

# The Reading and Meaning of Ecclesiastes

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## Abstract

This article tries to understand the message of Ecclesiastes as part of the poetic-wisdom group in the Hebrew Canon according to the BHS (Psalter, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Songs of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes). Therefore, Ecclesiastes is able to tie the message of the preceding books. The prologue (1:1) and epilogue (12:13-14) of Ecclesiastes recall the foundations of faith in Israel, that is Psalm 1 and 2 (law and David). Next, like Job, Ecclesiastes recognizes the destruction of human wisdom in order to carry this line into all parts of human experience. Ecclesiastes looks on life like it is without God in order to face Him again and the very end of the road. The outcome of Ruth's life exceeds the given dimension of human understanding. Ruth and Boaz did the very best in the fear of JHWH. But they could not plan the meaning of their life as part of the promise of the Davidic dynasty. According to Ecclesiastes, Solomon was not able to give life a lasting meaning. This only comes from God who appointed him as king of Jerusalem (1:1) and who has given his enduring covenant and law (12:12). Then, Song of Songs celebrates human love despite of suffering and disillusion. Similar Ecclesiastes encourages to enjoy life with the wife you love (9:9). In sum, Ecclesiastes includes every radical thought in life. Therefore it is an example where every reader in Israel and even today can reflect on his own questions.

## 1. Introduction

**Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Canon (can this be the first title? Or becomes part of the introduction)**

### 1.1. Ecclesiastes in the Writings

Most students that try to grasp the meaning of the Old Testament as the Hebrew canon come to the point where they recognize that the Old Testament is shaped as a threefold collection. This Hebrew Canon contains the Law (Torah), the Prophets (Nebiim) and the Writings (Ketubim). A lot of work has been done to comprehend the themes that hold together the Law and the Prophets. There is an inner relationship between Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numeri, and Deuteronomy that is continued in Joshua to Judges, Samuel and Kings. Recently, much effort has also been invested to detect the themes that hold together the prophetic books from Hosea through Malachi (see Redditt 2008: 197-208). But the Writings have received comparatively little attention (Childs 1979: 501). Most students and pastors who want to get an overview of the third part of the Hebrew Canon are not encouraged to expect much concerning the internal relationship and development from book to book. Some scholars may even reject any attempt to see an inner topical arrangement since they regard the Writings as merely a loose collection of books. They highlight, instead, the different genres of the books, e.g. love poem, wisdom literature, folktale, history, and apocalypse and use these to rearrange the books accordingly (Witte 2006: 404). Finally, one could identify a collection of poetical (wisdom) books in one group and of narrative books in another (Stendebach 1994: 232).

Other Old Testament scholars emphasize the special collection of the Megilloth within the Writings of which Ecclesiastes is a part of. Here, this anthology is guided by the liturgical principle according to

the Babylonian calendar opening in spring: Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther (Witte 2006: 403).

Starting with the arrangement of the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS) as today's standard edition for the Hebrew Bible, one may detect a chronological sequence within Megillot. The collection begins with Ruth (drawn to the time of Judges), followed by Song of Song (with the young Salomon in 1:1), Ecclesiastes (with the old Salomon in 1:1), Lamentation (reflecting the tragedy of the destroyed Jerusalem 586 B.C.) and finally the book of Esther (which shows in chapter 1:1 that these events took place during the time of the Persian king Xerxes, 485-465 B.C.) (Witte 2006: 403).

Although some of these insights might be supported with good arguments, one could also pursue another path of reasoning that corresponds more adequately to the character of the Hebrew Bible as a single united literary collection with theological implications. If the Law and the Prophets demonstrate close thematic relationships between the books, one would expect, or at least venture, a similar view for the Writings.

