



# Did Solomon write Ecclesiastes in repentance?

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**T**HE AUTHORSHIP of the book of Ecclesiastes has been called in question by some Bible scholars who credit the work to a later writer, but the internal evidence shows clearly that Solomon was the author, as we discover in the first chapter, which we consider to be so plain and convincing as to be beyond dispute, for the Scripture says: "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem . . . I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem" (Eccl. 1:1,12).

### Solomon's wisdom

Whenever we attempt a contemplation of the life and character of Solomon we seem to be confronted with the complexities of a man who had been endowed by the God of Israel with exceptional wisdom, great riches and an encyclopaedic knowledge of trees, animals, birds, fish and creeping things that was quite astonishing: "And he spake three thousand proverbs . . . And he spake of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: he spake also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes. And there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom" (1 Kgs. 4:32-34). This gives some idea of the impact that his wisdom, knowledge and striking personality made upon all those who were granted an audience with him.

And besides all this we have to consider the testimony so freely provided by the illustrious Queen of Sheba:

"And when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the LORD, she came to prove him with hard questions . . . And Solomon told her all her questions: there was not any thing hid from the

king, which he told her not. And when the queen of Sheba had seen all Solomon's wisdom, and the house that he had built, and the meat of his table, and the sitting of his servants, and the attendance of his ministers, and their apparel, and his cupbearers, and his ascent by which he went up unto the house of the LORD; there was no more spirit in her" (10:1-5).

It will be recalled that Nathan the prophet informed David that the Lord did not want him to build the temple. It was to be built by the son that would be born to him (that is, Solomon), as the inspired record reveals: "Go and tell David My servant, Thus saith the LORD, Thou shalt not build Me an house to dwell in . . . And it shall come to pass, when thy days be expired that thou must go to be with thy fathers, that I will raise up thy seed after thee, which shall be of thy sons; and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build Me an house, and I will stablish his throne for ever" (1 Chron. 17:4,11,12).

We also remember the occasion when the God of Israel appeared to Solomon in a dream and said to him: "Ask what I shall give thee" (1 Kgs. 3:5). Solomon in response asked for "an understanding heart to judge Thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this Thy so great a people?" (v. 9). We cannot imagine just how encouraged Solomon must have been at the Lord's reply: "behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches, and honour: so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days" (vv. 12,13).

**Solomon goes astray**

These blessings were, however, accompanied by a timely warning which said: "And if thou wilt walk in My ways, to keep My statutes and My commandments, as thy father David did walk, then I will lengthen thy days" (v. 14). Sadly, Solomon, who must have known God's commandments that Israelites were forbidden to marry foreign women with heathen affiliations, disobeyed this Divine injunction. He proceeded to marry the daughter of Pharaoh, and also women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians and Hittites: "And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart" (11:3).

The verses that follow portray the fallen state to which he had been reduced:

"For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites . . . Then did Solomon build an high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, in the hill that is before Jerusalem, and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon. And likewise did he for all his strange wives, which burnt incense and sacrificed unto their gods" (vv. 4-8).

Solomon also disobeyed a specific commandment in regard to what a king should not do, as the Scripture so clearly states: "But he shall not multiply horses to himself . . . Neither shall he multiply wives to himself . . . neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold" (Deut. 17:16,17). Though blessed by the God of Israel with riches, yet Solomon pursued his quest for the accumulation of the two precious metals and other costly items by sending his trading ships on regular visits to other lands where they were readily available.

After a glittering reign, during which accolades of praise had been showered upon him from many quarters, and he was lionised by foreign dignitaries on many different occasions, Solomon was now in disfavour with his God and given the Divine rebuke:

"And the LORD was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned from the LORD God of Israel, Which had appeared unto him twice, and had commanded him concerning

this thing, that he should not go after other gods: but he kept not that which the LORD commanded. Wherefore the LORD said unto Solomon, Forasmuch as this is done of thee, and thou hast not kept My covenant and My statutes, which I have commanded thee, I will surely rend the kingdom from thee, and will give it to thy servant. Notwithstanding in thy days I will not do it for David thy father's sake: but I will rend it out of the hand of thy son" (1 Kgs. 11:9-12).

