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The Life of Solomon from a Messianic Jewish Perspective

To Rabbi Barney Kasdan of Kehilat Ariel Messianic Synagogue in San Diego, California. Faithful shepherd of his flock and great teacher of the Word. He makes the Scriptures come alive and has the true heart of a servant.



As an ancient document, the Old Testament often seems something quite foreign to the men and women of today. Opening its pages may feel, to the modern reader, like traveling a kind of literary time warp into a whole other world. In that world, sisters and brothers marry, long hair mysteriously makes men superhuman, the Temple altars daily smell of savory burning flesh and sweet incense. There, desert bushes burn but leave no ashes, water gushes from rocks, and cities fall because people march around them. A different world indeed!

Even **God**, the main character in the Old Testament, seems a stranger compared to **His** more familiar New Testament counterpart. Sometimes the divine is portrayed as a loving father and faithful friend, someone who rescues people from their greatest dangers or generously rewards them for heroic deeds. At other times, however, **God** resembles more of a cruel despot, one furious at human failures, raving against enemies and bloodthirsty for revenge. Thus, skittish about the Old Testament's diverse portrayal of **God**, some readers carefully select which portions of the Bible to study, or they just avoid the Old Testament altogether.¹

Even some preachers find it difficult to construct sermons from Old Testament texts. Misconceptions about Old Testament history, such as its supposedly boring, non-theological nature, cause Gentile believers to question the book's value for devotional reading. Not only that, believers from all walks of life doubt the practicality of studying events that occurred three thousand years ago. Even diligent Bible students may get discouraged trying to fit the kings, foreign enemies, and relevant dates into a coherent whole.

But these barriers *can* be overcome. Pastors *can*, and *should*, prepare doctrinally sound, relevant messages from **Kings, Ecclesiastes, and Chronicles**. They *should* teach and preach through books of the Old Testament. Believers *can*, and *should*, glean important insights for daily living and dealing with the stresses of this world. Historical situations such as war, poverty, political corruption, and oppression are just as relevant today as they were in ancient times. Likewise, faithfulness, loyalty, and obedience remain marks of **God's** people. Also, crucial Biblical doctrines like **God's** sovereignty, redemption, wrath and love permeate these books.² My hope is that your walk with **God** will be just as blessed by reading this commentary as mine has been in writing it.

First Kings:

Author: Though it is obvious that the author utilized various source materials in writing **First** and **Second Kings**, the book bears the marks of single rather than multiple authors. Some of the indicators are the choice of materials recorded (for example, the records of the deeds and evaluations of the kings, and the ministries of several prophets), the emphases which run throughout the books (for example, the ministries of the prophets and the evaluation of the kings in relation to the Torah, and the primacy of the Davidic dynasty), the method of expressing the beginnings and endings of the kings' reigns (for example, **First Kings 14:31, 15:1-3 and 23-26**), and phrases and terms that reappear from beginning to end (for example, **now the rest of the act are . . . are they not written . . . evil in the sight of ADONAI . . . he reigned . . . years and his mother's name was . . . as surely as ADONAI lives**).³

The identity of the author is unknown. **But according to the Talmud (B. Bat. 15a), he was the prophet Jeremiah.** This is not accepted by modern scholars who contend that events which took place in Babylon after **Jeremiah's** death are recorded in the books of **Kings**. But what can be safely said is that the majority of the book bears the markings of one author, who, as

an eyewitness of the Jewish nation's final demise, was concerned to show the divine reasons for that fall. In doing so, he utilized many sources, weaving the details together to graphically show **Isra'el's** failure to keep the covenant.⁴

Date: The book of **Kings** was originally written on one scroll. Today's division into **First** and **Second Kings** is merely an arbitrary point marking the middle of the narrative. **First Kings** begins at the end of **David's** reign, which would be in 970 BC. And the last event mentioned in **Second Kings** is the release of **Jehoicachin** (or **Jeconiah**) from a Babylonian prison in **the thirty-seventh year** of his exile, which would make it 562 BC or 561 BC. There is no mention of a return to the Land in 536 BC (as is the case with the books of **the Chronicles**), so it would have to have been written sometime between the year 562/561 BC and 536 BC, with the date of 550 BC probably the best guess.