## 1.2. The value of a thematic-canonical reading of Ecclesiastes

Steinberg (2006) examined the collection of the Writings based on the arrangement listed in the Babylonian Talmud (Baba Bathra 14b). According to him we might reckon with a relative old alignment authorized by the old Rabbanan arguing for the sequence: Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles. Steinberg sees Ruth as preparing the Davidic perspective of the Book of Psalms that constitutes the introduction of the Ketuvim. What follows is the teaching of the wisdom books Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs. Here we can see an ascending development of these four books from suffering to joy. Job describes the destruction of human wisdom, closing with the fear of the Lord. This fear of the Lord is taken up by Proverbs as the beginning of all wisdom, thus presenting the basics about how to live wisely. But Ecclesiastes goes one step further because it shows that life is much more complex, multilayered or even disillusioning. Nevertheless it calls to enjoy life that is given by God. Here Steinberg ( [Ref required](#)) sees Song of Songs as a culmination of Ecc. 9:9 ("Enjoy life with your wife"). In sum, this book is celebrating the gift of love. After the wisdom books there is another line of four books: Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra-Nehemia. Here too we can see a progression of message from suffering to joy. Lamentations mourns the destruction of Jerusalem. Despite this hopeless situation there is a glimpse of grace in the middle of the book (ch. 3) and the last four verses (5:19-22). This call for God's intervention is picked up by Daniel who shows that God is still King of the earth who leads even the most powerful kings in the world (Dan 2:20). Daniel and his companions demonstrate that God is still in control. Esther enhances the hope of the people. By her faith and intervention the whole Jewish community has been saved from genocide. As one book in two volumes, Ezra-Nehemia show how land, people and temple have being restored. Chronicles at the end can be read as conclusion of the entire Old Testament. In this book the history of JHWH with his people is placed within the global history of humankind. The God of Israel is also the God of heaven and earth. The God who has given his promises to David and his successors is also the God who tells Cyrus what Israel has to do: go back to Jerusalem (2Chr. 36:23). Therefore, the last verse of the Old Testament leads the reader all the way back to the worship of God in Jerusalem. With this conclusion Chronicles

forms a bracket together with the introductory character of Psalms that challenged the Israelite to praise the Lord (cf. Ps.145-150).

This approach of Steinberg is different because he tries to illustrate the thematic threads that hold the books together. Or, to put it differently, he begins with the message of the individual book and then identifies its contribution to the development of the canon. In this arrangement, the book of Ecclesiastes is not part of a loose collection of books. Rather Ecclesiastes is closely linked to the books of Job, Proverbs and Song of Songs. Here, Ecclesiastes contributes to a balanced development of the message of wisdom books because it builds on Job and Proverbs while providing a starting point for Song of Songs.

Taking the approach of Steinberg, I shall try to examine the order of the Writings according to the BHS. In addition to considering a chronological, liturgical and generic arrangement of books, we try to recognize the thematic relations between the books. For this enterprise we have to limit the scope of our inquiry to the reading and meaning of Ecclesiastes. In the Writings according to the BHS Ecclesiastes marks the end of a sequence in which poetic books are predominant: Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, and finally Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes, is followed by books that are concerned with the destruction, survival and reconstruction of Israel as nation: Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemia, and Chronicles.

What does this position of Ecclesiastes mean for its reading and meaning? In his article about the current trends in the interpretation of Ecclesiastes, C. Bartholomew names four points at the end of his study as “right ways to approach Ecclesiastes so that it might yield its message to us” [Check quotes here and below](#)

“First, we have to read Ecclesiastes as a literary whole. Hints of different voices in the book should not lead to the conclusion that we try to find the ‘the real Qohelet’. Second, this includes the view that even the epilogue (Ecc.12:9-14) might be examined as part of the whole book. Third, Ecclesiastes has to be understood in the context of the whole canon of the Old Testament, especially wisdom literature. Fourth, Ecclesiastes needs to be read through the lens of Hebrew poetry. This could help to juxtapose and relate passages that might contradict on the first view” (Bartholomew 1999: 14-16).

Bartholomew’s conclusions may function as the starting point for reading Ecclesiastes in the present study. I shall Steinberg’s canonical-structural approach and try to apply it by looking at Ecclesiastes as part of the arrangement in the BHS. While one might not be able to discern different voices but different levels of references in Ecclesiastes that cannot be neglected. On the lowest level, the book of Ecclesiastes shows a clear relationship to the life of Solomon. This historical setting takes Solomon’s life as the basic plot for the discussion. On the next level Ecclesiastes broadens the horizon from the specific life of that king to a big picture about the meaning of life, history, and experience for all humankind. For this paper I propose to begin reading Ecclesiastes already with the epilogue in mind. On the final level the book, Ecclesiastes is situated in the context of the Ketuvim. Here it is not only part of the wisdom books, but also viewed in relation to books of other genres. The question has to be answered how Ecclesiastes is linked to, for example, Psalms or Ruth. Or one might extend this

canonical view to the poetic-wisdom line of the Ketuvim that starts with Psalter and finishes with Ecclesiastes: Psalter, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes. One could most likely trace and unify the different themes of Ecclesiastes on this level.

