

# THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

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## ITS DESIGN AND PURPOSE.

There is a more important reason for writing on this book than at first might be thought. There is no book in the Bible which, as a whole, has the same character. In certain passages in other books we find the same character, but they are for the most very brief. But they help us to appreciate the character of this book.

If not rightly understood its character affords an opportunity for certain errorists to make false props for their doctrine. And as we are living in days of which it is prophesied that many will depart from the truth, and we find that some who appeared to be established in the truth are being swept away in this current of error, it becomes necessary to examine the book and note its peculiarity that we may see its true teaching.

The particular error that finds its support in this book is that which declares that "death is total extinction", or in other words "a complete cessation of being". That is, that at death the body returns to the dust from whence it came, and the soul ceases to exist. That there is no existence of either saved or unsaved between death and resurrection. And in addition to this that the unsaved will be cast into the lake of fire for a period which will end in their complete cessation of being.

This teaching makes an appeal to the natural mind in that it makes a tremendous difference to the unsaved from what Scripture teaches will be their suffering under God's judgment. It makes a show of exalting God's character as a merciful God. It also makes a strong appeal to those who have unsaved relatives who are dead, by saying that such are totally extinct now and therefore are not suffering, and that after the final judgment they will only suffer for a period and not eternally.

But though they quote various preachers' dramatic expressions and the erroneous idea that Satan and his hosts will be the tormentors, to prejudice people's minds against the truth, the teaching of God's word remains that the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and our view of God's character must be that which He has revealed in His word (for there is no other source of information) and not that which appeals to the minds of fallen humanity.

One error usually leads to another, or prepares the mind to accept another. And in this case the error does not stand alone. One sect denies the Deity of Christ. Another denies that baptism and the Lord's Supper are for Christians of the present dispensation, and so on. But these do not come under our present consideration of Ecclesiastes, to which we prefer to confine ourselves for the moment.

These errorists are very loud in their exhortation to "rightly divide the word of truth". But like others who so strongly advocate it, they cut it up into dispensations that only exist in their own minds. They also speak much of taking heed to the context of a statement in order to rightly understand it. And not only to the context of immediate verses but of the whole chapter: and the context of the chapter in the book in which it occurs: and the context of the book in the whole Bible. That is to say, to be careful to note to what dispensation it belongs.

All this is good advice; but they need to make their practice consistent with such advice.

We will therefore commence by asking, to what dispensation does Ecclesiastes belong? It commences "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, King in Jerusalem". That is sufficient to show that it was written during the dispensation of the law of Moses. Other statements shew that it was Solomon who wrote it.

The law of Moses ceased to be in force at the death of Christ (Col. 2.14). The coming of Christ brought fresh light on some things that were not known, and fuller light of some that were known. In 2 Tim. 1.10 we see that our Saviour Jesus Christ hath "abolished death and brought life and incorruption to light through the Gospel". Life and incorruption are both associated with the resurrection. Such a statement therefore shews that there was very little revealed in the Old Testament concerning resurrection. And as we read through it we can see that it is so. But, there are passages that clearly assert it, for instance, Job 19.25-27: Psalm 16.9, 10: Isa. 26.19: Dan. 12.2. The *state* of resurrection and the time of the *two* resurrections remained to be made clear in the New Testament.

The consciousness of the soul too, between death and resurrection is also asserted in the Old Testament, but the fuller revelation is only found in the New. One interesting passage in the Old Testament is Isa. 57.2. "They shall rest in their beds (comp. 2 Chron. 16.74), each one walking in his uprightness". There is no question as to the meaning of this word, "walking", in the Hebrew: the body rests in sleep, the soul lives on.

There is a reason in the wisdom of God for the fact that in Solomon's time these things were not brought fully to light. In that dispensation all the promises to Israel were of an earthly character. If they obeyed God they were promised the blessings of the land which He gave them and freedom from molestation from the surrounding nations.

But now, since God's people must expect suffering and persecution if they are faithful, the things that were kept secret from other ages, as to life after death, are made known for our comfort.

From this dispensational view of the Book, therefore, we must conclude that Old Testament passages on such subjects must be understood in the light of New Testament teaching. In Matt. 10.28 the Lord said, "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul". These errorists, when they have been confronted with this statement, try to avoid its force by diverting attention to the words that follow. But nothing that follows, nor anything else in Scripture alters the clear meaning of the Lord's words that if the body is killed, the soul lives on. This was for the comfort of those who were being prepared to suffer and die, for His name.

