

Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries

Eric S. Christianson

Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries

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Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries

Eric S. Christianson

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For Sonya

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Series Editors' Preface

The Blackwell Bible Commentaries series, the first to be devoted primarily to the reception history of the Bible, is based on the premise that how people have interpreted, and been influenced by, a sacred text like the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant. The series emphasizes the influence of the Bible on literature, art, music, and film, its role in the evolution of religious beliefs and practices, and its impact on social and political developments. Drawing on work in a variety of disciplines, it is designed to provide a convenient and scholarly means of access to material until now hard to find, and a much-needed resource for all those interested in the influence of the Bible on Western culture.

Until quite recently this whole dimension was for the most part neglected by biblical scholars. The goal of a commentary was primarily if not exclusively to get behind the centuries of accumulated Christian and Jewish tradition to

one single meaning, normally identified with the author's original intention. The most important and distinctive feature of the Blackwell Commentaries is that they will present readers with many different interpretations of each text, in such a way as to heighten their awareness of what a text, especially a sacred text, can mean and what it can do, what it has meant and what it has done, in the many contexts in which it operates.

The Blackwell Bible Commentaries will consider patristic, rabbinic (where relevant), and medieval exegesis as well as insights from various types of modern criticism, acquainting readers with a wide variety of interpretative techniques. As part of the history of interpretation, questions of source, date, authorship, and other historical-critical and archaeological issues will be discussed, but since these are covered extensively in existing commentaries, such references will be brief, serving to point readers in the direction of readily accessible literature where they can be followed up.

Original to this series is the consideration of the reception history of specific biblical books arranged in commentary format. The chapter-by-chapter arrangement ensures that the biblical text is always central to the discussion. Given the wide influence of the Bible and the richly varied appropriation of each biblical book, it is a difficult question which interpretations to include. While each volume will have its own distinctive point of view, the guiding principle for the series as a whole is that readers should be given a representative sampling of material from different ages, with emphasis on interpretations that have been especially influential or historically significant. Though commentators will have their preferences among the different interpretations, the material will be presented in such a way that readers can make up their own minds on the value, morality, and validity of particular interpretations.

The series encourages readers to consider how the biblical text has been interpreted down the ages and seeks to open their eyes to different uses of the Bible in contemporary culture. The aim is to write a series of scholarly commentaries that draw on all the insights of modern research to illustrate the rich interpretative potential of each biblical book.

John Sawyer
Christopher Rowland
Judith Kovacs
David M. Gunn

Preface

Qoheleth himself hints at the reality of the situation. The world may run its course with elegant regularity, but the stuff of interpretation – the articulation of words and the pursuit of understanding especially – is marred by fatigue, cognitive exasperation and endless publication. Rendering such boundless hermeneutical energy has required the use of fat paintbrushes, often resulting in far simpler lines than the subject would demand if examined more closely (though often that scrutiny has been more comprehensive than the lines suggest). In this respect I share wholeheartedly the views of James Barr in his preface to *The Bible in the Modern World*, that the phrases he found himself using (such as ‘in the early church’ or ‘up to modern times’) ‘must be the abomination of the true historian’ (1973: p. x).

It has of course not been possible to fully contextualize all of the examples of Ecclesiastes’ reception presented here, but I hope that will not be conceived

as a criticism. This commentary provides a portal of sorts to more in-depth investigation, and it is hoped that at least some of these examples will tempt readers to get out their spades and dig further. Indeed, this is precisely my own experience. In the course of research I was so enticed by the story of Voltaire's *Précis* of Ecclesiastes that I selected it as a case study for detailed scrutiny (the results of which are published in Christianson 2005). I have done my best, therefore, to point the way to studies that fill out the areas that this commentary has by necessity excluded. And with primary material I have spent many hours producing as full and as accurate references as I could manage.

As for selection, I do not pretend to have followed an objective set of criteria. I have, however, sought to indicate the ongoing relationship in Ecclesiastes' reading history between the well established and the subversive. While in many cases my own proclivities have biased me to showcase the latter, subversive readings nevertheless can say a great deal about what is conventional. Often the selection was driven by a moment of piqued curiosity or by the recognition of some strange and perceptive response to Qoheleth's words. In such a choice there is little in the way of science.

