

The Book of Ecclesiastes

When Guy Montag meets Granger, he is introduced to a community in which each member is committed to learning a book by heart. Their purpose is to commit whole texts to memory and pass them down to future generations, surviving the “Dark Age” of atomic war and government censorship.

Montag chooses the book of Ecclesiastes, a text from the Biblical Old Testament probably written about the 3rd century B.C. Narrated by the “Teacher” who is traditionally considered to be King Solomon, Ecclesiastes is a wonderfully diverse collection of advice on matters including good and evil, temptation and vice, love and hate, vanity, and wisdom. Along with the Old Testament books of Job and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes is an essential part of the wisdom literature of early Jewish philosophy.

A philosophical essay rather than a narrative or history, Ecclesiastes offers ambiguous guidance about the nature of the world. Its tone changes throughout, it is merciful, skeptical, loving, cynical, sorrowful, and ecstatic. As one of its most famous passages says, there is “a time to rend and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love and a time to hate” (3:7-8). Ecclesiastes does not provide any easy answers.

Ultimately, this very short book is an endorsement of concrete human experience rather than dogmatic abstraction. The Teacher asserts that one should experience life as fully as possible, even if death and God’s judgment are final. The use of simple and concrete imagery is a call to experience all one can while learning that the difference between good and evil is not to be fully divined by mere mortals.

The prominent themes of wisdom and mercy in Ecclesiastes make the book a fitting choice for Montag to learn. This is not a text that lends itself to systematic answers. It is, in a sense, a book to stand for all books, which in their entirety give a loud chorus of voices, the voices that the firemen in *Fahrenheit 451* wanted to extinguish in the first place.