This clear statement from the Lord's own lips at a time when life and incorruption were being brought to light is final on the matter of conscious existence after death. Therefore, all the Old Testament passages on the matter must be understood in the light of it. Other passages in the New Testament are to be found, but this one alone is sufficient for our purpose here. The Book of Ecclesiastes, therefore, must be understood to agree with this statement and not contradict it.

So then from this dispensational standpoint we expect that this book will present a view associated with time rather than eternity; with that which belonged to its own dispensation of earthly blessing rather than that which belongs to the after death experience, which was not then fully revealed.

And seeing that other books of the Old Testament are all limited in the same way as to prospect and revelation, all that has been said above will apply to Job, Psalms, the Prophets, and indeed all the writings prior to the New Testament.

As to the internal context of the Book, that is, the relation of one part to the whole, we observe that Solomon introduces himself at the beginning as "The Preacher". He calls to people to listen to what he has to say; and normally a preacher is heard to the end of his discourse, and the summing up is usually the most important part. Therefore, if we would understand the statements in the earlier part of the book, we must read to the end first and "hear the conclusion of the whole matter". Then we can come back and consider what we have read and with the Preacher's end in view see the underlying wisdom of His remarks.

At the beginning of his reign, Solomon had a difficult case to judge. Two women claimed the same child. How could he determine whose it was. He said, "Bring me a sword", and they brought a sword. Then he said, "Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other". If the record had been cut off there, we would have said, "What a brute"! But when we see the issue (1 Kings 3), we see, as Israel did, that the wisdom of God was in Him. The one who was not the real mother said "let it be divided". But the true mother said, "O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it".

It is obvious that Solomon never intended to kill the child. And there are other cases in Scripture where men have said things that were not true at the first, with a view to impressing what they had to say at the end.

This principle finds expression in various ways: shall we consider some of them? Joseph's dealing with his brethren is a well-known narrative. Some have questioned his doings at that time; and we would not say that he carried out his plan perfectly. When a man does it apart from inspiration he may make mistakes, and even fail of his purpose at the end. Herein is a warning to us. But when a prophet of God does it, or one inspired to write, as Solomon was, and even the Lord Himself, we can see that there is Divine authority for the method and we must be prepared for its use.

For Joseph to have made himself known to his brethren at the first and ignored their crime would not have produced the repentance which is always God's way to forgiveness. At the end they were brought to say, "God hath found out the iniquity of thy servants". And his dreams were fulfilled in their bowing down in fear before him.

There is also a notable case in 1 Kings 22, where Ahab invites Jehoshaphat to go out to battle with him. Ahab's prophets all encouraged him to go up and prosper. But Jehoshaphat asked for a prophet of the Lord; and when he came, he too said go up and prosper. But Ahab said to him, "How many times shall I adjure thee that thou tell me nothing but truth in the name of the Lord"?

This shews that Ahab, a wicked king, was familiar with this mode of speech. Then the prophet revealed what he had seen in vision, that lying spirits had been permitted to speak through the prophets of Baal, that Ahab might "go up and fall at Ramoth Gilead". If the prophet had said at first, "If you go up you will fall", Ahab might have said it was not from the Lord. But when he had replied as he had to the first answer, what could he say?

That Ahab was familiar with this method is further borne out in ch. 20.<sup>35-43</sup>. But in addition we have the fact of the prophet disguising himself and pretending to be one who had been wounded and escaped out of the battle. But by this method the king was led to pronounce his own condemnation: and as in the later case, his mouth was shut. These passages should be read through that the force of the method may be appreciated.

In Luke 8.<sup>52</sup> we read of the Lord saying concerning the maid that was dead, "She is not dead but sleepeth". In John 11 He did not say "Lazarus is *not* dead". He said "Lazarus sleepeth," and afterwards, "Lazarus is dead". The inspired record, in Luke 9.<sup>53</sup>, says they laughed Him to scorn, "knowing that she was dead". Not "thinking that she was

dead". What then was the Lord's object in saying that she was not dead? If He had raised her without saying she was not dead, and thus drawing out their laughter, *they* might have said, afterwards, that she was not dead. But having laughed Him to scorn when He said it, what could they say?