Readers would of course be right to recognize the inordinate swelling of the Introduction, an abscess that suggests some form of unchecked verbal abandon, but the growth comes from the inordinate attention given by readers to the person of Qoheleth and the tenor of the book. In the manner of Ray Bradbury's hero Guy Montag/Ecclesiastes in *Fahrenheit 451*, Ecclesiastes itself has become a byword for all sorts of critical ideas. The same can be said for the Testimonia chapter, which compiles citations on a range of subjects that authors have in some way related to 'Qoheleth' or the book as a whole. It is perhaps due to the manageable size of Ecclesiastes and its relatively easily grasped themes that writers have characterized its entirety with alarming frequency.

About seven years ago John Sawyer invited me to write this commentary. I immediately warmed to the spirit of the series but was wary of rereading material I had previously covered. Indeed, I set to work on a proposal for another book and surprised myself by coming to the conclusion that I did not want anyone else to write the Ecclesiastes volume! I am, then, immensely grateful to John for the invitation. The project has transformed my views on the nature of interpretation.

In charting this vast interpretive activity, I have been truly overwhelmed by the support of friends and colleagues who have been generous with their time, resources and skills. Among those who brought relevant material to my attention, I would like to thank George Aichele, Andy Benson, Jane Day, Paul Fiddes, Paul Joyce and Tina Nicolson. I would also like to thank those who have kindly made available to me their unpublished or soon-to-be published

work (often in the form of old conference papers which their authors had presumed forgotten!): Rebecca Beal, Howard Clarke, Eric Eliason, Paul Flesher, Michael Fox, Larry Kreitzer, Scott Langston and Anthony Perry. I must offer particular thanks to Robin MacGregor Lane who allowed me to make use of his as yet unpublished translation of Jerome's commentary on Ecclesiastes. David Gunn, John Jarick, John Sawyer and Anthony Thiselton each gave of their valuable time reading portions of this book, and I am grateful for their many improvements (and I hereby exonerate them of any errors that follow). I am also grateful to those who kindly provided their translation skills: Andrew Dawson, Robert Evans, Terry McWilliams and Victor Morales (who also located some very useful material during a stint as research assistant). My own understanding of many of the odd occurrences of reception has benefited from conversations with friends and colleagues, for which I offer particular thanks to Trevor Dennis, John Jarick, Chris Partridge and Mike Williams. Mike's knowledge of classical music and perceptive listening skills was positively enlightening. Colleagues in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Chester have supported this work in numerous ways, and I offer them my wholehearted thanks. And thanks as well to the editorial staff at Blackwell – in particular, Hannah Berry, Rebecca Harkin, Andrew Humphries, Karen Wilson, Jean van Altena and Cameron Laux – who have shown remarkable patience and support for this long-term project.

Of course a project like this requires exceptional resources, and many library staff have offered far more of their time and expertise than can reasonably be expected. They include: staff at St Deiniols library in Hawarden, North Wales (Peter Francis, Jenny Jones, Gregory Morris, Karen Parry, Nicola Pickett and Patsy Williams); staff in charge of rare collections at the Bodleian and University of Cambridge libraries; staff at the University of Chester library, in particular our indefatigable inter-library loan officer, Donna Crookall.

A special note of thanks must be offered to Catherine Milnes, who undertook a work placement as my research assistant in the early stages. It was not until I had reached the latter stages of writing that I came to realize the astonishing energy and detail of Catherine's work, particularly on the *vanitas* arts tradition. She was, it seems, as enamoured as I with this extraordinary interpretive history.

I would like to thank my parents, who continue to show their support across many miles of ocean. I also thank Bob and Carol Rowberry, my parents-in-law. They will never know just how much their unstinting generosity has enriched my life in the UK. I can offer only the most inadequate thanks to my wife, Sonya, for once again enduring my obsession with Qoheleth, but also for showing me uncommon support (including late night coffee and toast!).

Finally, our children, Juliana and Elliot, have supported me no less with laughter and a steady stream of reality doses.

A Pragmatic Note

In the commentary proper each chapter begins with a brief *précis* of the passage and its literary context in Ecclesiastes. The remainder of each chapter charts its interpreters. These readings are arranged chronologically, but are not categorized under epochs or interpretive provenances (the only exceptions are the sections that deal with 1:1–2 and 12:1–7, which suited another scheme). Readers can, however, find extensive discussion of roughly conceived shifts of reading Ecclesiastes along such lines in the Introduction (e.g. Ecclesiastes in Renaissance readings, in modern literature etc.).

