

Youth Teaching Resources

January 1, 2023



January 1, 2023—Ecclesiastes 3:1-13—“It’s Always Time”

Season of Epiphany: What Does God Expect?

January 8, 2023—Isaiah 42:1-9—“Bringing Justice”

January 15, 2023—Isaiah 49:1-7—“Bearing Light”

January 22, 2023—Isaiah 9:1-7—“Multiplying Joy”

January 29, 2023—Micah 6:1-8—“Defining Expectations”

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It's Always Time

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

YOUTH Teaching Guide

by Robert Tackett-Evans

This youth teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Gathering

As the group begins to gather, take a few moments to reflect on last week's challenge. After everyone has been able to share, continue with today's lesson.

Opening Activity

As you begin, play "Both Sides Now" by Joni Mitchell. The song and lyrics can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOPwviOUenA>.

- When you hear this song, what do you think about? How does it make you feel? Why?
- Are there any lyrics in the song you find yourself relating to? If so, which ones?
- Where do you hear mystery expressed in the song?

Listening to the Scripture

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 aloud.

- What words or phrases stand out to you in this scripture passage? Why?
- In one sentence, what would you say the author was communicating in this passage of scripture?
- Can you think of a time when you wondered what the point/purpose of life was? When was that time? What did you conclude?
- Where do you hear mystery expressed by the author?
- Why do you think there is mystery when it comes to life? To God?
- Do you think the author's statement, "for everything there is a season," is a reasonable statement to make about human existence? Why or why not?
- Some of the seasons the author names are painful at best. Do you think that when those seasons come and go, that means God somehow desires for us to have that experience? Why or why not?
- Do you, like our author, believe that God desires for us to take pleasure in life? If so, what evidence do you find in life that would point to such a conclusion?

Listening to the Scripture *continued*

- Based on your present life circumstances, where do you find hope in this scripture?

If the group would like to continue with the discussion, see *Digging Deeper*.

- In verse 11 we hear God “*has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.*” What do you think is the importance of mystery when it comes to God?
- It seems that as human beings, we tend to not like mystery. Why do you think people struggle with mystery or not knowing?

If the group is up for a challenge, consider discussing what Tony poses as *The Hardest Question*:

- Why couldn't Solomon have written Ecclesiastes?

Application

Before closing, introduce this week's challenge.

What are some of the mysteries of life you find yourself pondering. Share some of those on your social media accounts as you are able. Come prepared to share one of those mysteries with the group next week.

Close with prayer.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Turn! Turn! Turn!—Here’s a link to the Byrds’ cover of Pete Seeger’s adaptation of Ecc. 3:3-8, along with other information about the song. <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=246>

Qoheleth—The book we call “Ecclesiastes” was written by a man who called himself Qoheleth, an unusual name that is formed from the feminine form of the qal active participle of the verb *qāhal*, which means something like “to assemble” or “gather,” as when Moses called together the “congregation of Israel” (Exod. 35:1, Lev. 8:3, Num. 1:18, 8:9, etc.). In that sense, it may mean something like “one who assembles,” or “convener.” The feminine ending was sometimes used to indicate a title rather than a personal name.

The notion of Qoheleth as one who assembles a group led the Septuagint translators to use the equivalent Greek word, *Ecclesiastes*. This is related to the term *ekklesia*, the Greek word often used for the church (the letters “c” and “k” represent the same Greek letter *kappa*; there have been different systems of transliteration). Perhaps this connection, and the notion that Qoheleth’s purpose was to address the assembly, inspired the fourth century Latin scholar Jerome to call him *Conciantor*, and Martin Luther to use the German word *Prediger*, both meaning something like “preacher,” a translation reflected in the King James Version.

Most readers would not think Qoheleth was much of a preacher. Qoheleth appears to be a member of Israel’s wisdom community, a philosopher of sorts whose reflections on life were often at odds with traditional teaching, but which nevertheless drew an audience and were considered valuable enough to be preserved as scripture.

For an explanation of why the tradition attributing authorship to Solomon cannot be correct, see “The Hardest Question” below.

Editorial comments—Ecclesiastes 1:1 and 12:9-12 were almost certainly added by a later hand, someone who sought to balance Qoheleth’s radical cynicism and *carpe diem* musings with more traditional beliefs. The presence of the same sentence in 1:2 and 12:8 appears to have been intentional bracketing, Qoheleth’s way of underscoring his belief that humans might find some joy and profit in life, but were unable to obtain deeper meaning or understand the ways of God.

Hevel hevelim—Some translators render *hevel* with words like “meaninglessness” or “absurdity.” Robert Alter’s translation lets the metaphor speak for itself without interpretation: “Merest breath, said Qoheleth. Merest breath. All is mere breath” (*The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* [W. W. Norton, 2010], 346).