These cases are instances of dealing with ungodly ones, now we have a case of the Lord's dealing with His disciples. In Luke 24 we have His journey to Emmaus: and when they drew nigh unto the village, "He made as though He would have gone further". In the case where He said "She is not dead but sleepeth", some fearing to suggest that the Lord would say anything but what was strictly true, look for some other explanation. But what shall we say of this case? When the Lord saw Zaccheus up the tree, He said, "To-day I must abide at thy house". He invited Himself. He could have done the same with His disciples surely? But it may be said well that is just common practice, a matter of courtesy. But that does not alter the fact that the Lord (Who is the Truth) made as though He would go further; and the common meaning in such a case would be to "pretend" or "feign". The reason is made clear in the next verse, "*They* constrained *Him*". He would not have their hospitality to be of compunction. Their hearts had burned within them as they had listened to Him; and He would give them the opportunity of heartily entertaining not "angels unawares", but One greater than angels. And they had their reward, so that with hearts burning still, they walked back to Jerusalem.

In Amos 4.4, 5 we have another aspect of the same principle. Did the prophet really mean that they were to do as he said, "Come to Bethel and transgress; at Gilgal multiply transgression; and bring your sacrifices every morning, and your tithes after three years: and offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven, and proclaim and publish the free offerings"? The following words explain, "For this liketh you". We see there is cutting sarcasm throughout and the context shews that judgment was coming upon them for these very things.

But again, we find that the Lord Himself did the same thing. In Matt. 23.31, 32, He says to the Pharisees, "Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers". Did He wish them to do this? No, it is the sharpest sarcasm. The words that follow shew it. "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of Hell". This was His parting speech, His preaching was at its end. He had rebuked and exhorted them in every way, but with no effect. So He says, as it were, Then go your own way, but it will end in Hell.

If all that has so far been said on this aspect of the case had no bearing on the Book of Ecclesiastes it would not be without profit, but on investigation we find that it is exactly the charac-

teristic of that Book. Only, that we have to go further for the conclusion; the book has twelve chapters, and we get the conclusion in the last; and should therefore read the whole in view of that.

So then, to condense what we have seen, Ecclesiastes was written before "life and incorruption were brought to light". It was when the promises of God were earthly, and eternal issues were very much in the background; and Solomon's mode of presentation is that of sarcasm or satire such as we have seen in all ages, which calls for the conclusion to be kept prominently in mind.

The expression "under the sun" which occurs so frequently may well be taken as a guide to the book also. We start with ch. 1.2. Did other kings assume such a standpoint? When David and even Solomon himself were engaged with the temple, did they consider it vanity of vanities? Surely that should set us on the right line of thought. This is the standpoint of the man that lives for himself and not to God. The numerous contrasts to this in the New Testament need not to be mentioned beyond the "cup of cold water". Therefore, as this statement, "all is vanity" recurs so often, the whole book is coloured by it and its contrast. Satire is flowing out all the time. And what would impress a worldling more than for Solomon the wise king and preacher to be emphasizing his own depraved and selfish standpoint. He would not need to wait for the conclusion, he would discern it before it was uttered.

Verse 15 says, "The crooked cannot be made straight". Is that true? Is anything too hard for the Lord? John said, "The crooked shall be made straight" (Luke 3.5).

In 2.15-17 there seems to be the suggestion that before Solomon wrote the book he passed through an experience corresponding to what he is setting forth. The fact that he took many wives who at the end turned his heart away from the Lord would suggest the possibility of it. So that he wrote with real feeling on the matter; but with sound wisdom and by inspiration.

Again as to ver. 18, does this apply to the building of the temple? We could go on like this with almost every verse, but it is not necessary.

Ch. 3.15-17 is one of a number of cases which illustrates that the preacher does not fully disguise his real object till he reaches the end, his heart reveals itself. So after verses 13 and 14 we come to the statement that "God requireth that which is past".

But verses 19 and 20 are advanced in support of the error we have in view, "All have one breath (lit. spirit), so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again".

Do you believe that a man has no pre-eminence above a beast? These errorists admit that there is a resurrection for men; surely that is a great pre-eminence. Therefore Solomon must have been excluding the resurrection, of which *very* little had been revealed then, for he wrote before Isaiah and Daniel. Yes, he is presenting the view of the man that lives for this life only.

But what about ver. 21? "Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth". Is there no pre-eminence here? Why does he make this distinction? But the words "Who knoweth" are interesting. The sceptic says, "Who knows?" Implying we cannot know anything. But Solomon did make a distinction, even if the full revelation was not made known. But the standpoint is that of the materialist, all in satire.

