

Ecclesiastes is probably one of the most difficult of the Old Testament (OT) books to understand. Charles Bridges remarks in the preface to his commentary: *'The Book of Ecclesiastes has exercised the Church of God in no uncommon degree. Many learned men have not hesitated to number it among the most difficult Books in the Sacred Canon.'* What is the author trying to say? Popular modern translations have not made things any easier by the way they render what the older versions give as 'vanity'. *The Good News Bible*, for instance, translates it as 'useless' and the *New International Version* and *New Living Translation* as 'meaningless'.

Interestingly, the more recent English translations have reverted to the traditional reading. The aim in this short article is a modest one. It is not to consider all the introductory issues relating to Ecclesiastes, important though they all are, but to help preachers make the most of this intriguing part of God's word.

The Purpose

Many evangelical expositors of recent times see the book as a pre-evangelistic tract, the Preacher being a kind of Francis Schaeffer before his time. Looked at in this way the book is used, like the Law, to drive people to Christ. It is claimed that the book forces the humanist and practical atheist or secularist to realise that all of life without God is completely meaningless. Eaton in his Tyndale commentary summarises the purpose of Ecclesiastes in this way: 'It is an essay in apologetics. It defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative.' He suggests that the Preacher does in his own 'pre-Christian' way something similar to Paul in his sermon in Acts 17 when he preached to the pagan Greek philosophers. The

Preacher's work, Eaton argues, 'is not full-orbed evangelism; it is the opening sentences of an evangelistic message, leading to faith along a pathway of conviction of need.'

On the other hand, the traditional view, both Jewish and Christian, has been to see the work as a tract written by an old, repentant Solomon to teach against the dangers of living for this world and forgetting God. Matthew Henry follows this interpretive grid and asserts that the book is a penitential sermon like some of David's penitential psalms; 'it is a recantation-sermon, in which the preacher sadly laments his own folly and mistake'. He would also understand the sermon to be a warning to backsliders as well as to the unconverted. Henry describes it as 'a practical profitable sermon. Solomon, being brought to repentance, resolves, like his father, to teach transgressors God's way.' John Wesley likewise saw the book as proving the grand truth that 'there is no happiness out of God.'

Some modern commentators who do not consider the work either as a call by a repentant Solomon or a pre-evangelistic work will nevertheless consider that the book's pessimism does prepare us in a negative way to consider the hope that is to be found in the gospel. For Tremper Longman the Preacher is correct in depicting a world without God as meaningless. He 'has rightly described the horror of a world under the curse and apart from God.' It is Jesus Christ who 'who redeems us from the vanity, the meaninglessness' under which the Preacher suffered.

Considering the book in this way can certainly lead to many searching sermons that speak to the human conscience and situation. It is one of the implications of the book that without God all

worldly activity gets a person nowhere. However, this is to miss the main point that the Preacher is making.

Peter Craigie suggests that as Job grapples with the problem of human suffering so Ecclesiastes grapples with radical doubt and scepticism. There is some truth in this but it does not get to the heart of the issue. This book does not only come into its own when as Craigie puts it 'the virus of doubt or scepticism attacks the organism of faith.' Ecclesiastes does offer consolation and insight when the harsh realities of life batter our faith. It does also warn against worldliness and show the futility of living without God. But it does more. While its message is not, as some of the early Christian commentators suggested, to encourage a life of asceticism, it seeks to present wisdom for the godly to ponder every day of their lives.

Like Job and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes is a wisdom book and like the Book of Job it prevents us from looking at Proverbs and some of the Psalms in a simplistic and literalistic way. Often it is assumed that Job and Ecclesiastes are protesting against the traditional wisdom teaching that is said to be found in Proverbs. This is not the case at all. Scripture does not contradict Scripture as liberal scholars suggest. What Job and the Preacher do is to protest against a faulty understanding of Proverbs, where general statements are absolutised. They correct a view of life that assumes that the righteous will always prosper and the wicked will always come to ruin in this life. This means that when Proverbs or Psalms depict fellowship with God in terms of health and prosperity we are not to take such pictures in a literalistic way. This would be as inappropriate as trying literally to bind God's

commands on the heart and to tie them around the neck (see Proverbs 6:21). Furthermore, it is also the purpose of both Job and Ecclesiastes to examine life as it is in the raw and not life as we would like it to be.

