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Lesson 1

Ecclesiastes: Background and Survey

Ecclesiastes is perplexing to many, partly because its perspectives and purposes are not understood. The object of this lesson is to learn what these are by studying the book's background and making a general survey of its contents. The time you spend in this lesson will greatly help in the analytical studies that follow.

I. BACKGROUND

Not many details are known about the immediate setting of Ecclesiastes. This lack only serves to let the book shine forth in its essential quality, as a timeless and contemporary message to all generations since its writing. The things that are known about this book's setting are both interesting and important. Let us now look at these.

A. Title

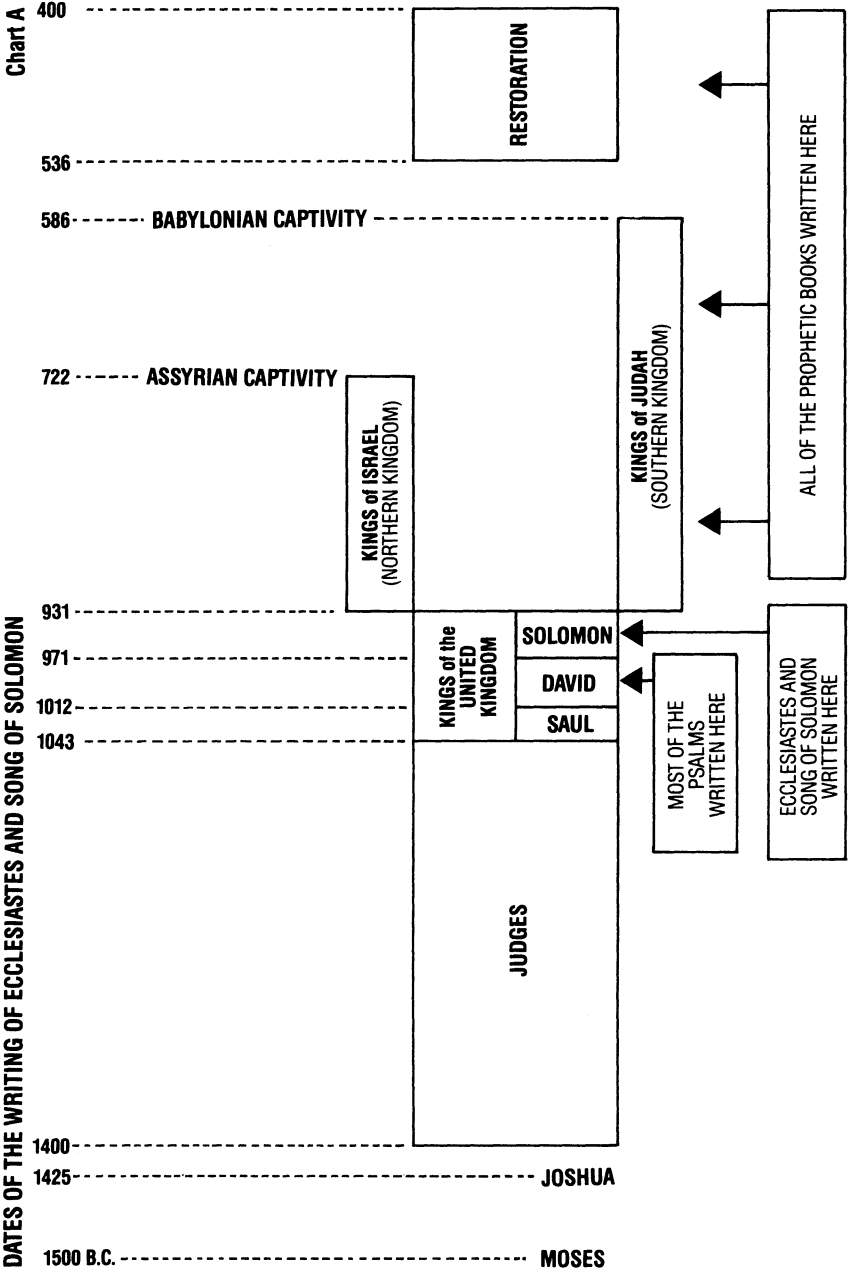
The title for the book comes from the opening phrase, "The words of the preacher" (1:1). The word "preacher" comes from the Hebrew text thus:

Hebrew: *qobeleth*—from the root *qabal*, "to assemble"

Greek version: Ecclesiastes—from *ek*, "out of," and *klesis*, "a calling"

English: preacher (1:1)—who speaks to an assembly of people
Ecclesiastes (title)—one who speaks to an assembly of people

In Old Testament days, a *qobeleth* was an official speaker to an assembly of people. Other appearances of the word "preacher" in



Ecclesiastes are at 1:1, 2, 12; 7:17; 12:8, 9, 10. The word is not found in any other Old Testament book.

