (far too brief to do his work justice).

[110]Ibid., 11. Cf. p. 77, "By exploiting our limited possibilities we become most fully human."

[111]Ibid., 117-20.

[112]For example, Agur (Prov 30:3-4); Fox, *Qohelet*, 109.

[113]Ibid., 111-12.

His solution to the dilemma of absurdity is thus not what Fox perceives it to be. He does not celebrate emotional and intellectual experiences as the givers of human value. To be sure, he does counsel that his readers enjoy the fleeting pleasures of life and assures them that these pleasures can be appreciated as long as their transitory nature and limited value are understood.

Nevertheless, the Teacher's arguments drive the readers not to the self but *to God* as the only giver of permanent worth—not simply to doctrines about God or to the teachings of the wise but to the very person of God. Thus he does not deny but rather emphasizes that much about God is beyond our ability to know. Even if, however, he does as Paul in Athens and preaches the unknown God, it is nevertheless *God* he preaches and not *humanity*. The Teacher anticipates the existentialists in perceiving the absurdities they see, but his response is quite different.

(6) Reflection for the Wise

If Ecclesiastes is to be understood as having an evangelistic purpose, it can only be interpreted as such within its genre and context. The work is written for the educated elite in the ancient Near Eastern setting. It is addressed, in short, to the "wise."

Childs rightly notes that "Koheleth's (the Teacher's) sayings do not have an independent status but function as a critical corrective (to conventional wisdom), much as the book of James serves in the New Testament as an essential corrective to misunderstanding the Pauline letters."[114] The book is unintelligible if it is not assumed that it is primarily addressed to an aristocratic audience. The implied readers were people who were likely to have access to the king and to the circles of power. They were people for whom the pursuit of wealth was a real possibility and not just a fantasy and who had the leisure time for intellectual pursuits.

Some of his audience were adherents of traditional, conventional wisdom. He warns these readers of the limits of wisdom. Many were wealthy bureaucrats or were at least comfortable in their situations. For these the Teacher is trying to strip away the illusion of having achieved permanence and value in life. Still others knew the Babylonian and Egyptian skeptical philosophy and already were familiar with pessimistic literature. To these he asserts that although life is often arbitrary, despair and cynicism are not appropriate responses. The wise reader will enjoy the good things life offers and yet maintain reverence for God.

Ecclesiastes could be accurately described as a report on the failed quest for eternal life. In this it stands well in the tradition of ancient Near Eastern literature, especially the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. "Eternal life" is not

[114]Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 588.

merely perpetual existence. It includes this, but it is especially the sense that one's life and work are fundamentally meaningful rather than of no lasting value. A writer seeks "immortality" through the masterpiece of literature, an athlete wishes to be "immortalized in the record books," and an actor desires to live forever through fame (all of which the Teacher would pronounce futile).[115] The search for value also includes the hedonist's attempt to make life worth living through pleasure, the politician's effort to control life through power, and the intellectual's attempt to master life through knowledge. Ecclesiastes therefore examines not only the specific question of life after death but also the vain attempts to gain genuine personal worth through wealth and pleasure, through accomplishments and power, and through knowledge.

The Teacher tells his readers how to live in the world as it really is instead of living in a world of false hope. In short, *Ecclesiastes urges its readers to recognize that they are mortal.* They must abandon all illusions of self-importance, face death and life squarely, and accept with fear and trembling their dependence on God.

Recognition of personal mortality leads necessarily to three conclusions. First, all pretense of pride in oneself must be abandoned. For the ruling elite this means a humble acceptance of the limitations on both their political power and on their ability to achieve intellectual comprehension of life.[116]

Second, life should be enjoyed for what it is—a gift of God. The book counsels that while avoiding the temptation to consider pleasure to the point of being the goal of life, one should not miss the fleeting joys life affords. This too is an act of humility, for it is an admission that one's work is not as important is one might wish and that it has no eternal validity. It is also, ironically, an antidote to the madness of the quest for wealth. Although money is ostensively sought for the pleasure it can provide, personal happiness and the enjoyment of life's pleasures are often the price paid for wealth.

Third, and most important for us and for the book, one must revere God. To refuse to do so is to deny one's dependency on God.

(7) Reflections on Creation and the Fall

One other aspect of the theology of Ecclesiastes that deserves mention is its theological and literary dependence on the early chapters of Gene-

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[115] See 9:1; 12:12.

[116] Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 15: "For all those who have been disillusioned by the discovery that the all-embracing systems on which they relied were not in fact reliable, how thrilling and astonishing it is to discover that in Scripture itself a similarly disillusioned and desperate voice may be heard." He notes that Ecclesiastes "cries out" for "a deliverance from the misery of meaninglessness."

sis. In these chapters humanity is subjected to a life of toil and condemned to death. The presentation of God in Ecclesiastes as absent and hidden arises directly from Gen 3 (where humanity loses access to God). The frequent refrain that all is "meaningless" may be a play on the name of Abel, the murdered son of Adam.[117] More to the point, the Teacher ponders what has become of *'ādām* ("humanity, Adam") as a result of sin. Ecclesiastes can also be called a collection of reflections on creation and the fall, or even reflections on the continuing significance of creation and the fall. The reasons for this are not difficult to imagine. Genesis tells the story of how humans—originally in a state of life, paradise, and innocence—fell into guilt, toil, and mortality. Ecclesiastes tells how persons now made weak and mortal should live.

[117]In Hebrew both are written הבל. C. C. Forman, "Koheleth's Use of Genesis," *JSS* 5 (1960): 256-63.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

1. Introduction (1:1-2)
2. On Time and the World (1:3-11)
3. On Wisdom (1:12-18)
4. On Wealth (2:1-11)
5. On Wisdom (2:12-17)
6. On Wealth (2:18-26)
7. On Time and the World (3:1-15b)
8. On Politics (3:15c-17)
9. On Death (3:18-22)
10. On Politics (4:1-3)
11. On Wealth (4:4-8)
12. On Friendship (4:9-12)
13. On Politics (4:13-16)
14. On Religion (5:1-7)
15. On Politics (5:8-9)
16. On Wealth (5:10–6:6)
17. Transition (6:7-9)
18. On Wisdom and Death (6:10–7:4)
19. Transition (7:5-6)
20. On Wisdom and Politics (7:7-9)
21. Transition (7:10)
22. On Wisdom and Wealth (7:11-14)
23. On Religion, Wisdom, and Evil (7:15-29)
24. Transition (8:1)
25. On Politics (8:2-6)
26. Transition (8:7-8)
27. On Theodicy (8:9–9:1)
28. Transition (9:2)
29. On Death and Contentment (9:3-10)
30. Transition (9:11-12)
31. On Politics (9:13–10:17)
32. Transition (10:18-20)
33. On Wealth (11:1-6)
34. On Death and Contentment (11:7–12:7)
35. Conclusion (12:8-14)