

# *Lectures on the Prophetical Books of the Old Testament*

by  
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## Chapter IV "Ecclesiastes"

### 1. GENERAL CHARACTER OF THE BOOK

In many respects Ecclesiastes is the most puzzling book in the O. T. canon. The Hebrew title, *Koheleth*, corresponds to the Greek *Ekklesiastes*, Latin *Ecclesiastes*, and English *Preacher*, in the LXX, Vulgate and Authorized Version respectively. The Hebrew term is derived from *Kahal* (*an assembly*), which, in turn, comes from a verb signifying *to call together, to assemble*, just as the English *congregation* and Latin *Ecclesia* are derived from verbs of similar signification. Preacher is therefore the natural, as it is the ancient, rendering.

*Fanciful Renderings of the Title.* -- Various far-fetched and unreasonable renderings have been suggested :

(1.) Some, for example, render the words *collector of Proverbs*. They, therefore, consider the book to be a collection or conglomeration of wise sayings. But (a) the etymology of the word shows that it is related to an assembly of men, and (b) there is a unity to the book which opposes the idea of its being a debate. Hence this view cannot be accepted.

(2.) Others render it assembly. They explain the book by suggesting that there was probably an assembly of wise men convened by Solomon, and of which he was the head; and that the book consists of the debates of this assembly. In reply to this we affirm (a) that the word evidently refers to a person and not a thing, and (b) that the view is based on the false assumption that discordant sentiments are expressed in the book.

(3.) As the word possesses a feminine termination some suggest that it does not represent Solomon in his own person, but wisdom personified. But certainly no foundation for this is found in the book itself, while this form for abstract nouns denoting offices is not at all uncommon in Hebrew. The advocates of the ancient view claim that the title is a symbolical designation of the author as a public preacher, addressing God's people. The name Solomon does not occur, but that he is intended by the title seems to be manifest from the words *son of David, king in Jerusalem*, (1:1), since there is no one else to whom these words can properly apply.

(4.) It has been suggested by one scholar, indeed, that the words *son of David* may be taken in a wide sense as indicating all the sons of David till the time of Hezekiah. The book is, therefore, an account of each of these princes. But what is said of wisdom (1:16) and of wealth and temporal power (2:4-9) certainly corresponds with what is known of Solomon. This view, also against the generally accepted idea that Solomon is the author, we reject without refutation.

## 2. AUTHORSHIP

No doubt has ever been expressed until recent times that Solomon was the author. Arguments for this have been advanced.

*Supposed Proofs That Solomon Wrote Ecclesiastes.* -- These are: (1.) The reference in 1:12, *I the Preacher was King over Israel in Jerusalem*. Solomon is here supposed to be referred to as speaking in the first person. (2.) Another argument was found in the fact that this has always been the prevalent view. So far as we have evidence concerning them, the Jews have always held it. So the Christian Church. Only in recent times have contrary views been held. (3.) Then, too, it was assumed that the reception of the book into the canon gave authentic confirmation that the book is genuine, that it is what it professes to be, and that it is, therefore, by Solomon. An infallible test of the canonicity of the book is given by our Lord in his sanctioning the O. T. canon which contained it.

*The View of Grotius.* -- In modern times Grotius was the first to deny that the book was written by Solomon. (Indeed, there is a random remark of Luther's, in his *Table Talk*, concerning the authorship of the book, which is noteworthy as looking in the same direction. Yet he probably confuses *Ecclesiastes* with *Ecclesiasticus*, since he speaks of Sirach in connection with its authorship.) Since Grotius advanced his view many German critics have adopted it. These include not only unbelieving scholars, but also some of the soundest and ablest of Evangelical interpreters. (E. g., Hengstenberg, Keil; and of our own scholars, Moses Stuart.)

*The Book a Work of Fiction.* -- The view of these critics is not that the book is a forgery, issued in the name of Solomon, and professing to be from Solomon, but that it is a fiction, in which Solomon is represented as talking, and that without the intention of conveying the idea that he was the author. They lay stress on the fact that the name of Solomon does not occur in the book, as it does in other books of which he is the alleged author. Their idea, then, is that the book was originally intended as a work of fiction.

