

The Ultimate Quest

*I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.
And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by
wisdom all that is done under heaven.*

ECCLESIASTES 1:12-13

In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* Douglas Adams writes about Deep Thought, the powerful supercomputer tasked with determining 'the Answer to Life, the Universe, and Everything'. It takes the computer a long time to check and double check its computations—seven and a half million years, to be exact—but eventually it spits out a simple, unambiguous answer: the meaning of life is 42.

'Forty-two!' someone yells at the computer. 'Is that all you've got to show for seven and a half million years' work?'

'I checked it very thoroughly,' Deep Thought replies, 'and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is.'¹

1. Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (London: Pan Books, 1979), 162.

WHY EVERYTHING MATTERS

Deep down, everyone wants to know the meaning of life, but to get the right answer we have to ask the right question in the right way. This is our quest in Ecclesiastes: to come to a true, accurate understanding of life, the universe and everything—which hopefully will take less than seven and a half million years!

Authorship

Our guide on this journey is called Qoheleth, or as we know him in English, ‘the Preacher’. Before we go any further it is important to clarify this man’s identity. The Hebrew root of the word *qoheleth* literally means ‘to gather or assemble’. Some scholars take this as a reference to the way the author collected wise sayings. But in the Old Testament the verbal form of this word typically refers to gathering a community of people, especially for the worship of God. So think of Qoheleth as a preacher or teacher speaking wisdom to the people of God.

This context is reflected in the book’s English title. ‘Ecclesiastes’ comes from Greek, not Hebrew. It is a form of the word *ekklesia*, which is the common New Testament word for ‘church’. Taken most literally, Ecclesiastes means ‘one who speaks to the congregation’²—in a word, the ‘Preacher’. This Preacher is further identified as ‘the son of David, king in Jerusalem’ (Eccles. 1:1). Naturally, we think first of King Solomon, the only immediate son of David to rule in Jerusalem after his father. Besides, many of the things that Qoheleth tells us about his life experience sound like Solomon. Who else could say, ‘I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me’ (Eccles. 1:16)?

As the author describes the houses he built, the gardens he planted and the women he kept, we are reminded repeatedly

2. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 2.

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of the power and luxury of King Solomon. Then, at the end of the book, the author is described as ‘weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care’ (Eccles. 12:9), which also sounds a lot like Solomon. The name Qoheleth fits, too, because when Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem, he gathered his people and led them in the worship of God. In describing that great assembly, the Bible repeatedly uses the same root word that Ecclesiastes uses for the name of its author, *qoheleth* (see 1 Kings 8:1).

So, the church has long identified Solomon as the Preacher of Ecclesiastes. According to this point of view, after wandering away from God and falling into tragic sin, that wise king repented of his wicked ways and turned back to God. Ecclesiastes is his memoir, or last testament, in which he tells us what he learned from his hopeless attempt to live without God.

More recently, some scholars have moved away from identifying Solomon as the book’s author. They point out that he is never mentioned by name (the way he is in Proverbs, for example). If Solomon wrote this book, then why doesn’t he come right out and say so?³ Although the opening verse associates the book with that famous king, it never explicitly identifies him as the author. Furthermore, the Preacher says things that some people find it hard to imagine Solomon ever saying, such as when he starts to criticize wealthy kings for oppressing the poor (e.g. Eccles. 5:8).

Thus, some scholars believe that Ecclesiastes was written after the time of Solomon, possibly during Israel’s exile in Babylon or even later. They point out that in ancient times it was conventional to write fictional autobiographies, in which a writer would take on the persona of someone famous—not to deceive anyone, but to deliver a message.

3. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 159.

Perhaps Ecclesiastes is the same kind of book—a fictional royal autobiography, in which a second ‘Solomon’ uses the life of Israel’s famous king to illustrate his philosophy of life. Who better to show the emptiness of life without God than the wisest, richest man who ever lived? In effect, the author gives us a literary argument from the greater to the lesser. He slips on the sandals (so to speak) of a man who had everything that anyone could ever want. But the world is not enough. If it could not satisfy Solomon, it will never satisfy anyone.

