

Ecclesiastes is not easily outlined due to the repetitive and culminative nature of the book. This is about the best I can do:

- I. Prologue 1:1-11
- II. First Discourse 1:12-2
- III. Second Discourse 3:1- ch. 5
- IV. Third Discourse 6:1-8:15
- V. Fourth Discourse 8:15-12:7
- VI. Epilogue 12:8-14

The division into discourse is honest but the material in the discourse lapses back and forth and makes further categorization difficult if not impossible.

Regarding the history of redemption, nonhistorical books (as noted in other places) that do not emerge from a specific time frame make it difficult to locate a "history of redemption" thrust. But Ecclesiastes teaches us about God's nature and plan and therefore contributes some comments on the redemptive program.

Written as a unit by one author, its introduction (1:2-11) and conclusion (12:9-14) correlate with one another. The author wrote from a "hidden-agenda" --his purpose was to write from the standpoint of his pagan neighbors in such a way as to demonstrate to them the utter pointlessness and hopelessness of their lives without God at the center of all things. Thus understood, this becomes a tract to draw people to God through their despair. It is not, as has frequently been asserted, a demonstration of sinful human reasoning which should be avoided because it teaches nothing Good. Quite to the contrary, it presses for the central place of the Lord in our lives and our necessary dependence on His revelation and will. All men are sinners (7:20) and apart from the Lord everything is empty.

Regarding some questions of interest we ask how we should interpret and use Ecclesiastes today? If Solomon were not the author of the book would this affect our interpretation of it? To what extent are cynical or skeptical philosophies reflected in the writing?

In connexion with archaeology note that in some ancient texts and inscriptions we find many interesting parallels to Ecclesiastes. Derek Kidner notes many of these in his commentary A TIME TO MOURN, A TIME TO DANCE (IVP). Some other parallels come from the WORDS OF AHIKAR, an Egyptian wise man and sage. These show that the emotions and thoughts which Ecclesiastes ascribes to those without God existed as truly then as now. If the Solomonic authorship is correct then what we know of that era is supportive of the picture of chapter 2 and the "out-of-joint" conditions would surely be true of the latter part of Solomon's reign.

The key to Ecclesiastes is to discover what "vanity" is and how it expresses itself in the other activities of life: learning, material possessions, popularity, etc. The continuing contrast of wisdom and foolishness from Proverbs is also apparent and if this character study is pursued (who is wise? who is foolish?) it helps unlock the book. It must be remembered that "death" in Ecclesiastes is the cessation of all our normal and human activity...not the end of all existence. Therefore we understand the book better if we understand that it is forewarning us of the finality of death and the destruction of all human projects in that way.

Study tips for Ecclesiastes begin with the single reading: the whole book at one sitting. Following this one should read through it again and note the themes as they recur throughout the book...you may need a