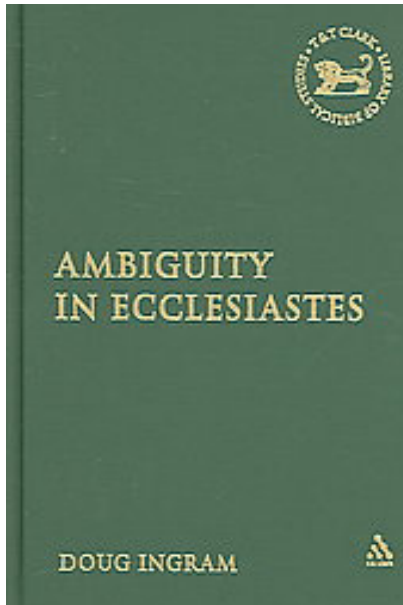


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Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes

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Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes is based on Doug Ingram's 1996 Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Stirling under the supervision of Keith Whitlam. Ingram's basic thesis is that the vast range of scholarly opinions about Ecclesiastes reflects an inherent and deliberate ambiguity in the text itself.

Ingram begins the work by discussing and ultimately defining "ambiguity" itself as "those aspects of the text—be it a word, phrase, sentence, or longer piece of text, including the whole book... —whose indeterminacy requires the reader to fill in the meaning in order for a coherent reading to be produced" (41). Ingram acknowledges that it is possible to argue that *any* text is ambiguous from a readerly perspective, for it is essentially impossible for any text to comprehensively and unambiguously convey the author's message with absolute precision (3–4). There is nothing particularly new in the notion that texts can be read differently by different readers, but Ingram makes a far bolder claim: the ambiguity he sees in Ecclesiastes is there by design: it reflects the author's intention and not merely the varied reactions of individual readers. Ingram explains:

My intention is to demonstrate that this book, more than most biblical books, is susceptible to different readings depending on the approach of the reader—specifically because key elements of the text (and much else, I believe) are

ambiguous. I hope to provide sufficient evidence to indicate that this is a deliberate technique adopted by the author, though, of course, the possibility cannot be ruled out that some of the ambiguity results from editorial activity, errors in transmission of the text and the difficulty of trying to interpret the text at some two thousand and more years distance, with relatively little knowledge of its cultural setting. (37)

Ingram seeks to demonstrate Ecclesiastes' ambiguity through an analysis of several key words and a phrase: קהלת (75–90), הבל (91–129), יתרון (130–49), עמל and עשה (150–68), טוב (169–249), and תחת השמש (250–61). Ingram's analysis extends to discussion of phrases and passages in which these terms appear, so it encompasses a good deal more of the text of Ecclesiastes than merely these words. In addition, a substantial part of each chapter is devoted to reviewing scholarly opinions on the meaning and significance of these terms within Ecclesiastes, and Ingram appropriates the diversity of opinions as evidence in support of his contention that Ecclesiastes is deliberately ambiguous.

Some idea of Ingram's general approach can be illustrated by considering his analysis of the word קהלת (82–85). Ingram begins by noting the diversity in scholarly interpretation of the term, citing both opinions regarding its meaning and observations by some that the precise meaning of the term remains elusive. Ingram then summarizes contexts in which the noun קהל occurs throughout the Hebrew Bible. Next, Ingram discusses each of the occurrences of קהלת within Ecclesiastes. Ingram compares the MT of Eccl 7:27 with Eccl 1:2; 12:8 and concludes that “[t]hese three verses could indicate either that קהלת is a masculine proper noun, a feminine proper noun or the title of an office.... thus the main speaker in Ecclesiastes could be a man, a woman ... or the holder of an office. In view of the web of ambiguities that become ever more entangled in the book, it seems likely that this variation is intentional” (85).