All things considered I tend to agree with the conclusion of Richard Schultz, who encourages us to read Ecclesiastes from a Solomonic perspective, accepting the possibility if not the necessity that Solomon wrote the book himself.⁴

The Seeker’s Quest

After introducing the author (Eccles. 1:1) and stating the theme (Eccles 1:2), Ecclesiastes offers a series of examples (Eccles. 1:3-11) taken from nature and from human experience to prove that the world is ‘endlessly busy and hopelessly inconclusive.’⁵ These verses come from someone who refers to the Preacher in the third person—perhaps the book’s final editor.

Then, starting in verse 12, Qoheleth speaks for himself and invites us on a spiritual and intellectual quest: ‘I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven’ (Eccles. 1:12-13). Ecclesiastes is a ‘thinking

4. Richard L. Schultz, ‘Ecclesiastes’, in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Commentary*, ed. by Gary M. Burge and Andrew E. Hill (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 581.

5. Kidner, *Message of Ecclesiastes*, 28.

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person's book.⁶ Its author was a seeker who always asked the ultimate questions. Here he writes from the vantage point of age and experience, telling us what he learned from his lifelong quest to understand the meaning of life.

This description of interests and passions fits what we know about King Solomon. When David's son became king, God gave him the opportunity of a lifetime: he could ask for anything he wished. Wisely, Solomon chose wisdom. God was so pleased with this request that he said, 'Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you' (1 Kings 3:12). But this precious gift did not mean that the king instantly understood everything. He still had to apply himself to the pursuit of knowledge, which is exactly what he did.

Solomon's quest was *sincere*. He devoted his heart and soul to knowing the truth. His quest was *comprehensive*. The words 'seek' and 'search' in verse 13 show how serious he was.⁷ Solomon wanted to take it all in, leaving nothing out, so that his conclusions about life would be as definitive as possible. He wanted to investigate every area of human endeavor—'all that is done under heaven' (Eccles. 1:13). This quest was also *commendable*. Rather than seeking pleasure, or looking for popularity, or finding significance in personal accomplishments, the Preacher pursued the life of the mind. Solomon was the kind of person who, given the choice, would attend a liberal arts college and major in philosophy.

6. Walter C. Kaiser, *Coping with Change—Ecclesiastes* (Fearn, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus, 2013), 12.

7. As Dan Treier points out, these words also tie in with the life of Solomon: in 1 Kings 3:9, 12 and 2 Chronicles 1:10, 12, Solomon receives a 'heart' and 'wisdom' from God (Treier, *Proverbs & Ecclesiastes*, 135).

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Understand that the kind of wisdom he pursued was not divine, but human—the best that human beings have thought or said. Here ‘wisdom’ refers to what people can learn about the world without special revelation from God. This is a worthy pursuit, as far as it goes. All truth is God’s truth, wherever it may be found. Because God created the world, and everything in it, any truth that we discover is a divine gift; ‘the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding’ (Prov. 2:6). But the question still needs to be asked: how far will human wisdom take us? Will information bring transformation? Can it lead us to everlasting life?

A Bad Business

One way to answer these questions is to see the result of Qoheleth’s quest. What did he discover? The reality is that he came up empty. Rather than totaling 42, the meaning of life did not add up for him at all.

Verses 13 to 15 summarize the author’s unhappy efforts to understand the universe. His mood is unmistakably gloomy: ‘It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with’ (Eccles. 1:13). Sooner or later, most people end up feeling the same way. Many things in life make us feel unhappy: the bad relationship our parents have, the unkind comments people make about us, the things we do not have but wish we did, the recognition we deserve but never get—even the ordinary frustrations of daily life can make us feel unhappy.

When the Preacher talks about ‘unhappy business’ (or ‘evil business’), he may be referring to the things that people do—human activity. If so, then what he says is certainly true. Ever since the sin of our first parents, work has been cursed. Leonard Woolf, the publisher and political theorist

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