## 2. Reading Ecclesiastes as part of the poetic-wisdom group

### 2.1. Psalter as the starting point of Ecclesiastes

#### 2.1.1. David and the King of Jerusalem

The Prologue: the first few words of Ecclesiastes (1:1) introduce “the preacher” (*Qohelet*) as the son of David, the king of Jerusalem. These words may not function as a detailed designation of a specific king in Jerusalem. Rather they refer to the general meaning of the Davidic Kingship in Jerusalem. Qohelet is part of this story and history. It was initiated and founded by JHWH himself in Jerusalem. Coming from the beginning of the Ketuvim, we see Psalms 1 & 2 as a double portal into the Psalter (Steinberg 2006: 226). Psalm 2 demonstrates how JHWH rules through his anointed servant, who is the Davidic king in Jerusalem. Even the end of the Psalter praises the majesty of JHWH. There is no other King than JHWH (Ps.145). Finally, there is a call to praise this great king (V.21). Eventually, the subsequent Psalms (146-150) represent the answer of the praying community in terms of a tenfold hallelujah. Thus, Ecclesiastes1:1 echoes the meaning of this son of David who is king in Jerusalem. It is not just a notice but a strong connection to a central theme in the Old Testament. Ecclesiastes builds on the promise of JHWH to David that has survived even through the exile. Despite the lack of fulfillment of the glorious visible reign of the Davidic king JHWH is still in control. Because the Davidic line has not been cut off after the exile there is hope that JHWH will definitely show his sovereignty above all humankind. Therefore Ecclesiastes does not stagger in a theological vague environment but builds on firm divine promises. Consequently, the introduction in Ecclesiastes1:1 places the book in an Old Testament setting where JHWH is King of the whole earth based on the king in Jerusalem, the son of David. This JHWH had shown his faithfulness through David and his successor in the past. Furthermore, in Psalm 3 one hears the voice of David. He is calling for God’s rescue from Zion (Ps. 3:5). **Here a close connection to Psalm 2 can be seen (Weber 2010: 840-843).** As the one who is part of the promise in Psalm 2, David is able to raise his voice to God in Psalm 3. A similar line can be drawn in Ecclesiastes. This time Qohelet is part of JHWH’s promise in Jerusalem. For this reason he can confront God with this meaningless life with all its contradictions like David did starting with Psalm 3 for the first book in the Psalter (3-41). In the same way as David laments the absence of God’s faithfulness and grace, Qohelet is able to express the trouble of life in general. Just as Qohelet does this ‘under the sun’ in the presence of the creator, even David knows God above who reigns in his majesty (Psalms 2 & 145).

#### 2.1.2. Keeping the Law

The epilogue in Ecclesiastes12:13 leads the reader to the fear of God. Consequently this means keeping God’s commands. This conclusion can be read in correspondence with Psalm 1 that shows a way of wisdom for those who follow the path of the law. Therefore, when read from a canonical perspective, the epilogue forms a concluding bracket together with Psalm 1 around the poetic line from

Psalter to Ecclesiastes. Although Psalms 1 & 2 might have been written as two independent Psalms, it has often been shown that these two psalms are closely interwoven (Weber 2010: 837-840) – both literarily and theologically. In Psalm 1 the reader is taught and motivated to make a good decision: the way of the law leads to life. In Psalm 2 the reader is also required to make a choice. This time he may decide to subdue oneself to JHWH and his anointed king.

In sum, the beginning and the end of Ecclesiastes reflect the two major themes of the Psalter. Psalms 1 & 2 function as a starting point of the Psalter and may even be seen as an introduction to the Writings collectively. Ecclesiastes, at the least, supports this view because its introduction and conclusion pick up these themes of David and the law. Both subjects culminate in the fear of the Lord.

## **2.2. Ecclesiastes as the concluding end of the wisdom series**

### **2.2.1. Job and the destruction of human wisdom**

Job and his friends do not receive any answer why this dreadful pain had happened to Job. But at the end of the book God talks to him, but Job is not able to answer adequately. Instead, he acknowledges God as the one who controls and rules every part of the world and nature. Only God knows all the correlations and interrelationships. Humankind may have understood a brief section of life but it is not capable to look behind the curtain (Job 42:1-6). Job has to repent and he has to accept God above all things in his personal life. Finally, his god-fearing life from the beginning (1:1) ends up into the fear of God again in the last chapter. But he has gone through a process of experience and reflection.