The message of this book is not unique in the Bible even if the method of presentation is and it will be demonstrated that the wisdom teaching of Ecclesiastes is an important element running through the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Contrary to the view of one recent evangelical writer who states that 'The New Testament gives no help towards the interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes', the New Testament (NT) certainly does give significant help in interpreting the message of Ecclesiastes. Though it is not directly quoted most scholars agree that there are obvious allusions and these will be considered later.

The Preacher

We begin with the term often translated as 'Preacher'. The Hebrew is Qoheleth, a feminine participle from the verb 'to assemble' which could be translated as 'one who assembles'. The feminine form acts for the nonexistent Hebrew neuter gender. Here it is probably used to refer to an office. The closest parallels to this are in Ezra 2:55 'the sons of Hasophereth' (cf. Neh.7:57 'Sophereth') – 'the scribe'; and Ezra 2:57 and Neh.7:59 'the sons of Pochereth' – 'the binder'. From the same word group as Qoheleth comes the term for Israel as an assembly or congregation of people (qahal) which when translated into Greek (ekklesia) becomes the NT word for 'church'.

It is interesting that in the account of the dedication of the Temple, both the verb 'to assemble' and/or the noun 'assembly or congregation' occur at the

beginning of each key moment: when the ark was brought into the newly built temple (1 Kgs.8:1-13; see verses 1-2); when Solomon made his great speech (8:14-21; see v14); when he offered his powerful prayer (8:22-53; see v22); when he blessed the people (8:54-61; see v55); and then after he offered sacrifice in the summing up there is a reference to the 'great assembly' (8:62-66; see v65). Clearly, for the prophetic author of Kings, that was a very significant event in Solomon's reign when he gathered 'all Israel' or 'all the sons of Israel', this great 'assembly of Israel' for the dedication of the newly built temple. It is not unnatural then for the author of Ecclesiastes to make up a word (we find it nowhere else in the OT) that is associated so closely with Solomon who assembled God's people on the most solemn occasion of his reign at the central sanctuary in the capital city.

Qoheleth, 'the Assembler' of God's people, then is a term that the author uses to describe this person who is associated with the Davidic kingship - 'the son of David', and with 'Jerusalem', the capital of the Davidic kingdom and centre of Israelite religion, and who was 'king over Israel in Jerusalem' (see 1:1,12,16; 2:7,9). It draws our attention to the Solomon who assembled all Israel to the heart of the Israelite faith and practice. It is this Solomonic wisdom tradition that we are to gather round and listen to. The Preacher's listeners are in the first place the OT people of God but now as part of the canon of Scripture he is addressing God's people in every age.

I emphasise all this to show that Tremper Longman III is woefully astray in his interpretation. He suggests that Qoheleth's pessimistic theology is out of sorts with the rest of the OT and the only reason

it is part of the canon of Scripture is because of the epilogue (12:8-14). In this he follows Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart in their popular book *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth*. They consider Ecclesiastes to be a cynical work pointing us to the rest of Scripture; 'it is there as a foil, i.e., as a contrast to what the rest of the Bible teaches.' The final two verses of the epilogue we are told present the contrast by issuing the reader with an 'orthodox warning'. Longman also follows Fox in suggesting that the epilogue warns the reader to beware of teachers like Qoheleth who although they can be classed as wise, their words are nevertheless harmful and wearisome to the body. Qoheleth is considered to be like the speeches in the book of Job. Only at the end are they torn down and demolished. Thus, according to Longman, the wise person responsible for putting the book together uses Qoheleth's speech 'as a foil, a teaching device' to instruct his pupils 'concerning the dangers of speculative, doubting wisdom in Israel'.

This view is far from being satisfactory. It seems incredible that a whole book is given over to stating wrong theology with only the last couple of verses to counter all that has been said. Job is not written like that. What Longman accuses others of doing, namely, straining at 'the interpretation of words and passages to make them fit a preconceived idea of the function of the book', is done on a massive scale by him, not only in his exegesis of the epilogue but also in the body of the work. Furthermore, it would be strange to find in the Old Testament an unknown wisdom author warning against Qoheleth, whom he considers to be Solomon, the great wise man of the OT.

The People

To return to Qoheleth himself, it is important to emphasise that he is an Assembler of God's people. He is teaching the people of God and if the final author is different from Qoheleth they are both on the same wavelength and both express the kind of wisdom that comes from God, the 'one shepherd' (12:11). Qoheleth is speaking to an audience of Israelite men and women who have been taught from the book of the Law that God is involved in his world, that he will prosper the righteous and punish the wicked. But time and again he forces his audience to see that life in this world is far from being simplistic and to remember other items taught in the Law of Moses that tend to be forgotten especially when life is treating them well. He brings people down to earth by reminding us that we live in a topsy-turvy world. The world is not what it ought to be.

