

## Ecclesiastes: Preacher of Surprising Joy

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February 21, 2010  
Session 1/4

## What do these have in common?

City Slickers (the movie)  
Groundhog Day (the movie)  
The Superbowl  
The economic downturn  
The earthquake in Haiti  
9/11  
Hurricane Katrina  
The death of my father  
Jean Barrett  
Lois Draayer  
Mardi Gras  
Louisiana  
Laissez les bon temps rouler  
The Epic of Gilgamesh  
A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens  
The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings by J. R. R. Tolkien  
The Dispossessed by Ursula LeGuin  
Existentialism  
Postmodernism  
Apophatic theology  
Hesychism

## Ecclesiastes?!?

- Have you studied the book of Ecclesiastes?
- Have you heard it read during worship?
- Have you heard a sermon on it?
- Shows up only once in the three year lectionary cycle (Ecclesiastes 3)

## KWL

- Know – What do you already know?
- Want – What do you want to know?
- Learn – What have we learned?
- What do you already know about Ecclesiastes?
- What do you want to learn about the book?

## The beginning

- Ecclesiastes 1:1
  - Superscription
  - Title
- Hebrew **qohelet**
  - < **Qahal** = collect, gather, assemble
  - Qohelet = Gatherer? Teacher? Preacher?
  - Gather or assemble what? whom?
  - People (for worship)? Students? Wisdom?
- Royal figure in Jerusalem

## Central theme

- Ecclesiastes 1:2-3
- Hebrew **hebel** = breath, puff, wind
- 38x in book of Ecclesiastes
- Something that does not last or cannot be grasped (physically or mentally)
- Sometimes with a note of criticism or protest
- Vanity, meaningless, temporary, impermanent, unreliable, unfair, absurd

## When?

- Historical development of Biblical Hebrew
- Archaic → Standard → Late (postexilic)
- Language of Ecclesiastes is late (postexilic)
- Persian loanwords = 450 BC or later
- Hebrew root \*SH-L-T = “able to dispose (money or property)” only before 350 BC
- So 450-350 BC
- Also social and economic context
  - Commerce, money, mobility, urban setting

## Who?

- Hebrew **ben dawiyd** = son or descendant of David
- Royal figure
- Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:12
- Author has knowledge, power, experience
- If anybody has the right to say these things Qohelet does
  - Knew it all, had it all, did it all
  - And it is all **hebel!**

## Does it matter?

- Solomon around 900 BC?
- Anonymous author 450-350 BC?
- Socio-economic context 450-350 BC **does** help us interpret and relate to the book
- Inspired by God and what God wants us to have
- What kind of Bible do we actually have? Not what we expect or think we should have? (John Barton, *What Is The Bible?*)

## Canon (place in the Bible)

- Almost rejected at Jamnia 1<sup>st</sup> century
  - Council of Jewish rabbis
- Objections
  - Full of contradictions
  - Some ideas are heretical
- Reasons
  - Solomon wrote it (yeah yeah I know)
  - “fear of the Lord” in Eccl 12:13-14 and elsewhere (RW – **very important!**)
  - Enough orthodoxy can be read into(?) it

## Canon (place in the Bible)

- Jewish canon (Torah – Prophets - Writings)
  - One of the **Writings**
  - One of the **Megillot**
    - Five Scrolls for five Jewish festivals
    - Qohelet goes with **Sukkot** (RW – **very important**)
- Christian canon
  - One of the **Wisdom** books
- Scholars interpret Ecclesiastes as **wisdom** literature

## Structure

- Choon-Leong Seow (Princeton)
- Eccl 1:1 – Superscription
  - PART I
    - 1:2-4:16 – **Reflection**. Everything temporary and unreliable
    - 5:1-6:9 – **Ethic**. Coping with uncertainty
  - PART II
    - 6:10-8:17 – **Reflection**. Everything is elusive
    - 9:1-12:8 – **Ethic**. Coping with risk and death
- 12:9-13a – Epilogue
- 12:13b-14 – Additional material

## Where we are going

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Qohelet's critique. What's the bad news?**
- 3. Qohelet's gospel. The surprising good news.**
- 4. Qohelet and Christ**
- 5. ?**
- 6. ?**

## Why Ecclesiastes?

- Lent
  - time to reflect
  - we are finite mortal sinful
  - the wilderness
  - you are dust and unto dust you shall return
- Our context similar to that of Ecclesiastes
  - opportunity and risk
  - fortunes made and lost
  - work work work without rest
- A book we need to hear again

## Why Ecclesiastes?

- Studied with William Brown
- Skeptical and pessimistic?
- Precisely the point
- Reject false knowledge and false motives
- Powerful liberating transforming good news
- Preview – We are finite. And everybody dies.

## Juice quote time

- William Brown, *Character in Crisis*
- Qoheleth attributes the oppression of the poor to an interminable social hierarchy that diffuses communal responsibility for the poor. Either everyone's hands are tied or nobody cares in this bureaucracy of indifference.
- Qoheleth unmask the danger brought on by a form of works righteousness: the obsessive striving to outdo oneself and each other in righteousness. Such righteousness is rooted in thinking that one can know the work of God (8:16)

## Juicy quotes (continued)

The book of Ecclesiastes is at root a confession of disillusionment about life in general and the frustration of work in particular. [It] speaks to those who with great and ambitious plans are ripe for disillusionment, whether in the business world, politics, raising children, ministry, or academia. In every vocation there is the personal struggle over the perceived lack of effectiveness and progress that can bring one to the brink of burnout and despair. For clearly misguided reasons,... it is too easy to fall into the trap of pinning one's hopes on the human capacity to fulfill dreams and goals... (Brown, *Character*)

## Juicy quotes (continued)

Nowhere does Qoheleth mention the work of the family. One gets the impression that the family, the once stable unit and basis of culture in proverbial wisdom [such as Proverbs], has disintegrated in Qoheleth's social world. Qoheleth addresses a world filled with individuals, like himself, who are without associations and can find only meager utilitarian value in common labor. (Brown, *Character*, 125)

## Juicy quotes (continued)

- Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible

The arrogant ones keep climbing the ladder, but no matter how high they climb, there are always people higher up than they, who look down on them. The text goes on to speak of the insatiability of the greedy... These people keep consuming more and more, but they will never seem to have enough. They permit themselves no rest....

The author addresses those whose "eyes are not satisfied with wealth," who toil and toil even though they have neither descendants nor kinfolks with whom to share their wealth (4:7-8). The fear of poverty and the possibility of wealth prompted people to be excessively driven and to be ever discontented with what they had....

## Juicy quotes (continued)

Qohelet's audience does not seem secure with what they have. Rather, they are constantly toiling to acquire more and more, and they are worried about the possibility of losing what they have.... They are socially and economically in the middle... They are ordinary citizens facing the vagaries of a rapidly changing social world. They are... trying to scale the socioeconomic pyramid without sliding down into poverty... They are a people caught between the opportunities and risks of a volatile economy. (Seow)