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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

WISDOM LITERATURE

UNIT 09: ECCLESIASTES – 1

BIBLICAL READINGS:

Read the citations given from the book of Ecclesiastes as you study the units on this book.

INTRODUCTION TO ECCLESIASTES:

One of the most fascinating and debated books of the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes (see Note 1) is unique in that it does not clearly mention the nation or law of Israel, but stands back and looks at the most basic truths about life seemingly apart from any specific theological context (see Note 2). It is often thought to be a pessimistic work with little in common with the Christian viewpoint, but this is far from the truth, and Ecclesiastes is a profound book of great meaning for today's world, as we will see.

ECCLESIASTES IN CULTURAL CONTEXT:

Like all the books classed as Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes shows some similarities with wisdom writings of the other nations of the ancient Near East. For example, it makes use of the same types of literary forms: proverbs, sayings, monologue discourses, etc. But when it comes to the book's content, it is harder to find similar works of literature.

In the writings of ancient Mesopotamia, the work known as the *Dialogue of Pessimism* (c. 2200-1000 BC) is sometimes compared with Ecclesiastes. This work is in the form of a dialogue between a man and his wise servant and essentially stresses the futility of all human action. The man repeatedly proposes a course of action, for which the slave provides good reasons. Each time, however, the man changes his mind, and the servant provides equally good reasons for not pursuing the stated course of action. But the similarity with Ecclesiastes is hardly close, and the work is more cynical than pessimistic or philosophical. In Egyptian literature the *Debate between a Man and his Ba* (c. 1937-1759 BC) is a work in which a man considering suicide discusses the frustrations of life and his failure to find satisfaction. In this respect it has some general similarity to Ecclesiastes, but its philosophy is markedly different. The debate begins with the man rebuking his *Ba* (soul) for restraining him from committing suicide and ends with the *Ba* urging the man to continue his life and not to wish for its end before its time.

If we compare Ecclesiastes closely with these and other Near Eastern works that seem somewhat similar, we find that the Hebrew work is different in many ways. The book is arguably much deeper and represents a far more penetrating philosophical approach. It is certainly not an exaggeration to state that Ecclesiastes is, in many ways, unique in the known literature of the ancient world.

THE AUTHOR AND DATE OF ECCLESIASTES:

The traditional view of Ecclesiastes is that it was written by King Solomon in his old age, between 950 and 900 BC, but in recent years a number of scholars have leaned toward the view that the book was produced much later, perhaps in the fourth or even third century BC. This view is based on the claim that the Hebrew in which Ecclesiastes is written seems to contain some Persian words and Aramaic influence. However, it is well known that in the ancient world books compiled or edited in periods after their composition often included later words and influences, but that does not indicate the material itself had not already existed for some time, even centuries.

It is certainly possible that this situation applies to Ecclesiastes because although the book seems to imply that its author was King Solomon, there is some uncertainty in this regard. Ecclesiastes begins with the words “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1), and while Solomon immediately comes to mind as fitting this description, it could also apply to some later king, as “son of David” was used to describe any of David’s descendants. In the same way, although the author states that he had “increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me” (1:16), and that again might sound like Solomon, why would Solomon compare himself to previous rulers in Jerusalem when that only included his father David? On the other hand, it would be difficult for any of the kings who were Solomon’s successors to describe themselves as wiser than Solomon, and Ecclesiastes 2:1–11 enumerates exactly the kind of achievements that Solomon accomplished.

Some have claimed these problems indicate that Solomon’s name was being used to give authority to a later author’s work, but the simplest explanation for the seemingly conflicting facts is that the words of Ecclesiastes are the words of Solomon, but that they were placed into their current form by a later editor. This would explain why such an editor would include an introduction that identified the words with Solomon, but in the third person “The words of the Teacher ...” and would use the third person again at the book’s conclusion: “Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true” (12:9-10). It would also explain why a number of things said in the book seem to be quotations rather than direct statements; for example, 7:27 – “‘Look,’ says the Teacher, ‘this is what I have discovered’” (rather than “Look, this is what I have discovered”). Finally, the later editing of Solomon’s writing would account for the words found in the book that are sometimes used to claim its late authorship and the fact that some of the language of the book is somewhat different from that of Solomon’s other writings.



King Solomon in old age, by Gustave Dore (Image: Getty)

In conclusion, it is certainly possible that Solomon was the author of Ecclesiastes, but it is also possible that material composed by Solomon was brought into its present form by a later editor. Biblical evidence does not firmly decide the matter, but fortunately it does not matter whether the words of this book come to us directly or indirectly. The book itself claims that its wisdom comes from the “one Shepherd” (12:11), and Proverbs 2:6 indicates that is God himself.

THE STRUCTURE OF ECCLESIASTES:

The most basic structure we see in the book of Ecclesiastes is that of the three major sections of the work. While 1:1-11 and 12:8-14 are written in the third person and form the book’s prologue and epilogue respectively, 1:12-12:7 is in the first-person and represents the body of the book (see Note 3). This structure ties in well with the understanding that a later editor introduced and concluded some of Solomon’s writing.