Too many assume that Qoheleth is considering the horror of life in this world *without God*. But the fact is the Assembler of God's people is struggling with the problem of understanding the world from the vantage point of one who is a person of faith. It is precisely because he is looking at life as a godly believer that he is all too well aware of the vanity of this world. It is a place of hardship, of toil, misery and death and this is true not only for the wicked but for the righteous. Life 'under the sun' is full of frustrations and troubles. The Preacher is impressing upon us that even *with God* life in this world is vanity. 'The cry of vanity in the book of Ecclesiastes is a cry which proceeds from the man of faith ... the response of the man of faith to the world in which he finds himself.'

This book therefore encourages the people of faith to

understand that life in this present world will always be full of trouble, and yet to accept whatever joys we do have as gifts from God, and to continue to be wise by fearing God and keeping his commandments remembering there is an eschatological judgement when God will put everything to rights.

The Point

In order to appreciate the teaching of this book we shall need to look at what Qoheleth really means by the word 'vanity', a term he uses 38 times. Once we understand that 'vanity' has less to do with modern philosophical ideas of meaninglessness and more to do with the idea of what is fleeting and elusive the more we shall understand what the Preacher is teaching to the assembly of God's people. As Provan rightly states, 'Qoheleth is not Camus'. He is not presenting an unscriptural pessimism but forcing us to accept some unpleasant home truths about life in this world whether we are godly or not. In fact, we could say that Qoheleth uses what he observes to expound Scripture. Parallels have been noted, for instance, between the early chapters of Genesis and Qoheleth's message. David Clemens' article in *Themelios* is a particularly helpful treatment.

Despite the good that Qoheleth acknowledges, such as an original world created 'beautiful' (3:11) and items in this world that are gifts from God (on twelve occasions we are told of God giving) to be enjoyed, for example the marriage bond (9:9), the emphasis throughout is upon the effects of the Fall. The Assembler of God's people highlights the very same things that Genesis 3 presents as the punishment that human beings must endure because of their sin. They include toil, pain and death. The world is as it is because of God's judgement.

It is no accident then that the very word that Qoheleth uses time and again to express his verdict on life in this world is the name of the first person to experience physical death, the result of the madness of human sin. The name is Abel. Everything under the sun is 'Abel' (*hebbel*). It is the word for 'breath' or 'vapour' and is often used metaphorically throughout the OT to present ideas of transience and what is insubstantial, elusive and false. The term is so loaded with meaning, says Clemens, 'that it virtually defies a unitary English translation'; but he suggests that 'fallen' captures most of its connotations in Ecclesiastes. We might therefore translate the Preacher's text as: 'Subject to the Fall, subject to the Fall, everything is subject to the Fall'.

There is a phrase unique to Qoheleth that makes it clear that when he proclaims everything is vanity he means everything in this world. It is the phrase 'under the sun' which he uses 30 times. He is therefore not including God and the heavenly realm in the vanity of all things. Rather, he is referring to human existence in this present world. Life in this world for everybody is expressive of the Fall, that means for the wise and the foolish, the righteous and the unrighteous. We notice from Genesis that Abel was not an ungodly rascal but a person accepted by God, yet it is such a person who experienced a savage death, cut off in the prime of life before he married and had children. And this is the point that Qoheleth is seeking to stress to his Israelite congregation. We live in a fallen world and he feels the agony of God's people living in such a world under the curse of God. It is wisdom to see this.

The smell of death lies over the whole of creation.

That is what Genesis emphasises as a result of the Fall. The warning of Gen.2:17 - 'in the day you eat of it you shall surely die' - is fulfilled as a result of human disobedience. The judgement of toil, pain and death recorded in Genesis 3 is emphasised in Genesis 5 with the continuing refrain 'and he died' along with a further reminder of the curse in the name that Lamech gave his son Noah: 'This one will comfort us concerning our work and the toil of our hands, because of the ground which the Lord has cursed' (5:29).

