

# THE STRUCTURE OF ECCLESIASTES

*David Holder*

## **Introduction:**

- A. Some students are almost entirely pessimistic that Ecclesiastes has any discernible structure. Some students are a little too optimistic that they have discovered a neat and orderly arrangement of the book. Ecclesiastes is more than a group of meditations loosely strung together; it is less than a group of paragraphs symmetrically balanced and arranged.
- B. The person who penned the epilogue evidently thought the body of the book had some kind of structure. S/he noted that “the Preacher taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care” (Eccl. 12:9). Our pursuit of discovering his arrangement is at least legitimate and may be rewarding.

## **Body:**

### **I. Structural Apparatus of Ecclesiastes**

- C. The first obvious structural apparatus is the shift of viewpoint between the three major sections of the book. 1:1-11 and 12:8-14 are cast in the third person, and thus form the book’s prologue and epilogue respectively. The body of the book, 1:12-12:7, is the first-person monologue of Qoheleth. The third-person prologue and epilogue frame Qoheleth’s autobiographical speech comprising the bulk of the book. The single exception is the brief emergence of the narrator at 7:27.
- D. Qoheleth’s speech (1:12-12:7) appears to have a three-part structure that parallels some autobiographies from the ancient world. Based on his research of Akkadian autobiographies, Tremper Longman III notes structural parallels between these works and Ecclesiastes.
  1. Longman observes that Qoheleth’s autobiographical speech has the same three-part structure found in three Akkadian texts, especially the Cuthaeen Legend. The three-part structure is as follows:
    - a. A first-person introduction (1:12)
    - b. An extended first-person narrative (1:13-6:9)
    - c. First-person instruction (6:10-12:7)
  2. Longman notes that while Qoheleth’s content and wisdom advice are quite different than in the Akkadian texts, the structure is practically the same. He further notes that the structure serves the speaker’s message in that “the advice offered by Qoheleth is firmly rooted in his own personal experience. His experience is the soil out of which his wisdom grows” (*The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT, 19).
- E. Recurring phrases in Ecclesiastes, while not always structural apparatus, may in some instances serve as opening and closing markers to paragraphs and sections in the work (See H. Carl Shank, “Qoheleth’s World and Life View,” reprinted from *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1974) 57-73 in *Reflecting With Solomon*, edited by Roy B. Zuck, 67-80). The following phrases recur at varying frequencies in Ecclesiastes:
  1. “All is vanity” or “This is vanity” (1:2, 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:7, 10; 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14; 9:9; 11:8, 10; 12:8)
  2. “Under the sun” (1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1, 12; 8:9, 15, 17; 9:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10:5)
  3. “Striving after wind” (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9)

4. "I perceived" or "I know" (1:17; 2:14; 3:12, 22)
5. "I said in my heart" (1:16, 2:1, 15; 3:17, 18; 9:1)
6. "I gave my heart to consider" & variations (1:13, 17; 2:3; 7:25; 8:9, 16; 9:1)
7. "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and make his soul enjoy good in his labor" (2:24; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-19, 8:15; 9:7-9)
8. Some variation of "fear God" (3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12, 13; 12:13)

## II. Structural Architecture of Ecclesiastes

F. The sections that follow serve as analyses of detectable structural apparatus in major sections of Ecclesiastes, taken together forming the architecture of the book.

G. **1:1 Introduction:** A third-person superscription identifying the general genre (words) and the author (Qoheleth, the son of David, king in Jerusalem) of the work that follows.

