ECCLESIATES
SONG OF SOLOMON

The Book of Ecclesiastes takes its name from the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *koheleth*: "**The words of the Preacher** (*Koheleth*), **the son of David, king of Jerusalem"** (1:1). *Koheleth* is not a proper name but the title of a leader of an assembly who is addressing a congregation or *kahal* of wise men. "Ecclesiastes" (or *ekklesia,* Greek, "assembly") is where we get *ecclesia* or "church."

The reference to the Preacher as the son of David was typical; unknown authors attributed their work to illustrious persons for greater credibility. In this instance, the writer chose to place his thoughts under the patronage of the most enduring of Israel's wise men—King David. And since Solomon is the actual son and successor of King David, Ecclesiastes is associated with Solomon, who offers his timeless reflections on the meaning of life. Ecclesiastes can also be read as a kind of one-man, one-act play, introduced and concluded by a narrator. After a brief introduction, the speaker who calls himself *koheleth* enters onstage to deliver a series of powerful speeches. As the "play" concludes, the curtain falls and the narrator's voice summarizes the message for the audience.

Despite the somewhat depressing message of Ecclesiastes, believers have found solace in its pages. In fact, spiritual writers have often recommended meditation on Ecclesiastes to aid their detachment from the temporal world and its fleeting pleasures.

Ecclesiastes took its final form between 250 and 200 B.C. The book's twelve chapters consider the same theme – the uselessness of things, which it describes as "**vanity of vanities**" (1:2; 12:8). The word "vanity" in Hebrew, *hebel,* means "mist" or "breath." As we read in the Book of Job, "**let me alone, for my days are a breath** (Job 7:16); and again in the Psalms, **"Men of low state are but a breath, men of high estate are a delusion"** (Psalm 62:9). This "vanity" is the barrenness, the temporary nature of things. Therefore such vanities have power to deceive those who put their trust in them. Ecclesiastes is not saying that all things are essentially valueless, but that they cannot provide man with the contentment he thinks is found in them (Romans 8:20).

Ecclesiastes follows no particular plan. As in Job and Proverbs (and later Sirach), Ecclesiastes is a series of observations on life and everything connected with it—knowledge, pleasure, wisdom, human striving, ambition—all of which ultimately are fleeting.

1. **The vanity of knowledge** (1:12-18).
A wise king seeks out all that is done under heaven and, after acquiring great wisdom, is disenchanted because his wisdom is in vain.

2. **The vanity of pleasure** (2:12-26).
The king now seeks new experiences—the pleasures of life. He indulges his every desire but the result is the same: vanity.

3. **The vanity of wisdom** (2:12-26).
Therefore what benefit does the king derive from acquiring so much wisdom and striving so hard to get it? None, for all is vanity. However, being a man of faith, he asserts that God alone gives true wisdom and knowledge and joy.

4. **The vanity of human striving** (3:1-22).
Everything has a season. Although we cannot see it, everything has a cause, a reason for being which only God knows. God invites us to penetrate these ministries to realize our intellectual limitations and His sovereign power. If man refuses to recognize God's lordship, social order will break down (4:1-5:8).

5. **The vanity of riches** (5:10-11).
Further experience shows him that wealth cannot bring happiness; on the contrary, it can take away his peace of mind. To his dismay he discovers that wealth is impermanent, for it is someone else who benefits from all his effort.

Further on he realizes the better value, "a good name" (7:1-2), but asserts that this virtue cannot assure him of happiness (7:13-9:10). Prosperity and adversity seem to be distributed without reference to a person's merits (9:11-12). Life proves to be a risky business which calls for prudence (11:1-6).

Ecclesiastes is teaching realism rather than a cynicism which leads to despair. Instead of being paralyzed with inaction by circumstances beyond one's control, one should work with vigor because **"you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good"** (11:6).

Ecclesiastes ends with an epilogue recommending the fear of God and the keeping of God's commandments, for they will be the standard against which actions, good and bad, will be judged. Whether one is a hedonist, philosopher, or an ordinary laborer, Solomon finds life to be *hebel* or meaningless because all men die. Whatever may be had—pleasures, knowledge, or accomplishments—they ultimately pass away.

The inadequacy of human answers
The basic problem posed by Ecclesiastes is the same as that posed by Job: in this life do the just receive reward and evildoers their punishment? The answer is No. Experience shows that it just does not happen that way.

Unlike Job, Ecclesiastes does not discuss the problem of human suffering. Yet while the author emphasizes that material things in themselves do not provide happiness, the overall message is not pessimistic. The author's faith leads him to see prosperity and misfortune as both coming from God (7:14). Therefore he recommends a middle way: not defeatism or mediocrity but conduct inspired by devotion and confidence in God. Still, he does not yet give the answer which Revelation will later give to the question. In fact the author seems to give no answer at all, for he says: **"there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil-doing"** (7:15). God uses this perplexity to stress that man should remember his eternal destiny. He must recognize his ignorance and inability to reach true knowledge and wisdom by his own efforts; and in so doing, invite God to communicate a final revelation.