B. Author

The author is not named in the Bible. In 1:1 he is identified as “the son of David, king of Jerusalem.” Internal evidences favor the traditional view that Solomon is meant by this phrase.¹ The following descriptions in the text coincide with what is known about Solomon from the historical record in 1 Kings.

1. The author’s unrivaled wisdom (1:16)
2. His wealth (2:8)
3. His extensive building projects (2:4-6)
4. His collection of proverbs (12:9)

Chart A shows when Ecclesiastes was written, if Solomon was the author. Observe, among other things, that the preaching ministries of the Bible prophets did not begin until after Solomon’s time.

C. Place in the Bible

Ecclesiastes is the fourth of five poetical books in our English Bible: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon.² In the Hebrew Bible it is the fourth of five megilloth writings (“five rolls”): Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther.³ Chart B shows comparisons of some of the major subjects of the poetical books. (Lamentations is included because it is written in poetical style also.)

D. Author’s Perspectives and Purposes

Throughout Ecclesiastes, the author shows two opposite life views. First he views things around him as the natural man would do without the light of divine revelation. His conclusion is, “All is vanity.” (Read 1 Cor. 2:14.) (He went through this searching expe-

1. Many commentators believe that the author lived a few hundred years after Solomon’s time. See Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1964), pp. 462-72, for a defense of Solomonic authorship. Some hold to the view that the author was an impersonator of Solomon in the book and that he lived a few hundred years after Solomon.
2. It is interesting to observe that the historical, poetical, and prophetic sections of the Old Testament are of approximately equal chapter length: historical books, 249 chapters; poetical books, 243 chapters; prophetic books, 250 chapters.
3. Each of the five rolls was read at an annual Jewish feast. Ecclesiastes was read at the Feast of Tabernacles, which was the most joyous of festivals.

rience himself sometime earlier in his career: read Eccles. 1:13-14.) But then the author writes as one to whom God has revealed Himself, and now his observations and conclusions have the ring of surety and hope. For example: “Whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever” (3:14). This pattern of alternating perspectives continues throughout the book, as we shall see.

POETICAL BOOKS COMPARED

Chart B

		KEY THOUGHTS	KEY SUBJECTS
3 DIDACTIC BOOKS	PROVERBS	WISDOM	Description and fruits of the righteous man
	ECCLESIASTES	FUTILITY	The way to God
	JOB	TRIAL	Crucible of testing
3 DEVOTIONAL BOOKS	PSALMS	WORSHIP	Meditations and worship of the righteous man
	SONG OF SOLOMON	LOVE	The way of God
	LAMENTATIONS	DESTRUCTION	Crucible of judgment

It should be observed that when the author of Ecclesiastes writes from the second perspective noted above, not as one who knows God from full revelation. He views life as a man does who knows and worships God primarily as Creator. This is confirmed by the fact the every time he names Him, he uses the word *Elohim*, which is the name especially associated with the work of creation (cf. Gen. 1:1). The name *Lord* (Jehovah), which is the Old Testament equivalent of Redeemer-Saviour, does not appear once in the book.⁴ Today when the reader of Ecclesiastes reaches the

4. Read Exodus 5:22-6:9 for the significance of this covenant-name, *Jehovah* (KJV*, Lord). Solomon refers to Jehovah often in Proverbs, so it is not that he himself did not know God as Lord. If Ecclesiastes was composed after Proverbs, Solomon is recalling his search for meaning in life before he came to know God as His Redeemer (cf. 1:13). Some maintain that he wrote from a backslidden condition.

*King James Version.

last command of the book, “Fear God, and keep his commandments” (12:13), he is ready to be introduced to Christ the Redeemer. “As the law was designed to lead men to Christ, so this book was written to lead those ‘under the sun’ to the Son (cf. Heb. 1:1).”⁵

The purposes of Ecclesiastes, then, are to show the futility of pursuing materialistic, earthly goals as an end in themselves and to point to God as the source of all that is truly good.⁶ The theme of the book is determined by those purposes and may be stated in this twofold way:

- (1) Every pursuit of man is futile if God is excluded.
- (2) Only God’s work endures, so that only He can impart true value to man’s life and service.