*The Authorship Difficult to Decide.* -- This question as to authorship is exceedingly perplexing. We may affirm, however, at the outset, that only one of the arguments which have been advanced against the claim that Solomon wrote it possesses any considerable force. That is *the argument based upon the language and style of the book*. The other arguments can be easily refuted. Thus, for example, we may easily, if necessary, answer the claim that the book is a work of fiction. It is asserted that in certain places the fiction is transparent, as in the words, *I, the Preacher, was King over Israel* (1:12), where the language appears such as Solomon could not use in speaking of himself. The argument is based upon the use of the past tense in the word *was*. Again, it is said that the author makes a formal statement of his being a king, as though the fact were not generally known. But it is evident that all this mistakes the true purport of the verse. It is not there meant to say that Solomon had been king, nor that Solomon had reigned in Jerusalem, in contrast with those who reigned elsewhere; but that Solomon was king in Jerusalem at the time when his experiments of human life were being tried. The idea is simply that this trial was made by him as a king, and not as an ordinary person, (Cf. 2:12; 2:25.) In fact, if any argument can be drawn from the language of 1:12 it would be on the other side. Previous to the Schism Israel

included the twelve tribes. Subsequently, *Israel* denoted ten of the tribes, and *Judah* represented the other two. If the book were written subsequent to the Schism, then the author would naturally have used the words "Israel and Judah" instead of "Israel."

*Further Arguments Considered: --*

(1.) One argument against the ancient view is based upon the reference to wealth, (1: 16; 2:7-9.) The objection here arises, (a) from the use of the past tense of the verb in those verses; (b) from the expression "All that were before me" (2:9), since there was only one, viz., David, who "went before" Solomon; (c) from the laudation of his wisdom, which would appear appropriate in another author, but not in Solomon, if he is writing concerning himself.

But in regard to this objection we reply (a), this argument from the use of the past tense of the verb is groundless. The author is, in fact, speaking of what is past at the time in which he writes. He merely states the conditions of his trial of human prosperity at the time that trial was made. And then, (b) as to the second consideration concerning the expression "All that were before me," it is to be remarked that the author does not say "All the kings that were," &c., but "*all*," i. e., *all the people*. There is no need, therefore, to think that heathen kings are referred to. The meaning is merely that he was wealthier and wiser than any--kings or people. No man had ever been in better worldly circumstances in which to obtain happiness; and, in order to state fully his experience, it is necessary for him to mention these conditions. Besides, (c), the tone of the book is neither that of self-depreciation on the one hand nor of self-exaltation on the other. The charge of undue laudation of the author's wisdom is therefore unfounded. He tells of his unsatisfactory attempts, and of his perplexity as well as his success. He makes a statement only of what is true, and that in no boastful spirit. Like Moses when speaking of his own meekness, or Paul when referring to the honor which God had placed upon him, he loses all sense of self or self-praise.

(2.) Another argument is based on the language of 7:15--*all things have I seen in the days of my vanity*. It is argued from these words that Solomon's life must have been ended at the time when the book was written. But it would be quite easy and natural for Solomon to speak thus during his lifetime of himself. The argument is altogether without force.

*A Second Class of Objections:--*

(1.) It is alleged that views are expressed in the book which show that Solomon cannot be the author. Thus a dark, gloomy view of human life is shown, which could have arisen only in a time of great national distress, and not during the period of the prosperous abundance of Solomon's reign. But we reply by claiming (a) that it is preposterous to think that State or national matters could have to do with such a subject as is treated of in this composition. The book could have been written by a king whatever the condition of public affairs in his kingdom. And (b) this gloomy view of human affairs may have sprung from a very surfeit of the pleasures which earthly prosperity imparts.

(2.) A further objection of this class is based upon the language of 5:1--*and be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools*. It is claimed that this is a depreciation of the value of sacrifice not to be expected in the builder of the Temple. But this is not so. The language does not imply that sacrifice is unimportant, valueless or wrong, but only that it is inferior to

a right state of heart. And certainly we could expect such language from Solomon. God does not despise sacrifice, but he will not accept it in lieu of a right state of heart; (*Vid.* 1Sam. 15:25; Ps. 50:7-15.)

(3.) A third objection is based upon references to the *oppression of rulers* in certain passages, which oppression, it is thought, Solomon should have corrected rather than made the subject of his complaints, (3:16; 4:1; 5:8; 10:5,-7.) But we reply that apart from the fact that no ruler can correct, in his own kingdom, all the abuses of government on the part of those in authority under him, the view of the author here is not really nor professedly confined to his own age or kingdom. The author is taking a broad view of life, and the misery to which he refers arises from the existence of wicked rulers everywhere. That misrule did, as a matter of fact, exist in his own reign appears from 1 Kings 12:4.

