

The book of ecclesiastes and the human experience



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

As a philosophical treatise in which the author considers the meaning of man's existence on earth, the Book of Ecclesiastes is an exceptional section of the Tanakh that differs from the traditional didactic narratives surrounding it. The Preacher in Ecclesiastes is concerned with the idea that no matter how a man chooses to live his life, in the end, his actions are in vain and have no lasting consequence because the world itself remains unaffected and essentially static. In light of this observation, the driving question of the work becomes "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" (Ecc. 1: 3) By the end of the book, the author does not provide a traditional, concrete answer to this question, but the ambiguous solution can be found throughout the text as a whole. Consistently, the Preacher's reasoning is based in what can be viewed as the inherent duality of life, which man is able to recognize and contemplate but not fully understand, and the inability to resolve this basic uncertainty leads the author to the simple conclusion that, "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in his toil," (Ecc. 2: 24). The Preacher's dialectic argument is as circular and static as the world he observes, and from this parallel, one can infer that life is meant to be ambiguous, and that every human being must do his best with what he is given by taking advantage of the present. Within the text, dichotomies arise out of what are seeming contradictions in the author's claims as he makes statements such as, "I hated all my toil," (Ecc. 2: 18) and then goes on to say that enjoyment of toil is what is best for man. This apparent leap in logic is a result of the fact that the Preacher's thought process cannot escape the dichotomy of life. He must consider hating toil before he can love it, because one emotion rises out of the other, "for by sadness of countenance the heart

<https://assignbuster.com/the-book-of-ecclesiastes-and-the-human-experience/>

is made glad,” (Ecc. 7: 3). Light cannot exist without dark just as wisdom cannot exist without folly, because they compliment and define one another. Happiness and contentment would be inconceivable without the alternative of grief and hardship. In order to demonstrate this idea, the author makes unconventional claims such as, “ Sorrow is better than laughter,” (Ecc. 7: 3). Sorrow is not necessarily better than laughter, but laughter cannot be better than sorrow either, because they rely on one another for existence and are both inescapable characteristics of life. In his time on earth, a man cannot change the nature of existence; therefore he must accept both the good and the bad in turn. The opening verses of chapter three express this concept eloquently as the Preacher reasons that, “ For everything there is a season... a time to be born, and a time to die,” (Ecc. 3: 1-2) because God’s work “ endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it,” (3: 14). This inherent dichotomy is what makes the Preacher’s toil enjoyable, because he is a philosopher whose work takes place in the mind, and the ambiguity that he sees as being ordained by God is what gives substance to his thoughts. Near the beginning, in chapter four, verse two, he concludes that the dead are more fortunate than the living, but in chapter nine, “ a living dog is better than a dead lion,” (v. 4). His arguments qualify each other just as life and death go hand in hand. Recognizing the value of pairs, the Preacher translates the concept of duality into human relations. A rich man who has no companion with whom to share the fruit of his toil will experience only misery while he is alive since, “ Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil,” (Ecc. 4: 9). As one of God’s creations, human beings are naturally dichotomous and need a

complimentary partner whether it is a close friend or spouse. According to <https://assignbuster.com/the-book-of-ecclesiastes-and-the-human-experience/>

the Preacher, a man cannot be secure by himself, “ if two lie together, they are warm; but how can one be warm alone?” (Ecc. 4: 11). Alone, a man is easily overcome, but with the bulwark of companionship that reflects the inherent nature of life, adversity can be withstood. This logic supports the idea that monogamous marriage is the foundation of human community as the opposite sexes support one another and are able to build a strong family unit off of this support. While interhuman relationships are easier for us to understand, the Preacher comes to the conclusion that, overall, mankind is only given the ability to recognize the presence of duality but not to fully comprehend its meaning or purpose, because only God knows the real truth of his creation. The ambiguous nature of life makes it by definition uncertain, and man must learn to live with this uncertainty, “ for you know not what evil may happen on earth,” (Ecc. 11: 2). Since the Preacher believes that all existence is the will of God, he sees beauty in doubt, but is also troubled by his inability to come to a firm resolution. He states, “(God) has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man’s mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end,” (Ecc. 3: 11). From the standpoint of a philosopher, these dilemmas are like clay for a potter, because they provide endless material with which to speculate and debate, but they can also be a troublesome burden for the curious human intellect, “ For in much wisdom is much vexation,” (Ecc. 1: 18). Once again, man is confronted by conflicting ideas. On the one hand, human beings are given a unique position among animals because we have the ability to reason, but that ability has limitations so that we really “ do not know the work of God,” (Ecc. 11: 5) and remain, essentially, as ignorant as beasts. As a whole, the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes struggles with the <https://assignbuster.com/the-book-of-ecclesiastes-and-the-human-experience/>

notion that man's knowledge is limited, but it also praises life's ambiguity as the will of God who is seen as the omniscient creator. Ultimately, the faithful preacher comes to the conclusion that life is neither good nor bad, it simply is, because one side of the coin cannot exist without the other. Life would lose some of its preciousness if existence were merely one-dimensional. There would be no happiness, because there would be no sorrow, and there would be no joy in liberation, because there would be no oppression. It is difficult for humans as conscious beings to accept the more harsh and bitter aspects of the world, and this is one of the Preacher's main concerns at first, but he seems to have resolved them for himself in the end. Ironically, his final resolution is that there is no real answer as to why human existence seems to be in vain and fleeting. Man must accept his fate or doom himself to mental anguish. Repeatedly, the Preacher states that, "all is vanity and a striving after wind," (Ecc. 1: 14) but in the end this conclusion is not as bleak as it sounds. While it is vain to presuppose that a man's life is of such grand importance that it will affect the cycle of life, it can be healthy and comforting to accept this vanity as the Preacher does. If one accepts the fact that one's deeds are not lasting, then the present can be enjoyed for what it is rather than what proud human aspirations feel it should be. Although this book seems more secular than the rest of the Tanakh due to its blatant questioning of the meaning and purpose of existence, in the end, the Preacher leaves the reader with a profession of faith in the beautiful complexity of the Creator as he admits that as a mortal man he is not meant to understand the ways of God. The process of his rationale is very scientific in nature as he considers all aspects of the problem of existence, but his reasoning falls back on religious conviction. This melding of rational

<https://assignbuster.com/the-book-of-ecclesiastes-and-the-human-experience/>

philosophy and an acceptance of the inevitability of uncertainty seems confusing, but Ecclesiastes itself is confusing, because it is such an accurate reflection of the basic ambiguity of life, which leaves the book open to endless interpretation. Even from a non-religious viewpoint though, it cannot be denied that the author of this work had remarkable insight into the persistent enigma that is existence. In the end, the question “What gain has the worker from his toil?” (Ecc. 3: 9) remains, but in acknowledging the fact that there is no straightforward answer to this question, the Preacher reminds his audience that all human ideas are mere speculation, and we should appreciate the short time that we have on earth, because all we really have is our present existence and all the wonderful complexities that give it depth and color.