

Ecclesiastes

McMaster Divinity College
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Course Designation

OT 6XB6 Ecclesiastes

Course Schedule

Classes begin Wednesday January 6th
Class meets each Wednesday 1:30 – 3:20 p.m.
No class on Wednesday February 17th (reading week)
Last class on Wednesday March 30th

Course Description

This course is a study of the book of Ecclesiastes. The name is the Greco-Latin form of the Hebrew Qoheleth, an epithet for the main character who calls the people together for instruction in wisdom. Qoheleth is not conventional wisdom, but the author is a conservative upper class wisdom writer. This course adopts the position that “life has meaning and can be endowed with joy—even if the meaning is often veiled from man and the joy must be achieved in the face of frustration” (Robert Gordis, *Koheleth – The Man and His World*, pp. 120-21). This course will examine the wisdom of Koheleth in pursuit of the joy of life which he advocates.

Course Objectives

Knowing

In this course the student will come to know the content and literary form of the book of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth finds much in life that is contrary to reason. The contradictions of his book are an important part of his approach to help mortals deal with the frustrations of life as they are experienced.

The interpretation of Qoheleth has been as contradictory as the book itself. Qoheleth has been regarded as a skeptic, pessimist, and a preacher of joy. The epilogue has been regarded as both a confirmation

and a correction of the collected thoughts of Qoheleth. The course will examine all these approaches to assist students in their own understanding and appreciation of this unique book in the canon.

Being

This course is an existential reflection on human life and an exercise in finding the joy that may be found each day. It will demand an evaluation of the values by which each day is lived.

It has been said that “You are not what you think you are, but what you think you are.” Qoheleth would agree. He has done a lot of thinking about his own life in order to become more the person he wants to be. His “autobiography” is intended to enable his readers to find themselves as they contemplate his life as a youth and in old age that they may *remember their creator in the days of their youth, before the troublesome days come, when you have no desire for them.*

Doing

Pondering Ecclesiastes changes how each day is lived. Students will evaluate their goals and how they plan to achieve them.

The most influential goals in life are often informal and even unconscious. This can be seen in the behaviour of each day, which so often is contradictory to intentions. Further, the events of a day are unpredictable. As Qoheleth observes, life may be altered in an instant in irrational ways without any warning. The wisdom of Qoheleth helps readers be more conscious of the significance of ordinary routines that constitute most of our days.

Course Texts

Micahel V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, Eerdmans, 1999.

Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 2nd ed., 1996.

Mark J. Boda et al. *The Words of the Wise Are Like Goats: Engaging Qoheleth in the 21st Century*. Winona Lake, IN, Eisenbrauns, 2013.

Textbook Purchase

All required textbooks for this class are available from the College’s book service, READ On Bookstore, Room 145, McMaster Divinity College. Texts may be purchased on the first day of class. For advance purchase, you may contact READ On Bookstore, 304 The East Mall, Suite 100, Etobicoke, ON M9C 5K1: phone 416.620.2934; fax 416.622.2308; email books@readon.ca. Other book services may also carry the texts.

Course Lectures

1. Ecclesiastes as part of Hebrew Wisdom Literature
2. The Narrator 1:1-11; 12:8-14
3. Life Experiment 1:12–2:26
4. Elusive Pursuit of the Joy of Life 3:1-22

5. Life in Community	4:1-16
6. Conduct before God in Word and Work	5:1–6:9
7. What is Good?	6:10–7:14
8. Wisdom and Righteousness	7:15-29
9. The Limits of Wisdom	8:1–9:3
10. Joy and Misfortune	9:4–10:1
11. Virtues of Life	10:2–11:6
12. Remember your Creator	11:7–12:7

Course Requirements and Grading

Word Study 10%

Ecclesiastes is known for its refrain translated by Tyndale as “Vanity of vanities, everything is vanity.” Vanity is not the meaning of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes, but there is little agreement on what it does mean. With reference to the essay by Miller in his commentary on Ecclesiastes (see bibliography), the article by Meek in *Words of the Wise* (see Biblical Studies Text), and other lexical resources of your choice, explain how you understand the author’s use of the word *hebel*. Explain why this word should or should not be translated with the same English word. This paper is **due January 27** and should be approximately 1000 words.

Biblical Wisdom 20%

Using the text by Murphy as a resource, summarize the five major compositions classified as Hebrew wisdom. Discuss the authorship, date, genre, and purpose of each of these compositions, showing the development of Hebrew wisdom thought. Show how Ecclesiastes is not conventional Hebrew wisdom and yet is a part of the development of the Hebrew wisdom tradition. This paper is **due February 10**, and should be about 2000 words.

Exegetical Assignment 30%

Using the methodology of Greidanus for Christian preaching of the Old Testament as a guide (see bibliography), choose a passage like one of the examples of Greidanus. Do a research that would serve as the preparation for a sermon or lecture. Note the context, literary features, textual structure, theocentric interpretation, textual theme and goal, and explore ways in which this passage applies to contemporary Christian life. This paper is **due March 2**, and should be about 2500 words.

Research Assignment 40%

Students will complete a research assignment of about 5000 words in one of the five general areas outlined in *The Words of the Wise are Like Goads* (history of interpretation, form and rhetorical criticism, key concepts and passages, language and grammar, and interpretation of Qoheleth). The student will compile about 5000-6000 pages of reading related to the topic chosen and approved by the professor. The paper should be of particular value to the student and program, one that could be presented at a scholarly society. This paper is **due April 6**. The paper will be presented in class at a time mutually agreed upon with the professor.

Course Policies

Academic Honesty

Academic dishonesty is a serious offence that may take any number of forms, including plagiarism, the submission of work that is not one's own or for which previous credit has been obtained, and/or unauthorized collaboration with other students. Academic dishonesty can result in severe consequences, e.g., failure of the assignment, failure of the course, a notation on one's academic transcript, and/or suspension or expulsion from the College.

Students are responsible for understanding what constitutes academic dishonesty. Please refer to the Divinity College Statement on Academic Honesty ~ <http://www.mcmasterdivinity.ca/programs/rules-regulations>

Gender Inclusive Language

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all of its publications. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected. The NRSV and TNIV are examples of the use of inclusive language for human beings. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments.

Style

All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) must conform to the McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses <http://www.mcmasterdivinity.ca/sites/default/files/documents/MDCStyleGuide.pdf>
Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

Bibliography

Text

Schenker, Godman Van Der. *Biblia Hebraica Quinta: Megilloth: Ruth, Canticles, Qoheleth, Lamentations, Esther*. Edited by A. Shenker et al. Bilingual edition. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004.

Hebrew Wisdom

An extensive though now dated bibliography on wisdom can be found in James L. Crenshaw, *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, KTAV, 1976, 46–60.

Wisdom in the Ancient Near East

Fensham, F. Charles. "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature." *JNES* 21 (1962) 129–39.

Kayatz, Christa B. *Studien zu Proverbien 1–9: Eine form- und motivgeschichtliche Untersuchung unter Einbeziehung ägyptischen Vergleichsmaterials*. WMANT 22. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener,

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