Every matter—In the phrase, “a time for every matter under heaven,” the word translated as “matter” is *hēphets*, which often means “delight,” “desire,” “pleasure,” or even “precious

Digging Deeper *continued*

stones.” The same word is translated as “pleasure” in Ecc. 5:4 and 12:1, and as “pleasing” in 12:10. It can also mean something as mundane as “matter,” however, and context requires that translation here, as in Ecc. 3:17, 5:8, and 8:6.

Wordplay—In verse 4 the poet utilizes a playful combination of words that share similar sounds. “Weeping” and “laughing” are *libkōt* and *lishōq*, while the words for “mourning” and “dancing” are *sepōd* and *reqōd*.

Midrash—Within Judaism, a primary role of the rabbis has been the interpretation of scriptures found in the Hebrew Bible. From the early centuries of the Common Era, rabbinic interpretations have been collected into works such as the *Mishnah* and the *Midrashim*. The *Midrash Rabbah* (“Great Midrash”) on Qoheleth probably dates back at least to the seventh century CE.

Chiasm—Some interpreters see a structure within the poem that literary scholars call a chiasm: various thematic elements that appear in one part of the text are balanced by similar statements later in the text, in reverse order. A line drawn along the left margins of the diagram would look like the left half of the Greek letter *chi* (X), hence the name “chiasm.” Recognizing the elements of chiasm in vv. 2-8 reinforces the view that in v. 7, which corresponds to v. 4, the rending of clothes should be seen as a symbol of mourning.

v. 2-3—Life and death, killing and healing

v. 4—Mourning and joy

v. 5—Throwing away and gathering

v. 6—Throwing away and gathering

v. 7—Mourning (ripping clothes) and silence

v. 8—Love and hate, war and peace

Eternity, or ignorance?—The Hebrew text was written without vowels, which were added many centuries later, based on the way rabbis were commonly pronouncing the text at that time. Some scholars believe the word *’ōlam* in v. 11 should be read with different vowels, as *’elem*, which can mean “darkness.” Thus, they would translate the verse to say that God has put darkness or ignorance into human hearts, so they cannot understand what God is doing (see, for example, NET2).

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

The Hardest Question is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Why couldn't Solomon have written Ecclesiastes?

We have indicated above that the book of Ecclesiastes appears to have been written during the postexilic period. Modern scholars hold differing opinions of whether he wrote during the rule of the Persians (538-333 BCE), or after Alexander the Great conquered Palestine in 333 BCE, bringing the area under Greek rule and expanding the influence of Hellenistic thought. There are few, however, who would date the book earlier than 400-350 BCE.

But what about the traditional belief, held by many, that Solomon was the author? This came about because of the superscription in 1:1 (“The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem”) and 1:12-2:26, where Qoheleth employs the literary device of royal fiction as a teaching method.

It is unlikely that Qoheleth expected anyone to believe he really was “king of Israel in Jerusalem,” though countless people have done so, including the person who added the superscription and identified him as a “son of David,” since all the kings who ruled in Jerusalem were Davidic descendants. Solomon, of course, also had a reputation for great wisdom, so it is not surprising that a tradition arose that Solomon was the author of this book as well as Proverbs, even though much of Ecclesiastes is contradictory to the traditional wisdom of Proverbs, which contains attributions to a variety of authors.

Solomon could hardly have written the Book of Ecclesiastes. Why?

First, the royal fiction is found only in a small part of the book. In most of the book, Qoheleth makes no pretension about being king. In fact, his attitude toward kingship is more critical than friendly. He sometimes connects kingship with injustice (3:16, 4:1-2, 5:7) and often makes comments about how to deal with kings, but not how to rule (8:2-4; 10:4-7, 16-17, 20). A king would hardly write in this way.

Secondly, the themes and vocabulary of the book are manifestly unlike what one would expect from a book written in the 10th century, as it would have to be if Solomon was the author. The Hebrew text has all the characteristics of the postexilic period, a time when the Hebrew language showed influence from Aramaic, which had become the *lingua franca* of the period. The presence of Aramaic and Persian style or loan words is strong evidence that the work was written in a later period. Qoheleth's grammar is unlike classical Hebrew and has often been described as reflecting the transition period between biblical Hebrew and the Mishnaic Hebrew of the rabbis that developed in the last couple of centuries before Christ. Perhaps Franz Delitzsch said it best: “If the Book of Qoheleth were of old Solomonic origin, then there is no history of the Hebrew language” (cited by Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, vol. 23A of Word Biblical Commentary [Zondervan, 1992], xxvii).

The Hardest Question *continued*

Thus, there is little to substantiate the idea that Qoheleth and Solomon were the same person. Qoheleth could pretend to be Solomon for the sake of teaching his students, even as a modern preacher might present a dramatic monologue in the guise of an ancient prophet, but he was a sage from a much later period. Qoheleth's background and occupation are unclear. He appears to have been a person of some means (and frustrated that he could not take his wealth with him), but he was neither a king nor the richest man who ever lived.