

# The scope of wisdom: an examination of proverbs 20 and ecclesiastes 1



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Ecclesiastes and Proverbs both strive to examine wisdom and faith but approach these subjects on varying levels of existence. The individual person is approached differently in the two books, which enter into a dynamic discourse on the pursuit of understanding. Proverbs strives to instruct God's creations, human beings, as they dwell on earth. But Ecclesiastes expands its scope to eradicate details like individual people. As though it is responding to the clunky instruction-book quality of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes poetically dismisses the insignificant concerns of mortal man. Its fatalistic, frustrated pondering is often in direct opposition to Proverbs hopeful warnings and calm faith. Proverbs is occupied by common, daily acts. Its subjects are earthbound and the language has a kind of familiar physicality that makes it accessible and penetrable. Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, dedicates itself to larger spaces with sweeping generalizations and all-encompassing terms. It is as though Ecclesiastes addresses the framework containing the subjects of Proverbs. This framework is the web of eternity, operating in cycles that consume the brief linear existences of Proverbs' individual subjects. The linearity of Proverbs provides its logical reasoning, a manner of thinking that posits rational cause and effect. But the flowing, circular space of Ecclesiastes makes such logic seem oversimplified and basic. Side by side, Proverbs 20 and Ecclesiastes 1 (RSV) provide many examples of the contrasting nature of the two books. They propose different kinds of wisdom: wisdom that informs average daily life and wisdom that occupies impossibly lofty realms, where questions do not have answers and the terms are effectively intangible. A difference in scope is clearly established through the language of the two texts. The basic aspect of vocabulary, of word choice, is already one area of discrepancy. The <https://assignbuster.com/the-scope-of-wisdom-an-examination-of-proverbs-20-and-ecclesiastes-1/>

terminology is simply different. The sense that Proverbs is more grounded in human experience is derived from references to objects and actions that consume average daily life. This is intended for those who 'plow' and 'harvest' (20: 4), those who are subject to 'a king who sits on a throne,' (20: 8) and those who are familiar with 'weights,' 'scales,' (20: 23) and 'wheel[s]' (20: 26). These physical references contribute to a sense of familiarity and physicality. Proverbs dwells in the active, working person, concerning itself with their every move. Ecclesiastes is not built on these kind of references. Instead, its vocabulary is one of a grander scale, full of untouchable and massive forces. Its objects are 'the sun,' (1: 5) 'the wind,' (1: 6) and 'heaven' (1: 14). These are not places where the daily activities of Proverbs are a concern. They hover high above such tangible details and eradicate the simple human subject. The human becomes small and unworthy in the face of such sweeping terms. Ecclesiastes communicates a distinct impatience with the measly, earthbound individual, as though the human form is limiting in its corporeality. This is just the opposite of Proverbs, which continually identifies this body as its subject. Where the text of Proverbs is content to state 'The hearing ear and the seeing eye/the LORD has made them both,' (20: 12) Ecclesiastes looks beyond the mere physical wonderment of this fact and complains 'the eye is not satisfied with seeing,/nor the ear filled with hearing<sup>2</sup> (1: 8). It is moments like these that truly set the two texts apart in terms of scope, even pitting them against each other. Ecclesiastes does not have the patience for the simple and obvious physical statements that characterize the language in Proverbs. Ecclesiastes soars above the grounded Proverbs in other qualities of the language. Another dissimilarity between the two sections is the use of <https://assignbuster.com/the-scope-of-wisdom-an-examination-of-proverbs-20-and-ecclesiastes-1/>

