

Who Wrote Ecclesiastes?

Commentary for October 17, 2018 — Questions about Solomon's Authorship

Dr. Martin began his 1977 tape to "[The Book of Ecclesiastes](#)" (transcribed in 2006):

"The Book of Ecclesiastes is reputed to have been written by Solomon. I believe it was written by him about 1,000 years before Christ."

Indeed, I have agreed with this assessment and it is the accepted understanding of almost all scholars. But did Solomon write that book of wisdom? Some interesting questions were raised by Vladimir Gelesnoff in Part 1 of his 1920 monograph "[Studies in Ecclesiastes](#)." Gelesnoff was not the first to question Solomon's authorship,¹ but his idea was presented clearly, and I review Gelesnoff's argument here. Make up your own mind. The first verse:

1. Ecclesiastes 1:1, KJV, identifies some aspects of the writer. **"The words of the Preacher, [1] the son of David, [2] king in Jerusalem."** This verse does not say the preacher was Solomon. Gelesnoff writes:

"When we turn to the prologue and epilogue, where it is most natural to expect information respecting authorship, we find no mention whatever of Solomon, nor anything to suggest his personality. On the contrary, there are many things in the book incompatible with the historic Solomon.

But it may be said, while Solomon is not mentioned by name, the designation 'Son of David' is equivalent to it. This seemingly decisive argument is in reality of no weight. The Hebrew 'son' may equally well mean 'descendant'."

Though several English translations insert it, there is no definite article before **"son of David"** in Hebrew or Greek texts. This means any of David's male descendants who reigned after him **"in Jerusalem,"** up to the destruction of the kingdom, could be **"the Preacher"** and a possible author of Ecclesiastes.

2. Ecclesiastes 1:12, again identifies **"the Preacher"** as being **"king over Israel in Jerusalem."** Solomon did rule over the 12 tribes of Israel just like his father David, but he was not the only king to do so, as we will see below.
3. Ecclesiastes 1:16, continuing the context from verse 12, that the Preacher had **"gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge."** Those before him were also kings, and there were several of them, not just Solomon's father David.²

¹ Some Jewish scholars in the past suggested Solomon did not write Ecclesiastes, but they were a minority. They concentrated in linguistic variances. See "[Ecclesiastes](#)" in McCintock and Strong's *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature* (NY: Harper, 1895).

² Usurpers such as Absalom and Sheba (2 Samuel chapters 15–18 and chapter 20 respectively) were before Solomon, but do not qualify as kings nor could they be considered as being wise. Solomon's

Solomon was given special wisdom from God as a young man, but not until after he became king (1 Kings 4:29–34, 5:12, 10:23–24). This Preacher of Ecclesiastes gained and increased his wisdom from experience of life. No special help by YHWH is mentioned.

4. **“I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me ...”** (Ecclesiastes 2:7). Again, this king refers to **“all that were ... before me”** referring to those who qualify as both **“son of David”** and **king in Jerusalem”** from Ecclesiastes 1:1.
5. The same phrasing is used in verse 2:9, **“So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me.”** (This verse is often used to show that Solomon’s idolatry did not diminish his wisdom, yet his idolatry seems to have continued to his death.) Gelesnoff writes, to the contrary, **“Ecclesiastes looks back on a series of predecessors, a thing Solomon could not do.”**
6. In fact, the term “Preacher” (*Qoheleth* in Hebrew) occurs in seven verses: three in Ecclesiastes 1:1–2 and 1:12, once in verse 7:27, and three in each verse of 12:8–10. The book *Ecclesiastes* is named from the title in the Greek Old Testament. In the Greek translation (from the Hebrew) the word “Preacher” is *Ἐκκλησιαστοῦ*, or a noun variant. In the NETS translation,³ it is rendered each time as “Ecclesiast.” Note the first two verses in this Greek-to-English translation:

“The words of the Ecclesiast, son of David, king of Israel in Ierousalem. ‘Vanity of vanities,’ said the Ecclesiast, ‘Vanity of vanities! All things are vanity.’”

• *Ecclesiastes 1:1–2, NETS*

An “Ecclesiast” is one who compiles or assembles information to teach others. It means to be an assembler. The Greek word *ekklesia* as we know means “assembly” or a gathering (weakly translated in the King James Version as “church”). The Concordant Literal Version (CLV) of the Old Testament translates the word *Qoheleth* (Hebrew) or Preacher (KJV) into English as “Assembler”:

“The words of the Assembler, son of David, king in Jerusalem: ‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the Assembler; ‘Vanity of vanities, the whole is vanity.’”

• *Ecclesiastes 1:1–2, CLV*

Note what the Assembler does:

“See, this is what I found, said the Assembler: — Adding one thing to another to find a design ...”

• *Ecclesiastes 7:27, CLV*

The author of Ecclesiastes assembled information (he organized data) to teach his readers and listeners the collected wisdom from his experience and the experiences of others.

7. In Ecclesiastes 4:1–4, 5:8, 8:1–4, 9–11, 10:5–7, and 10:20, oppression, sufferings, and

father, King David, was wise as were several of his advisors. David’s advisors were not kings to satisfy verse 16. Other kings after David excluding Solomon seem to be referred to here.

³ **NETS** is an acronym for the **N**ew **E**nglish **T**ranslation of the **S**eptuagint (Oxford Univ. Press, 2007).

misery are widespread all through the kingdom of the Preacher. These texts show that the people of Israel were groaning under a grinding tyranny with injustice abounding (article "[Ecclesiastes](#)," McClintock and Strong, *Cyclopedia*).⁴

To the contrary, the histories of the reign of Solomon (whose name means "peace") show 40 years of peace in the land of Israel for his entire reign. There was some territorial expansion to increase security and great construction projects were completed including the first Temple in Jerusalem. The borders of Solomon's realm went from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates River in the north, and to the south encompassed most if not all of what we call the Arabian Peninsula today (see the map on page 11 of "[Geography, A Prime Prophetic Truth](#)" or Map D in "[Prophetic Geography and the Time of the End](#)").

8. Lastly, Ecclesiastes nowhere says Solomon is the author, while other works do identify Solomon as the writer in Song of Solomon 1:1 and Proverbs 1:1 (Note "[The Book of Proverbs: Its Structure, Design and Teaching](#)").

So ... Who Was the Author of Ecclesiastes?

Gelesnoff proposes Hezekiah as the author. Ecclesiastes 1:12 says, "**I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem.**" Hezekiah would qualify in this regard. After the northern kingdom of Israel was eliminated by Assyria, Hezekiah was effectively king of all Israel, even though the northern territory of Samaria was partially occupied by non-Israelites brought to live there by the Assyrian king. Those who escaped or evaded forced exile to Assyria from Israel settled in Judah or in the southern part of Samaria. For point 7 above, Assyria was the reason for the oppression of Israel and threats and invasion of Judah.

Gelesnoff identified three topics the Book of Ecclesiastes focuses on: death, succession, and violence against the just, all these fit the threat to Judah and Jerusalem from Assyria:

[1] Death occupies a large place (cf 2:16, 3:19, 4:2, 7:1, 17, 26, 8:10, 9:3–5), the special point of perplexity being the just dying the death of the unclean.

[2] The prominence given to Succession (2:18–19, 4:8, 6:2) is not surprising, seeing the writer himself is a king, for with royalty it is a paramount question, especially in Israel, where the Messianic hope was bound up with the perpetuity of the Davidic house. Hence the kings of Judah occupied a place which no other kings ever have, or could, occupy — they were forerunners of the Messiah.

[3] The violent fate overtaking the just — his being carried off from the holy place — is also a matter of grave concern (7:15, 8:10–14, 9:2–3)." [Numbers in brackets are mine. DWS]

These topics in Ecclesiastes were major concerns for King Hezekiah, far more than for Solomon who had prosperity, massive building programs like the Temple, and peace. Let us examine the three issues of Hezekiah as the author of Ecclesiastes. **[1]** Gelesnoff writes:

"King Hezekiah gave himself to Yahweh's service, loved His law supremely and

⁴ The author of this *Cyclopedia* article thought the oppressor to be Persia, but the words fit Assyria better. Assyria was known for cruelty and the enemy of Israel and Judah before Hezekiah's reign, but Persian rule of Judea was benign in contrast to Assyria as the books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell us.

trusted in Him implicitly. Yet he is smitten with the disease of Egypt, and his death is decreed by the God he served: 'Thus speaks Yahweh: Give instruction to your household, for you are going to die; and you shall not remain alive' (Isa. 38:1). Surely here is an experience to stagger faith and arouse questionings."

Hezekiah became ill, declining toward death, with no reason given. It was not a judgment for idolatry as with Solomon. Hezekiah's death was postponed by God and after humbling himself, he was given 15 additional years of life, writing Ecclesiastes within those 15 years⁵:

"Go, and say to Hezekiah, Thus says YHWH, 'the God of David your father, I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears: behold, I will add unto your days fifteen years.'"

• *Isaiah 38:5*

[2] Succession was not a concern to Solomon who reigned 40 years. His son, Rehoboam, began his reign at 41 years of age (1 King 14:21; 2 Chronicles 12:13), being born one year before Solomon succeeded David. In addition, Solomon had many sons from his many wives.

For Hezekiah succession was a very serious concern. He had no son, no heir, when YHWH afflicted him with illness, but YHWH gave Hezekiah 15 more years of life fulfilling His promise to David (2 Samuel chapter 7). Manasseh, Hezekiah's first son, was born 3 years after Hezekiah was healed. We know because Manasseh was 12 years old when Hezekiah died (2 Kings 21:1; 2 Chronicles 33:1). Hezekiah was very concerned about succession.

[3] There were no calamities, disasters, or invasions of Israel during Solomon's entire 40-year reign. There was only peace for Israel, although turmoil was brewing before Solomon's death. During Hezekiah's reign, unjust death of the innocent (humanly speaking) was widespread as the Assyrians destroyed the kingdom of Israel and invaded the kingdom of Judah (2 Kings 18:13; Isaiah 36:1; 2 Chronicles 31:1). In the last chapter, in his old age the author leaves us with a positive message:

"'Vanity of vanities,' says the Assembler, 'The whole is vanity.' Yet furthermore, because the Assembler was wise, He still taught the people knowledge, And he listened and investigated And set in order many proverbs. The Assembler sought to find words of delight, And what was written is uprightness and words of truth."

• *Ecclesiastes 12:8–10, CLV*

These are positive and uplifting words. He "set in order many proverbs" just as Proverbs 25:1 says, "These are also proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied out." The Assembler did this for posterity. The author of Ecclesiastes was not a sad debauched idolater waiting for death and judgment from God as Solomon was at the end of his life, who except for God's promises to David, would have received severe punishment.

Who wrote Ecclesiastes or any Scripture is not important to your salvation, but authorship of biblical documents may impact our understanding of prophecies yet to be fulfilled.

David Sielaff
david@askelm.com

⁵ Like Hezekiah, God gave David a reprieve from death, "The Tomb of David and Psalm 30."