

# English Language resources

## Bible texts analysis – Ecclesiastes 3

### **A textual analysis of a passage from the King James Bible**

The text is the *King James Bible* translation of Ecclesiastes 3:1-15. The analysis is to show the way in which language has changed over time.

#### **Audience**

The audience can be considered on different levels:

- ❖ Since Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 comes from the Old Testament of the Bible, its original audience was pre-Christian. Attributed to King Solomon, one of the great Israelite kings, it was part of Jewish scripture, particularly of its tradition of Wisdom Literature.
- ❖ The *KJB* audience (from the seventeenth century onwards) was a Christian society with limited access to the Bible until the *KJB* appeared. The translation maintains ceremony and tradition. It was used in church where the priest would read it aloud for the congregation, but increasingly families and individuals with growing literacy had access to the text. Owning a family Bible was a matter of prestige and made possible by the affordability of texts owing to the advent of the printing press. The lexical choices in the *KJB* were intended to suit a wide audience and most of the population would either read or hear the text.
- ❖ Modern audiences of the text are widespread and multiple: the philosophy of this passage has been reflected in popular culture (eg. The Byrds' *Turn turn!*) as well as being familiar to contemporary Christian and Jewish believers.

#### **Purpose**

The primary purpose of the text is instruction. We see this in the use of the modal auxiliary verb 'should' in vv.13 and 14 and 'shall' in v.14. But rather than direct instruction with the use of imperative verbs, the author reflects on

the way in which the world works. The repetition of the word 'time' from vv. 1-8 underlines the idea of a plan that should direct the way in which people live their lives. It could be said that this is part of a secondary purpose of giving information about God's plan.

This repetition of the word 'time' followed with an infinitive verb (eg. 'a time to keep') also provides an element of entertainment. This patterning has the phonological effect of giving a poetic rhythm to this passage. As a result, it is one of the most memorable in the Bible.

#### **Content/genre**

This is a sacred text, specifically from the Old Testament section of the Bible. The passage is a sermon from a preacher who is addressing some of the most important questions of life and death. In an attempt to answer those who are looking for a purpose in life, he concludes that God is eternal and that everything happens within God's time / purposes.

Although this is a written text, there is a strong sense that this might have originated as a spoken piece. It is personal and direct with the use of the first person pronoun 'I', as in, 'I have seen the travail'. The use of structural repetition and the contrasting pairs of verbs (eg. 'rend' / 'sew') in vv. 1-8 suggest that it is intended to be memorable to a listening audience.

It is a very familiar passage from the Bible. The first eight verses in particular are often quoted and have been incorporated into a song. It has almost transcended its Biblical origin and become part of folk wisdom.

#### **Discourse**

This text has a first person narrator with use of the first person pronoun 'I'. There is a strong sense of personal experience as in v.12, 'I know that ...'. This also lends an authoritative tone to the text. The narrator seems to be a teacher who is giving the benefit of his experience in

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order to instruct listeners/readers in the ways of God. The narrator/teacher seems to wield some influence over the audience, pronouncing moral judgements on them: 'there is no good in them' v.12.

The discourse structure is based on ideas and their opposites to make the meanings clear e.g. birth and death. There is a high level of patterning in the language. Verses 1-8 especially include rhetorical devices:

- ❖ There is the repetition of 'A time to' and the structural repetition of 'A time to' plus infinitive verb
- ❖ There is also the use of antithetical parallelism e.g. 'born' and 'die'; 'kill' and 'heal'; 'love' and 'hate' etc., perhaps illustrating that God's remit covers the whole range of human experience
- ❖ Although the lexis is high frequency, familiar to its seventeenth century audience and there is little in the way of metaphor, yet the passage has the effect of being poetic.

There is a strong emphasis on 'time' running throughout the passage which creates cohesion within the text. The common theme is that there is a right time to fulfill God's purposes and that time itself belongs to God. Human beings live in time but God is eternal. The contrast of perspective in the first ten compared to the last five verses emphasises this.

### Graphology

The passage demonstrates typical discourse features of the *King James Bible (KJB)*. Ecclesiastes is divided into chapters and verses with a new line for each verse and many of the verses beginning with the same words. The sense of pattern and repetition, which is being emphasised in the sounds and the lexis, is also reflected in the appearance on the page.

There is a typical use of initial capitalisation for 'God' as a proper noun, emphasising his pre-eminence

### Grammar

The text has many marks of formality. There are long sentences. In particular, vv. 1-8 is one sentence. Verse 11 is also one long sentence. Colons and semi colons are used to divide up these long sentences, indicating the pauses required by the spoken mode / oral tradition. Such punctuation features more prominently in older texts.

