

Ecclesiastes (Part-1)

The book of Ecclesiastes takes its name from the Greek Septuagint (LXX) word *Ekklesia* or assembly which became Ecclesiastes in the Latin Vulgate and in English. *Ekklesia* is related to the Hebrew verb *qabal*, —to assemble. It is both the title of the book in Hebrews and the name of the chief speaker (grk., *Ἐκκλησιαστού* /heb., קהלת in Ecc1:1) of the book. The Hebrew is the word *Qohelet* (also spelled Qoheleth, Kohelet, Koheleth) and it is usually referred to as *Qohelet* in scholarly articles. Qohelet can be used as a name or a title. As a title it seems to mean a —caller of assemblies, that is, one who calls the assembly together for teaching —teacher, —speaker, or —Preacher, are all dynamic renderings. Although the word “Qoheleth” is understood as masculine, its form is Qal, feminine participle. Elsewhere the root qhl is always Hip.il or Nip.al (causative or reflexive/passive). Perhaps the feminine ending denotes the personification of wisdom.

What is the message of Qohelet?

The ancient Rabbis taught that Qohelet was “joyous” (most) modern scholars understand it as cynical and pessimistic and view the epilogue (often attributed to a different author) as a sort of “corrective” on the overall message of the book.¹ However, before the book can be properly interpreted we must understand *why* it was written and *when* it was written. The available options are that it was either written by Solomon in the early monarchy (ca. 970 BC) or by an “unknown Jew” in the late post-exilic era (ca.300 BC).² La Sor holds that “The serious questioning of beliefs and values of ancient Israel points to a time where prophetic activist had crested and vital hope in God’s active presence and power had waned... both vocabulary and sentence structure are post-exilic, more closely akin to Mishnaic style than any other Old Testament book.”³ The oldest texts of Qohelet are two Dead Sea Scrolls: 4Q109 and 4Q110. Portions of four chapters are represented. Scroll 4Q109 has been dated to 175-150 B.C., ruling out any possibility of an exceptionally late date for Qohelet.⁴ The late post-exilic date is justified on the hand of Late Hebrew (LH) linguistic features and the early date is justified because Solomon is the champion of “wisdom literature” and Ecclesiastes seems to demonstrate many affinities with the reign of Solomon (although he is never mentioned by name). Hill and Walton argue that if, indeed, it was Solomon writing to identify himself he would do so boldly rather than by using evasive techniques.⁵ The message of Qohelet will remain elusive unless we can sort out the problem of dating and authorship.

Dating and authorship

Critical to the question of dating is the question of language. However, previously a twofold conclusion was drawn⁶ – (1) Linguistic features by themselves are insufficient for dating texts as they require

¹ Brevard Childs says, “Indeed Koheleth’s sayings do not have an independent status, but function as a critical corrective, much as the book of James serves in the New Testament as an essential corrective to misunderstanding the Pauline letters” (Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979], 588). Walther Zimmerli argues that Qohelet’s value is in its assessment of the wisdom tradition as incomplete and insufficient (“The Place and Limit of the [sic] Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology,” *SJT* 17 [1964]: 157–58)

² Craig Bartholomew, sums up the situation as follows; “A certain consensus has emerged out of a historical critical interpretation of Ecclesiastes. Very few scholars defend Solomonic authorship nowadays: most regard Ecclesiastes as written by an unknown Jew around the late third century BC. Most scholars regard the book as a basic unity with the exception of the epilogue. However, as regards Ecclesiastes’ structure, message, relationship to OT traditions and to international wisdom there is no consensus”. Craig Bartholomew, “Qoheleth in the Canon? Current Trends in the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes,” *Themelios* 24.3 (May 1999): 4-20, p.6

³ William Sanford La Sor, David Allan Hubbard, Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, (1st ed 1982) 1996), 499

⁴ Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: Volume 18 of Anchor Yale Bible*, (Yale University Press, 1997), 6. La Sor states that, “a date later than 200 is ruled out, both by Ecclesiastes... and by fragments of Qohelet among Qumran scrolls” (*Ibid*, 499).

⁵ Hill, Andrew E., and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3rd edition, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 457

⁶ For a fuller discussion see, P. Wyns, “Songs” (part 1) *Vol. 7, No. 3, Jul 2013* : P. Wyns, “Using Biblical Hebrew to date the OT” *Vol. 8, No. 3, Jul 2014* and P. Wyns, “Songs of Degrees” (part 2) *Vol. 8, No. 4, Oct 2014* in *The*

supporting intertextual evidence – (2) Linguistic anomalies can be accounted for by the sudden introduction of dialect or colloquialisms (such as northern Israelite Hebrew) rather than by gradual dispersion and replacement. The language of Qohelet will be examined in a separate article but for now we must suffice with presenting an *a priori* conclusion – (3) Language, syntax and orthography are not static it is quite possible for older language to be revised and updated.