However, the Preacher makes a number of points which are worth bearing in mind. For example, when he says that riches can never satisfy our unlimited desires for happiness, he is doing so without a clear understanding of the immortality of the soul and, therefore, man's eternal destiny in the kingdom of God.

In a famous passage the author points out the transitory nature of human life: **"for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to dig up what was planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up . . . ."** (Eccles 3:1-4).

One of the most memorable and universally applicable portions of Ecclesiastes is when the author addresses himself to the young: **"Remember also your creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days, and the years draw nigh, when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them'"** (11:7-12:1). Then follows a description of the deterioration of the body and eventual failure of all the faculties by which human beings take pleasure in the world. Either human beings will learn not to give their hearts to the pleasures of this world by heeding the words of wisdom in their youth, or the Creator Himself will teach them how fleeting life is with the slow breakdown of the body, as it makes its way toward the day of death.

In the end Ecclesiastes reminds us that happiness can be found only in material things *if* we use them in accordance with God's will (5:17) and in moderation. Thus the virtue of temperance can be attained only with the help of God's grace. No matter how many possessions a man acquires, they will never fully satisfy him; for the immortal soul aspires to higher things which are found in God alone.

Song of Solomon

The "Song of Solomon" is also known in some Bibles as the "Song of Songs." This is simply because the first verse reads: **"The Song of Songs , which is Solomon's"** (1:1). The superlative "Song of songs" is the way the Hebrews expressed something to be the greatest. For example, they called the inner sanctum of the Temple the "**holy of holies**" (Exodus 26:33), or referred to the home where God dwells the "**heaven of heavens**" (Deuteronomy 10:14).

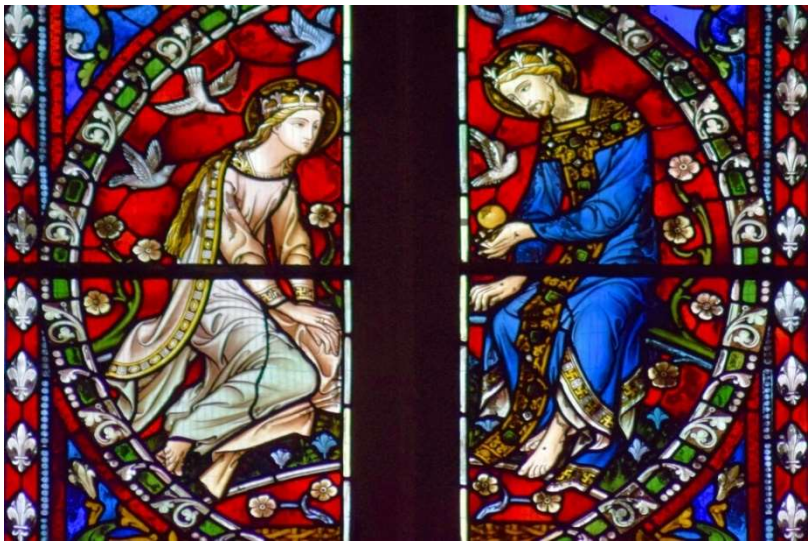
2 Corinthians 12:2 **"I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows."**
Though the Bible does not mention a first and second heaven, it was thought in the biblical world that the first heaven was the atmosphere around and above us. The second heaven was the sun, moon, and stars. The third heaven was the home of God.

Thus the "Song of Songs" means the greatest of all songs. It was likely written in the fourth century B.C., a time of peace immediately following the religious reforms introduced by Ezra and Nehemiah. The title bears Solomon's name, but this was often done in substitution of the writer's real name (as is true with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes). The true author of the Song of Songs remains unknown.

Theme and Setting

Various themes are attributed to the Song of Songs. Many commentators say it is an allegory or fable of the relationship between Israel and God. Others say it is a song of praise for the renewal of the alliance between Yahweh and the remnant of Israel that returned safely from Babylon to Jerusalem. Still others say it is the expressed love of a simple shepherd maiden and her young shepherd lover.

The setting of the poem is the rural, unspoiled countryside where the couple have grown up together. The faithfulness of the couple symbolizes the relationship of God and His people. They had been tested in exile by all the attractions of life in Babylon, but they still felt the call to be faithful to the God of the covenant. In fact, many Jews did succumb to the temptations of the "big city" of Babylon, but a remnant chose to stay true to God. Those who returned to Jerusalem expressed their gratitude to God in a song of praise.



Conclusion

While the Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon uses images of physical beauty and marital embrace, it has been treasured by Jews and Christians primarily for its spiritual meaning, which describes the nuptial relationship between Yahweh and Israel, between Christ and the Church, or between God and the individual soul. Probably no other Old Testament book is open to so many different interpretations. The Jews see the Song of Solomon as a kind of parable of the love between the couple and Yahweh's love for Israel. For Christians, it is the marital love that symbolizes the relationship of Jesus Christ with His Church (Ephesians 5:27).