

ECCLESIASTES

Introduction

Author. According to the text the author was a "son of David," a king in Jerusalem (1:1), and wrote many proverbs (12:9). These facts strongly suggest that Solomon was the author.

Date. Solomonic authorship places the date of the book in the 10th century B.C. The subject matter suggests that it is the reflection of an older man placing the writing late in the reign of Solomon (circa 935).

Structure. Without structure as a key to the message of the book, a holistic interpretation of this book would very subjective. The repetition and arrangement of certain phrases gives the interpreter the necessary clues to the author's intended literary scheme. The phrase "this is vanity" and/or "striving after wind" is one which occurs with frequency throughout the first five and one half chapters of the book. It does not occur again until the conclusion in 12:8, and in its place the phrase "man can not know" or an equivalent expression dominates for the rest of the book. Thus the first half of the book is dedicated to the premise that man's life is ultimately futile while the second half discusses the fact of man's limited knowledge concerning things good (7-8) and the future (9-11). Most divisions in the following outline have been determined on the assumption that certain repetitive phrases faithfully indicate literary structure. Those literary features have been noted in the outline.

Occasion/Purpose. As is the case with the rest of wisdom literature, its occasion was simply life in general in Israel. Its application is universal, intended for every man who searches for the answers to life's most basic questions in a life subject to the curse of Genesis 3.

Message Statement. *God's design for man in a sin-cursed world is that man obey Him and enjoy his fleeting life.*

Argument

- 1A INTRODUCTION 1:1-11
The theme of the book, the hebel (translated correctly in a multiplicity of ways: transience, perplexity, obscurity, futility, profitlessness)² of life is introduced here. It is first stated (1:2), then restated (1:3) and then poetically illustrated (1:4-11). The word is not necessarily cynical, but rather neutral, describing the reality that the lives of finite men do not issue in any infinite results. The consequences of a man's life will not be felt long after he is gone; thus, God's charge to man in his short life in a world after eden is that he enjoy this life which he is given within divinely ordained parameters. Or, perhaps better, "All human endeavors lack ultimate value; life should be enjoyed in the fear of God, as a gift from His hand."³
- 2A MAIN ARGUMENT: EVEN THOUGH LIFE IS A VAPOR GOD INTENDS FOR MAN TO OBEY HIM AND ENJOY LIFE 1:12--11:6
- 1B Even Though Life is Futile God Intends That Men Enjoy Life as a Gift from Him 1:12--6:9
Though some have understood hebel in a pejorative way, and thus found it only fittingly descriptive of the life of the unregenerate, the term applies to the lives of all men, believing and unbelieving alike. Its original meaning was that of a "vapor" or "the breath of man on a cold day." Solomon's point is that men must recognize their creaturely limitations and seek to conform to the divine design and enjoy their lives while on earth.
- 1C Introduction: Argument by personal testimony 1:12-18
In this section Solomon introduces two of the three main subjects (labor and wisdom) with which he will deal in this half of the book. This section may be arranged chiasmatically (cf. the similarities between 1:13 and 1:17; 1:14 and 1:16) evidencing a high degree of structure. The phrases "this is vanity and striving after wind" (1:14, 17) serve as structural markers throughout the first section (1:12--6:9).
- 2C The pursuit of pleasure is ephemeral 2:1-11
This word pleasure serves as an inclusion for this section (2:1, 10) which ends with the threefold repetitive marker, "all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun" (2:11). Some of these pleasures may have been moral, while others were immoral. The point is not morality vs. immorality nor the benefits of morality or lack of the same but simply the ephemeral quality of any kind of pleasure.
- 3C The pursuit of wisdom is fruitless 2:12-17
Although wisdom may profit to a certain extent, wisdom does not extend the limits of a man's life making him immortal. It does not change the "hebel" character of his life and thus it is charged, "hebel."
- 4C The pursuit of labor is empty 2:18--6:9
In four pericopes (all determined by the marker, "this is vanity and striving after wind, 2:27; 4:4, 6; 4:16; 6:9) Solomon focuses on human toil and determines that it is ultimately profitless ("hebel"). Yet, throughout the section he counsels the reader to eat and enjoy the fruit of his labor and to understand that even the ability to do so is a gift from God (2:24-26; 3:13, 22; 5:17-18 and also outside of this section in 8:15).