(4.) A further objection is based on 7:10--*say not thou what is the cause that the former days were better than these?* It is claimed that during Solomon's lifetime affairs were in reality more prosperous or "better" than during any "former days." But we reply that the "former days" refer to a spiritual rather than political condition. Those who are spiritually minded often find their greatest trouble in times of greatest temporal wealth or power. In the same way the poet Horace praises the purity of the times of his youth.

(5.) Again, it is claimed that the book treats of woman in a way inconsistent with the notorious fondness of Solomon for the sex; (*Vid.* 7:26, 28.) But the reply is (a) that it is not the design of the author to rebuke the entire class of women; and (b), concerning the degradation of those women who *are* degraded Solomon certainly speaks quite as plainly in Proverbs. Then, too, his own experience may have given rise to these opinions of his concerning the sex. And (c) lastly, the language may here be allegorical. In that case he treats figuratively of *Folly personified*.

*The Foregoing Objections Trivial.*-- These are the leading objections against the authorship of Solomon, outside of that based on the language and style of the book. If it were not for this latter they would possess but little force; and, in fact, they can all be easily disposed of and answered, as we have seen. But we come now to a weightier objection.

*The Main Objection--Language and Style.*-- The most serious objection is one based upon the language and style. It is alleged, and the fact seems to be, that the Hebrew of this book is so Aramean that it must belong to a period later than Solomon; and the style is unlike that of any other of the writings of Solomon. It would be tedious and useless to enter into details here. It is enough to remark that in this respect the book stands alone in the Bible. Delitzsch gives a long list of such Arameanisms, which it is unnecessary to mention, while the grammar and style, as already said, point in this direction. The same line of argument is followed by Hengstenberg and Keil.

Only one thing can be said in answer to this. One reason why there are so many Aramean words may arise from the character of the discussion, which is of a philosophic nature. Again, Aramaic forms are not infrequent in some of the oldest books of the Bible. And further, Solomon had intercourse with the Tyrians, and married foreign women, which facts may account for the Arameanisms.

As to the charge of diversity of style between this book and Proverbs, it seems to be true. Yet

there are proverbs in Ecclesiastes as terse, sententious and pointed as in Proverbs, so that the author of Ecclesiastes, if he be not Solomon, must have imitated Solomon.

One skeptical scholar thinks that the Book of Ecclesiastes could not be post-exilic, for it speaks of kings. Its origin, he claims, must be placed as far back as the time of Solomon, while we have the book reproduced in more recent style, just as Shakespeare's plays are slightly modified in order to adapt them to the stage of our own day. After all that has been said, however, we do not see how the argument from the language can be met. We conclude, therefore, that it is decisive. We agree with Delitzsch that if the book is Solomon's we must give up everything like a history of the Hebrew language. And this is the uniform opinion of scholars at the present time.

### 3. THE DATE OF AUTHORSHIP

The greatest diversity of opinion exists as to the date of the authorship of this book among those who do not accept Solomon as the author. Some place it before the exile, between the reigns of Manasseh and Zedekiah. It is said that the expressions used in 8:10 and 10:4, 16-20 are not applicable to a later period, when the Jews no longer had a king. The majority of interpreters ascribe it to a period subsequent to the exile. Some place it immediately after the return; others in the time of Malachi; while others refer it to the period of Persian dominion, or to the time of Alexander the Great, or place it between Alexander the Great and Antiochus Epiphanes. Hitzig, with great confidence, assigns it to 204 B. C., on the ground of the use of the expression "oath of God" (8:2), which, he says, refers to the oath exacted of the Jews by Ptolemy Epiphanes. In his opinion 7:10 must refer to the reigns of Ptolemy Philadelphus, Ptolemy Lagus and Ptolemy Energetes. The "little city" mentioned in 9:4 is said to refer to a city which Antiochus the Great failed to capture.

### 4. AIM AND DESIGN

There is a wide difference of opinion in regard to its *aim and design*. Here, as in Job, the occasion of the divergence seems to lie in the complexity of the book itself.

*Different Views:--*

(1.) Some regard it as impossible to discover a definite plan. Grotius regards it as a collection of conflicting opinions of various sages. This opinion is based on the idea that the author is a collector (*Koheleth*.) He thus evades any claim to its inspiration, and also explains apparent contradictions. The collector, Zerubbabel, is supposed to give the opinions of different men, now on one side, now on another, but all related to one subject, namely, *human happiness*.