It is certain that Solomon's wives of many different nationalities placed him under continual duress with their demands for freedom to be able to pursue their heathen rituals, even persuading him to build altars for them. This, sadly, led to them converting him to their evil practices. It is also highly likely that his self-willed wives wrung concessions from him in deference to their heathen cultures, possibly gaining privileges for foreign governments, bearing in mind that one of his wives was the daughter of Pharaoh. And it is probable that there were continuing rivalries among his many wives for his special favours.

No doubt the extravagant splendours of his luxurious life at court, and the lavish homage and banqueting accorded visiting foreign dignitaries, added to the intolerable burdens under which his subjects suffered, almost to the point of revolt. Excessive imposts of taxation were firmly applied to maintain his flamboyant lifestyle, his extensive building enterprises, his huge army with numerous horses and chariots and a large mercantile fleet and navy.

The situation became even more volatile when his son Rehoboam summarily dismissed the deputation led by Jeroboam to alleviate the distress and oppression of the people: "And Jeroboam and all the congregation of Israel came, and spake unto Rehoboam, saying, Thy father made our yoke grievous: now therefore make thou the grievous service of thy father, and his heavy yoke which he put upon us, lighter, and we will serve thee" (12:3,4).

Note the utter ruthlessness and inflexibility of Rehoboam as he summarily rejects their appeal: "But he forsook the counsel of the old men, which they had given him . . . and spake to them [the people] after the counsel of the young men, saying, My father made your yoke heavy, and I will add to your yoke: my father also chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions" (vv. 8,14).

This might be an appropriate juncture to digress for a moment and briefly reflect upon the significant phrase, “when Solomon was old”. His defection from the faith of his father David seemed to commence when “his wives turned away his heart after other gods” (11:4). We are not unmindful of the adversities that can overtake people in old age. In this age of medical awareness and advance, we have come to know of a common condition encapsulated in the term ‘senility’, which unfortunately can result in impairment of memory and reduced powers of concentration, and sometimes even in the incapacity to comport oneself in a responsible manner. Of course, this is not to say that Solomon was afflicted in the same way as many in the communities among whom we live today are, for we know that his vexing problems were caused primarily as a consequence of falling completely under the domination and evil influences of his foreign heathen wives, as indicated above. It is a truly sad story of a blessed king of Israel whose earlier fervent prayer at the dedication of the new temple built by him is so overwhelming whenever we read it (8:22-53).

#### All is vanity

This background scenario of the life and reign of Solomon prepares us for what he has written in the book of Ecclesiastes, a book clearly composed in disillusionment, as we gather from the recurring phrase, “all is vanity”, rendered ‘emptiness’ or ‘meaningless’ in *Strong’s Concordance*. It is a greatly disturbing book, which seems to challenge some of the values that we have so long taken for granted, and brings into focus our way of life in Western society, which, apart from our clearly defined religious beliefs, in a measure resembles the routines of those among whom we live. We get married, care for our children with parental love and take a dutiful interest in their education, as do other parents. We like the conveniences of well-equipped homes, own motor cars, and take holidays when they become available. These are familiar things, which we would consider to be part of the normal routine of our daily lives, and yet the despairing cry of Solomon, “all is vanity and vexation of spirit”, seems to leap up at us from the sobering pages of Ecclesiastes (1:14).

Ecclesiastes appears to be the product of a troubled mind. We are able to understand something of the distress, even despair, which Solomon must have felt as a result of his unwise

marriages to such a diversity of foreign women with heathen beliefs. Indeed, it seems inevitable that the exemplary faith that characterized the early part of his reign as king of Israel would suffer as a consequence of his indiscretions.

It does seem, however, that the inevitable pangs of conscience that were now troubling Solomon for those things that he had done amiss, and his pent-up feelings of remorse as he turned his back upon all that the allurements of the world had to offer, came to the surface and overflowed so that he could no longer forbear, confessing: “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun” (2:11). It was now plain to see that the joy that he had experienced in amassing tremendous wealth, voluminous knowledge, and a reputation as one of the great kings of his time, had diminished to such a degree that he was enveloped in disillusionment and repentance, impelling him to declare with heartfelt emotion: “Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit” (v. 17).