²This variety of meanings is gleaned from Robin Cover's Th. M. thesis, "The Use of hebel in Ecclesiastes" Dallas Theological Seminary, 1978

³Robert K. Johnston, "Confessions of a Workaholic: A Reappraisal of Qoheleth." CBQ 38 (1976):1:18, cited in BKC, "Ecclesiastes," p 978.

- 1D A reality concerning the future use of the result of one's labor 2:18-26
 The first reality which establishes the real "profitlessness" of man's "profit" is that it must be left to another, one who may well be a fool. Considering the wisdom of Rehoboam, it seems that Solomon's fear here was just. At the end of this section Solomon gives words to his basic counsel (for the first of five times) that "There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This is . . . from the hand of God." While this may seem contradictory, it actually is understandable in light of the meaning of the word "hebel." Because life and toil are fleeting, one ought to enjoy life and the fruits of labor now, receiving them as a gift of God.
- 2D A reality concerning human labor in light of God's decrees 3:1--4:6
- 1E God's decree has determined all the events of human existence: no toil can change that 3:1-9
 This lengthy section focuses upon the profitlessness of toil against the backdrop of God's eternal plan. Solomon asserts that God's decrees encompass the totality of man's life. His question (3:9) after this poetic masterpiece is "What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils?" The implication seems to be that man can not change or add to God's decree, so that none of man's work has ultimate value. It is in this section the Solomon twice counsels man to enjoy life (3:12-13, 22).
- 2E God's plan is appropriate and perfect: thus men need not change this 3:10-15
 Solomon includes the reassurance that God's plan is complete: nothing can be added and nothing can be taken away.
- 3E God's plan includes a time for injustice and a time for judgment of injustice 3:16-17
 The reiteration of the introductory phrase of 3:1 "for a time for every matter and for every deed is there" in 3:17b underscores that the plan which God has determined will prevail rather than those of men. So, no amount of man's effort will change one of the most grievous burdens of the fall: injustice; thus, man's toil is fruitless in this instance because it changes nothing.
- 4E God's plan includes the certain death of everyman 3:18-21
 Solomon is not affirming that there is no essential difference in the nephesh of man and beast. He is simply stating that in this bare fact that man has no advantage over the beast: both die. Thus, men are limited. The death of all men is proof enough that the essence of their existence is little more than a vapor.
- 5E God's plan includes the happiness of man 3:22
 A repetitive theme: though man's toil is not ultimately meaningful, God desires him to have joy in his toil.
- 6E God's plan includes oppression 4:1-3
 The point here is that often men are horribly oppressed without redress in this life. Solomon's only solution to this problem is not an optimistic human plan of rectification but a rather hopeless resignation to the fact. "So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living

who are still living" (4:2). In this Solomon willingly acquiesces to his counsel that no ruler, even those with the noblest intentions, can thwart the plan of God.