(2.) By others the occasion is supposed to be a debate in an assembly over which Solomon presided.

(3.) A third view attempts to establish a unity by assuming that it is a dialogue between an impetuous inquirer and a sage, who endeavors to curb the impetuosity of his questioner.

This view is adopted by Herder, Eichhorn and others.

(4.) But all this is unnecessary. It is possible to find in the book unity and a single theme. The above theories are arbitrary; there is no intimation of more than one speaker. The same difficulties are met in another, a fourth view, viz., that instead of different speakers, different states of mind in the same speaker are represented, and that at the close the speaker reaches clear convictions.

*The True View.*-- The true view is that the book is one continuous and consistent discussion with a single aim. Yet a difference of opinion is found even here:

*Not Ascetic.*-- Some suppose a condemnation of too exclusive attention to the vanities of the world. This view was used by Jerome in support of monasticism. (So Augustine, commentators of the Middle Ages, and others.)

*Not Epicurean.*-- A second view, which has been advocated by some who adopt the general theory that the book possesses a single design and theme, is that its aim is to teach Epicurean doctrine. They charge the author with being Epicurean, and base the charge on the following passages: 2:24; 3:12, 13; 5:18, 19; 8:15; 9:7-10. But the adoption of this view would lead only to endless confusion. In order to understand the real purpose of the book, we should not base an opinion upon a single class of passages. That the above view is false appears immediately from passages like 2:1-2 and 11:9. Those verses are wholly inconsistent with an Epicurean belief. In fact, the object of the former class of passages is merely to prove that there is a law in human life which renders happiness the result and accompaniment of goodness, and that without exalting the former over the latter. Piety holds the key to the chamber of happiness. That is the doctrine of the book. And such teaching is surely not Epicurean.

*Not Fatalistic.*-- From another class of passages some have inferred a third view, that the book teaches that the destinies of men are shaped by inexorable fate. Such passages are these: 1:4-11; 3:1-11, 14, 15; 7:13; 8:6; 9:11. It is claimed that the author teaches here that the established order of things leaves no room for the action of the human will. Men can only bow before and submit to the sway of fate.

This, of course, is a distortion of the true teaching of the book. The doctrine is that of the Divine Providence and not of fate. The author simply shows in the passages named that God has forever dissociated sin and happiness, and that man cannot unite them.

*Future Judgment not the Distinctive Doctrine.*-- A fourth view magnifies the doctrine, as taught in the book, of a future judgment. There are inequalities in the present life, and these are to be rectified in the future. Such is supposed to be the all-important doctrine of the author. The view is based on the following verses: 3:17; 5:8; 11:9; 12:7, 14.

The fault with this view is that it limits the theme to too narrow a range. True, this doctrine is taught; but it is not solely taught. As in Job, although the doctrine appears, yet it is not the exclusive topic.

*Immortality Not Denied.*-- Others, again, think that the book denies the immortality of the soul. The following passages are relied upon for their proof: 3:19-21; 9:4-6.

This view is based upon a false interpretation of these passages, and upon a failure to properly connect them with other portions of the book. Hence, of course, it is to be rejected.

*The Theme not to be Unduly Widened.* -- Still another view, a fifth, advanced by those who consider the book to be a miscellaneous collection possessing neither a single theme nor a single design, is that the book is a presentation of *general rules for the guidance of life*. Wisdom is especially emphasized. The following verses are supposed to justify the view: 4:9-13; 5:1-7; 7:1-9; 10:1-6.

The fault here is that the treatment is made to appear too vague and indefinite. In fact, the author has but a single theme before him. True, there are occasional digressions; but when examined these digressions all appear related to the common topic evidently in the author's mind.

*The True View.*-- This embraces all that is true in partial or one-sided views. It exhibits all the elements of the book in their proper relations, and in due symmetry and proportion. The true theme of the book has been already substantially stated. There is in life a true harmony between goodness and happiness. Job presents the first apparent exception to that harmony, where a good man is represented as suffering from the ills of life for a season; while the other exception is shown in Ecclesiastes, viz., the apparent successes of evil men. Yet in both books it is shown that, after all, real and lasting happiness is only for the good. That this is especially shown in Ecclesiastes appears from the following considerations:

*First*, the doctrine is explicitly stated. In 8:12, 13 we read, "Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him: But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God." That is to say, not even external or worldly happiness can be permanent in the case of the ungodly.

