

I

Introduction and Main Thesis: Vanity of Vanities!

ECCLESIASTES 1:1–11

Behind our work is a desire for permanent achievement and significance in this life (verse 3). Because the accomplishments of our life's work are soon erased, however, our lives fail to achieve this purpose, and so are in vain (verse 2). The natural order witnesses to this (verses 4–7). Humanity is stuck in the same patterns (verses 9–11), unable to produce anything new or lasting.

Everything is meaningless

1 The words of the Teacher,^a son
of David, king of Jerusalem:

2 'Meaningless! Meaningless!'

says the Teacher.

'Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless.'

3 What do people gain from all

their labours

at which they toil under the

sun?

4 Generations come and genera-

tions go,

but the earth remains for

ever.

5 The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it
rises.

6 The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.

7 All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.
To the place the streams come
from,
there they return again.

8 All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.
The eye never has enough of
seeing,

nor the ear its fill of hearing.
9What has been will be again,
 what has been done will be
 done again;
 there is nothing new under
 the sun.
10Is there anything of which one
 can say,
 ‘Look! This is something
 new’?

It was here already, long ago;
 it was here before our time.
11No one remembers the former
 generations,
 and even those yet to come
 will not be remembered
 by those who follow them.

a 1 Or *the leader of the assembly*; also in
 verses 2 and 12

1. Title • Ecclesiastes 1:1

The book begins by telling us its main speaker (the Teacher), his pedigree and ancestry (son of David) and his role (king). This information both locates and authenticates the wisdom of the book. Since kings were (ideally) profound in their wisdom (see Proverbs 1:1 and 25:1, as well as 16:10; 20:8; 25:2–3), Ecclesiastes is not just anonymous good advice. Royal authority and insight stand behind it.

Attentive readers will quickly learn, however, that two voices speak in the book: the Teacher and an anonymous writer. We know this because someone speaks about Qohelet in the third person in 7:27 and 12:8, even evaluating the Teacher for us in 12:9–14. While authors can, of course, refer to themselves in the third person, it would be strange for them to do so in the middle of a first-person sentence (see 7:27). It would also be strange for an author to recommend his own work within his own text – imagine the present author including in this commentary the sentence, ‘Ortlund worked very hard on this book and was insightful about Ecclesiastes’ (compare 12:9–10). Aside from the presence of this second author, however, we can say nothing about him; he gives us no clues whatsoever as to his identity. All he does is pass on the Teacher’s words with a warm recommendation.

As for the first voice in the book, many have identified the Teacher with King Solomon. This identification is natural, for there was only one son of David (1:1) who reigned over all Israel (verse 12; 1 Kings 12 records how the kingdom split under the foolish reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam). The fact that Solomon was renowned for his wisdom makes it even easier to imagine him penning this comprehensive investigation into what is good for humans in whatever time they have (see 2:3).

There is another way to interpret these Solomonic hints in Ecclesiastes, however, which I think better accords with the book's original purpose. I do not want to make too much of whether or not Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, for any Christian can receive this book as God's word regardless of who they believe wrote it. I am very happy for readers to draw their own conclusions.¹ But the reader should be aware of the strong hints that the second anonymous author gives that the Teacher is a literary creation, a persona, with a calculated rhetorical purpose.

Perhaps the strongest hint is that Solomon is never directly named. (Well-intentioned readers who insist on Solomonic authorship go beyond the evidence of the text.) The word standing behind the NIV's 'Teacher' (in Hebrew, *qōhelet*) is not a proper name, but a job title: a leader or teacher in the religious assembly (see 12:9).² This is confirmed in 12:8, where we read of 'the Qohelet' (the definite article is not added to proper

¹ J. I. Packer, who loved Ecclesiastes, categorically states that it does not matter whether or not Solomon wrote the book. See Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 93. Packer gives a short but penetrating discussion of Ecclesiastes in *Knowing God*, 93–7.

² Biblical Hebrew can use a feminine singular noun derived from a verb to denote male occupations, such as the word for 'scribe' (*sōpheret*, from *sāphar*, 'to write' (Ezra 2:55; Nehemiah 7:57)). The verb related to *qōhelet* is *qāhal*, 'to assemble', repeatedly used for the religious assembly in the Pentateuch (e.g., Leviticus 4:13; Numbers 1:18). It is also used in 1 Kings 8:1 to describe Solomon assembling all Israel for the dedication of the Temple.

names in biblical Hebrew). ‘The Qohelet’ might, of course, be a way of referring to Solomon, but Solomon is named directly as the author in other parts of the Old Testament (see Proverbs 1:1; 25:1; Song of Songs 1:1; Psalms 72:1; 127:1). What is gained by describing one of Israel’s most famous kings indirectly?³ No one would pass up a chance to read a reflection on life from Israel’s wisest king. If Solomon were the author, I cannot think of any reason not to say so. It would also be strange for a second anonymous voice to feel the need to recommend a book by Solomon, of all people, to later readers (12:9–14).

Another related factor against Solomonic authorship is the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes, which does not appear to be pre-exilic. All languages change over time, and biblical languages are no exception. In the particular case of Ecclesiastes, there are characteristic markers that put it in the post-exilic period, centuries after Solomon. Of course, reconstructing the historical development of an ancient language is a tricky business, and perhaps access to more ancient Hebrew manuscripts would change the current picture of how Hebrew changed over time.⁴ Without ignoring these cautions, however, readers should be aware that what evidence exists points to Ecclesiastes being closer linguistically to books like Esther or 1 and 2 Chronicles than books

³ Readers who insist on ‘Teacher’ as a code name for Solomon can run into other difficulties. The great Jewish exegete Rashi, for example, argued that Qohelet is a code name for Solomon because Solomon ‘assembled’ many proverbs – and then went on to argue that Proverbs 30 was written by Solomon as well, even though the author Agur is listed in verse 1. Rashi does this by appealing to the Hebrew verb ‘*āgar*, which means ‘to gather’ (as in Proverbs 6:8) – so Solomon is the ‘gatherer’; see *Miqra’ot Gedolot HaKeter: Hamesh Megillot*, 124. But this is implausible; Agur is a perfectly good Hebrew name. If we follow this line of argument, how many other biblical authors will turn out to be Solomon in disguise?

⁴ See the appropriate cautions registered by Ian Young, ‘Is the Prose Tale of Job in Late Biblical Hebrew?’, *Vetus Testamentum* 59 (2009): 606–29.