### H. 1:2-11 – A Third-Person Prologue About Life’s Meaninglessness

1. These verses form a third-person prologue introducing “the words of Qoheleth.” The narrator begins by summarizing Qoheleth’s favorite observation – “Vanity of vanities. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity,” stating a major theme and setting a somber tone for the book.
2. Most scholars take 2:3-11 as a poem, yet Longman notes that “while there is a little parallelism in the prologue, it is my opinion that the prologue is prose since it lacks the heightened presence of the cluster of traits that defines poetry in Hebrews: parallelism, terseness, and wordplays” (*Ecclesiastes*, NICOT, 59).
3. The narrator may employ a 4 + 3 pattern, the symmetry of which is poetic. In addition, the parallels between this section and the poem in 12:1-7 may indicate that these verses also form a poem. The 4 + 3 pattern depicts the cyclical nature of the world coupled with human insignificance. Consider human insignificance in light of the:
  - a. Continuing earth (4)
  - b. Continuing cycle of the sun (5)
  - c. Continuing cycle of the wind (6)
  - d. Continuing cycle of the rivers (7)
    - 1) Man cannot see or hear all of it (8)
    - 2) Man cannot find new meaning in it (9-10)
    - 3) Man will not even be remembered (11)

### I. 1:12-2:26 Reflections on the Vanities of Life

1. The shift to first person point of view at 1:12 initiates a new section. Qoheleth’s change in genre to poetry at 3:1-8 likely indicates that the previous unit ends at 2:26. The regular use of reflective terminology binds the section together:
  - a. I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom (1:13)
  - b. I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun (1:14)
  - c. I said to myself [lit., I spoke with my heart] (1:16)
  - d. I set my mind [lit., heart] (1:17)

- e. I said to myself [lit., in my heart] (2:1)
  - f. I explored with my mind [lit., heart] (2:3)
  - g. Thus I considered (2:11)
  - h. So I turned to consider (2:12)
  - i. Then I said to myself [lit., in my heart] (2:15)
  - j. So I said to myself [lit., spoke in my heart] (2:15)
  - k. Cf. Therefore I completely despaired [lit., turned aside my heart to despair] (2:20)
2. This section ends with the first of the so-called “enjoyment” paragraphs (2:24-26, cf. 3:12-14, 3:22, 5:18-20, 8:15, 9:7-10), that allow for the possibility of enjoying life despite its vanities.
  3. The repeated use of the vanity verdict also ties the section together and its position may indicate the subdivisions:
    - a. 1:13-14: all the works which have been done under the sun – verdict
    - b. 1:15-18: pursuit of wisdom and knowledge – verdict + proverb
    - c. 2:1-11: pursuit of pleasures and properties – verdict
    - d. 2:12-17: wise men and fools’ fate – verdict
    - e. 2:18-23: fruit of labor’s fate – verdict
    - f. 3:24-27: eat and drink as a gift from God – verdict

**J. 3:1-15 A Poem about Time and the “Big Picture”**

1. This section begins with a fourteen verse poem. Each verse is made up of two coordinated segments, and each segment begins with the word “time.” The segments of each verse stand in obvious contrast to each other.
2. It is debatable whether or not 3:9-15 concludes the poem or introduces the following section. It shares the genre of the first-person report with paragraphs that follow – I have seen (3:10, 16, 22) and I know (3:12, 14), yet the paragraph shares the theme of time (mentioned in 3:11 and implied in 3:14-15) with the poem preceding it. In addition, 3:12-14 is an “enjoyment” paragraph that echoes the conclusion in the previous section (2:24-26), pointing to it as a conclusion as well. Similarly, the writer’s conclusion in this second unit is the same as in the first – “you cannot discover the big picture, so abandon the effort and simply obey God, who alone knows the big picture, enjoying the gifts God gives you, including your food and work, trusting that God has his perfect purposes in all that happens ‘from beginning to end’” (David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, 194).

**K. 3:16-6:9 Observations About Life**

1. It appears that the next section is 3:16-6:9, composed of a series of paragraphs introduced by the recurring phrase, “I have seen” or some variation, with the exception of 5:1-7.
  - a. Furthermore, I have seen under the sun (3:16)
  - b. And I have seen (3:22)
  - c. Then I looked again (4:1)