metaphor. Proverbs 20 makes extensive use of metaphor, an aspect that seems essentially absent in Ecclesiastes 1. Again, this creates a sense of dwelling in heavy detail and attempting to connect with a living, breathing, and working audience. Metaphors like 'The dread wrath of a king is like the growling of a lion,' (20: 2) and 'The purpose in a man's mind is like deep water,' (20: 5) are making use of concrete and identifiable imagery to make a point. They reach out with distinct and identifiable things lifted from the real world. The average reader can use these references as tools to penetrate meaning. Ecclesiastes does not furnish its points with accessible terms. In its more ethereal and vague tone, it does not clarify with metaphors. Instead, imagery suggests deeper meaning without spelling it out. 'All streams run to the sea,/but the sea is not full,' (1: 7) is certainly not simply about the geography of actual streams, but the infinite quality of time. The speaker creates a sense of eternity without specifying. This is one of many aspects making Ecclesiastes seem loftier, and thus less accessible than Proverbs. Instead of localizing the references, this speaker expands them until they are distinctly unspecific. The terms grow enough to become absolute and all-encompassing. For example, the word 'All' occurs constantly in Ecclesiastes 20. The chapter is characterized by phrases like 'All is vanity,' (1: 2) 'All streams run to the sea,' (1: 7) 'All things are full of weariness,' (1: 8) 'all that is done under heaven,' (1: 13) and 'all who were over Jerusalem before me' (1: 16). By using referencing this totality, Ecclesiastes establishes a much grander scale for its subject. Details are eradicated by the sheer power of its questions and breadth of its scope. It refuses to attach specific meaning to specific things, or even narrow its subject down to the tangible world. The alternate title of 'The Preacher' is an <https://assignbuster.com/the-scope-of-wisdom-an-examination-of-proverbs-20-and-ecclesiastes-1/>

apt description of Ecclesiastes authorial stance. While 'Proverbs' is a democratic set of ideas, placed deliberately among the people with the people as its subject, Ecclesiastes seems perched above and calling down from the pulpit. The individual human being is thus embraced by Proverbs and diminished by Ecclesiastes. Where Proverbs probes differences between individuals, Ecclesiastes eradicates differences through generalization. Proverbs makes distinctions between different types of people, building its small cast of characters. These include 'king,' (20: 2) 'fool,' (20: 3) 'sluggard,' (20: 4) 'child' (20: 11) and 'stranger' (20: 16). It is not only in the list of types that individuality is lauded, but in the presence of variation among characters. Adjectives are used to classify varying kinds of men among the many, driving home the idea that humanity is a diverse and complex gathering of solitary creatures. We encounter 'a man of understanding' (20: 5), 'a faithful man,' (20: 6) 'a righteous man,' (20: 7) and see a comparison between 'young' and 'old' men (20: 29). By alluding to possibilities of personality, the philosophy of Proverbs is embracing the individual. The polar opposite of this attention is very clearly stated in Ecclesiastes. Human lives are not worthy of attention in a worldview that reminds us 'A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever,' (1: 4) disposing in its opening lines of any concern for the singular human experience. The mortal world of Proverbs and the all-encompassing universal dilemmas of Ecclesiastes make use of dissimilar modes of reason and logic. In the metaphors of Proverbs, there is a characteristic rationality that is missing in the questions of Ecclesiastes. The concept of cause and effect is crucial in both the message and form of Proverbs. The rhythm of the book moves forward in a distinctly linear

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description of action and consequence, whether positive or negative. One such moral process is contained in 'Bread gained by deceit is sweet to a man, but afterward his mouth will be full of gravel' (20: 17). This plots an event along an obvious line. There are specific and logistical warnings such as 'The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing' (20: 4). This idea contains the framework of seasonal time to ground it, and a distinct cause and effect that lends an accessible clarity to its point. Ecclesiastes throws a wrench in this clear line of thought, demanding 'What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?' (1: 3). Ecclesiastes also directly counters the scheme of forward-moving linear time in its emphasis on cycles. There is no simple beginning and ending in descriptions like 'The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises' (1: 5). In statements like these, the sentence carefully returns to the beginning instead of moving to a conclusion at the end. The form of the language mimics the circles it is describing. The entire book is woven of these overlapping cycles, operating outside of man's empirical reasoning. The glorious scope and lofty subject matter of Ecclesiastes does not mean it reigns above Proverbs. Although the poetic flow of cycles in the universe is engaging and beautiful, the accessibility of Proverbs' mortal concerns renders it an extremely powerful book. Proverbs is able to apply the ethereal and vague concept of 'wisdom' to action. This is a necessary entrance-point into the teachings of the Bible. Unlike The Preacher's stance assumed by Ecclesiastes, the instructions of Proverbs put faith directly into the hands of the people. The inclusion of the individual human as a worthy subject sends a crucial message. Proverbs, through careful instruction and calm warning, suggests that there is hope for the

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person who acts in a certain way. But Ecclesiastes' schema is a fatalistic and hopeless one, where the subject is simply left to ponder. The individual in search of wisdom lives by Proverbs and thinks by Ecclesiastes, turning inward through the teachings of one and gazing upward by grace of the other.