

OVERVIEW OF THE BIBLE
April 4, 2018

THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES
THE SONG OF SOLOMON

Answers to the Questions (Lesson 17)
Found on Page 89

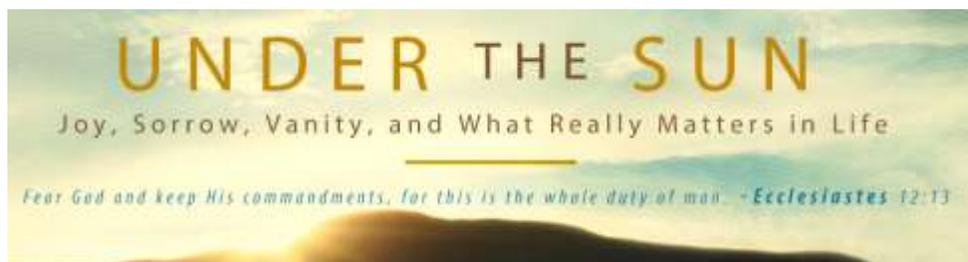
Solomon is presumed to be the author of Proverbs as indicated in the first verse of the book. Chapter 30 was written by Agur and the opening verses parallel Isaiah 40:12-14. The word *Agur* means *the compiler or the one who first gathered the maxims together*.

Chapter 31 contains the words of King Lemuel. Jewish legend identifies him as Solomon (who took his advice from Bathsheba).

There are many similarities between the *Thirty Sayings of the Wise* found in Proverbs 22:17 through 24:34 and the thirty sections of the Egyptian *Wisdom of Amenemope* (a collection of wise sayings that is contemporary with the time of Solomon). It is not unreasonable to believe that Solomon and his wise men accumulated and incorporated wisdom from the East. Some of the proverbs were also compiled by King Hezekiah, the first king of Judah following the fall of the Northern Kingdom.

The fear of the Lord is a wholesome awe and respect for God which expresses itself in obedience and reliance on God and deliberate avoidance of evil. It is the root of wisdom and knowledge and the source of life and blessing.

THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES



The distinctive teaching of Israel was that wisdom is a gift from the Lord. Wisdom is not a human achievement. It leads to the right course of action and it offers some understanding of the divine. This confidence was challenged by the author of the book of Ecclesiastes.

In Proverbs we read a *collection of collections* covering a long history of wisdom literature. Ecclesiastes is fundamentally the work of one sage who wrote during the post-exilic period (250-200 BCE). It was a bold enough challenge to Judaism that the book was edited to make it more palatable. Two conclusions were added:

In 12:9-11 one disciple praised the sage for the genius displayed in these proverbs.

In 12:12-14 another editor cautioned the reader to take the teaching with a grain of salt.

Had it not been for these revisions (and the tradition that Solomon had written the book) it is doubtful whether it would have found its way into the Hebrew canon. Ecclesiastes was one of the three books whose right to be included in the Bible was seriously questioned by the rabbis during the 1st to 3rd centuries BCE (Esther and Song of Solomon).

There are 5 festival scrolls (books) connected to the 5 main Jewish festivals:

- 1) Song of Songs (Passover) – The song is viewed as an expression of God’s love for Israel.
- 2) Ruth (Weeks) – It picks up the barley and wheat harvests featured in the book.
- 3) Lamentations (the ninth of Ab) – A response to the destruction of Solomon’s temple.
- 4) Ecclesiastes (Tabernacles or Booths) – Reminds the people of their difficulties in wilderness.
- 5) Esther (Purim) – The story behind the feast of Purim.

Today the Jewish community reads Ecclesiastes on the third day of the Feast of Tabernacles. It adds a serious tone to the festivity by reminding the people that the joys of life are transient.

The word *Ecclesiastes* comes from the Greek Old Testament.

It means *one who speaks to an assembly* or *a speaker or preacher*.

It is not a proper name but a description of a function.

It is attributed to Solomon who searched wisdom to discover the meaning of human experience.

Preacher – a lecture on the meaning of life given by a professional wisdom teacher.

The book is not arranged according to any pattern or scheme of development.

The main point of the discourse is made by the end of the second chapter.

All human activity is vanity and a striving after the wind.

Wisdom enables one to be aware of the limitations of mortal life.

But the advantage of practical wisdom is doubtful for it only increases sorrow.

We are to make the most of life while we are alive.

We are to enjoy the present and not try to probe too deeply into the future.

We are left with our personal insights and experiences to define the meaning of life.

The sage knows how to accept the joys and sufferings of life with an inner serenity.

He is undisturbed by the ebb and flow of fortune.

Nevertheless he emphatically affirms that everything is in the hands of God.

The trouble is that God has things so hidden to human view that we are left in the dark.

Our days turn in a circle rather than moving us toward the fulfillment of a purpose.

Chapter 3 describes the nature of time.

The author writes about concrete times (times that have a specific content).

Time is an opportunity that invites a particular action (the time is ripe).

We (in our limited wisdom) cannot discern any overall purpose through our varied experiences. Consequently, the times just come one after another. God sees the whole drama from beginning to end. We cannot peer beyond the veil that hides the purpose of God from human understanding.