I have sought to preserve the variant spellings of early and pre-modern English, and I have not inserted ‘*sic*’ where exclusive language occurs (I use it only sparingly to clarify sense). Such language is so frequent in the sources that it would have become tiresome to do so.

Eric S. Christianson
1 March 2006

Testimonia

The Vagaries of Interpreting Ecclesiastes

For just as those who have trained in wrestling in the gymnasium strip for greater exertions and efforts in the athletic contests, so it seems to me that the teaching of Proverbs is an exercise, which trains our souls and makes them supple for the struggle with Ecclesiastes. . . . Indeed, one could think of every hyperbole and still not properly express in words what great struggles the contest with this scripture involves for the contestants, as they fight for a foothold for their thoughts, using their skill as athletes so that they may not find their argument overthrown, but in every intellectual encounter keep the mind on its feet to the end through the truth.

Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, c.380
(hom. 1, in Gregory of Nyssa 1993: 33)

[commenting on 1:9, 'There is nothing new under the sun':] A similar idea was suggested by the comic poet [Terence]: 'Nothing has been said which has not been said before.' Thus my teacher Donatus, when he would explain this verse, said, 'They can go to hell who have said my interpretations before me.'

Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 388/9 (in Kraus 1999–2000: 183)

I, in my humility, have considered the writings and compositions of those who have commented on the book of Ecclesiastes, both the more ancient and those of later date, and have found that they divide themselves into several classes; some have explained it by strange and far-fetched primary interpretations; and some by deep and subtle scientific disquisitions; and some by the method of recondite interpretation have drawn from it just and right doctrines; but the phase of resemblance between them is, that they have all been forced to alter its sense with glossing expressions, and not one of them has given us reason by any sufficient causes which he alleges, to give it any higher praise than that of 'a rock which produces wholesome food'; or 'a strong lion from whence cometh forth sweetness'.

Isaac Aramah, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 1492
(Preface, in Preston 1845: 14–15)

This book is . . . one which no one has ever completely mastered. Indeed, it has been so distorted by the miserable commentaries of many writers that it is almost a bigger job to purify and defend the author from the notions which they have smuggled into him than it is to show his real meaning.

Martin Luther, *Notes on Ecclesiastes*, 1532 (in Luther 1972: 7)

If we look upon this Sermon in the Text, or any of the rest in the whole Book, as the word of man, though as the wisest of men, for so was King *Solomon*, we shall finde work for our wits to censure it, if not for our wilfulness to contradict it; (for no one book in all the Bible hath been more upon the rack, more stretched upon the tenter-hooks, by all sorts of men, then this) . . .

Edward Hyde, *Allegiance and Conscience Not Fled out of England* . . . (1662: 18)

It was impossible to compare the interpreters together, without being struck at the wonderful diversity of their opinions, which the light *Solomon's* design and method appeared in to me gave me little room to expect . . . but the more I inquired into the grounds of every scheme that differed from mine, the more I found reason to conclude mine the most probable . . . For some find nothing in it but what appears to them perfectly agreeable [*sic*] to the purest notions we can have of a revealed Doctrine; whereas others imagine they spy out Monsters, and discover many things which they can by no means reconcile with those notions, nor of consequence look upon as worthy of the holy Ghost.

A. V. Desvoeux, *A Philosophical and Critical Essay on Ecclesiastes*
(1760: pp. vii, 6)

For I have observed that nearly all the commentators who had preceded me have almost entirely failed in doing justice to their task of interpretation.

Moses Mendelssohn, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 1770
(in Preston 1845: 73)

Every fresh commentator either actually or virtually regards all his predecessors as having misunderstood Coheleth.

C. D. Ginsburg, *Coheleth* (1861: 73)

. . . the Book of Ecclesiastes [is] one of the wisest and one of the worst understood books in the Bible.

Matthew Arnold, *A Speech at Eton*, 1879 (in Arnold 1973: 31)

Ecclesiastes passed formerly as the most obscure book of the Bible. This is only the opinion of theologians, and in reality is completely false. The book, as a whole, is very clear; only the theologians had a major interest to find it obscure.

Ernest Renan, *L'Éclésiaste* (1882: 15; my tr.)

. . . we have now reviewed the main lines of interpretation of this fascinating Book. I do not know how far any one of them has satisfied you, but none of them completely satisfies me.

J. S. Wright, 'The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes' (1946: 21)

How many far-fetched theories have been hazarded by modern writers who are locked up in their own crippling presuppositions? Even the vagaries and extravagances of ancient exegesis can have a sobering effect on current scholarship.