*Second*, this aim and purpose are shown by the testimony of the author, when he states the true doctrine formally at the close of the book. "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments: For this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil," (12:13, 14.) The clause, "For this is the whole duty of man," properly rendered, reads, *For this should every man do*. The entire passage proves that it has been the result of the author's experience that happiness results to the good, and sorrow to the bad.

*Third*, The true purpose of the book is stated by the author in sentences constantly repeated and often referred to. There are two classes of these expressions. They are to be properly combined together. (1.) The first class embraces those expressions in which the enjoyments of this life are spoken of as vanity. "Striving after vanity" is literally *striving after wind*; showing the utter emptiness of worldly enjoyments to the wicked. (2.) The second class includes passages which are the converse of the above. They explain what enjoyment this present life does afford, and how it may be obtained. This is not an Epicurean sentiment, as we have shown. *Eating* and *drinking* stand, not for the material act, but for enjoyment of all

kinds. It all amounts to saying that happiness is not graduated by earthly enjoyments; for the ability to secure happiness is always and solely a gift of God.

And *fourth, finally*, the same truth appears from an analysis of the entire book.

## 5. THE ANALYSIS OF ECCLESIASTES

The following analysis is submitted. It may be helpful in endeavoring to understand the framework of the book. And while it has the name of no author attached to it, and represents merely the lecturer's own view, it may be suggestive to the student, as showing at least one method of analyzing the work:

Section I. Chs. 1-21  
Section II. Chs. 3-5

} Preliminary.

Section III. Chs. 6:1-8: 15--Principal argument.  
Section IV. Chs. 8:16-12: 14--Supplementary.

### I. Chs. 1 and 2--Argument from Solomon's own experience.

- 1:1-3, Author and general theme.
- 1:4-11, Uniformity of sequences amidst all changes.
- 1:12-18, General statement of the character and results of Solomon's experience.
- 2:1-11, The experiment of worldly pleasure and its failure.
- 2:12-17, All must be lost at death.
- 2:18-23, And pass into the hands of he knows not whom.

**Conclusion:** 2:24-26, Happiness does not arise from worldly acquisitions, but is the gift of God to the good.

### II. Chs. 3-5 --Argument from Solomon's observation.

- 3:1-15, The Divine order in the multifarious affairs of men.
- 3:16-4:16, Apparent inequalities observed in the world.
  - (a) 3:16, iniquity in judicial tribunals; v. 17, rectified by God's future judgment; vs. 18-22, temporarily permitted to teach men their weakness and frailty.
  - (b) 4:1-3, the oppression of the weak by the strong.
  - (c) 4:4-6, the envy attendant upon success, which yet is no apology for indolence nor insatiate travail,
  - (d) 4:7-12, folly and misery of selfish toil,
  - (e) 4:13-16, fickleness of popular favor however deserved.
- 5:1-7, Such facts should not seduce to irreligion.
- 5:8-17, Their explanation by an appeal, vs. 8, 9 to a superior tribunal which always exists to rectify abuses, and vss. 10-17, to various considerations, showing that external prosperity and real welfare are not coincident.

**Conclusion**, 5:18-20, Happiness does not arise from worldly considerations, but is the gift of God.

III. 6 :1-8:1 5--Principal argument.

The seeming inequalities in Divine Providence may be set at rest.

1. 6:1-7:14, by a correct estimate of men's outward fortunes.

(a.) 6:1-12, prosperity is not always a good.

(b.) 7:1-14, affliction is not always an evil.

2. 7:15-29, by a correct estimate of men's character.

(a.) Vs. 16-19, some are righteous overmuch.

(b.) Vs. 20-22, none are perfect in deed and word.

(c.) Vs. 23-29, real virtue is extremely rare.

3. 8:1-13, by the existence of a righteous government.

(a.) Vs. 2-5, human.

(b.) Vs. 6-13, divine.

**Conclusion**, 8:14-15, contented enjoyment is superior to that outward good, which even the wicked may possess.

IV. 8:16-12:14-- Discouragements removed and practical duties enforced.

8:16-9:9, The remaining mystery of this subject need not interfere with enjoyment.

9:10-11:6, nor hinder energetic action.

(a.) 9:11, 12, results do not always correspond with the means employed.

(b.) 9:13-10:20, but generally they do: Wisdom is an advantage, and folly ruins.

(c.) 11:1-6, this general fact is a sufficient ground for active exertion.

11:7-12:8, In all their enjoyments and actions men should remember the coming judgment.

**Conclusion**, 12:9-14, Fear God and keep His commandments.

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