The tragedy of life is heightened by the realization that the problem of existence must be answered within the brief span between birth and death (and death casts a dark shadow over the whole book).

The death of an individual was not a serious problem in the early period of Israel. Life was given meaning through participation in the covenant community. All the generations were bound together.

But for the *preacher* the destiny of the individual becomes an acute problem. He advises discrete reverence in the house of God. He recommends moderation in both wisdom and folly (too much of either leads to disaster). He counsels people to enjoy marriage and find satisfaction in work. He broods over the accidents of life that make it absurd to plan for the future.

The preacher does not pretend to give divine teaching. He sets forth lessons derived from experience and reflection. His basic conception of God is that God is hidden. God gives *signs* of being present but never provides any proof that eliminates doubt. He vigorously repudiates the claim that traditional wisdom can discern the purpose of God.

Its purpose then: Ecclesiastes awakens people from complacency and stimulates the struggle for faith that can stand all the tests of doubt and despair.

THE SONG OF SOLOMON

MY Beloved
& IS MINE
I AM His.

The *Song of Songs* is sometimes referred to as the *Song of Solomon*.

It is a remarkable departure from that of other books in the Bible.
We leave the communal and enter the world of domestic relations and private sentiments.
It is filled with longing, intimacy, playfulness and human affection.
The relationships are private and the language hints of familial bonds.
It is another book of the Bible that does not mention God.
It also has no connection to the sacred religious traditions of Israel but is read during Passover.
It is the only biblical book in which a female voice predominates.
Unlike many women in the Bible she is assertive, uninhibited, and unabashed about her desires.
The book is the journal-like reflections of a female.

It might have been viewed as the feminine counterpart to Ecclesiastes.
In the end she is also impatient with traditional wisdom.
But instead of expressing her contempt openly, she takes the subtle approach.
She extols the erotic happiness she has found – despite all its complications and limitations.

This brings up the debate regarding authorship:
Attributing the love poems to Solomon represents an attempt to associate the work with the wisest and most famous king in the history of Israel. After all, he was rumored to have married hundreds of wives so he had vast knowledge about romance and matters of the heart.

In 1 Kings 4:32 it reports that Solomon composed 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs.
Each of these statements is *possible* but not *probable*.

The *sweetest* of his songs are found in the *Song of Songs*.

The two lovers mentioned in these songs are King Solomon and the famed Shunammite.

In 1 Kings 1:1-4 she was brought to David to minister to him and keep him warm.

It became part of the Hebrew Bible based on the understanding that the songs offer an allegory of the covenant love between God and Israel. Today in some Jewish traditions the text of *Song of Songs* is chanted at the end of the eight-day celebration of Passover. In other Jewish traditions, it is sung weekly in services prior to the Sabbath.

The songs accent truths that are basic to the faith of Israel:
that human beings live their lives totally in relationship to God
that a man and a woman should find fulfillment in their union with each other
that sexual love is part of the goodness of God's creation

Content

1:1 – The *Song of Songs* (double word) indicates it is the greatest and most beautiful of its class.
It begins with the woman expressing her desires for her lover.

The two compete in offering flattering compliments.

The section closes with the woman telling the others not to stir up love such as hers until ready.

2:8 – The woman recalls a visit from her lover in the springtime.
She uses imagery from a shepherd's life.
She describes her successful search for her lover through the night-time streets of the city.
When she finds him she takes him almost by force into the chambers.
She reveals that this is a dream.
She ends by again warning the daughters of Jerusalem not to stir up love until it is ready.

3:6 – The next section reports a royal wedding procession.
King Solomon is mentioned by name.
The daughters of Jerusalem are invited to come out and see the spectacle.

4:1 – The man describes his beloved:
Her hair is like a flock of goats and her teeth are like shorn ewes.
Her neck is like the Tower of David, her smell like the scent of Lebanon.
He hastens to summon his beloved, saying that he is ravished by even a single glance.
The section becomes a *garden poem* in which he describes her as a *locked garden* (chaste).
The woman invites the man to enter the garden and taste the fruits.
The man accepts the invitation. A third party tells them to eat, drink, and be drunk with love.

5:2 – The woman tells the daughters of Jerusalem of another dream.
She was in her chamber when her lover knocked.
She was slow to open, and when she did, he was gone.
She searched through the streets again, but this time she failed to find him.
The watchmen, who had helped her before, now beat her.
She asks the daughters of Jerusalem to help her find him and describes his physical good looks.
She admits her lover is in the garden (safe from harm) and was committed to her as she is to him.

6:4 – The man describes his beloved and the woman describes a rendezvous they have shared.
The people praise the beauty of the woman (pools of Hebron, tower of Damascus).
The man states his intention to enjoy the fruits of the woman's garden.
The woman invites him to a tryst in the fields.
She once more warns the daughters of Jerusalem against waking love until it is ready.

8:5 – The woman compares love to death and the grave.
Love is as relentless and jealous as these two, and cannot be quenched by any force.
She summons her lover, using the language used before:
He should come *like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountain of spices*.

Ecclesiastes 1:2-14 and 2:18-23
Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

August 4, 2019
New Year's Eve

Assignment for April 11

Complete the Exercises on Pages 90-92
Read Isaiah (or the portions outlined on Page 92)