Roland E. Murphy, 'Qohelet Interpreted' (1982: 336)

It may be that in the last resort Qoheleth is a mirror which reflects the soul of the interpreter. If so, there is sufficient vanity in scholarship to appreciate reliable mirrors.

James Crenshaw, 'Qoheleth in Current Research' (1983: 51)

Since one of Qohelet's themes is the inability of human enterprise to seize and hold, to take possession of a thing, it is perhaps no accident that the book eludes the attempts of interpretive activity to fix its meaning determinately . . . It is always interesting to see where the 'interpretive sweat' breaks out in dealing with such an iconoclastic book.

Carol A. Newsom, 'Job and Ecclesiastes' (1995: 190, 191)

Charting a Harsh Terrain

When . . . I had made myself, as I apprehended, a tolerable master of the subject [of interpreting Ecclesiastes], I set about the work, which, after all, proved a far more laborious task than I at first imagined, not only from the phraseology peculiar to this Book, which in many places, is dark enough in itself, and rendered still darker from the prodigious variety of arbitrary interpretations, but sometimes also from the difficulty of finding out the true connexion of the several parts, which, on a cursory view, seem to have no dependence on each other.

Anonymous, *Chohemoth, or the Royal Preacher* (1765: p. vi)

It would be very difficult to distinguish the parts and arrangement of this production; the order of the subject and the connexion of the arguments are involved in so much obscurity, that scarcely any two commentators have agreed concerning the plan of the work. The style of this work is . . . singular; the language is generally low, I might almost call it mean or vulgar; it is frequently loose, unconnected, approaching to the incorrectness of conversation; and possesses very little of the poetical character, even in the composition and structure of the periods.

Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, 1787
(in Lowth 1995: 2.174–5)

[Ecclesiastes] reminds me of the remains of a daring explorer, who has met with some terrible accident, leaving his shattered form exposed to the encroachments of all sorts of foul vermin.

Paul Haupt, 'The Book of Ecclesiastes', 1894 (in G. A. Barton 1959: 28)

In the river of revelation these chapters of Ecclesiastes seem to lie in some quiet and shadowy backwater, far removed from the central stream.

Wilfrid Johnson Moulton, c.1925 (in Scott 1929: 74)

It is a sort of scrapbook collection of contradictory meditations on identical themes. Here the lore of the sages turns in upon itself, comments on and refutes itself . . . The effect of such a methodology is to open vacuous chasms in knowledge and experience. This is destructive criticism; even the alternative offered by Job is passed by . . .

Lawrence B. Porter, 'Bankruptcy: The Words of Qoheleth, Son of David, King in Jerusalem' (1969: 3042)

. . . there is a tremendous interpretive pressure to raise the valleys and lower the hills, to make the way straight and level before the reader. But a reading faithful

to this book, at least, should try to describe the territory with all its bumps and clefts, for they are not mere flaws, but the essence of the landscape.

Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions* (1989: 28)

Inasmuch as it would be absurd to criticize a Rubik's Cube for the problems it presents to its user, so it is with the text of Ecclesiastes.

Gary Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric* (2001: 147)

Qoheleth the Philosopher

How then do I interpret the words, *Qoheleth sought to find out words of delight?* Qoheleth sought to pronounce verdicts from his own insight [lit. 'that are in the heart'], without witnesses and without warning . . .

Babylonian Talmud, c.450 (*b. Rosh Hashanah* 21b)

[Qoheleth] contemplates, teaches, mourns, comforts, imparts counsel, contradicts, and corrects himself . . . The author is no dogmatic and phlegmatic teacher, but a warm and animated examiner of truth. To a philosopher, it is essential to listen to the opposite opinions. He, without regarding his own system, listens to all objections which can be made, and does not fear the consequences of statements he admits . . . [He] candidly places before the eyes of the reader all the objections which he makes, and all that transpires in his inmost soul; *he is not afraid to think aloud.*

David Friedländer, *Der Prediger*, 1788 (in Ginsburg 1861: 79–80)

This book contains the investigations of several associations of literary men among the Israelites; it contains propositions which at that time formed the limits of philosophic speculation, and which seem to have been proposed intentionally, to agitate and to explain doubts, and thus to develop the intellectual faculties.

J. C. C. Nachtigal, *Qoheleth*, 1798 (in Ginsburg 1861: 192)

It is an autobiography with a purpose. The book may seem unnatural, but it is because the life was a calculation . . . He seems to be a fool, but he is rather a wise man making experiments in folly – a philosopher blowing bubbles from which may come out the science of light.