Character and aim: The books of **Kings** continue the history of the monarchy, begun in the books of Samuel, down to the Babylonian captivity. They tell how **God's** promise to **David** of a continuous succession was fulfilled in the life of his son **Solomon** and his successors. It persists through the books to their end where there is a record of the surviving prince of the **Davidic** line, though a captive in Babylon.

The books of **First** and **Second Kings** dwell on three institutions which symbolize **the Presence of God** among **His** people: **the Temple, prophecy,** and **the Davidic dynasty.** The omission of any one of them would negate the promise of **ADONAI** to **David**, thus endangering the peace and existence of the nation. The dominant purpose of the narratives is religious instruction. The historical records are but the vehicle of the moral and spiritual truths which are conveyed to the reader.

The account of the rise and fall of **Solomon** drives home in an impressive manner, the lesson that so long as we walk the path of righteousness all is well; but no sooner do we yield to the flesh and go our own way that we become subject to **God's** discipline. This is true of **the king** as well as **his** subjects. The sinfulness of idolatry in all its forms, the duty of wholehearted devotion to **ADONAI** are fully illustrated, and, as with the individual, a people's obedience to **God** is rewarded by national security and prosperity, while disobedience is punished by national calamity.⁵

Ecclesiastes:

Author: Our guide on this journey in **Ecclesiastes** is called **Qoheleth**, or as we know **him** in English, **the Teacher**. Before we go any further it is important to clarify this man's identity. The Hebrew root of the word *qoheleth* literally means *to gather or assemble*. Some take this as a reference to the way the author collected wise sayings. But in the TaNaKh the verbal form of this word typically refers to gathering a community of people, especially for the worship of **ADONAI**. So think of **Qoheleth** as **a teacher** speaking **wisdom** to the people of **God**.

The Church has long identified **Solomon** as **the Teacher** of **Ecclesiastes**. According to this point of view, the old **king** looked back over **his** life, particularly the period after **his** apostasy from **ADONAI** (**to see link click Bx - Solomon's Wives**), repented of **his** wicked ways and turned back to **YHVH**. A surface reading of the text supports this identification: **The words of Qoheleth, son of David, king in Jerusalem (Ecclesiastes 1:1)**. These words seem most naturally to point to **Solomon**, the biological **son of King David**, who was a **king** living **in Jerusalem**, and who ruled the kingdom after **his father**. **Ecclesiastes**, then, is **his** memoir, or last testament, in which **he** tells us what **he** learned from **his** hopeless attempt to live without **God**.⁶

In the autobiographical section (see **Cd - The Search for Satisfaction**) **he** said **he** was wiser **than anyone who had ruled over Jerusalem before him (Ecclesiastes 1:16)**, that **he** was the builder of great projects (**2:4-6**), and that **he** possessed numerous slaves (**2:7**), incomparable herds of sheep and cattle (**2:7**), great wealth (**2:8**), and a large harem (**2:8**). In short, **he** claimed to be greater than anyone who lived in **Jerusalem** before **him (2:9)**. Given that understanding, only **Solomon** could have been the author of **Ecclesiastes**, even though **his** name is never explicitly used in the book.⁷

As the Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the TaNaKh (published in 1861) says: The epilogue (see **Cy - The Conclusion of the Matter**), written from the same hand as the book, seals its truth: **Ecclesiastes** is written as from the very soul of **Solomon**. **The Midrash regards it as written by Solomon in the evening of his days; while the Song of Solomon was written in his youth, and Proverbs when he was of middle age. And the Soncino Commentary on Ecclesiastes (1947) also assumes the author is Solomon**. Bloch, in his work on the origin and era of **Ecclesiastes** (1872), is right in saying that all objections to the canonicity of the book leave the

Solomonic authorship without doubt.⁸ Therefore, both historically and currently, Jews believe that **Solomon** was the author of **Ecclesiastes**.

