



# ECCLESIASTES

Overview: Themes & Approaches For Study

# Author

“..the words of the Preacher (“*Qoheleth*” Heb), son of David, king in Jerusalem.”  
(1:1)

“*Qoheleth*” (Heb) can mean:

“One who assembles, a teacher, preacher,  
one who gathers truth and opinions”

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# Author

Who wrote Ecclesiastes?

“son of David” suggests Solomon  
Jewish tradition is that Solomon wrote

1. Song of songs when he was young
2. Proverbs when he was an adult
3. Ecclesiastes when he was old and bitter

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# Author

Most scholars take the view that Ecclesiastes ("E") was not written by Solomon. The author is likely an unknown wise preacher or teacher.

Author refers to the persona of Solomon as a literary device, a parody of the pursuit of wisdom and wealth.

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# Date and Historical Context

Scholars agree that E was written after the Jews returned from exile (539 B.C.):

1. Stylistic form of Hebrew used
2. Literary parallels to Phoenician wisdom literature (600 – 400 B.C.)
3. Allusions to E found in the writings of Ben Sirach (around 180 B.C.)
4. Parts of E found in the Dead Sea Scrolls (2<sup>nd</sup> Century B.C.)

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# Date and Historical Context

Post-exilic Persian period (539 – 332 B.C.)  
and Hellenistic period (332 – 63 B.C.)

Time of turbulent socioeconomic change:

1. Monetary currency introduced
2. Aggressive systems of taxation
3. Economic vulnerabilities and volatility

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# Date and Historical Context

Wealth in the new monetarized economy could come quickly and go just as quickly, justice was uncertain, and the ordinary citizen was vulnerable to power structures (Eccl 3:16; 4:1-6; 5:8, 10, 13-17; 6:1-2; 8:1-9; 10:5-20)

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# Genre

Characteristics of wisdom literature:

1. Shares the art of navigating the complexities of life and discerning God's ways in life
2. Contains instruction that is theologically charged and morally pragmatic

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# Genre

Characteristics of wisdom literature:

3. Structured as short sayings to lengthy discourse
4. One topic that all three books (Proverbs, Eccl, Job) has is “the fear of the Lord” (Prov 1:7,29; Job 28:28; Eccl 12:13)

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# Genre

E stands out.

- It is rife with contradictions
- It offers no neat maxims like Proverbs, but acknowledges and grapples with the mystery of life and God
- It challenges traditional Jewish wisdom (e.g. the concept of afterlife, 3:19-21)

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# Literary style and unity

“Autobiographical treatise”

Sophisticated reflection and autobiographical in style, a mix of personal ruminations, reflections and instructions.

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# Literary style and unity

## Style of Reflection:

1. observation(s) is/are stated
2. considered from several points of view
3. followed by a conclusion

See Eccl 2:24-26 as an example.

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# Literary style and unity

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

“A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, **I see (observation)**, is from the hand of God,

**(consideration)** <sup>25</sup> for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? <sup>26</sup> To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. **This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind (conclusion)**

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# Literary style and unity

Style of E is characterized by opposites and contradictions.

Antithetical Parallelism

E.g. Eccl 10:2

“The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left.”

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# Literary style and unity

## The contradictions in E:

1. wisdom vs. folly
2. good vs. evil
3. light vs. dark
4. love vs. hate
5. life vs. death
6. this world vs. afterlife

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# Literary style and unity

Example of contradiction:

The dead are more fortunate than the living (4:2)

The stillborn child is better off than the patriarch who begets a hundred children but does not receive a burial (6:3)

a living dog is better than a dead lion (9:4)

—

Does the teacher favour life or death?

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# Literary style and unity

## How do you explain the contradictions?

1. Pessimistic skepticism
2. Traditional Jewish wisdom and challenge to it (quote to refute)
3. A dialogue between teacher and student
4. A life's journal (conflict in fallen mankind)

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# Literary style and unity

**How do you explain the contradictions?**

A journey and quest for meaning.

The Teacher's ruminations are designed to provoke a *movement* of reflection and dialogue with the reader, rather than to reach or teach quick conclusions.

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# Literary style and unity

## Unity of E through recurring words and expressions:

1. "Vanity" ("*hebel*") - breath, vapour, cloud of steam, smoke
2. "under the sun" – the earth where we live
3. "time" - God's appointed and fixed times

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# Literary style and unity

## Unity of E through recurring words and expressions:

4. "toil" or "work" - God's work and the work he gives people to do
5. "evil" – Points also to the painfulness of a situation as well as the moral wrong
6. "portion," or "share" - The material blessing that we can have in this life

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# Literary style and unity

**Unity of E through recurring words and expressions:**

7. “fear God” – to revere, stand in awe, honour, be awed

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# Main themes

## 1. Futility of human quest and pursuit

“Vanity of vanities..all is vanity.”