- d. And I have seen (4:4)
  - e. Then I looked again (4:7)
  - f. I have seen (4:15)
  - g. If you see (5:8)
  - h. There is a grievous evil which I have seen (5:13)
  - i. Here is what I have seen (5:18)
  - j. There is an evil which I have seen (6:1)
2. 5:1-7 consists entirely of admonitions that focus on fearing God. It is interesting and perhaps significant that these admonitions are located roughly in the center of the section. Dorsey (*Literary Structure*, 195) tentatively suggests the section comprises seven parts arranged with a symmetric touch, though I do not see the hard evidence for this. Dorsey suggests the section ends at 6:12 instead of 6:9.
- a. **a** (3:16-22)
  - b** (4:1-6)
  - c** (4:7-16)
  - d** (5:1-7)
  - c'** (5:8-12)
  - b'** (5:13-20)
  - a'** (6:1-12)
3. The vanity verdict is scattered throughout this section at 4:4-6, 4:8, 4:16, 5:10, 6:2, and 6:9. The verdict with the addition of “striving after wind” is found at 4:4-6, 4:16, and 6:9, which is the final occurrence of the verdict in this form in the book. I am unable to detect a pattern in the use of this verdict. Addison G. Wright suggests that, as in 1:12-2:26, the vanity verdict in combination with “striving after wind,” at 4:4-6, 4:16, and 6:9 marks the close of the sections – 3:1-4:6, 4:7-16, and 4:17-6:9. Additionally, Wright points out that only in these four sections does the author evaluate the results of man’s toil (“The Riddle of the Sphinx,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968): 313-334, reprinted in *Reflecting With Solomon*, 45-65).

#### L. 6:10-7:14 Poem About What is “Good” or “Better”

1. Most likely, 6:10-12 introduces the last half of the book and a shift of emphasis. Longman suggests that “Qohelet here leaves his explicit search for meaning and in the second half of the book focuses on advice and commentary about the future” (*Ecclesiastes*, NICOT, 176). In 6:12, Qoheleth raises a question about knowing what is “good” for people. Several proverbs that follow in 7:1-14 address what is “good.”
2. 7:1-14 initiates a change in genre – a string of poetic proverbs that are tied together by the use of the word *tob* – “good” or “better,” which is used eleven times (1 [2x], 2, 3, 5, 8 [2x], 10, 11, 14 [2x]). Note that both *tob* and *yom* are used in vv. 1 and 14, forming an inclusion framing the poetic proverbs.
3. Dorsey notes several echoes in this poem to the poem about time in 3:1-15 (*Literary Structure*, 195-196).
  - a. There is “a time to give birth, and a time to die” (3:2), but “the day of death is better than the day of birth” (7:1)
  - b. There is “a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (3:4), but “it is better to go to a house of mourning Than to go to a house of feasting” (7:2) and “The mind of the

wise is in the house of mourning, While the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure” (7:4)

- c. There is “a time to weep, and a time to laugh” (3:4), but “Sorrow is better than laughter, For when a face is sad a heart may be happy” (7:3) and “For as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot, So is the laughter of fools” (7:6)
4. Dorsey suggests that the fourteen proverbs appear to form seven units of two verses apiece, each featuring what is *tob* (*Literary Structure*, 196). If this is the case, the literary structure parallels the time poem in 3:1-8. Here I have grouped the proverbs employing this suggestion:
  - a. 1-2: A good name is better than a good ointment, And the day of one’s death is better than the day of one’s birth.  
It is better to go to a house of mourning Than to go to a house of feasting, Because that is the end of every man, And the living takes it to heart.
  - b. 3-4: Sorrow is better than laughter, For when a face is sad a heart may be happy.  
The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning, While the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure.
  - c. 5-6: It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man Than for one to listen to the song of fools.  
For as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot, So is the laughter of the fool, And this too is futility.
  - d. 7-8: For oppression makes a wise man mad, And a bribe corrupts the heart.  
The end of a matter is better than its beginning; Patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit.
  - e. 9-10: Do not be eager in your heart to be angry, For anger resides in the bosom of fools.  
Do not say, “Why is it that the former days were better than these?” For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this.
  - f. 11-12: Wisdom along with an inheritance is good And an advantage to those who see the sun.  
For wisdom is protection just as money is protection. But the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors.
  - g. 13-14: Consider the work of God, For who is able to straighten what He has bent?  
In the day of prosperity be happy, But in the day of adversity consider – God has made the one as well as the other So that man may not discover anything that will be after him.