The most noticeable difference from a modern text is the syntax. The word order is often quite unfamiliar. Inversion of subject and object occurs in the first sentence, 'To everything there is a season'. It would be more normal to say, 'There is a season for everything'.

The structure of the question form has also changed. For example, in v.9 the inversion of verb and pronoun 'hath he' would now become 'does he have', with the use of the auxiliary verb 'does'. Using a rhetorical question like this is designed to engage and provoke thought in the audience into the nature of existence.

The archaic verb ending, '-eth' (as in 'worketh', 'laboureth', 'doeth') has disappeared in Modern Standard English.

### Lexis

At the time of the *KJB*, the text would have been accessible to most people as the lexis would have been familiar. The nouns are mostly common e.g. 'profit', 'man', 'labour', 'gift'. There are many verbs, which are high frequency ones, associated with everyday life e.g. 'plant', 'heal', 'laugh', 'dance'. There are also verbs associated with common emotions e.g. 'weep', 'love', 'hate'. These would be easily understood and would appeal to a broad audience, as well as suggesting that the whole range of human emotion is under the control of God.

Words have been selected from the lexical field of work and everyday occupations, e.g. 'plant', 'sew', 'travail', (work), 'profit', 'labour'. The lexical field of universal emotions (e.g. 'weep', 'laugh', 'mourn', 'rejoice', 'fear') is also

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represented. This makes the subject matter readily accessible. There are few abstract nouns and those are of common emotions and ideas such as 'good'. This makes the text easy to understand.

There are examples of archaic lexis e.g. 'rend' v.7, 'travail' v.10. There are also phrases which are still intelligible but would no longer be used in that form e.g.

- ❖ For 'cast away' v.5 we might today use the word 'drop' although it does not indicate such a deliberate gesture
- ❖ Good is more rarely used as a noun nowadays. For 'enjoy the good' v. 13 we might substitute 'benefit from' or 'gain satisfaction from'.

### Semantics

The use of the adjective 'beautiful' in v.11 would be unlikely now as it tends to be mainly used for physical appearance. This could be an example of narrowing. 'Beautiful' could refer here to a spiritual and moral beauty as it encompasses 'everything'.

### Phonology

This is a very memorable passage, partly as a result of the sound patterns in the text. The structural repetition of v.1-8 is a good example of this. It is no surprise that it has translated easily into the mode of song. The repetition of 'time' clearly signals the focus of the piece, conveying that at each point in our lives there will be different things happening.

The frequency of monosyllables – 'a time to kill', 'a time to dance' – maintains the simplicity of the message and makes it more universal to people's individual experiences than any discussion about when such activities/behaviour are needed.

### Concepts

Despite the formality of the text indicated by long complex sentences and rhetorical patterning, verse 13 begins the sentence with 'And'. This would be seen today as a mark of informality. However, such an attitude results from the prescriptive rules for

correct English that came in with eighteenth century grammarians like Bishop Lowth. The standardisation of English began at that time. However, no such rules existed at the time of the *KJB*. The use of 'and' at the beginning of a sentence would not be a marker of informality.

There are references to 'man' as the general term for 'humans' in vv. 11 and 13. It has been common practice to use 'man' as a term including both men and women and still is in use today, although there is often pressure to use gender neutral terminology. As the Bible is a historical and culturally important text, it is often considered appropriate that the traditional term should be used. But there are some modern translations which have moved towards gender neutrality e.g. the *New Revised Standard Version*.

### Context

The cultural references in the passage are those of a society which would recognise the realities of manual work and simple living. The society referred to is not that of the time of the *KJB*. It was an historical text referring to a society which existed many centuries before. However, at the time of translation (the seventeenth century), this type of society would still be familiar to most people.

This is a well known passage from the Bible. The idea of a time for everything is one that has become an important concept. An acceptance of God's plan runs throughout the text.

The Christian idea of gratitude to God for everyday life is made clear in verse 13: 'it is the gift of God'. There is also a sense of the mystery of God: 'no man can find out the work that God maketh'. This gives a sense of the insignificance and limitations of man before God. In the face of this, the narrator/teacher recommends simple living and an acceptance of God's power. This message might be more challenging to our modern society where so much is controlled by humans (e.g. medicine) in a way that was previously not possible.

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### **Ecclesiastes 3**

- <sup>1</sup> To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
- <sup>2</sup> A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
- <sup>3</sup> A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
- <sup>4</sup> A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
- <sup>5</sup> A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
- <sup>6</sup> A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
- <sup>7</sup> A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
- <sup>8</sup> A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.
- <sup>9</sup> What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?
- <sup>10</sup> I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it.
- <sup>11</sup> He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.
- <sup>12</sup> I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life.
- <sup>13</sup> And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God.
- <sup>14</sup> I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.
- <sup>15</sup> That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past.