Qoheleth drives home this point concerning toil and death. It is there in the introduction, 1:3-11, where we are told of humanity in labour and toil with generations coming and going while the earth continues. It is no different at the end with the poem on the tragedy of old age and death in 12:1-7. And throughout the intervening chapters Qoheleth continues to stress the reality of death. It is present in every chapter. The fool dies but so also does the wise (2:14-16); despite all the toil, hard labour and sorrow humans die and leave what they have struggled to achieve to others who have not worked for it (2:18-23); humans are no different to animals in this - all in whom is the breath of life die - a reminder of the flood (3:19-22); despite all the hard work and toil, just as we came naked from our mother's womb so shall we return (5:15-16); even though people were to live for over twice as long as Methuselah they still die (6:3-6); a person's life is like a shadow (6:12); the end of everyone is sorrow and death (7:1-4); no one has power in the day of death (8:8); one event happens to all - they die! (9:2-6).

Thus what Qoheleth says at the beginning he can say at the end of his message - 'Vanity of vanities,

all is vanity' (1:2 and 12:8). It is dust to dust for all and the echoes of Genesis 3:19 ('till you return to the ground: for out of it you were taken: for dust you are and to dust you shall return') are obvious in Ecclesiastes 3:20: 'all came from the dust and all return to the dust', and in 12:7: 'Then the dust will return to the earth as it was'. It is a depressing sermon, but it is a basic fact of life for everyone, the righteous and the unrighteous, the wise and the foolish, and it is wisdom to accept the reality of it. These are not the subjective feelings of a cynic who has lost interest in life but of a wise person who is looking at life realistically. Ecclesiastes describes an objective vanity that faces every human being, namely the fleeting nature of earthly life with all its frustrations and failures.

Comfortable Christians in the West particularly need to be reminded of this. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. Ecclesiastes also challenges the health and wealth gossellers who pedal a false security in present earthly gain. The gospel does not give Christians a bed of roses in this life. The most godly of people grow old, become incapable of doing what they once did and die. Some are taken when they are young, others when they are older, but all die and during their lives whether short or long there is often great suffering, toil and pain. But the Preacher encourages us not to live like the ungodly even though some of them may have a good time in comparison to others. Wisdom is better than folly and we are to take hold of and enjoy the good things of life that God gives during this fleeting and frustrating earthly existence while always bearing in mind that there is a judgement to come. Remembering we do live in a world under the curse of God will enable us not to be too disappointed

when things go wrong, when our plans do not work out as we would like or we find that people do not follow in the way we have legislated. It will also prevent us making ourselves too comfortable in this world and will remind us that this present world order is not our home, we are strangers and pilgrims on this present old earth that is passing away.

The Preacher, the Assembler of God's people, is not alone in presenting this truth. It is part of the wisdom tradition that the wise woman of Tekoah knew as she confronted king David: 'for we will surely die and become like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again' (2 Sam.14:14). Job 7:7,9,16 describe life as a breath. Then there is David himself. In his prayer to the Lord he pleads, 'let me know how fleeting my life is. You have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight. Surely everyone stands as a mere breath...' (Psalm 39:4-6). Or again, in Psalm144:3-4, he describes humans as 'like a breath; their days are like a passing shadow'. The prophet Isaiah speaks to the same effect, 'All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the Lord blows upon it: surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades but the word of our God stands for ever' (40:6).

When we turn to the NT, we find James, like Qoheleth, concerned to correct wrong views of life. He pulls up the busy merchants and reminds them of the brevity of life. 'What is your life? For you are a vapour that appears for a little while and then vanishes' (4:14). The word he uses to describe human life, 'vapour' or 'mist' (atmis), is the same that is found in Aquila's Greek translation of Ecclesiastes for 'vanity' (*hebbel*). James is warning

business people whether they are Christians or unbelievers that life is fleeting and uncertain.

Finally, on this point, there is Moses who first taught the Preacher about the Fall and its effects, who has recorded a prayer in Psalm 90 that powerfully states our short, uncertain life, consumed by God's anger and brought back to the dust. It is wisdom to recognise this judgement that applies to us all. 'So teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom' (90:12).

The Preaching

Preachers must not fail in their task as they preach from this book. The book directs us to Jesus Christ who freely and willingly for humanity's sake, entered this world under God's curse and experienced toil, sweat, sorrow and death.

Furthermore, he experienced the ultimate curse, the second death, God-forsakenness, with no mitigating blessing. But by suffering that awesome curse and death he has broken the curse, brought about the death of death and the end of all pain, sorrow and crying. On account of God's judgement at the cross and the vindication of Jesus in his resurrection, death has been abolished and life and immortality have been brought to light.