#### M. 7:15-10:19 Observations and Advice About Life in the World

1. Dorsey identifies four collections of proverbs in this section: 7:19-22, 8:1-8, 9:17-10:4, and 10:8-19, which determine something of its arrangement. He offers the following analysis of the section (which I have slightly modified):
  - a. Though life is not predictable, live wisely! (7:15-24); [a collection of proverbs (7:19-22), with a concluding observation (7:23-24)]
  - b. Though perfect wisdom is unattainable, live wisely! (7:25-8:8); [a collection of proverbs (8:1-8)]
  - c. Though the wicked sometimes prosper, fear God! (8:9-13)

- d. Though justice miscarries and life is incomprehensible, enjoy the life and gifts and work that God gives you! (8:14-17)
  - e. Though life is uncertain and fleeting, live life to the fullest! (9:1-10)
  - f. Though wisdom does not always bring success, live wisely! (9:11-10:4); [collection of proverbs (9:17-10:4)]
  - g. Though fools often succeed, avoid folly and live wisely! (10:5-19); [collection of proverbs (10:8-19)]
2. The strength of holding these paragraphs together is that, while not strictly a chiasmus, the section is symmetrical and 8:14-17 is at the center. Also, the collections of proverbs conclude the first two parts and the last two parts. In addition, I note the similar introductory phrases that initiate each section:
    - a. I have seen everything during my life of futility (7:15)
    - b. I directed my mind to know, to investigate, and to seek wisdom and an explanation (7:25)
    - c. All this I have seen and applied my mind to (8:9)
    - d. For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it (9:1)
    - e. There is an evil I have seen under the sun (10:5) (the final time the phrase “under the sun” is used in the book)

#### N. 10:20-12:7 Instructions and Exhortations About Living

1. Eaton argues that this section (11:1-12:8) is a literary unit “bound together by sustained exhortation, indicating that the whole section is concerned with decisive obedience” (*Ecclesiastes*, TOTC, 139). Dorsey notes that 10:20 actually initiates the division as one of seven imperatives that begin the section, one in each verse (10:20-11:6).
2. The imperatives are followed by an exhortation (11:7-10), which introduces the poem that closes the section (12:1-7). ‘Before’ (1-2a, 6) serves as an inclusion to the poem. Notably, Dorsey detects definite echoes of this last section to the book’s opening unit (1:2-11):
  - a. Also, the sun rises and the sun sets (1:5) – Remember also your Creator ... before the sun ... grows dark (12:1-2)
  - b. A generation goes [*halak*] and a generation comes, But the earth [*heres*] remains forever [*lam*] (1:4) – For man goes [*halak*] to his eternal [*olam*] home ... then [their] dust will return to the earth [*heres*] as it was (12:5, 7)
  - c. The wind [*ruach*] blows [*halak*], continues swirling [*sabab*], and returns [*sub*] (1:6) – the spirit [*ruach*] of a person returns [*sub*] to God who gave it (12:7)
  - d. There is no remembrance of earlier things; and also of the later things (1:11) – readers are encouraged to remember your Creator (12:1)
  - e. The eye is not satisfied with seeing (1:8) – remember your Creator before ... those who look through windows grow dim (12:3)

#### O. 12:8-14 A Third-Person Epilogue Stating the Conclusion

1. The epilogue begins with the book’s motto – “Vanity of vanities ... all is vanity,” that with 1:2 forms an inclusion for the body of the book.

2. The narrator comments on Qoheleth and his speech. As the “conclusion” s/he summarizes what should be learned from Qoheleth’s autobiographical monologue and why.

David Holder  
508 Club Oak Dr.  
Fort Worth, TX 76114  
(817) 737-9173 or 624-1780  
DavHold@aol.com

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