James Bennet, *The Wisdom of the King* (1870: 5)

He was reverent, sincerely reverent . . . The joys of youth and friendship, of home and garden, are fleeting, but after all they are real, and in spite of all the sorrow

in the world we need not hesitate to enjoy them while they last: they are God's gifts. Koheleth has not a satisfying philosophy of life. He has very little theology. He does have, however, something which in its intense earnestness and its steadfast allegiance to both reason and conscience, both mind and heart, well deserves to be called faith.

Millar Burrows, 'Kuhn and Koheleth' (1927: 97)

He stepped into the world of letters as a mature thinker. He had suffered much and seen much, and had formed the habit of looking at life analytically, searching always for an answer. He treated his own existence as an experiment to be lived out like a play. And he lived it alone.

Elizabeth Stone, 'Old Man Koheleth' (1942: 100)

Ecclesiastes . . . thinks it best to let sleeping dogmas lie . . . [He] is a free-lance humanist . . .

John Paterson, 'The Intimate Journal of an Old-Time Humanist'
(1950: 245)

[Qoheleth] is 'disillusioned' only in the sense that he has realized that an illusion is a self-constructed prison. He is not a weary pessimist tired of life: he is a vigorous realist determined to smash his way through every locked door of repression in his mind.

Northrop Frye, *The Great Code* (1982: 123)

He is a man for the eighties, a private-sectorite. But being a personality who wears contradictions without discomfort, he has another side, one that suits another realm – the realm of the artist, where a restless spirit of inquiry soars beyond the walls of the *status quo*.

Daphne Merkin, 'Ecclesiastes: A Reading out-of-Season' (1987: 401–2)

Qoheleth is an 'intellectual' in a sense otherwise unknown to the Old Testament. In his remorseless determination to probe the nature of things he belongs to a new world of thought, though . . . his sense of God's transcendence ('God is in heaven, and you upon the earth', 5:2) is a Jewish inheritance which distinguishes him quite radically from the secular philosopher . . . To some extent . . . Ecclesiastes stands as a lonely beacon in a dark and largely uncharted literary ocean.

R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (1989: 7, 8)

At most we could concede that the 'subjects treated' by Qohelet are also philosophers' favourite subjects – subjects that metaphysics has dealt with. But nothing more . . . Let us leave metaphysics to the metaphysicians, then, so that we can listen to Qohelet speak without metaphysicians' discourse interfering. This way we will see that he speaks differently from them.

Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (1990: 27)

Wrought by Melancholy

The Book of Ecclesiastes . . . is written as the solitary reflections of a worn-out debauchee, such as Solomon was, who looking back on scenes he can no longer enjoy, cries out *All is Vanity!* . . . From what is transmitted to us of the character of Solomon, he was witty, ostentatious, dissolute, and at last melancholy. He lived fast, and died, tired of the world, at the age of fifty-eight years . . . Seven hundred wives, and three hundred concubines would have stood in place of the whole book. It was needless after this to say that all was vanity and vexation of spirit; for it is impossible to derive happiness from the company of those whom we deprive of happiness.

Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, II, 1794 (in Paine 1896: 4.127–8)

Ecclesiastes had diffused a seriousness and solemnity over the frame of his spirit [i.e. of Jesus Christ, who ‘probably’ studied this scripture], glowing with youthful hope, and made audible to his listening heart

The still, sad music of humanity,
Not harsh or grating, but of ample power
To chasten and subdue.

Percy Shelley, ‘Essay on Christianity’, c.1820 (in Shelley 1880: 2.341; the lines Shelley cites are from William Wordsworth’s ‘Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey’ [1798], ll. 91–3)

The Book of Ecclesiastes has been called sceptical, epicurean; it is certainly without the glow and hope which animate the Bible in general.

Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma*, 1873 (in Arnold 1968: 207)

He is an uncompromising pessimist, who sees the world as it is. Everything that seems pleasant or profitable is vanity and a grasping of wind; there is nothing positive but pain, nothing real but the eternal Will, which is certainly unknowable and probably unconscious. These truths . . . are the bitter fruits of that rare knowledge, increase of which is increase of sorrow.