E. Style

Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and parts of other Old Testament books are classified as wisdom literature. The style of these books is that of the philosopher, who shares his observations, reflections, reasonings, and conclusions in terse and brief lines, often in poetical form. Here is one writer’s evaluation of Ecclesiastes’s composition:

Whether prose or verse, I know nothing grander in its impassioned survey of mortal pain and pleasure, its estimate of failure and success.⁷

F. Ecclesiastes and Philosophy

The dictionary defines philosophy as the investigation of causes and laws underlying reality. Stated simply, philosophy is man’s search for truth. Throughout Ecclesiastes, Solomon presents the position of one who is searching for truth and reality and meaning. From this standpoint, then, it would be correct to say that Ecclesiastes is a book of philosophy.

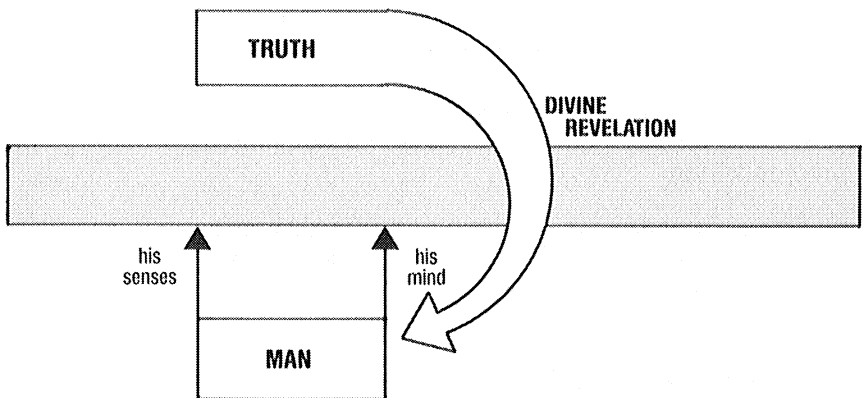
5. Wick Broomall, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, p. 232.
6. A marginal note of the *New American Standard Bible* suggests the word *futility* as a translation of “vanity” (1:2). This is the word that will be used most of the time in this manual.
7. E. C. Stedman, quoted by W. Graham Scroggie, *Know Your Bible* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1940), 1:144.

Generally speaking, there are two main schools of thought in philosophy: empiricism and rationalism. Empiricism says that human experience, especially of the senses, is the only source of knowledge. That is, man can know only what he experiences. Rationalism says that human reason is the prime source of knowledge and of spiritual truth. That is, man can know only what he can mentally grasp. It is interesting to observe in Ecclesiastes that truth is sought for in both ways:

“I made,” “I got,” etc. (2:4,7)—*empiricism*

“I gave my heart to know” (1:17)—*rationalism*

The conclusion in both quests is stated over and over again: “All is vanity.” That frustration serves to show that if truth is to be known, it must come by revelation from God. (See diagram.) The God-centered life-view that Solomon teaches in the book came from divine revelation.



It must have been an interesting experience to be personally acquainted with the man Solomon in the early days of Israel. Here was a man upon whom God lavished many gifts and talents. He was a musician, poet, botanist, zoologist, businessman, administrator, and king. His “wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt” (1 Kings 4:30). No wonder people traveled from all parts of the world to his palace to see and hear him. This was the man whom God chose to write a large portion of His inspired Scripture: Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Proverbs, and two psalms (72, 127). So although we did not live in the days of Solomon, we have the privilege to read and study his choicest writings, which excel all others penned by him, because they are uniquely and infallibly inspired, wholly trustworthy.

II. SURVEY

Now you are ready to study the actual text of Ecclesiastes. Before you begin to analyze each chapter in detail, however, it is important that you first view the book as a whole—in a panoramic survey or overview. This will show you such things as general theme, perspectives, and highlights of the book. Survey of this kind will help you later to analyze accurately with the broad context in mind.

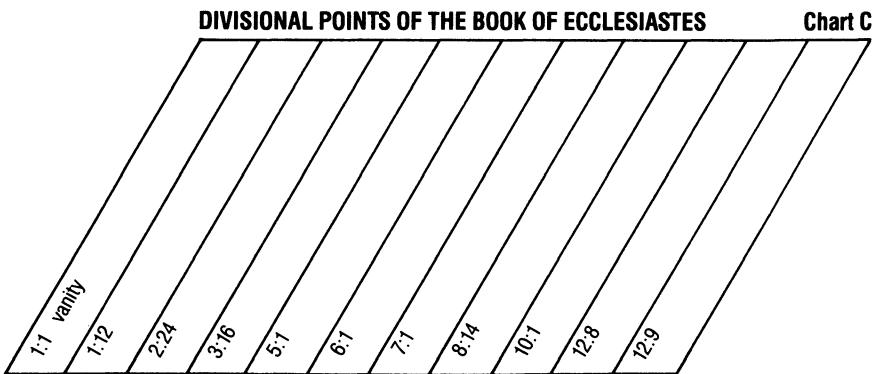
A. First Readings

Scan Ecclesiastes once or twice, catching its tone and large emphases. What are your impressions after this first reading? (Note: Do not tarry over details in this scanning stage, or you may lose sight of the broad panorama.)