All is *hebel*, futile and meaningless (NIV)

Empty and transient

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# Main themes

## 1. Futility of human quest and pursuit

The pursuit of wisdom is futile because wisdom cannot give us a comprehensive explanation of the reality we face and provide us with the means to control it (e.g. 1:1-18; 2:12-16; 3:11; 7:23-29)

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# Main themes

## 1. Futility of human quest and pursuit

The pursuit of wealth is futile for one cannot guarantee even if one attains it that one will be able to keep it, use it, or pass it on to your descendants. The possession of wealth does not inevitably lead to the possession of fulfilment and of joy (e.g. 2:1-11, 17-23; 4:7-8; 5:10-17; 6:1-6).

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# Main themes

## 2. Fragility of human existence

Inability of man to secure themselves against the inevitable eventuality of death

Death brings the wise man and the fool to the same place. (2:12-16)

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# Main themes

## 2. Fragility of human existence

Death comes to everyone, whether righteous or wicked, good or bad. (9:1-6)

Death is the ultimate reality of life.

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# Main themes

## 3. Fulfillment of life in God

The Teacher places God at the centre for true fulfillment in life:

1. God is the one who enables the eating, drinking and enjoyment of work (e.g. 2:24-25)
2. God grants the gift of the days when joy can be found, enjoyment and contentment may be experienced (e.g. 3:12-13; 5:18-20)

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# Main themes

## 3. Fulfillment of life in God

God at the centre:

3. God is the one who approves our activities (9:7-10)
4. God is the one who ultimately judges (e.g. 11:9-10)

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# Main themes

## 3. Fulfillment of life in God

The conclusion of the matter:

“Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.” Eccl 12:13

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# Approaches for study

## Observe, Interpret, Apply

1) Interpret *as a whole* taking into account the genre and literary style of the book

Be careful not to draw a conclusion just from a passage without understanding the full message of the book.

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# Approaches for study

2) **Embrace the complexity of the issues raised without needing to find an explanation or resolution**

Don't expect a black and white treatment of or resolution to the issues raised.

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# Approaches for study

## E.g. Eccl 4:1-3 (NIV)

I saw the tears of the oppressed—  
and they have no comforter;  
power was on the side of their oppressors—  
and they have no comforter.

<sup>2</sup> And I declared that the dead,  
who had already died,  
are happier than the living,  
who are still alive.

<sup>3</sup> But better than both  
is the one who has never been born,  
who has not seen the evil  
that is done under the sun

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# Approaches for study

## E.g. Eccl 4:1-3 (NIV)

I saw the tears of the oppressed—  
and they have no comforter;  
power was on the side of their oppressors—  
and they have no comforter.

<sup>2</sup> And I declared that the dead,  
who had already died,  
are happier than the living, **(No clear explanation  
for the issue)**  
who are still alive.

<sup>3</sup> But better than both  
is the one who has never been born,  
who has not seen the evil  
that is done under the sun

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# Approaches for study

**3) First reflect on what the Teacher says to gain perspective before trying to interpret his sayings in the light of the rest of Scripture**

E.g. Eccl 4:1-3

Better not to be born than to be oppressed?

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# Approaches for study

**4) Re-examine the sayings of the Teacher in the context of revelation from the rest of Scripture for lessons for application**

E.g. Eccl 4:1-3

Is death really the way to deal with injustice and oppression?

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# Approaches for study

4) **Re-examine the sayings of the Teacher in the context of revelation from the rest of Scripture for lessons for application**

E.g. Eccl 4:1-3

Is death really the way to handle injustice and oppression? **No!**

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# Approaches for study

4) **Re-examine the sayings of the Teacher in the context of revelation from the rest of Scripture for lessons for application**

E.g. Eccl 4:1-3

Is death really the only way to handle injustice and oppression? **No!**

**Resurrection and hope, Ultimate Justice when Christ returns**

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# Approaches for study

## 5) Focus on going deeper in the application of lessons for discipleship

Take time to allow space for reflecting, sharing, empathic listening and prayer.

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# Discipleship

## Our earnest searching

What are we pursuing for meaning and satisfaction?

Eccl. 1-2 highlights the things that humans seek:

1. wisdom, Eccl. 1:13-18
2. pleasure, Eccl. 2:1-3
3. possessions or wealth, Eccl. 2:4-8a
4. sex, Eccl. 2:8b
5. fame and popularity, Eccl. 2:9-11

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# Discipleship

## Our earnest searching

But we are not satisfied (Eccl 6:7)

Do we turn to God for true meaning and satisfaction? (Isa 55:2)

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# Discipleship

## Our sincere wrestling

We can have sincere doubt and even question God

E gives space and expression for that

Invite a sincere seeker to your Small Gp

“I believe, help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24)

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# Discipleship

## Our ready contentment

Contentment is a gift from God – enjoy it when and where you can (Eccl 2:24-26; 3:12,13, 22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-9)

Pursue godly contentment (1 Tim 6:6-9)

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# Discipleship

## Our reverential worship

Who is God in our lives?

Is there a genuine fear of the Lord?

Does that really shape the way I live?

“The fear of the Lord is the fear of a life without God.” (John Piper, *paraphrased*)

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# Discipleship

**Our earnest searching**

**Our sincere wrestling**

**Our ready contentment**

**Our reverential worship**

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# Conclusion

## Ecc1 12:13 (NIV)

“Now all has been heard;  
here is the conclusion of the matter:  
Fear God and keep his commandments,  
for this is the duty of all mankind.”

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