Here, too, can be seen some of the difficulties Ingram faces in demonstrating his thesis. There can be little doubt that Qohelet is consistently depicted as a male: he is at the outset specified as “son of David,” he is the subject of masculine verbs (1:2), he describes himself with the masculine מלך (1:12), his self-deliberation employs masculine verb forms (2:1), while the qal feminine participle is used elsewhere as a designation of an occupation (cf. Ezra 2:55, 57; Neh 7:57, 59), and so forth. Scholars almost universally accept that the MT has an incorrect word division in Eccl 7:27, an emendation that removes any basis for conjecture about the intended gender of Qohelet. If the author really had wished to make this ambiguous, would not a far more balanced distribution of male and female inferences have better served such a purpose? Further, although scholars reflect a diverse array of opinions over precisely what קהלת meant, scrutiny tends to highlight the improbability

of many of the suggestions. Whitley's suggestion, "the Sceptic" (cited by Ingram, 83), for example, ultimately has little if anything to do with the meaning of the term קהלת itself.

The remaining chapters of Ingram's book present a more convincing case for finding ambiguities in Ecclesiastes, yet the issue of whether Ecclesiastes is quite so thoroughly intentionally ambiguous remains unproven. There are a number of factors that contribute to both the diversity in scholarly opinion and the appearance of ambiguity that lie outside any notion of authorial intent and that Ingram has not adequately addressed. First, presuppositions about the nature of the text itself do play some role in readings of Ecclesiastes: those who see the text as part of a coherent corpus of religious texts are generally predisposed to reading the text in such a way as to reconcile it with those other texts, while those without such a commitment are not so constrained.

Second, modern academia encourages the exploration of new ideas—simple endorsement of existing ideas is not particularly encouraged—so diversity in academic opinion is, to some extent, to be expected; indeed, it is to be valued. But each new contribution needs to be subject to scrutiny and cannot of itself be considered evidence of the underlying ambiguity of the subject matter.

Third, the text may appear ambiguous to modern readers where it was clear to the author and original audience simply by virtue of our distance from its *Sitz im Leben*. Consider Paul's words in Rom 16:7: analysis of modern scholarship may drive us to conclude that Junia(s) was of ambiguous gender and status; nonetheless, there is little doubt that both Paul and the letter's original recipients—all of whom knew the person in question—saw no ambiguity in Paul's words whatsoever. Similar considerations could easily apply to a number of apparently ambiguous portions of Ecclesiastes: the meaning of the designation "Qohelet," the identity of the characters in 4:13–16, and so forth. Although Ingram does acknowledge the possible impact of our distance from Ecclesiastes on modern readings, it is rarely raised in the discussion of the meaning of specific passages.

Fourth, ambiguity may be perceived simply because we are looking for the text to tell us something it is not particularly interested in. Many commentators acknowledge the presence of some ambiguity in Ecclesiastes but further note that it has little impact on the meaning. For example, Whybray, commenting on Eccl 1:11, states that, although "these phrases could equally be rendered 'former/later men' or 'former/later ages'; the general point is unaffected" (Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 46; cf. Ingram, 69 n. 125). Fox makes a similar point about 4:13–16: "The multiplicity of possibilities for resolving the ambiguities has given rise to a considerable variety of interpretations... Nevertheless, most commentators agree that the point of the story is that wisdom's practical value is limited and transient" (Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 224). If 4:13–16 was intended to highlight the limited value

of wisdom, then the text has apparently succeeded without requiring further disambiguation. Our identification of ambiguity may simply reflect our failure correctly to identify the purpose of the text while focusing on peripheral issues.

There is also a danger of circularity in Ingram's approach to the text. He says "my purpose here is not at all 'disambiguation' because I believe that Ecclesiastes is ambiguous *by design* precisely to engage the reader in the process of creating or discovering meaning, not just in the text of Ecclesiastes, but in the world it reflects also" (42). Although he frequently does engage in adept analysis of passages—his discussion of טוֹב in Ecclesiastes contains valuable insights and is worth reading whether or not one agrees with his overall thesis—in a number of places Ingram's analysis of specific passages seems to have stopped short of a consideration of all the factors that could ultimately have reduced the appearance of ambiguity.

These issues illustrate the monumental difficulties faced in establishing intentional ambiguity and so the magnitude of the challenge Ingram has undertaken. Although his argument falls short of the certitude with which he presents his results, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes* provides a valuable contrast to the general tendency among scholars to presuppose the existence of a single meaning for the text. Ingram's work highlights the possibility that the presuppositions that underlie this tendency need to be called into question and thus forms a valuable contribution to the study of this most puzzling of biblical books by opening avenues of reading often overlooked by scholars.