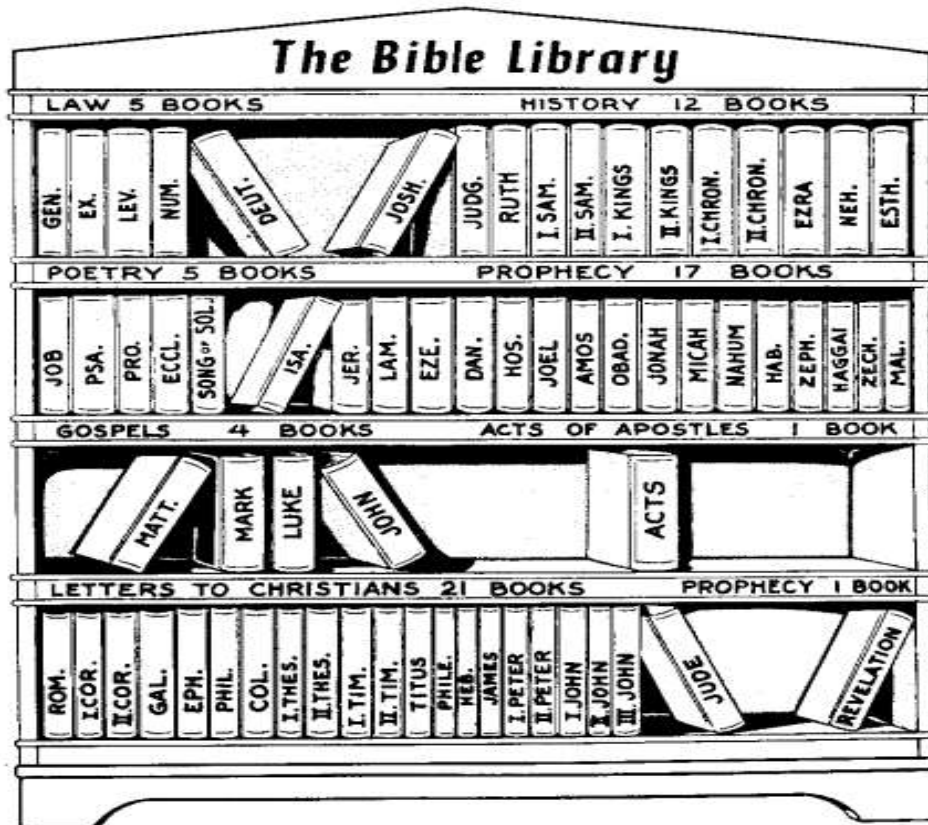


ecclesiastes



The Old Testament introduction.

The Old Testament speaks about God's relationship with his creatures. It speaks of God's amazing power and shows God's holiness and glory. It also shows the failure of his creatures to live up to His standards and how despite this problem, God deals with his creatures mercifully.

The Old Testament is a large collection of books written over many centuries by many different human authors. It records many historical events and stories about the nation of Israel but it is more than just a history text book. God speaks through the prophets explaining why these events were taking place. The OT is God's explanation for those events and therefore reveals Himself to us.

The books of the OT are grouped into sections. One common grouping was the one recognized by Jesus in Luke 24: 44 as the Law of Moses, the Prophets (& history) and the Psalms (or Poetry).

Introduction to Ecclesiastes.

The Hebrew title for this book is called “Qohelet” which simply means “Teacher”. It is known as Ecclesiastes in our English translations. The Book “Ecclesiastes” belongs in the 3rd grouping of the Old Testament Bible which is called the Writings or Psalms (Poetry). The way it is written is similar to the book of Proverbs and Psalms and Songs of Solomon. It does not contain stories but rather poems and wisdoms saying about life in general.



Why study Ecclesiastes?

The reason why we are studying Ecclesiastes is to learn about God from the hard and unanswerable questions in life. Have you ever wondered why life is so unfair at times? Why do evil people succeed in life? And so on? The book allows us to ask these type of questions and forces us to think about them and in the process, helps us appreciate God more. I hope that God will speak to us in a great way. Revealing things about himself that will help us trust him when life is confusing.

Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament.

As mentioned before, the wisdom books of the OT are books like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. God has created for us a universe with order. That means actions will create consequences and results. Being wise and doing the right things will lead to a good and a beneficial life. Being wise and acting wisely is also highly desired. However, wisdom is learnt over years of experiencing life and is learnt slowly. The book of Proverbs collects all the wisdom of Israel into one written form. It is for our benefit and instruction.

However, life is not as simple as that. Sometimes life is confusing and doesn't go according to plan. You do all the right things but it doesn't produce the results you want. So why do we even bother? The book of Ecclesiastes asks these questions. As creatures in God's finite universe, our wisdom has limits. The book of Ecclesiastes makes us think about these limits and makes us aware of our own humanness. It doesn't give us all the answers but is still helpful by making us aware of our own limits. As you read Ecclesiastes, it may feel very negative for some of you. Don't give up, keep reading on and let it ask us the hard questions.

How to prepare for the study.

Before continuing on with this study guide. Pause for a moment and take out your Bibles to read Ecclesiastes. Read the whole book once, first to get a sense of the book. Don't worry about the details or the hard questions (leave this for your second or third reading). The first reading should be quick and is meant to give you a general "feel" for the book. Grab a cup of coffee or tea, find a comfortable chair and read the whole book. Or if you feel that you prefer to listen check out <http://www.audio-bible.com/bible/bible.html> and you can listen to the whole book of Ecclesiastes read aloud for you.

The structure of Ecclesiastes.

Understanding the structure of the book will help us make better sense of its message. The first thing to note about the structure is that the themes in the book do not follow the numbering of the chapters. For example the theme of "meaningless toil" goes over a number of chapters. So if we try to follow the chapters of the book it will be hard to detect any kind of meaningful structure. However as you were reading the book you may have noticed something different about the way the writer was speaking. There are two kinds of speeches, the first kind is an "observation" saying things that the author sees in life. The second kind of speech is an "instruction" where the author gives instructions about life. Because of the two kinds of speeches we can now find a helpful form of structure :

Chapter 1 :1 (editors's note)

*Editor's
voice*

**Chapter 1:2 Introduce the theme
(Meaningless, meaningless ...)**

Chapter 1:3-4:16 first observation

Chapter 5 : 1-9 first instruction

Chapter 5:10 – 6:9 second observation

Chapter 6:10- 7:22 second instruction

Chapter 7:23 – 29 third observation

Chapter 8:1-8 third instruction

Chapter 8:9- 9:12 fourth observation

Chapter 9:13 – 12:7 fourth instruction

**Chapter 12:8 Conclude by repeating the
theme again**

Writer's
voice



*Editor's
voice*

Chapter 12:9-14 (editor's comments)

You may have also noticed in your reading that the theme is repeated many times and the author introduces his theme at Chapter 1:2 and concludes his saying by repeating his theme again at 12:8. So with this added info the structure now looks like this.

Chapter 1:2 Introduce the theme (Meaningless, meaningless ...)

4 Observations & 4 Instructions

Chapter 12:8 Conclude by repeating the theme again

Go through the book of Ecclesiastes again and check to see if this makes sense to you. It looks like the book's theme is about the meaningless of life. It starts by saying that everything is meaningless and then goes on to show us how it is meaningless in the middle section of the book. Then it concludes by confirming it again by saying it is meaningless.

I hope that as you were reading the passages above, that you also noticed that I have been leaving something out. That's right ! it is Chapter 1 : 1 and Chapter 12 : 9-14 the first and the last bit of the Book. I left this out because it is very different from the other parts of the book.

The person speaking in this section of the book sounds very different from the person writing the rest of the book. He almost sounds like a commentator or an editor. This person is important because he helps us interpret what the author of the book is saying. In other words he is telling us how to understand the message of the book.

I have explained the structure of the book to help us see that the OT doesn't have to be a scary book to read. With a bit of work and study we can make sense of it. Just like the books that we read in our studies or leisure, the structure of the book helps us understand how the author is making his point. Now that we know how the book is organized let's get into it and see what it is saying to us.