#### Lessons for today

Perhaps we are able to glimpse a repentant heart in Solomon as he presents to those contemplating marriage the ideal for which they should strive: “Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which He hath given thee under the sun . . . and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun” (9:9). Note the sage advice regarding monogamous marriage and also the indissoluble nature of the marriage bond.

At this late stage in the book a spirit of repentance can be discerned in Solomon. In all sincerity, and aware of the enthusiasm and energy that young people are able to generate in their activities—as we also in our own day have noted in ecclesial life—he urges them: “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth”. But he is at pains, as we can well imagine because of his own experience, to sound a solemn warning of the pitfalls that can bring about the undoing of the unwary, for he adds: “. . . while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them” (12:1).

We are able to view the book of Ecclesiastes as an exceptional document that presents a very sobering analysis of some of the so-called values

that the world about us holds in high esteem—the acquisition of wealth, increased knowledge, and status in the community—regarding them as valid prizes for which we should strive. Solomon, however, sets the whole matter of worldly ambition in its proper perspective as, in the memorable epilogue, he comes finally and significantly to the axiomatic moment of truth, declaring with fervour and conviction: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man” (v. 13).

After reading this heartfelt confession by Solomon, we are left with the impression that it was

given only after agonising self-examination and deep repentance. It was uttered, perhaps, in the same spirit as his earlier impassioned prayers before the God of Israel at the dedication and consecration of the temple, when, in the presence of all the people, he pleaded: “Hearken therefore unto the supplications of Thy servant, and of Thy people Israel, which they shall make toward this place . . . and when Thou hearest, forgive . . . if they pray toward this place, and confess Thy name, and turn from their sin . . . then hear Thou from heaven, and forgive the sin of Thy servants, and of Thy people Israel” (2 Chron. 6:21,26,27).

## The signs of John’s Gospel

Tony Fitzgerald

IT IS CUSTOMARY to think of there being eight ‘signs’ in John’s Gospel. The Greek word *sēmeion* is not unique to John’s Gospel, but John does use only this word in relation to the miracles he describes. Reference works tell us that *sēmeion* means ‘a sign’, so this, rather than ‘miracle’, is an appropriate translation into English. The AV is not consistent, sometimes translating *sēmeion* as ‘miracle’ and sometimes as ‘sign’, thirteen and four times respectively in John’s Gospel. More recent versions use ‘sign’ more consistently.

The signs recorded by John are, as he himself reports, a selection from the many signs which “truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples” (20:30). The eight signs commonly identified are often related to each other in pairs, set out in the table as described by that arch pattern seeker Bullinger in his *Companion Bible*, Appendix 176.

disciples asking, concerning the blind man, “who did sin, this man, or his parents . . . ?” (9:2). Further connections are suggested for these and the other pairs, some more convincing than others.

It is interesting, and can be helpful, to find what seem to us to be patterns in Scripture. There is the risk, however, that we can allow a possible pattern to take precedence over the actual situation as recorded. So, with John’s signs, the suggestion that there are nine, rather than eight, might appear to upset the pattern and, unreasonably, be rejected merely on that score. What must be examined, as impartially as possible, is the evidence within the text of Scripture.

Taking the Gospel as a whole, without any preconceived notions, is not the greatest miracle, and sign, the resurrection of Jesus himself? And, indeed, when asked the question by the Jews, “What sign [*sēmeion*] shewest thou . . . ?”, he “an-

**Sign 1:** water into wine (2:1-11)  
**Sign 2:** healing nobleman’s son (4:46-54)  
**Sign 3:** healing the paralytic (5:1-16)  
**Sign 4:** feeding the five thousand (6:1-14)

**Sign 5:** walking on the water (6:15-21)  
**Sign 6:** healing the man born blind (ch. 9)  
**Sign 7:** raising of Lazarus (ch. 11)  
**Sign 8:** multitude of fishes (21:1-14)

There are quite striking connections between the elements of some of these pairs. For example, the second and seventh both refer to death, the nobleman’s son being “at the point of death” (4:47) and Lazarus being raised from death. The third and sixth both refer to sin, Jesus telling the healed paralytic to “sin no more” (5:14) and the

swered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”. Clearly, as a sign, he was referring to his resurrection, as the disciples later recognised (2:18-22).

However, the resurrection of Jesus did not occur “in the presence of his disciples” (20:30), for none of them, nor indeed any other human