Who wrote Qohelet?

The following “working hypothesis” will be presented in this series of articles; (1) Qohelet is based on the memoirs of a king (2) Those memoirs were revised in the post-exilic period as Qohelet demonstrates awareness of post-exilic books and some of the language of the original memoir was updated then.⁷ Ecclesiastes is philosophical “wisdom literature” and although Qohelet is the author his tract is based on memoirs and reminiscences of a historical king that were diligently preserved.⁸ (3) Qohelet functions as both the “frame-narrator” and also speaks for the “king” (whose sources he had access to).⁹

Which king did Qohelet speak for?

Traditionalist will answer that the “king” in Qohelet is Solomon. Archer boldly states that he is prepared “to demonstrate that the incidental allusions to the contemporary scene reflect conditions known to obtain only during the reign of Solomon and at no other time”.¹⁰ This is an exaggeration especially as Solomon’s “idealized” reign ended in apostasy resulting in a divided monarchy. Even many conservative scholars (Luther, Moses Stuart, Delitzsch, Young, and Kidner - to name a few) reject Solomonic authorship. Intertextual evidence (to be examined in part 2) weighs heavily against Solomon but perhaps the greatest objection against Solomonic authorship is his lack of repentance.¹¹ It is often stated that Ecclesiastes itself is evidence of his repentance but that is circular reasoning. Another enormously successful royal will be proposed as the king of Qohelet.

Solomon as king?

Longman and Dillard state that, “A careful reading of the book will take note of other indications that Qohelet is not Solomon. For instance, Qohelet’s statement in 1:16, “I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me,” is strange to imagine in the mouth of Solomon. After all, there was only one other Israelite king, his father David, who ruled in Jerusalem before him. It is inconceivable that he would be thinking of the Jebusite rulers who preceded David

Christadelphian eJournal of Biblical Interpretation, [CEJBI], (eds., A. Perry, T. Gaston, P. Wyns) online, @ www.christadelphian-ejbi.org [cited May 2014]

⁷ See the separate article on the *Language of Qohelet*

⁸ We might think here of the book of Job which A. Perry (in my view) has successfully demonstrated as a parabolic dramatization of the philosophical question facing king Hezekiah (the question of disinterested service i.e., service without immediate reward in the face of suffering). A. Perry, *Job*, (Willow Publications, 2009)

⁹ Longman observes; “Furthermore, the Teacher, even if he was Solomon, is clearly not the author of the book of Ecclesiastes, in spite of some popularly held interpretations that insist on this view. There is a second voice in the book—that of an unnamed wise man who uses the Teacher’s words and life story to teach the dangers of embracing “under the sun” perspectives (12:12). This unnamed wise man talks about the Teacher in 1:1-11 and 12:8-14. By contrast, the Teacher’s distinct voice can be recognized by the fact that he speaks in the first person in 1:12–12:7. The second wise man, whose words frame the Teacher’s speech, could be called the “frame narrator” (Fox 1977)”. Tremper Longman III, “Ecclesiastes Song of Songs” in the *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Volume 6*, (Ed., P.W. Comfort, Tyndale House: Carol Stream, Illinois, 2006), 254

¹⁰ Gleason L. Archer, *The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of Ecclesiastes*, *JETS* 12:3 (1969):167-181,167

¹¹ On Solomon’s apostasy and lack of repentance see; P. Wyns, “Solomon and the Sons of God” in *The Christadelphian eJournal of Biblical Interpretation*, [CEJBI], (eds., A. Perry, T. Gaston, P. Wyns, Willow Publications: Vol.3. No.4. Oct 2009). There was a Jewish legend that Solomon left his throne, which was then inhabited by the demon Ashmodai, wandered about as a madman, and then repented of his apostasy before he returned to the throne. There is no biblical warrant for this story. Solomon slept with his fathers, and was buried (1 Kgs.11:41) this does not imply that Solomon repented, as a similar phrase is employed throughout 1 and 2 Kings (25 times) also for wicked kings such as Ahab (1 Kings 22:40). Furthermore 1 Chron.28:9 warns that those who forsake God will be cast of forever this despite the promise to lengthen his days (1 Kgs.3:14) if he walked in God’s ways (Solomon did not live to a great age).