The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is the guarantee and objective evidence of the regeneration of all things and of the believer's bodily resurrection. Ecclesiastes should make Christians long for that new creation. In Christ believers are already new creations awaiting the recreation of the world at the final judgement. However, they are still living in the old age, and their present bodily existence is still part of a creation under the curse of decay and death. Ecclesiastes does not make Christians yearn

for the day of their death, for death is seen as part of the curse, even though the sting has been taken out of death for the believer. The unnatural separation of body and spirit is part of the judgement. No. This book makes the godly yearn for the resurrection of the body, for the time when our present lowly bodies will be changed to become like our Lord's glorious body.

Greidanus argues that there are many roads leading from the OT to Christ and he lists them, giving examples of each, such as the way of promise-fulfilment and the way of typology. The final way that he mentions is the way of contrast. While the other ways focus on the continuity between the OT and Christ, contrast focuses on the discontinuity Christ brings. As an example from the Wisdom Literature he uses Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8. For the Preacher, he says, death ends everything. But as NT Christians we know that Christ has overcome death, and that astonishing victory also gives us a different view of life. So he considers that the passage clearly begs to be contrasted with 1 Corinthians 15. Death has been overcome. Therefore we have a reversal, from the Preacher's summary 'all is vanity' to Paul's summary that 'in the Lord your labour is not in vain', and all because Jesus rose from death. Now that is fine as it stands but it does give rise to one misgiving. Greidanus makes it sound as if the vanity under the sun has finished for the believer.

While it is true that the Preacher did not have the fuller revelation that we have concerning Christ and the resurrection, he still lived with the knowledge of the eschatological judgement and urged his people to live in the light of it. But that did not mean for the godly in this world that the effects of the Fall did not apply to them. Likewise, the fact that Christ

has died and conquered death, while it should indeed make an even bigger difference to the way we view life in this world, does not remove us from the day to day effects of living in a fallen world. We Christians still experience the frustrations of a world under the curse. Christian women still suffer labour pains in bringing children into the world. Along with the rest of humanity, there are Christians who become bodily and mentally ill, who suffer Alzheimer's disease. Furthermore, we all die. It is tragic to see fine handsome intelligent Christian men and beautiful bright Christian ladies full of energy and drive, who achieve great success and bring great benefits to society, being struck down in the prime of life with some cancerous disease or reduced in old age to wizened old men and women unable to think or do anything for themselves but to lie in a nursing home until death takes them.

When Paul writes what he does in Romans 8:18-24 the Greek word he uses for 'vanity', is the very word that the Septuagint translators adopt when rendering the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes. Paul tells us very clearly that the creation was subject to vanity by God. Creation groans on account of God's curse and waits to be set free. But then he goes on to show that believers too groan with the rest of creation waiting for the consummation, the redemption of our bodies. Here surely we have the NT confirmation of the Preacher's position. The believer lives with this tension. Christians belong to the world to come, to the new creation, and yet they are still living here in this old fallen atmosphere where it is anything but a paradise.

It is part of the gospel of Jesus Christ to preach the effects of the curse on everyone's life in this world

and to encourage the believer as well as the unbeliever to understand that the form of this world is passing away. Martyn Lloyd-Jones never tired of reminding his congregation at Westminster Chapel, London, in his closing benediction, of our 'short and uncertain pilgrimage' here on earth. Ecclesiastes is part of God's revelation to us. It speaks to modern British middle class Christians as well as unbelievers who have never had it so good 'to get real'. It calls us back to view life in this world as subject to vanity, a life under God's curse. At a time when Christians, never mind non-Christians, are afraid to talk about death and to face up to the real world where there is so much unhappiness, distress and cruelty, the Preacher forces us to reckon with the brevity and uncertainty of life and all the other effects of the Fall. We are not allowed to forget that Christians groan with the rest of creation.

Nevertheless, the book also prompts us to look to the day when God will put the world to rights (12:14). With the fuller revelation of the NT and in the light of the death and resurrection of Messiah we long for the day when the Lord will appear and a new earth will become the home of righteousness, where the Lord's people will have bodies like the glorious body of Jesus. God will 'wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away... Nothing of the curse will be found there any more' (Revelation 21:4; 22:3).

There is much more that could be said about the Preacher's teaching, especially concerning the contented and joyful life that can be lived in this fallen world, but enough has been given to encourage preachers to address Christians as well as unbelievers as they seek to expound this mistranslated and misunderstood book.