Ecclesiastes, likewise, encourages the reader to challenge human wisdom and experience. But it comes from an opposite angle. Whereas Job and his friends confidently understand the meaning of life Ecclesiastes is radically realistic or even pessimistic. Job and his friends start a dialogue in which each party is highly self-confident. But the end turns out to be a capitulation of human wisdom.

Apparently, Ecclesiastes' foundation describes precisely this inconsistency of all that fills the earth.

Therefore it wants to unfold this uncertainty to the highest degree of honesty and reality. The book of Job struggles with the human attempt to understand the way of God in, through, and behind this life.

Ecclesiastes assumes that human wisdom is very limited. **When even Solomon's deeds, knowledge and joy are collapsing at the end of his life without making any sense, then everybody should have the same attitude for his own life. (Sentence not clear. Needs reframing as not sure what you are trying to say)** Job tried to look on life through the eyes of God – **without success (Reviewer believes that it is clear in the bk of Job that Job was clear and understood suffering through the eyes of God. Clarify).**

Ecclesiastes looks on life like it is without God; let us say it turns its back on God in order to face Him again and the very end. Ecclesiastes obviously knows that there is a God. But this conclusion is made only when men hits the end of the road. At this point Ecclesiastes recognizes the destruction of human wisdom. Even though this was already realized by Job, Ecclesiastes carries this line much farther and deeper into all parts and levels of human experience.

### **2.2.2. Proverbs and the boundary of wisdom in daily life**

Our comparison of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes will show again that Ecclesiastes provides a complementary view to Proverbs. The book of Proverbs is structured by the meaning of the fear of the Lord. This is set up in the introduction by Proverbs 1:7. When we take Proverbs 1-9 as the foundation

of this book, we meet exactly this aspect in 9:10. Furthermore, coming to the conclusion of Proverbs in chapter 31, there is a search for the very best wife. This girl/ woman ultimately fears the Lord (31:30). Ecclesiastes also finishes in the fear of the Lord (12:13) but it does so differently. Proverbs shows that a good portion of all the possibilities for a good life is based on the fear of the Lord, while Ecclesiastes scrutinizes life in its entire dimension. Proverbs left too many questions unanswered. These are taken up by Ecclesiastes as a re-lecture of Proverbs (Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2004: 44-45). Proverbs ascertained the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom. Finally, Ecclesiastes discovers the fear of the Lord as even surviving the failure of human experience of life and delusion.

### 2.2.3. Ruth as a model of wisdom despite destruction

As much as Job can be read as the individual extension of the Psalter, one can see the book of Ruth as a practical answer or illustration of Proverbs. At the end of Proverbs in chapter 31 King Lemuel is taught by his mother how to live and reign wisely. The initial point is expressed in v.3: "Do not spend your strength on women." A king can use his power to surround himself with many wives and concubines. In the context of Proverbs one remembers how Solomon misused his power and finally lost his strength (Longman 2006: 539). Thus, the wrong wife takes away the strength of man. The word "strength" (hebr. *chajil*) is picked up again immediately in the poem about the wife with noble character as Proverbs' epilogue (v.10-31). This unit is framed by the word *chajil*. This time this strength is stated for the prospective wife. A wife with "strength" is the starting point of the search for a wife (v. 10). After that the following verses describe the character, gifts and deeds of this kind of a woman. At the end of this acrostic poem the text comes to the essential aspect of the beginning, which is the wife with *chajil*. Verse 29 shows that the wife in mind is better than all. She has shown her strength so much more than all the other girls. The next verse adds the fear of the Lord to the characterization of the wife with *chajil* (v. 30). Furthermore, this wife will be praised officially and publically in the gates (v. 31). The deeds of this wife are affected by her strength and grounded in the fear of the Lord. The praise of this wife has not been initiated on her own. In fact, it comes from other people who have recognized this God-fearing wisdom.

Now the book of Ruth can go one step further. In Ruth 3:11 Boaz mentions what all the people in the gate of the town have acknowledged: Ruth is a woman of strength (*chajil*). By this designation she is appointed as a very good wife for Boaz. But the strength of Ruth is grounded only on her surrender to the God of Israel and her strong conviction to stay with Naomi (1:16-18). Later, Ruth is blessed by the people in the gate (4:12): "Through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah." The end of Ruth makes clear that this wish becomes a reality. The genealogy of Perez leads to Boaz and further until the king David. But Ruth is never described as one who tries to build her own big house of life. She never planned to be in the line of David.