A common mistake interpreters make is to take **Solomon's** comments as incorrect conclusions about life made by a man who was out of fellowship with **God**. On the contrary, the teachings of **Ecclesiastes** are not of an unscriptural nature, but rather insights and counsel from a man who observed some of the frustrating characteristics of life in this world. Even though believers began enjoying the indwelling of **the Spirit of God** after Shavu'ot, that reality does not remove the fact that many of life's experiences remain a mystery and many people experience frustrations similar to **Solomon's**.⁹

Title: Ecclesiastes comes from Greek, not Hebrew. It is a form of the word *ekklesia*, which is the common word in the B'rit Chadashah for "church." Taken most literally, **Ecclesiastes** means *one who speaks to the congregation* – in a word **the Teacher**.

Date: Life in this world does not fundamentally change, and we do not need a date for **Ecclesiastes** in order to receive its message. It is part of the genius of **the Teacher's** thought that it stands on its own feet at any time or at any place. The book, in fact, provides few clues to its date, language, or possible dependence on foreign thought.¹⁰

Why Ecclesiastes: There are several good reasons to study **Ecclesiastes**. This book helps us ask the biggest and hardest questions that people still have today – questions that lie in a fallen world: What is the meaning of life? Why is there so much suffering and injustice? Does **God** even care? Is life really worth living? The writer asks the tough intellectual and practical questions that people always have, and he is not satisfied with the easy answers that children usually get. In fact, part of his spiritual struggle is with the answers he has always been given. If you are the kind of person who always says, "Yes, but . . .", then this book is for you.

Here is another reason to study **Ecclesiastes**: it helps us worship the one true **God**. For all its doubts and dissatisfaction, this book teaches many great truths about **ADONAI**. It presents **Him** as **the Mighty Creator** and **Sovereign LORD**, the all-powerful **Ruler** of the universe, the only wise **God**. So reading this book will help you get to know **Him** better.

Ecclesiastes will also help you live with **God** and not only ourselves. **Solomon** had more money, enjoyed more pleasure, and possessed more wisdom than anyone else in the world, yet it all ended in tears. The same thing could happen to us, but it doesn't have to. "Why make your own mistakes," **Solomon** is constantly saying to us, "when you can learn from an expert like me instead?" Then he helps us with everyday issues such as money, sex, power and death, which may be the most practical issue of all. **Solomon** had it all, but discovering that "having it all" nearly destroyed **him**. Fortunately for us, when **he** "climbs the golden ladder of ultimate success and looks over the brink, he actually has the good sense to step back down, and tell the rest of us, "There's nothing up there!"

Finally, **Ecclesiastes** also helps us to be honest about the troubles of life. Perhaps this explains why some call it "the truest of all books." More than anything else in the Bible, it captures the futility and frustration of a fallen world: the drudgery of work, the emptiness of foolish pleasure and the mind-numbing tedium of everyday life. Reading it helps us to be honest with **God** about our problems – even those of us who trust in the goodness of **ADONAI**. It is a "kind of back door" that allows believers to have the sad and skeptical thoughts that they would never allow to enter the front door of their faith."¹¹

Chronicles:

Date and Author: The books of **Chronicles**, which are actually a single work only artificially divided in two, are of unknown authorship. **Early Jewish traditions designated Ezra as the author of Chronicles.** But we will refer to the author as "the Chronicler" in this devotional commentary. The date is generally, but not precisely, known. The final two verses of **Second Chronicles** show that the perspective of the whole work is that of a time later than the Babylonian Exile, in other words, after 539 BC. This means that it probably belongs in the period between that year and 331 BC during which the Persian Empire exercised sovereignty over what was then the rather small and politically weakened province of Judah, the sole remnant of Isra'el with its once mighty royal house. This places Chronicles somewhere in the fourth century BC. It's position roughly in the middle of the English Old Testament disguises that fact. The TaNaKh, however, places it last.¹²

A sermon: What seems at first glance to be a casual re-telling of **Samuel/Kings** turns out to be something quite different. Indeed, there are

considerable differences between the two histories. Under the inspiration of **the Ruach**, the Chronicler writes history of an unprecedented sweep, going back to the very beginning of mankind; and where he does cover the same ground as **Samuel/Kings**, he uses those books as a source, but with great freedom, adding quite as much as he omits. So although he may seem in some ways an unattractive writer, with a number of bees in his bonnet, eccentric ideas as to what is important and interesting, and a tendency to exaggerate, he can at any rate be seen as a helpful provider of extra information about the history of **God's** people.