E. J. Dillon, *The Sceptics of the Old Testament* (1895: 113)

The truth is, he was a disappointed man, and there are two sorts of disappointed men in life . . . The man who is disappointed because he has not got, may have still the fascination of his hopes before him. But the man who has got what he desires and is then disappointed, has pricked the bubble, and knows the meaning of emptiness and vexation of spirit.

E. E. Cleal, *Christian World Pulpit*, 1907 (in Nicoll and Stoddart 1910: 531)

A Chopin prelude always is saddening, and Milton's 'L'Allegro' never fails to liven up a leaden day. Koheleth, however, merely brings defeat and gladness into sharper outline in their relationship to each other, and does not deny or praise one or the other . . . His book is a record of profound personal disillusionment, which has ground him until he no longer feels it as anything but a faint taste of ashes in the mouth, and the red gone out of the sunset . . . Koheleth has not always been bored, and he participated passionately in the life around him, but in the end he set down his pen, and was only tired with life, and frustrated in his search to see something beyond it . . . Although the irony of his statements is apparent, I cannot think of them as being offered with a smile.

Elizabeth Stone, 'Old Man Koheleth' (1942: 99, 102)

There may have been many a melancholy streak in his nature that disposed him to look at the shadier sides of life. He is the original 'gloomy dean'. He had hung his harp on the weeping willows and it moaned in the breeze . . . Job is an eagle soaring in the face of the sun, but Ecclesiastes is a land-blown bird with bedraggled wings and no power of flight.

John Paterson, 'The Intimate Journal of an Old-Time Humanist'
(1950: 251)

He is a pathological doubter of everything, stemming from a drastic emotional experience, a psychic disturbance. He is doubtful about himself as a person of worth and character. He has no self-esteem or value of himself. His doubt has destroyed all values. He is an inferior, of no account, and he demeans himself constantly. His doubts come from a parapathy, a disease of the mind which he shares with many neurotics.

Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qohelet* (1973: 8)

I cannot imagine what it is like to read Ecclesiastes on a sunny day under a clear sky. It is, however much the pious commentators bustle in with their ready assuagements, a depressive's lament – perfect reading for a gray day . . . Nothing suffices for this acquisition-happy malcontent, this Biblical character blessed with the dazzling 'life style' of a corporate raider but burdened with the wrong soul – the soul of a Flaubert. Like that other great connoisseur of *ennui*, Koheleth is acutely aware of the 'boredom and ignominies of existence', and would, I suspect, agree with the nineteenth-century writer's calibrated assessment: 'I admire tinsel as much as gold: indeed the poetry of tinsel is even greater, because it is sadder'.

Daphne Merkin, 'Ecclesiastes: A Reading out-of-Season' (1987: 393–5)

In Job, Job's friends and ultimately even God argue against Job, but in Qohelet, no such opposition – human or divine – ever appears to mitigate Qohelet's unrelenting pessimism.

Paul Flesher, 'The Wisdom of the Sages' (1990)

Preacher of Joy

. . . he quickly changes from an observing inquirer into an instructing and counseling senior friend, and to our great surprise advances the most beautiful maxims about caution and patience, fidelity and thoughtful industry . . . he at last concludes, from his observations, experiments, and researches, that there is no other lasting good for man than serene joy in God, comprising as it does everything else.

Georg H. A. Ewald, *Sprüche Salomo's, Koheleth*, 1837
(in Ginsburg 1861: 210)

We marvel at the prodigality of nature, but how marvellous, too, the economy! The old cycles are for ever renewed, and it is no paradox that he who would advance can never cling too close to the past. The thing that has been is the thing that will be again; if we realize that, we may avoid many of the disillusiones, miseries, insanities that for ever accompany the throes of new birth. Set your shoulder joyously to the world's wheel: you may spare yourself some unhappiness if, beforehand, you slip the book of *Ecclesiastes* beneath your arm.

Havelock Ellis, *The New Spirit*, 1890 (in Ellis 1926: 33)

He looks at life in its vast sweep and, with a broad outlook on the world-order, sees not ground for despair, but order, reason, symmetry, and beauty – signs of an Infinite Wisdom and Goodness over all. He does not affirm that the world-order is meaningless, but, which is an altogether different thing, its meaning is beyond man's power utterly to fathom. This is not the impertinence of pessimism but the words of a real reverence, a mood of the spirit which we all do well to cultivate, in his opinion.