In a canonical reading of the Writings, Ruth echoes Proverbs' wife of strength that fears the Lord. What is crucial is that the outcome of Ruth's life exceeds the given dimension of human experience. It is God's own dimension of giving and carrying his promises for a whole nation through David. Never ever could anyone have understood this meaning of Ruth and Boaz in their setting.

Here we may suspect influence on Ecclesiastes: The reign of the Davidic king without the fear of the Lord is meaningless. Enduring freedom or power cannot be assured by human wisdom. When radically examined, all this is empty and worthless because it does not know where it comes from and where it finally goes. Ecclesiastes points rigorously to the meaningless (*hebel*) of this life (1:2). While it is difficult to translate this term in our context, it demonstrates the narrowness of human wisdom. Human wisdom can never break through to the end. It is always an unfinished project. It can never be planned and carried out to the very end and to full satisfaction. Eventually one has to accept that human wisdom is *hebel* (cf. Prov.31:30). But Ecclesiastes in the canonical form and arrangement puts human wisdom in a God-given order. Ruth and Boaz did the best with their lives, but God did even more that never ever could have done by human wisdom. According to Ecclesiastes, Solomon also did so much, but he was not able to give life a lasting meaning. This only comes from God alone who appointed him as king of Jerusalem (1:1) and who has given his enduring covenant and law (12:12).

#### 2.2.4. Song of Songs and the pleasure of love as a gift from God

When taken only as a collection of love songs, one might minimize the meaning of Song of Songs. But when read after the book of Ruth, there emerge some connecting aspects. First, Ruth provides the genealogy up to David, the father of Solomon who is mentioned subsequently in Song 1:1. Second, at the end of the Book of Ruth we see Boaz and Ruth coming together. This theme is taken up in Song of Songs by showing how another couple looks for the encounter. Third, Song of Songs can be read in a canonical horizon with Ecclesiastes in mind. It then celebrates love as a gift of God. But this love is vulnerable and contested. The reader of Song of Songs may know the peculiarity of this kind of love. Human life is full of suffering and disillusion. Despite all of this mess, there is this festival of love. Humankind is not able to grasp it. It may celebrate it from time to time. But finally it is beyond human wisdom. The only thing you can do is to enjoy life with the wife you love (Eccl. 9:9)

### 3. The Meaning of Ecclesiastes

This article tried to read Ecclesiastes as a whole, considering prologue and epilogue as integral parts of the book. Moreover, the meaning of Ecclesiastes was traced as the end of the poetic-wisdom line: Psalter – Job – Proverbs – Ruth – Song of Songs. These books provide the themes on which Ecclesiastes can build. Or, let's say that they build up the frame of reference in which Ecclesiastes can develop its radical and challenging reflection on wisdom. Ecclesiastes anticipates from the Psalter the praise of JHWH who reigns over the whole earth eternally. Therefore, He governs the course of life and history. He has given the law that is the guideline of a life in the fear of God. Ecclesiastes meticulously scrutinizes the meaning of human wisdom in order to come back to God as a final point. This role of God for human wisdom is only indicated from time to time in the book. But the prologue and the epilogue with their references to the meaning if God enables the reader to connect it to the other books of wisdom. Thus, they provide the material to talk about suffering, disillusion, success, joy and, last but not least, the fear of the Lord.

If Ecclesiastes is the contemplating conclusion on wisdom, one can accept a multilayered view on life. First, we see Solomon, the son of David. His life is well known from the book of Kings. Even the preceding books on wisdom testify to his life and wisdom. Now we hear the concluding thoughts about

his life in Ecclesiastes. Second, we see Ecclesiastes meditating on the life of Solomon as an invitation to everybody generally. Here Solomon's life serves as a case study that includes every radical thought in life. Therefore it is an example where every reader can reflect on his own questions. Third, Ecclesiastes is a book of the third part of the Hebrew Canon. The people of Israel returning from exile might learn from the example of Solomon about the fate of the whole nation of Israel. Eventually Solomon is a paradigm for the glory and fall of Israel as a people. They might ask the same questions and even get the same answers as they are led back to the land where the Davidic king ruled in Jerusalem. Even if this line of promise has survived, there is nothing visible about the majesty of JHWH. There remain a lot of questions that wear the people down. But after taking into account these enquiries on the meaning of life, Ecclesiastes shows the way to the fear of the Lord who reveals his rule in his constant requirements.

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