



THE BEREA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Must Reading for the Age of Man

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Longtime philosophy professor Peter Kreeft posits “that Ecclesiastes is the greatest of all books of philosophy” (Kreeft 1989, 15). A few pages later, he details its value for believers who wish to speak to the modern world.

Ecclesiastes is the one book in the Bible that modern man needs most to read, for it is Lesson One, and the rest of the Bible is Lesson Two, and modernity does not heed Lesson Two because it does not heed Lesson One. Whenever I teach the Bible as a whole, I always begin with Ecclesiastes. In another age, we could begin with God’s beginning, Genesis. But in this age, the Age of Man, we must begin where our patient is; we must begin with Ecclesiastes (Kreeft 1989, 20).

Did he overstate the point? Perhaps. Disciples in the pluralistic West are challenged by multiple worldviews; we need to begin in different places with different hearers. But “secularization,” the outlook that undergirds “the Age of Man,” remains a formidable challenger. George Hunter defines it as “the withdrawal of whole areas of life, thought, and activity from the control or influence of the Church” (Hunter 1992, 25–26). Similarly, Peter Berger says it is “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols” (Berger 1969, 108; in Hunter 1992, 173 n. 7). The affected sectors include “every area of western society’s life”—education, government, economics, art, architecture, literature, music, personal morality, and personal life (Hunter 1992, 26).

Much of the effect of secularization is seen in the pluralism of our world. If there is no overarching authority, it is sensible to say all opinions have equal weight and allow each group (or person) to go its own way. As Alan Bloom wrote forty years ago, this “relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating” (Bloom 1987, 25–26). But that openness comes with a cost: many are adrift, searching for identity and meaning while experiencing fragmentation and alienation, both socially and internally.

How can Ecclesiastes help? First by reminding us that our world is not the first to experience meaninglessness, fragmentation, and alienation. Ecclesiastes has been identified as an example of ancient “pessimism literature” (Eaton 1983, 33–34). Other examples include the Egyptian work, *The Man Who Was Tired of Life* (2300–2100 BC), and the Babylonian *Dialogue of Pessimism* (ca. 1300 BC). Both feature characters who ask themselves whether life is worth living or suicide is the only reasonable end (Eaton 1983, 34–35).

Second, Ecclesiastes reminds us that people have tried the man-centered way before. It is true

that the Teacher ends his musings on a positive note (Eccl 12.13). It is also true that he refers to God forty times. But the word he uses is always *Elohim*, never *YHWH*. That he would reference God is not unexpected; he lived in a world where atheists, in the sense of denying the existence of any divine being, were virtually unknown. But while he mentions *Elohim*, he says repeatedly that the realm of his testing (cf. Eccl 2.1) is “under the sun.” That phrase appears twenty-nine times in the text (1.3, 9, 14; 2.11, 17–20, 22; 3.16; 4.1, 3, 7, 15; 5.12, 17; 6.1, 12; 8.9, 15, 17; 9.3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10.5), and is repeated conceptually in the expressions, “under heaven” and “on earth” (cf. 1.13; 2.3; 3.1; 5.2; 7.20; 8.14, 16; 11.2–3) (Longman 1998, 66).

So, the Teacher’s focus in his experiments is this-worldly. And, despite traditional—and devotional—presentations of Ecclesiastes that have “effectively ignored, played down or allegorized” it, what he concludes about life “under the sun” is decidedly pessimistic (Eaton 1983, 44). He calls it a “labor” (ESV: “toil”; 1.3; 2.11, 18, 22; 4.4; 5.3, 18; 6.7; 8.15, 17), a “pursuit of the wind” (cf. 1.14, 17; 2.11, 17, 26; 4.4, 6, 16; 6.9; 8.8; 11.4) which he says profits or gains nothing (cf. 1.3; 2.11; 3.9; 5.11, 16). No wonder he concludes that under-the-sun life is “futile” (32 times in the CSB; 37 times as “vanity” in the ESV). In fact, that’s the word he uses to bookend the body of the book (1.3; 12.8).

Why “begin with Ecclesiastes” (Kreeft)? Because it is “an apologetic” (Eaton 1983, 44), “a searching criticism of human self-sufficiency” in which the Teacher “shocks us into seeing life and death strictly from ground level, and into reaching the only conclusions from that standpoint that honesty will allow” (Kidner 1985, 93–94).

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