Within the first-person body of the book (1:12-12:7), we can also detect three sub-sections and it is interesting to note that this three-part structure of the Teacher’s summary of his life and findings parallels some of the autobiographical texts from the ancient world. It has been found that some Mesopotamian autobiographies (for example, the so-called *Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin*, c. 2000-1600 BC) have the same three-part structure as follows: a short introduction (as Ecclesiastes has at 1:1-11), an extended narrative (as Ecclesiastes has at 1:12-4:16), and finally teachings based on what the individual had learned in life (as Ecclesiastes has at 5:1-12:8). While the content and conclusions of the biblical book are quite different, the structure of all these works is essentially the same.

The author of Ecclesiastes also uses several refrains that are repeated throughout the work and which help divide the material into different sections. For example, “There is nothing better for a person [or people] than to . . .” (2:24; 3:12; 3:22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7). Another important refrain is that of “Fear God ...” (3:14; 5:7; 12:13). These refrains also introduce or come after summaries of what is being said, and can be helpful in following the book’s argument and seeing its major points – as we see if we look at the position of the “Fear God ...” refrain:

Introduction and theme (1:1–11)

First discussion of things that are meaningless (1:12–2:26)

Inset conclusion: “Fear God” (3:9–15)

Second discussion of things that are meaningless (3:16–4:16)

Inset conclusion: “Fear God” (5:1–7)

Life “Under the Sun” (5:8–12:7)

Final conclusion: “Fear God,” (12:9–14)

Finally, within the various sub-sections of the text, Ecclesiastes uses repetitive contrast of positive and negative ideas, things and events. We see this clearly in the poem on “A time for every purpose” (3:2-8) as in “...a time for war, and a time for peace” (3:8), but contrast is used continually to help divide and define the points of the argument – often in carefully mirrored arrangements of Positive-Negative and Negative-Positive. These facts all show that Ecclesiastes is not just a meandering text, but a carefully written or edited composition with very definite structural patterns – different from, yet similar in intent to, some of the patterns we saw in the book of Proverbs.

CONTRADICTIONS IN ECCLESIASTES:

Some of the things written in Ecclesiastes seem to contradict other statements in the Old Testament or even other passages in Ecclesiastes itself. However, most of the supposed contradictions are easily explained. For example, when Ecclesiastes tells us that “the dead ... are happier than the living, who are still alive” (4:2), but also that “Anyone who is among the living has hope – a live dog is better off than a dead lion” (9:4), the book is simply utilizing the same kind of contrasting of ideas – each with its own aspect of truth – that we saw is used continually in the book of Proverbs.

As we will see, sometimes, the author of Ecclesiastes seems to quote existing proverbs or wise sayings in order to disagree with them. Notice, for example, “The wise have eyes in their heads, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both” (2:14). Here the thought is that “even though it is said ..., I came to realize ...” This is not a contradiction, but a disagreement.

Also, we need to realize that provisional statements are sometimes made early in Ecclesiastes that are then discounted or modified with the perspective that is reached later in the book. This will be explained more fully, but it is an important principle to keep in mind when studying Ecclesiastes – seeming contradictions often simply reflect the developing argument of the book.

Finally, there is also another factor that we should take into account. In some cases the writer does appear to make statements that are contradictory to what is found in the rest of Scripture, but this seems to be a result of the unique perspective found in the book. Ecclesiastes repeatedly states that it is an examination of life from a viewpoint “under the sun” (1:3; etc.) or “under heavens” (1:13; etc.). These expressions are used continually throughout the book (some thirty times in twelve chapters), showing that they are central to the book’s argument regarding life in the physical realm without divine revelation. This ties directly to the very purpose and meaning of Ecclesiastes, as we will see.

* Note 1: The title “Ecclesiastes” comes from the Greek translation *ekklesia* (meaning “assembly”) of the Hebrew word *Kohelet* (from *kahal*, also signifying assembly). The meaning of the form *Kohelet* itself appears to be “someone speaking before an assembly” – hence “Teacher” or “Preacher.”

* Note 2: Historically, some have questioned the place of Ecclesiastes in the Bible because of its assumed unspiritual approach, but this argument was never sufficient to cast serious doubt on the book and we will see that it is, in fact, entirely untrue.

* Note 3: The single exception is the brief comment of the narrator at 7:27, but this does not change the basic threefold structure of the book.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Background Basics

1. List some of the unique aspects of the book of Ecclesiastes.
2. Briefly summarize the arguments for and against the Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes.
3. What does the use of the first person “I...” and third person “The Teacher...” sections of Ecclesiastes suggest about the authorship and editing of the book?
4. Review and summarize the three types of apparent contradictions in Ecclesiastes. Notice that one type is common to much biblical Wisdom Literature and two types are unique to Ecclesiastes.

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