- 7E God's plan includes rivalry between people 4:4-6
One might infer from this passage that Solomon recognized the pervasive folly of "keeping up with the Jonesburgs."
- 3D A reality concerning the disadvantages of work and companions 4:7-16
Solomon recognizes that the one who works by and for himself without enjoying the work is engaged in futility. Companions can help in work, but ultimately others will forget and turn from us when it suits them.
- 4D A reality concerning the elusiveness of the fruits of one's labor 5:1-17
This lengthy section easily finds a unity in the liabilities of wealth. It may be lost through failure to pay one's vows (5:1-7) or through oppressive officials (5:8-9). If it is retained it can be a problem as well, (5:10-17).
- 5D Conclusion: word of exhortation and caution 5:18--6:9
To this predicament, Solomon offers two lines of advice.
- 1E Solomon's exhortation 5:18-20
For the fourth time Solomon counsels the reader to enjoy his life as a gift from God. The importance of this pervasive theme (found in both of the major sections of the book) is seen in its repetition.
- 2E Solomon's cautions 6:1-9
The enjoyment of life is a divinely designed ingredient of life. Unfortunately God does not allow some men to enjoy life and their lives are absolutely "hebel." Indeed, enjoyment is so important that if a man is not satisfied then he would be better off not having lived (6:3-6). In fact, if one is not happy then life is futile (6:7-9).
- 2B Man Does Not Know What the Future Holds 6:10--11:6
God intends for man to enjoy life and yet man's lack of knowledge concerning what is good to do (7-8) or what lies in the future (9-11) can restrict his ability to enjoy life. In the first section (1:12--6:9) the dominant theme was "vanity" and "chasing after wind." The last occurrence of this phrase is found in 6:9. From this point on a new theme dominates represented by the repetition of "who can know?" The preacher continues in his theme that men should enjoy life by encouraging men to avoid a fixation on what can not be known, and to avoid the postponement of enjoyment until a future time.
- In each of these units (7-8, 9-11) Solomon is not appealing to these realities as evidences of futility (a point which he has already established), rather, he is cautioning men that these realities do exist, and that to deny or neglect them will deprive them of the enjoyment which God intends them to have.
- 1C Introduction 6:10-12
The theme of the rest of the book (7:1--11:6) is clearly introduced and outlined in this section. Solomon notes that no man can know the mysteries which God has ordained in eternity past (6:10a) and that no amount of contention (6:10b) or sagacity (6:11) will change the matter. The fact is that no man can know what is good for him (6:12a corresponding to 7:1--8:17), and no man can know what the future holds

(6:12b, corresponding to 9:1--11:6).

- 2C Man does not know what is good for him to do: a fixation on this will only stifle joy.
Solomon focuses in this section on certain basic conundrums of life. He does not attempt to solve these riddles, rather, he simply reminds his reader that these cannot be solved. His point is simply to leave these mysteries to God and not to let them stifle one's enjoyment of life.
- 1D The mysteries of prosperity and adversity 7:1-14
Solomon lists certain "good" things which would not appear good to most people. His point, summarized in 7:13, 14 is that men need to take whatever comes from the hand of God as good since we do not have the necessary eternal perspective to judge what is good and what is evil.
- 2D The mysteries of wickedness which prevails and righteousness which does not.
The mystery of wickedness would not appear "good" to most and yet it is clearly a part of the ordained part of God. Man ought not to be satisfied with a superficial righteousness (7:15-18) which is ultimately wickedness. And yet he should not allow the presence of evil within himself and others to cause him to despair from enjoying life now.
- 3D The mysteries of the pervasiveness of evil 7:25-29
Solomon's dependence upon the Genesis account shows through in his theology of man's original innocence and his fallen depravity.
- 4D The mystery of unjust retribution 8:1-15
The point of this section is the reminder that although there are measures which one can take to avoid punishment (8:1-6), often there is little justice on the earth (8:7-14). This fact, however, should not prevent man from enjoying the life he has (8:15).
- 5D The conclusion 8:16-17
This section (7:1--8:17) closes with a threefold repetition in 8:17 of "man cannot discover."
- 3C Man can not know the future: rather than a fixation on the unknowable man ought to enjoy the present 9:1--11:6
This is the second mystery of this section as introduced in 6:12. It concerns the future and "what will be after man." It appears to this writer that "after him" is not a reference to the after life but rather to the balance of man's life on this earth. The following points represent the main flow of thought in this section.
- 1D One thing in the future of which men can be certain is death 9:1-6
- 2D The one wise course of action in light of this is to live today with all the gusto one can 9:7-10
- 3D No one can avoid misfortune 9:11-12
- 4D One thing man can know for certain about the future is that he can not know the future for certain 9:13--10:15
- 5D Man does not know what evil will come because of the possibility of evil in