But this neglected book deserves a better rehabilitation than that. It is more than merely an alternative history. It is a sermon. Its object is the fostering of a right relationship between **God** and **His** people. It sees in the records of Isra'el the great overall pattern of failure and judgment, then grace and restoration, with a perceptive eye to those events in the nation's history which highlight that pattern.

The last book of the TaNaKh: A reader new to **Chronicles** might see it wrongly as a valley of dry bones, as alternative history, as popular morality, or as inventive story-telling. It is unlikely that he would see it as the last book of the TaNaKh! Unless, that is, he was reading in Hebrew – for then he would find it right at the end – it closes the canon of the Hebrew scriptures. There is no agreement as to why it stands in that position; but it seems a fitting one. **The Chronicler's** selectivity is not unlike that of the writer of the last book of the Gospels, reflecting on innumerable memories of the earthly life of **Messiah**, and making a new selection from them to teach in a new way, old fundamental truths. Similarly, the way **the Chronicler** summarizes such truths, teaching nothing which could not be found elsewhere in Scripture, yet teaching with a sense of vividness, contrast and drama which are all his own, must bring to our memory the last book of the B'rit Chadashsh. Like **John** and **Revelation**, **Chronicles** rounds off an entire major section of Scripture. The countless people that our writer has named and chronicled for us are not dry bones; they are part of the army of the living **God**. They were real, and they make real for us truth by which **God's** people in every generation are to live.¹³

The Use of the Complete Jewish Bible: Because I am writing this commentary on the book of **Second Corinthians** from a **Jewish** perspective, I will be using *the Complete Jewish Bible* unless otherwise indicated.

The use of ADONAI: Long before **Yeshua's** day, the word **ADONAI** had, out of respect, been substituted in speaking and in reading aloud for **God's** personal name, the four Hebrew letters *yod-heh-vav-heh*, variously written in English as **YHVH**. **The Talmud (Pesachim 50a) made it a requirement not to pronounce the Tetragrammaton**, meaning the four-letter name of **the LORD**, and this remains the rule in most modern **Jewish** settings. In deference to this tradition, which is unnecessary but harmless, I will be using **ADONAI** where **YHVH** is meant. In ancient times when the scribes were translating the Hebrew Scriptures, they revered the name of **YHVH** so much that they would use a quill to make one stroke of the name and then throw it away. Then they would make another stroke and throw that quill away until the name was completed. **His** name became so sacred to them that they started to substitute the phrase *the Name*, instead of writing or pronouncing **His** Name. Over centuries of doing this, the actual letters and pronunciation of **His** Name were lost. The closest we can come is **YHVH**, with no syllables. The pronunciation has been totally lost. Therefore, the name Yahweh is only a guess of what the original name sounded like. Both **ADONAI** and **Ha'Shem** are substitute names for **YHVH**. **ADONAI** is more of an affectionate name like *daddy*, while **Ha'Shem** is a more formal name like *sir*.

The use of TaNaKh: The Hebrew word **TaNaKh** is an acronym, based on the letters **T** (for "**T**orah"), **N** (for "**N**evi'im," the Prophets), and **K** (for "**K**etuvim," the Sacred Writings). It is the collection of the teachings of **God** to human beings in document form. The term "Old Covenant" implies that it is no longer valid, or at the very least outdated. Something old, to be either ignored or discarded. But **Jesus Himself** said: **Don't think I have come to abolish the Torah and the Prophets, I have not come to abolish but to complete (Matthew 5:17 CJB)**. I will be using the Hebrew acronym **TaNaKh** instead of the phrase the Old Testament, throughout this devotional commentary.

The Use of the phrase, "the righteous of the TaNaKh," rather than using Old Testament saints: Messianic synagogues, and the **Jewish** messianic community in general, never use the phrase Old Testament saints. From a **Jewish** perspective, they prefer to use the phrase, "righteous of **the TaNaKh**." Therefore, I will be using "the righteous of **the TaNaKh**," rather than Old Testament saints throughout this devotional commentary.