As we read ch. 4.1-3, can we say that this is to be taken literally, in view of Heb. 11.36-40? We can only conclude that at this point Solomon had excluded all issues after death from his mind.

In ch. 5.6 God's anger is associated with the things of this life. And though ver. 8 speaks of a higher judgment, it may still be in this life; for the context down to ver. 17 is all on the same line of thought. So let us eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die (1 Cor. 15.32-34).

Ch. 6.3 is not true in view of the resurrection of the just, and the words of the Lord in Matt. 5.10-12.

And what shall we say of ch. 7.16-17? Can we take this as sound exhortation? There is only one answer to it, a satirical probe at the one who is only as "righteous" as the scribes and Pharisees, as righteous as is sufficient to get on in the world. But notice the judgment of the one who is overmuch wicked. "Why shouldest thou die before thy time?" There is no thought of judgment in resurrection. And if resurrection is not included are we surprised if the intermediate state is not? Moreover, ver. 18 speaks of a reward *in this life* to the one that feareth God.

Ch. 8.10. There are men who have become famous as criminals, but monuments are not erected to them. And generally speaking the wicked are forgotten. Psa. 109.15 is a similar passage.

So as we proceed through chaps. 8 and 9 the same standpoint prevails, one event happens to all, good and bad alike, therefore get the best out of life while you are here.

Ch. 9.5, 6 is a stronghold of those who teach total extinction at death. But let us read the whole statement and note the last clause. "For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in anything that is done *under the sun*".



So far as this life is concerned, the dead do not know anything; there is no communication between those in Sheol and those on the earth. Taking the worldlings standpoint, all ends at death.

But the last clause is not the only decisive one on the point. What about "neither have they anymore a reward"? Have they no reward in resurrection? Again, that which proves too much disproves itself. The words must all be viewed as limited to this life, "under the sun".

Now let us consider this proffered explanation, and note how the Hebrew is handled.

"the memory of them is forgotten", that is, the faculty of remembering.

Then follows a quotation from the Companion Bible, to which we are referred.

"The Heb. suffix 'Them' must be taken as the subject in all the four nouns alike. As in ver. 6 the possessive pronoun 'their' is, and must be, taken alike in each case. 'Is forgotten' (ceases to exist), as in Psa. 77.<sup>9</sup> where it is parallel with 'clean gone for ever', and 'evermore' in ver. 6 here where it stands parallel with 'perished' and 'for ever'."

Suppose instead of reading "the memory of them" in ver. 5, we read "their memory". (For that is what is meant by saying the four pronouns must be treated alike.) The meaning still remains the same, "Their remembrance", as in Deut. 32.26, where it is the same word with the same suffix.

There are other places where the meaning "their faculty of memory" has been given by these people. But we must always keep in mind that it is upon them to *prove* the meaning and not merely assert it. If a passage is capable of two meanings it cannot be used as proof of either.

By comparison with Deut. 32.26, it is clear that the meaning can be "the remembrance of them": that is, that the living will not remember them. It therefore remains for them to provide a passage which *cannot* mean anything but what they assert. This they *cannot* do.

This same word for "memory" is found in Psa. 109.15: 145.7: Prov. 10.7: Eccles. 9.5: Isa. 26.14. The reader may satisfy himself as to whether the meaning is "the remembrance of them" or, "their faculty of memory".

It is also translated "memorial" in Ex. 3.15: Esth. 9.28: Psa. 9.6: 135.13: Hos. 12.5. The reader may judge whether it would be sense to read "faculty of memory" in these cases.

And so with these following, where it is translated "remembrance". Ex. 17.14: Deut. 25.19: 32.26: Job 18.17: Psa. 6.5: 30.4: 34.16: 97.12: 102.12: 112.6: Isa. 26.8.

Now as to the word "forgotten", we are told that it means "cease to exist". This assertion is based on a "parallel" in Psa. 77.9.

By such parallels we come to the following. In the same Psalm, "I cried" in ver. 1 must have the *same meaning* as "I sought" in ver. 2. And "I remembered" must have the same meaning as "I sought" in verses 2, 3. And so throughout, "I considered", "I call to remembrance", "I commune", verses 5, 6. These words have a relation to each other, but to say that they mean the same is foolishness.