James A. Greissing, 'The Worst-Understood Book' (1909: 740)

So much in the world seems but an endless and wearying and unrewarding cycle of no more substance than a breath of wind over the desert. But this is no sterile wind blowing over empty places. And Koheleth is not a creation of T. S. Eliot – he is no Gerontion, no 'old man in a dry month, being read to by a boy . . .' There is no sense of futility here. Puzzlement, perhaps, and a sense of the absurdity of the world. But no desire to reject the world because it contains

so much ugliness and wrong. For the world of Koheleth contains beauty and joy as well.

Joan Abramson, *The Faces of Israel* (in Abramson and Freulich 1972: 15)

In the popular mind a happy Koheleth is an oxymoron: how could the sage who was convinced that 'all is vanity' have been capable of enjoyment? It is true that an *esprit de sérieux* hovers over the intelligent thinkers, by and large, and Koheleth is no exception . . . The problem is that although thinkers such as Koheleth try to be holistic and integrative, most readers tend to think atomistically, in terms of either/or . . . [Koheleth's] is a religious vision embracing the insoluble tension between divine transcendence and human aspiration and responsibility . . . And when one reads Koheleth from the perspective of comedy, which is the upset and recovery of the protagonist's equilibrium, it becomes clear that his existential 'bottom line' is *not* 'vanity of vanities', but rather 'Sweet is the light, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun. And however many years a person may live, let him rejoice in them all . . .' [11:7–8]

Étan Levine, 'The Humor in Qoheleth' (1997: 82–3)

. . . Ecclesiastes advocates resignation without despair, that is, cultivating an inner attitude toward life that strives to transcend the tragic limitations and sorrows of existence through a frank and courageous acceptance that they cannot be transformed. Ecclesiastes thus promotes dedicating oneself to striving after joy in life, not so much for the reasons the idealistic pious believe, because it is a gift from God to be treasured, but because the search for joy is the only sensible goal considering the frustrating, tragic, and fundamentally futile nature of existence. Freud probably saw life in a similar way when he wrote that the purpose of psychoanalysis was to transform hysterical misery into common unhappiness.

Paul Marcus, 'The Wisdom of Ecclesiastes and its Meaning for Psychoanalysis' (2000: 248)

True to Life

This book is like the basin which Moses made out of the mirrors of the women. For he taught not only to see men's faces in such mirrors, but to see their minds as well. Ecclesiastes also made this book out of the copper and the mirrors of women for the viewing of the minds of men . . . Therefore Ecclesiastes sees in this mirror whatever men do in the world.

Rupert of Deutz, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 1197
(in Eliason 1989: 74 n. 65)

This great Connoisseur of human nature would not have us to be always laughing, with *Democritus*, nor always weeping, with *Heraclitus*; but as, on some occasions, to be very serious, so, on others, to indulge social Mirth with more than ordinary freedom, provided we keep within the bounds of reason and moderation.

Anonymous, *Choeleth, or the Royal Preacher* (1765: p. xiii)

He speaks for humanity, and his words have always found an echo. His book is a great monologue, which presents life to us in its energetic traits, and its laconic style shews the profoundness of the thinker. It is scepticism softened by maxims.

S. Cahen, *La Bible*, 1848 (in Ginsburg 1861: 90)

This Preacher, I am willing to believe, had felt all that man's heart could feel; but he had no suspicion of what man is allowed to know. The human mind in his day overpowered science; in our day it is science that overpowers the human mind.

Ernest Renan, c.1870 (in Scott 1929: 78)

He has trodden the very paths we tread. He shares our craving and has pursued our quest after 'that which is good'. He has been misled by the illusions by which we are beguiled. And his aim is to save us from fruitless researches and defeated hopes by placing his experience at our command.

Samuel Cox, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (1896: 209)

The Preacher belongs in the company of such spirits as Dante, Browning, Tennyson, Amiel, Paschal, and their like, who have through long years brooded on the meaning of life. His dozen autobiographical pages, wrought with literary art, replete with epigram, reveal a gentle, sensitive spirit, sincere, honest, reverent, not without the saving grace of good humor, genial, urbane, cosmopolitan, tolerant. The book is a wonderfully human document.

