

## NOTES ON ECCLESIASTES

From J. Stafford Wright in *Classical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*  
Walter Kaiser, Jr., Ed.,  
Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1972, pp. 133-150.

### Introduction.

#### A. Doubts about *Ecclesiastes*.

1. Hillel (110 BC - AD 10) and Shammai (50 BC - AD 30): did it make one holy when it was handled or did it defile the hands?
2. Other Jewish expositors.
  - a. Put “?” after Epicurean passages.
  - b. Legend that Solomon was driven from his throne and this reflects his time of estrangement from God.
  - c. Paraphrase and explain away difficult passages.

(9:7 -- Solomon said by the spirit of prophecy before Jehovah, “The Lord of the world shall say to all the righteous one by one, 'Go taste with joy thy bread which has been give to thee on account of the bread which thou hast give to the poor and the unfortunate who were hungry, and drink with good heart thy wine, which is hidden for thee in the Garden pf Eden, for the wine which thou hast mingled for the poor and needy who were thirsty, for already thy good work has been pleasing before Jehovah,’” (Targum on *Ecclesiastes*.)

#### 3. Christian commentators.

- a. Jerome (AD 342 - 420) -- it teaches the vanity of all enjoyments of this world; we should be ascetic.
- b. Martin Luther (AD 1483 - 1546).
  - i. Should not be in the Bible.
  - ii. Collection from many books probably from the library of Ptolemy Euergetes (184-116 BC).
- c. A dialogue between a refined sensualist and a worldly sensualist.
- d. A dialogue between a teacher and pupil.
- e. Three hands:
  - i. The preacher.
  - ii. A pious man injecting orthodoxy whenever he is shocked.
  - iii. A wise man sprinkling in a a few maxims and proverbs.
- f. Siegfried (AD 1830 - 1903): a pessimist, a Sadducee, a wise man, a pious man, a proverbial anthologist, a redactor, an epilogist, another epilogist, and a Pharisee.
- g. Struggles of a thinking man trying to square his faith with the facts of life and fighting his way to submission to God.
- h. Pessimism.
  - i. The things of this world lead only to pessimism.
  - ii. Purpose -- to cause dissatisfaction.

- i. Scofield (AD 1843 - 1921): the reasoning of the man without God leading to inferior conclusions, but the best man can do by himself.

B. Basic responses.

1. Several hands, especially natural and uninspired, not worthy of God.
2. Attacks on the faith can be found free anywhere. Why include them in Scripture?
3. The conclusion is not inferior.

C. Principle of interpretation: look for the author's viewpoint.

1. Preface: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."
  - a. Ro. 8:20 -- All creation is subject to vanity.
  - b. Creation's vanity includes believers as part of creation.
2. Conclusion.
  - a. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (12:8).
  - b. Final conclusion: "Fear God...every work will be brought into judgment" (12:13-14) (cf. Mt. 19:17; 1 Co. 3:12-14).

Nothing can be taken to be a final conclusion if it contradicts THE final conclusion, and anything given as a final conclusion must be interpreted in the light of THE final conclusion.

3. Recurrent statements.

- a. Vanity theme, "under the sun," "I perceived," "I said in my heart."
- b. Most difficult: the Epicurean theme (6 times).

D. Resolution of Epicurean theme.

1. We read Epicureanism into it because we are familiar with it.
  - a. Solomon lived 900s BC; Epicurus lived 300s BC.

Epicurus: Pleasure is not that of the moment, but which lasts a lifetime = absence of pain = serenity of soul.

- b. Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die = hedonism.
2. Solomon's conclusions differ from hedonism.
  - a. Hedonism is vanity.
  - b. Solomon does not recommend hedonism.
3. Key to understanding *Ecclesiastes*: Vanity theme is the verdict on life; the conclusion is counsel in light of that verdict.
  - a. *Ecclesiastes* records the search for the key to life.
  - b. The key is not found under the sun (life has lost the key to itself).
  - c. We must go to the locksmith for the key.
  - d. BUT the locksmith will not give us the key.
  - e. We must live in faith that the locksmith will open the doors.

## I. The vanity of life.

- A. We are in time, but eternity is in us (3:10-11).
  - 1. We seek the WHY of life.
  - 2. Seeking, we find no answer (cf. 7:14; 8:16-17).
- B. Areas of search.
  - 1. Nature.
    - a. It is a closed system.
    - b. Speaks of God but does not reveal his plans (cf. Ro. 1:13ff.).
  - 2. Man.
    - a. Generation after generation of futility.
    - b. Nothing is new.
  - 3. Wisdom.
    - a. Brings greater disillusionment.
    - b. But better a Socrates unsatisfied than a swine satisfied.
  - 4. The mire of hedonism.
  - 5. Death -- the supreme folly.
    - a. Undoes all plans.
    - b. Everything goes to those who will squander it.
- C. Possible solutions.
  - 1. Suicide.
  - 2. Hedonism.
  - 3. Fatalism.
- D. The Christian answer.
  - 1. Life makes sense (Ep. 2:10; Ro. 8:29).
  - 2. Not even to God's people is it given to comprehend God's plan (Dt. 29:29; Job was never told why he suffered).
  - 3. Attitude: faith and confidence (Ro. 8:28).
  - 4. Live life one day at a time, taking it from the hand of God (Mt. 6:34).

## II. The conclusion of life.

- A. Live life from the hand of God (2:24-25; 3:11-13).
- B. Judgment implies a divine plan (11:9).
- C. Thoughts on death.
  - 1. **In and of himself**, man is no different from the animals (3:18).
  - 2. We must live knowing our own mortality.
  - 3. After death, no more means of service.
  - 4. Do our work, while we live, with all our might (9:10; cf. Jn. 9:4).
- D. Receiving life from God = serving him (Ro. 12:1).
  - 1. We have moral responsibility.
  - 2. No guarantees of success (9:11) but strive for God's glory (Ro. 8:29).
  - 3. We must not judge the whole plan from the little we can see.
- E. Conclusion: serve God in faith.