(Young, IOT, 348). Young also points out that the use of the past tense in 1:12, “I . . . was king over Israel in Jerusalem,”¹² is unlikely for Solomon, since there was never a time when he was older but not ruling as king (348). Also: The background of the book does not fit the age of Solomon. It was a time of misery and vanity (1:2–11); the splendour of Solomon’s age was gone (1:12–2:26); a time of death had begun for Israel (3:1–15); injustice and violence were present (4:1–3); there was heathen tyranny (5:8–19); death was preferred to life (7:1); “one man ruled over other men to their hurt”(8:9). (Young, IOT, 348, based on Hengstenberg)¹³

Elsewhere the author writes from the perspective of a subject powerless to redress the injustices and oppression perpetrated by higher officials. This seems strange when we consider that it was Solomon who introduced forced labour. The mention of horses as commonplace (10:7) is unusual as they were introduced by Solomon and the reference to dreams as vanities (5:7) is contradictory in the light of Solomon’s dream-vision. In places, he speaks about kings as if he were no longer one of them (4:13 and 8:2-4; 10:20). The only evidence pro Solomon is to him being “king over Israel” (1:12) which points to the united monarchy, but this seems incongruous and superfluous when placed against the prior introduction;

The words of Qoheleth son of David, King in Jerusalem (1:1).

I Qoheleth was king **over Israel** in Jerusalem (1:12).

Delitzsch remarks on the peculiarity of the expression as Solomon is called “king of Israel” (2Kgs. 23:13 cf. Neh. 13:26) but never “king in Jerusalem”. Delitzsch concludes; “We think that in this expression, “king in Jerusalem,” there is revealed a time in which Israel had ceased to be an independent kingdom, in which Jerusalem was no more a royal city”.¹⁴ Solomon’s greatest achievement was the building of the temple yet although Qoheleth asserts his wisdom he neglects to mention his temple building or other public works. This has been noted by Stuart Weeks - Russell L. Meek summarizes as follows; “Weeks argues forcefully that, whatever the relationship between Qohelet and the author of Ecclesiastes, it is certain that Solomon is not the author. In fact, Weeks goes a step further by arguing that Qohelet does not even intend to relate himself to Solomon—save for Eccl 1:1 and 1:12—contra most modern interpretations, even those that oppose Solomonic authorship. While this claim is somewhat extraordinary, Weeks defends it well, pointing out that Qohelet “notably does not boast about great public works or achievements—the meat and drink of royal inscriptions: the things which he creates are repeatedly and specifically ‘for me’ . . . and they include nothing which serves any obvious public function” (p. 26). Furthermore, Weeks points out that Solomon’s luxury, described in 1 Kings, “finds little echo in Qohelet’s story, and the sources of Solomon’s wealth are quite different from Qohelet’s” (p. 28). This is important for Weeks’s argument because he rightly points out that the reader must be aware of who Qohelet is in order to interpret the book appropriately”.¹⁵ In contrast Qohelet builds and plants for his own pleasure (I made me...I was great...etc).

The Talmud is ambivalent and attributes Qohelet to Solomon (Megilla 7a, Shabbat 30) or Hezekiah (BabaBathra15a). The attribution to Solomon can be explained by Eccl.1:12 but the reference to “Hezekiah and his colleagues” in *BabaBathra*15a has the scribes not only writing (i.e., editing) Qohelet, but Isaiah, Proverbs and the Song of Songs as well. It is very possible that a first edition of memoirs was edited during Hezekiah’s reign, particularly as we have good reason to associate his era (cf. Prov. 25:1) with those other works. Jed Wyrick cites H.M.I. Gevanyahu whose theory is that the baraita contains elements that resemble Akkadian colophons and is thus “based on an earlier catalogue that detailed the

¹² Cook recognises it as a notorious crux and translates it as a present-perfect ‘I, Qoheleth have been king over Israel in Jerusalem’ rather than a present state, ‘I am king’ or a past-stative interpretation (‘I was king’) as adopted by many translations (e.g., ASV, NIV, NJPS). John A. Cook, *The Verb in Qoheleth* (corrected draft); Asbury Theological Seminary, 19-20

¹³ Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Zondervan, 1994, 2006), 281

¹⁴ Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (1891), translated from the German by M. G. Easton, Edinburgh : T. & T. Clark, 14 available@ www.wls.wels.net/sites/default/files/KD_Ecclesiastes.docx