- places of rule 10:16--11:2
- 6D Conclusion to the reality of an uncertain future: do not let life's inevitabilities and questions keep you from working with all your might 11:3-6
 This section (9:1-11:6) closes, as did the last one (7:1--8:17), with a threefold repetition of "men do not know" (11:5, 6). Solomon's basic counsel is not to let the uncertainty of the future to prevent one from working with all his might. The proper attitude is to work hard and wait to see the results.
- 3A EXHORTATION AND CONCLUSION TO THE MATTER 11:7--12:14
- 1B Exhortation 11:7--12:8
 This exhortation crystallizes two of the major themes of the work: 1) enjoy life within God's parameters, 2) while constantly remembering its inherent transience.
- 1C Introduction 11:7-8
 Solomon notes that light is good, i.e., while one can see the light he ought to enjoy life. Days of darkness are coming, i.e., your life is fleeting.
- 2C Counsel 11:9--12:8
 The counsel to follow one's impulses is not to be understood as cynical. Rather, it is hopeful and realistic that within the boundaries of divine revelation men ought to creatively enjoy the world created for them even though life after the fall is inherently more difficult. Old age is then pictured with the figure of a deteriorating house (12:3-4). Solomon counsels the young not to behave as if youth will be eternal.
- 3C Restatement of the theme 12:8
 This repetitive statement serves as an inclusion with 1:2. Once again, Solomon is not giving one message for the believer and another for the unbeliever. It is not as though this verse only applies to the wicked. No man can claim the prerogatives of God. No man can make a difference in the endless cycle of events which occur on the earth. The life of every man is fleeting, and temporary. The best he can do is to recognize his finite creaturliness and submit to the infinite Creator's design for life.
- 2B Conclusion 12:9-14
 Although this conclusion may appear at first glance to be so disparate from the rest of the work as to suggest the hand of an editor, it is actually in perfect harmony with the message of the book. In fact, any interpretation of the rest of the book which is not in harmony with the spirit and essence of this section must be rejected. This section articulates in a more explicit fashion that which is communicated implicitly in the rest of the work. Only in creaturely submission to the Sovereign Creator can man appreciate and enjoy his "hebel" life under the sun.

Outline

1A	INTRODUCTION	1:1-11
1B	<u>Identification of the Author</u>	1:1
2B	<u>Identification of the Theme</u>	1:2-11
1C	Statement of the theme	1:2

2C	Restatement of the theme	1:3
3C	Poetic illustration of the theme	1:4-11
1D	In the realm of nature	1:4-7
2D	In the realm of man	1:8-11
2A	MAIN ARGUMENT: EVEN THOUGH LIFE IS A VAPOR GOD INTENDS FOR MAN TO OBEY HIM AND ENJOY LIFE	1:12--11:6
1B	<u>Even Though Life is Futile God Intends That Men Enjoy Life as a Gift from Him</u>	1:12--6:9
1C	Introduction: Argument by personal testimony	1:12-18
1D	Solomon observes that work is profitless	1:12-15
2D	Solomon observes that wisdom is profitless	1:16-18
2C	The pursuit of pleasure is ephemeral	2:1-11
1D	Mirth and pleasure	2:1-3
2D	Building and land improvements	2:4-6
3D	Possessions and music	2:7-8
4D	Summary and evaluation	2:9-11
3C	The pursuit of wisdom is fruitless	2:12-17
1D	Introduction	2:12
2D	Wisdom has an advantage over folly	2:13-14a
3D	But both wise and fool alike die	2:14b-16
4D	Conclusion: the pursuit of wisdom is like chasing the wind	2:17
4C	The pursuit of labor is empty	2:18--6:9
1D	A reality concerning the future use of the result of one's labor	2:18-26
1E	the statement of the reality	2:18-19
2E	Solomon's personal response to this reality	2:20-23
3E	Solomon's counsel in light of this reality	2:24-26
2D	A reality concerning human labor in light of God's decrees	3:1--4:6
1E	God's decree has determined all the events of human existence: not toil can change that	3:1-9
1F	the statement	3:1
2F	the examples	3:2-8
3F	the conclusion	3:9
2E	God's plan is appropriate and perfect: thus men need not change this	3:10-15
1F	statement	3:10-11
2F	proper response to the plan	3:12-13
3F	restatement	3:14-15
3E	God's plan includes a time for injustice and a time for judgment of injustice	3:16-17
4E	God's plan includes the certain death of everyman	3:18-21
5E	God's plan includes the happiness of man	3:22
6E	God's plan includes oppression	4:1-3
7E	God's plan includes rivalry between people	4:4-6
3D	A reality concerning the disadvantages of work and companions	4:7-16
1E	the folly of having no one with whom the results of labor can be shared	4:7-8