B. Further Readings

Your next readings should be in shorter portions and at a slower pace. But keep in mind that you are still in the survey stage of study. Here are some suggestions:

1. Chart C divides Ecclesiastes into eleven sections of varying lengths. The reason for divisions at the verses indicated will be evident as you proceed with your survey study. For now, mark these divisions in your Bible. It is recommended that you draw a line across the page of your Bible at the beginning of each divisional point. This is a big aid in study.



2. What repeated words and phrases have you already observed in the text of Ecclesiastes? Keep looking for others during

the remainder of the lesson. Three key examples are “vanity,” “under the sun,” and “God.” Read through the book, and underline or circle these words every time they appear. Use a different colored pencil for each, for this will help you see groupings of the phrases. Such groupings, or concentrations, are clues to emphasis. The importance of these phrases are indicated by their many appearances in the book:

- vanity—39 times
- under the sun—29 times
- God—40 times

3. Read 1:14, and note the close relation between “under the sun” and “vanity.” The phrase “under the sun” refers to the earth-bound, temporal outlook and experience of the natural man, and this is “vanity,” or futility. Thus in Ecclesiastes the phrases “under the sun” and “vanity” refer to the same thought. The opposite outlook, the hopeful one, is that which looks toward God, who is above the sun. With this in mind, scan your marked Bible, with its markings of the key phrases noted above. Observe which sections are about God more than they are about vanity, and which are about vanity more than about God. Record your findings below. (An example is given.)

SECTION	EMPHASIS
1:1-11	vanity
1:12–2:23	
2:24–3:15	God
3:16–4:16	
5:1-20	
6:1-12	
7:1–8:13	
8:14–9:18	
10:1–12:7	
12:8	
12:9-14	

What pattern or order do you observe here? Record the words *vanity* and *God* in the appropriate spaces on Chart C (example shown).

4. Compare 1:2 and 12:8. Since these similar verses appear at the beginning and end of the book, what do they suggest is a prominent theme of the chapters in between?

5. Read 1:1-11. How does the section serve as an introduction to the book?

6. Read 12:9-14. How do these verses conclude the book?

C. Survey Chart

Chart D is a survey chart of Ecclesiastes, showing how the book is organized according to thought.⁸ Refer to it as you follow each of the suggestions below.

1. Note how the introduction (1:1-11) is identified. The premise, or proposition, that “all is futility” is restated in the conclusion, at 12:8.

2. The main body of the book is 1:12–12:7. Observe on the chart that this is divided into four sermons. These sermons of the preacher could also be called discourses of the teacher. Each sermon expounds on two subjects: futility (“vanity”), and hope. In other words, in each sermon Solomon first shows the hopelessness of life where the outlook is earthbound (“under the sun”); and then he shows that hope is founded only on God, whose dwelling place is beyond the heavens. Compare this repeated alternation (vanity; God) in the four sermons with the observations you recorded on Chart C.

3. Observe what is recorded in the oblique spaces on Chart D. The first part of each sermon is mainly observation, where the preacher tells what he, as a natural man, saw. Hence the repeated phrase in these sections, “I saw” (e.g., 4:7). The second part of each sermon also includes observation, but it is mainly instruction and counsel about the things of God.

4. Note how the conclusion (12:8-14) is a condensed summary of the four sermons:

Part One: Observation—All is vanity (12:8).

Part Two: Instruction and counsel—Fear God (12:9-14).