¹⁵ Russell L. Meek, book review [MJTM 13 (2011–2012)] of Stuart Weeks. *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*. Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 541. New York: T. & T. Clark, 2012. xiv + 219 pp. Hdbk.

names, chronology and authorship of the books of the Bible”.¹⁶

Ecclesiastes was accepted rapidly into the Jewish canon, but not universally, there was a communal recognition that the book preserved an authentic wisdom voice in the Solomonic tradition. Authorship for the ancients had more to do with authoritative tradition than literary origins. Meade argues that the canonical decision to recognize Ecclesiastes as an authoritative wisdom voice in the tradition of Solomon is different than the literary question of actual authorship. Thus, “with the book of Qoheleth we can see the full birth of the genre of canonical pseudepigrapha”.¹⁷

According to Morris Jastrow liberal additions were made to Ecclesiastes; “For the express purpose of counteracting the effect of Koheleth’s unconventional views and to give a more orthodox turn to his thought.” He adds; “The circumstance that the authorship was attributed to Solomon was a vital factor in leading to its inclusion in the Canon, but even this would not have secured its admission without the additions which constitute such a considerable part of the work in its present form, and which made it practically a different kind of a book. The question arises, how were these additions made, or, rather, first of all, how was it possible for anyone to conceive of making them?”¹⁸

However, Qoheleth is not necessarily pseudepigraphic if the case can be made that it is based on **the actual royal memoirs of a king** transcribed (for example) during the reign of Hezekiah. We can rationalize the post-exilic addition of Jerusalem (e.g. king in Jerusalem) as clarification of the past royal status accorded to Jerusalem, but the words “over Israel” suggest an even later gloss to guarantee canonical inclusion in the guise of Solomonic wisdom literature tradition (similar to Songs, also from the Hezekiah era). However, it is more likely that a Judean king living some time after Solomon (at the stage when the memoirs were catalogued) saw himself and his descendants *as the rightful claimants* of the Israelite throne, (“over Israel”) particular during a period of northern instability caused by *coup d’état and external aggression*. Such a king, who was partial to boasting of his own grandeur (more wise and wealthy than anyone before him), would not hesitate to claim that he was actually “king over Israel” particularly in light of chaos in the northern kingdom.

Most modern biblical scholars would argue against Solomonic authorship.¹⁹ La Sor sums the argument up by writing “It is far easier to say that Solomon did not write Ecclesiastes than to say who did.”²⁰ This raises the question - who did write Qoheleth? Clarifying evidence seems evasive, and scholars have made no positive conclusions regarding authorship. They have, however, decisively ruled out several suggestions of authorship. “Despite superficial resemblances to Aristotle, Theognis... and stoics, Qohelet was a Semitic wise man, not a Greek philosopher, and his mood and approach reflect a very different world”²¹ Craig G. Bartholomew sums up as follows; “We can conclude that Ecclesiastes is not written by Solomon, nor should Qohelet be literally equated with Solomon. But if not Solomon, then who did write it? It might seem a waste of time even to pursue this, but Weinberg asserts that we should not quickly dispense with this issue. He notes that in the Near East of the Axial Age (the end of the second millennium and start of the first millennium BC) consciousness of authorship became a real issue and the authority of a teaching was connected with its authorship”.²²

Who was the king of Qoheleth?

The following article will propose that the life of king Uzziah of Judah provided the memoirs on which Qoheleth is based. The initial collection of these memoirs occurred during the Hezekiah era, a period of great social upheaval, northern instability and Assyrian aggression. At some time after the exile these

¹⁶ Jed Wyrick, *The Ascension of Authorship*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004): 21-79, 26. Wyrick is more cautious, writing “if it does reflect an older catalogue text, it is probably in a rather vague way.”

¹⁷ David G Meade, *Pseudonymity and canon*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986):44-72,59

¹⁸ Morris Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic: Being a Translation of the Book of Koheleth, Commonly known as Ecclesiastes, stripped of later additions: also its origin, growth, and interpretation*. (Philadelphia: Lippincott 1919), p. 29,30-31

¹⁹ See, Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, (London: SCM Press, 1979), 588.

²⁰ La Sor, *Ibid*,500

²¹ La Sor, *Ibid*, 499

²² Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, (Baker Academic, 2009),53

memoirs achieved their final form as the book that we know as Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth acts as the “frame-narrator” but is also able to place himself in the position of the king and speak for the king because he possessed the original memoirs.