

What Is the Point?

May 31, 2009

Purpose: To explore various ways people seek meaning for their lives in vain until they find meaning in God

Key Bible reference: Ecclesiastes 1.1-3, Ecclesiastes 2.1-4, Ecclesiastes 2.10-15, Ecclesiastes 4.1-3, Ecclesiastes 12.1, Ecclesiastes 12.13-14

Key Verse: Ecclesiastes 12.13-14

Generally, Wisdom Literature does not claim to have a special revelation or message from God. Its authors do not say, like the prophets, "Thus says the Lord." Rather, they base their insights in the observation of life and of nature and sometimes in deep reflection on the meaning and purpose of life.

The writers of Wisdom Literature do not always claim to have ultimate answers to their questions. Indeed, part of wisdom is to know what cannot be known, what mysteries are too deep to unravel, and then to know also how to live without all the answers one would like to have.

In a sense, Wisdom Literature is leisure literature. It is the product of people who had the time to reflect on the meaning of life and whose needs were not so urgent that their wits and energy were consumed with concern over food, shelter, and survival. For this reason, although you will find in Wisdom Literature some descriptions of the folly of wealth, you will find little or no denunciation of the abuses of power by the well-to-do and no calls for divine judgment on those who oppress the poor and the widow, as you will find in the writings of the prophets and elsewhere in the biblical canon.

The Book of Ecclesiastes is a book of faith and hope and confidence in God, but it approaches

these matters from a standpoint a bit different from many of the other biblical books. This technique sometimes makes Ecclesiastes difficult to understand.

The writer of this interesting collection of ideas on the meaning of life identifies himself as the Teacher, the son of David (1:1). Calling oneself the son of David does not always mean that one is a literal or biological son of David but a son of David in the sense that one stands in the tradition, the faith, the values of King David. We know from reading his words, however, that the Teacher was an Israelite who was an unusually insightful observer of human nature.

When were these words written? Some scholars suggest that this book was written about three hundred years before the birth of Christ, but the chances are great that the ideas and thoughts and images used in this book had been popular among the people of Judah and Israel for thousands of years. After all, we are still pondering these ideas today.

Ecclesiastes 1:1. The first verse, as mentioned above, attributes what follows to Solomon ("the son of David, king in Jerusalem"); and that may not be altogether mistaken. For while not actually the words of Solomon, the book contains much of what today we could call "Solomonic wisdom."

Verse 2. "Vanity" literally means emptiness, hollowness. The phrase "vanity of vanities" is a way to express the utmost hollowness—just as the King of kings is the highest of all. The repetition of the phrase makes it even stronger.

Verse 3. This verse illustrates what was said above, about the class origins of Wisdom Literature. An impoverished peasant would have answered the question by saying, "What I gain is survival for myself and my family." "The Teacher" of Ecclesiastes is asking the question at a different level—one that he can reach because he is not starving: What is the meaning of all human effort? Is there anything beyond mere survival?

The rest of the chapter follows along the same vein, showing that meaning and permanence are nowhere to be found. Thus we come to 2:1-2.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-2, 10-11. Here we read that the author, after having found all sorts of efforts ultimately hollow, tries a different way: pleasure and laughter. But these too prove to be empty and meaningless. In the verses that follow, the Teacher summarizes all he has done along this route. He has tried wine, but he also has tried the finer things of life. He has built houses and has planted vineyards and parks. But in the end, even after having tried every pleasure (2:10), there was no reward. "All was vanity and a chasing after wind" (2:11; or, in another possible translation, a "feeding on wind").

Verses 12-13. Finally, the Teacher comes to what one would expect is the answer: wisdom. If all these things are hollow and provide no answers, it makes sense to turn to wisdom. Our

author does, and he finds that indeed "wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness."

Yet that too is hollow. In the next verse the Teacher discovers that no matter whether one is wise or foolish, "the same fate befalls all of them." If wisdom is valuable, it must be valuable in and of itself, not because of any results it produces.

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3. Here the Teacher declares that there is no just order in the world. Not only do some people oppress others, there is no redress, no hope of change. The author's conclusion is that it is better to be dead than to see such evil and such lack of punishment. Even better, one should never be born, so as never to see such things.

Ecclesiastes 12:1, 13-14. By the time we come to 12:1, the Teacher has found an "answer": "Remember your creator in the days of your youth." Yet that is an "answer" only in a limited and temporary sense. There is still no justice. There is still no explanation as to why the oppressors get away with their crimes. There is still no meaning to all the toil and all the dreams and all the building and all the pleasures and all the sufferings.

The Teacher does not answer the question of how to live beyond the vanity of vanities. He does not say, "Now I know how God will make it all come out right." His answer is much more limited; and yet it is practical and wise: "There is no way that I can find an answer that will fill the hollowness, the vanity, of it all. All I can do is live within the limits that God has placed on me, accepting the mystery that I cannot unravel. But even so, it is wise to remember God and to obey God, trusting that God is judge: 'the end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and

keep his commandments; for that is the whole wisdom of everyone. For God will bring every

deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil."