

ECCLESIASTES

A PRIVATE TRANSLATION

by

Herman A. Hartmann

ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes has been described as one of the strangest books in the Hebrew Canon. The writer attempts to understand, by using reason, the meaning of human existence and the direction of human life. With that he seems to be baffled and declares, "Everything is perishable" or, as it has been translated, "Vanity, vanity. All is vanity." Yet despite all this, life as the writer sees it, is worth living.

The writer describes himself as Qoheleth ;-%8 which at the time of the Reformers was translated as "Preacher" and this translation seems to have remained. Perhaps "Gatherer" would be more accurate. The name could also mean: one who participates in a popular assembly; speaker before an assembly; officer of an assembly; or possibly the pen name or nom de plume of an author to conceal his identity. He apparently was a collector of proverbs or wise sayings. Qoheleth, having gathered these wise sayings, struggles with their meaning and seems to be trying to understand that which is beyond his power of understanding.

The title of the book, Ecclesiastes, is the English spelling of a word in verse 1 of the LXX version: Εχχλησιασστης. This has also become the title of the book in the Vulgate.

The book is not carefully organized though attempts have been made to divide the book into five segments: 1st Discourse: 1:1 - 2:26; 2nd Discourse: 3:1 - 5:20; 3rd Discourse: 6:1 - 8:17; 4th Discourse: 9:1 - 12:8. Conclusion: 12:9 - 14.

The book was late in receiving acceptance into the Hebrew Canon. The acceptance into the Canon was perhaps because it was attributed to Solomon. It is generally agreed that the book had its origin later than the time of Solomon. Some scholars seek to designate specific sayings as those of Solomon, though this can not be proven. Rabbinic tradition places it together with Proverbs and Song of Solomon, saying that these books were preserved by King Hezekiah. Another Rabbinic tradition says that Song of Solomon was written during Solomon's youth, Proverbs during middle age, and Ecclesiastes in his old age.

Chapter 1 verse 12 speaks of Qoheleth as "king in Jerusalem." Scholars have suggested a possible repointing of the consonants to read: "property holder in Jerusalem;" "councilor in Jerusalem;" "Ratsheer (i.e. counselor or senator) in Jerusalem." None of these emendations have been generally accepted by interpreters. Qoheleth is also described as the "son of David" though this need not indicate a direct lineal descendant, since none is so named in the listing of David's sons.

Qoheleth does not speak directly to God but wrestles within his being, seeking to solve the seeming

arbitrariness of the universe, its inequities and its injustice. Despite this Qoheleth urges moral responsibility of the individual, despite living the evidence that death cancels all the accomplishments of the person who struggles with life under these circumstances.

Some scholars feel the book is a Hebrew translation of an Aramaic text. The Hebrew text has few problems, textually, but having been written late it has not gone through countless instances of copying over the centuries.

Ecclesiastes represents an example of Wisdom Literature that was rather common not only among the Hebrew people but also among others of the nations in the Middle East during several centuries prior to the Common Era.