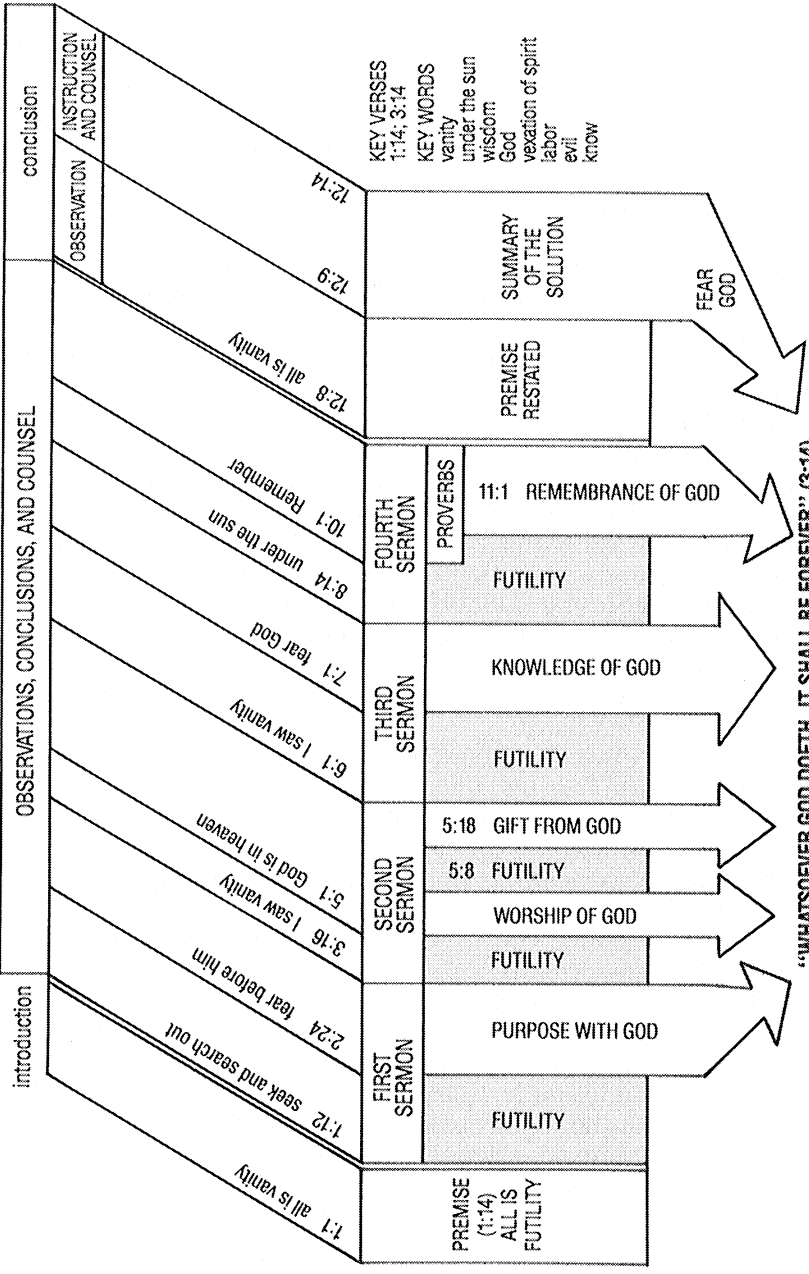
5. Lists of proverbs appear at a couple of places in the book. Chapter 10 is an example. Note how this is identified on Chart D.

6. Observe the key words listed on the chart. Read the two key verses that are also cited. How are these reflected in the title assigned to the book?

8. Various outlines have been made of Ecclesiastes. Some expositors believe there is no organization of thought, that the book is “disjointed in construction” (G. S. Hendry, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The New Bible Commentary*, p. 538). The position of this manual is that there is indeed a discernible pattern of thought, developed in four sermons, shown on Chart D.

Chart D

ECCLESIASTES VANITY UNDER THE SUN; HOPE IN GOD



D. A Study of the Topic of Vanity

Read the following selected verses as an introduction to the subject of vanity in this book.⁹

THE TEN VANITIES			
Human wisdom	2:15-16	Human fame	4:16
Human labor	2:19-21	Human insatiety	5:10
Human purpose	2:26	Human coveting	6:9
Human rivalry	4:4	Human frivolity	7:6
Human avarice	4:7	Human awards	8:10, 14

SOME REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What Hebrew word does the title *Ecclesiastes* translate? What is the literal meaning of that Hebrew word?

2. What are some evidences that Solomon was the writer of *Ecclesiastes*?

3. If Solomon wrote this book, was it before or after the Old Testament prophets?

4. If *Ecclesiastes* were written after the time of most of the Old Testament prophets, would you expect the book to reflect something of the prophets' messianic message?

5. What is the twofold theme of *Ecclesiastes*? How is this twofold message developed in the pattern of the whole book?

6. How many "sermons" appear in *Ecclesiastes*? What are the two main subjects of those sermons?

7. Compare the introduction and conclusion of the book.

8. Define philosophy, empiricism, and rationalism. What do these terms have to do with the message of *Ecclesiastes*?

9. Name some key words of *Ecclesiastes*. Can you recall the main point of each of the two key verses chosen for the book?

10. What title would you give to the book of *Ecclesiastes*?

9. The list is from J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 3:163. Used by permission.