	2E	the advantages of working with others	4:9-12
	3E	the cruel results of working with others	4:13-16
4D		A reality concerning the elusiveness of the fruits of one's labor	5:1-17
	1E	it may be lost as God disciplines for levitical negligence	5:1-7
	2E	it may be lost through oppressive officials	5:8-9
	3E	It carries many offsetting liabilities	5:10-17
	1F	concerning dissatisfaction	5:10-12
	1G	those who treasure it will not be satisfied by it	5:10
	2G	increase in income means increase in outgo	5:11
	3G	anxiety accompanies wealth	5:12
	2F	concerning the possibility of loss	5:13-17
5D		Conclusion: word of exhortation and caution	5:18--6:9
	1E	Solomon's exhortation	5:18-20
	1F	the essence of earthly reward: enjoyment	5:18
	2F	the source of earthly reward: God	5:19
	3F	An effect of earthly reward: happy preoccupation with life	5:20
	2E	Solomon's cautions	6:1-9
	1F	God does not allow some men to enjoy life showing the futility of existence	6:1-2
	2F	if man is not satisfied with what God gives he would be better off not having been born	6:3-6
	3F	if a man is not satisfied and always wants more then life is futile	6:7-9
2B		<u>Man Does Not Know What the Future Holds</u>	6:10--11:6
	1C	Introduction	6:10-12
2C		Man does not know what is good for him to do: a fixation on this will only still the job	7:1-18
	1D	The mysteries of prosperity and adversity	7:1-14
	1E	several things which are good for men to do	7:1-6
	1F	to consider death	7:1-4
	2F	to listen to rebuke	7:5-6
	2E	how to behave in adversity	7:7-14
	2D	The mysteries of wickedness which prevails and righteousness which does not	7:15-24
	1E	do not be satisfied with self righteousness or foolishness	7:15-18
	2E	do not despair over wickedness	7:19-24
	3D	The mysteries of the pervasiveness of evil	7:25-29
	4D	The mystery of unjust retribution	8:1-15
	5D	The conclusion	8:16-17
3C		Man can not know the future: rather than a fixation on the unknowable man ought to enjoy the present	9:1--11:6
	1D	One thing in the future of which men can be certain is death	9:1-6
	2D	The one wise course of action in light of this is to live today with all the <i>gusto</i> one can	9:7-10
	3D	No one can avoid misfortune	9:11-12
	4D	One thing man can know for certain about the future is that he can not know the future for certain	9:13--10:15
	1E	the future is uncertain because wise actions can be	

	nullified through folly or neglect	9:13--10:1
2E	the future is uncertain because wisdom is not always rewarded	10:2-7
3E	the future is uncertain because of the risks inherent in any activity	10:8-11
4E	conclusion: Men can not know the future at all and all the words of a fool will not change that fact	10:12-15
5D	Man does not know what evil will come because of the possibility of evil in places of rule	10:16--11:2
6D	Conclusion to the reality of an uncertain future	11:3-6
3A	EXHORTATION AND CONCLUSION TO THE MATTER	11:7--12:14
1B	<u>Exhortation</u>	11:7--12:8
1C	Introduction	11:7-8
2C	Counsel	11:9--12:8
1D	Counsel to enjoy one's youth	11:9-10
2D	Counsel to remember the coming of old age	12:1-7
3C	Restatement of the theme	12:8
2B	<u>Conclusion</u>	12:9-14