But in other parallels the folly is still more manifest. In ver. 16 the "depths" are parallel with the "earth" in ver. 18. That is, the two words occupy a like position in the construction of the Hebrew poetry. But dare we say that "the depths" and "the earth" are the same. And there is just as great a difference between "forgotten" and "ceases to exist". This Hebrew word for "forget" is found 102 times in the Old Testament and is never translated in any other way. There are also twenty Hebrew words that are translated "cease", such as "rest", "be silent", etc., etc., but this word "forgotten" is never so used.

To be clear on these points will help in other cases where these passages from Job and the Psalms are pressed as "proof" of this error.

Moral: don't make a companion of the "Companion Bible" or put any confidence in those who resort to such methods.

Ver. 10 is another stronghold of these errorists. The word "grave" is "sheol" in the Hebrew, but they say it means "gravedom". If then it does refer to the grave it presents no difficulty from our point of view, and proves nothing against us. We admit that there are none of these things in the grave.

But to say that sheol is gravedom is their means of getting rid of such passages as Luke 16, the rich man in "Hades", which is the Greek equivalent for "Sheol".

There is plenty of evidence of conscious existence between death and resurrection in both Old and New Testament: but that is not the purpose of our present study. Suffice it to say, that the words "sheol" and the "grave" have no relation whatever in the Hebrew. They are entirely distinct.

"Sheol" means, not merely the place out of sight where the body is laid, but that state of existence after death of which so little was revealed in those early times. And in that state there is "no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom", such as are associated with this life. Luke 16 reveals the awful contrast, but the words of Ecclesiastes do not say that there is no conscious existence.

Moreover the motive in ver. 10 should be noticed. Is this the real standpoint that Solomon took? He was a man of faith. The attitude of men of faith according to Heb. 11 was very different. Everything is limited to the outlook of the worldling.

But ch. 10 begins to shew a different aspect of the case. The fool will betray himself, and Luke 12. 20, 21 tells us who is the fool. The words of the wise are as goads (ch. 12.11); but the words of the fool will bite like a serpent at the end, and a

babbler is no better (Prov. 1.20, 33). Paul became a fool, but there was wisdom behind his foolishness (2 Cor. 11.16-19: 12.11): and the same applies to Solomon.

Ch. 11.1 begins the wise counsel against living for self, but it is still the earthly outlook—"after many days". So the wise counsel continues in ver. 2-4; and the ignorance of "the way of the spirit" in ver. 5. He proceeds in the same strain till we come to ver. 9, "But know thou that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment". The man of earth has felt the satire of the Preachers folly all through, and if he has been a sensitive one he must have begun to drop his eyes in shame; but now comes the lash of the open truth. Death is not the end, though the intermediate and the eternal states are both undefined, there is a judgment.

Ch. 12 opens up with the word "Remember"; with the warning that in old age there will not be the inclination to change ones ways, and the faculties fail.

Ver. 7 is another clear statement that the spirit of man is different from that of the beast, it "goeth upward" (ch. 3.21) to God. But the errorist would persuade us that the "spirit" is "breath". So we read in John 4.24 "God is breath" (?) And in Luke 24.37 "they supposed they have seen a breath" (?) And in Mark 5.8 the Lord commanded an "unclean breath" to come out (?) And in Psa. 104.4 "He meaketh His angels breaths" (?) The Hebrew and Greek words exactly correspond, and there is quite a different word for "breath". Moreover, in Zech. 12.1 God declares that He "formeth the spirit of man within him". The word "formed" is the same as in Gen. 2.7 for the forming of the body. It is the "inner man", without which the body is dead (James 2.26). Much more could be said on this part of the subject, but that will be done later, if the Lord will; what has been said is sufficient for the purpose of this paper.

There is no need to question either Solomon's wisdom or the inspiration of what he wrote, if we recognise the design of the whole book. The Preacher's words were wise, and they were as "goads": and when we come to the "conclusion of the whole matter" in verses 13 and 14 we see a very different standpoint from "Be not righteous overmuch" and "Be not overmuch wicked". The secret things are reserved for the final day of judgment (Rom. 2.16).

Let us hold to the position, that one statement from the Lord's lips which can only have one meaning must be regarded as "rock" foundation. He was shedding light on that which was hidden, either in part or in full, in the past ages; and therefore whether they be found in Ecclesiastes, Job, Psalms, or anywhere else, all statements must be understood to agree with His words. And if we seek diligently and open-mindedly we shall find the Holy Spirit's own solution.

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