James A. Greissing, 'The Worst-Understood Book' (1909: 737)

Koheleth belongs to the small coterie of books that do not grow old . . . He is almost brutally frank in holding the mirror up to life. For all that, he is neither a scoffer nor a pessimist. He loves life and has intense sympathy with the struggles and sufferings of humanity, but he smiles at the attempts of zealous reformers to change human nature or to improve a state of things, which (as he believes) follows logically from the conditions under which mankind carves out its career. Koheleth is not a cold and severely logical philosopher, intent upon building up a system of thought, but an easy-going dilettante who unfolds in a series of charming, witty and loosely connected *causeries* his view of life, as gained by a long and varied experience . . . Koheleth is serious in what he says, though he

always speaks with a slight ironical smile on his lips, but he does not want us to take him *too* seriously, just as he himself does not want to take life too seriously. The human interest of the book is all the more intense because of its main conclusion, that life itself is a paradox. Life is made to be enjoyed, and yet enjoyment is 'vanity'.

Morris Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic* (1919: 8–9)

His words reveal a sensitive soul, sensitive alike to the joys of life and to its disheartening and inexplicable disappointments.

Millar Burrows, 'Kuhn and Koheleth' (1927: 95)

[Ecclesiastes] defeats all endeavors to force upon it interior self-consistency and harmony, and in its inclusion of many points of view, even though at odds with one another, it remains true to life.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, *A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, 1938
(in Fosdick 1965: 182)

Like a candleflame in mist, we cannot see him or touch him or name him, and yet he is there. And as surely as food gives a fragrance and drums resound, Koheleth gives us his own particular light, whether he is one or many men, whether the page has felt the point of one or many pens . . . Koheleth, illusive and fantastic and quixotic though he may be, has entrenched himself firmly in our life and background, and we may challenge his right to sit there, but he goes right on sitting. He, or it or they, belongs to us, and the warring philosophies tied into the few pages of the book of Ecclesiastes exist to contradict and augment each other and intrigue the critics and yet there is a completeness in the thing.

Elizabeth Stone, 'Old Man Koheleth' (1942: 98)

In the deepest sense, Koheleth is a religious book, because it seeks to grapple with reality . . . This cry of a sensitive spirit wounded by man's cruelty and ignorance, this distilled essence of an honest and courageous mind, striving to penetrate the secret of the universe, yet unwilling to soar on the wings of faith beyond the limits of the knowable, remains one of man's noblest offerings on the altar of truth.

Robert Gordis, *Koheleth – The Man and his World* (1955: 122)

Not to the nonsense-writers, the archaic conformists, the purblind antiquarians, for whom Koheles was and probably will ever be a nasty and a naughty word, shall we go for enlightenment . . . Koheles is a book of Jewish philosophy, Bible style . . . It is written as one speaks rather than as one thinks and, at a few points, the writer gets so emotionally involved that he becomes self-

contradictory . . . [F]or those who want the story straight, who do not want to be flimflammed, bull-dozed or hypnotized by the so-called teachers of the many phony religious beliefs and practices that infest the earth, Koheles is one of the truly great (and there are not many of them) . . .

David Max Eichhorn, *Musings of the Old Professor* (1963: 2, 247, 254)

All he finds in [the world] is contradictions, which do not fit in with God. He cannot pile up enough contradictory concepts to describe the ambiguity of existence . . . All these contradictions he finds not following each other or accompanying each other, providing a meaningful solution to one or complementing each other, but confused and entangled with each other, entwined with each other in a meaningless way, cutting across and destroying each other in mutual hostility, apparently without end. The world he describes is enigmatic, discordant and contradictory – it is the world in which we live. But where is God in it?

Heinz Zahrnt, *What Kind of God?*, 1971 (in Short 1973: 76)

The man had so much insight into the absurdities of the world. His words strip away the rationalizations of life and yet leave us with all the more reason to live and to enjoy . . . He punctured the illusions of life – but always with a compassionate and never a barbed pen. Perhaps in so doing he could not allow himself even the shadow of an illusion so vain – he could not permit the thought that his own words might remain after him as his own immortality. It is possible. It is also possible that he is indulging his humor at our expense – that he is fishing; that he fully expects his reader to protest. I think he knew the value of his words.

Joan Abramson, *The Faces of Israel*
(in Abramson and Freulich 1972: 21)

Koheleth comes to us having faced down the existential void, the hollowness at the heart of the getting and spending that is the human enterprise . . . There is, to be sure, a bracing – even healing – aspect to the stark realism of the writer's vision, a way in which his resolute emphasis on the transience of all things human can be said to be a cloud-chaser. Still, the 'charm' of Ecclesiastes is a tonic charm, a somewhat bitter-tasting dose of our own dust-to-dustness . . . Koheleth cuts a less than imposing, recognizably human figure. Shamelessly inconsistent in his reasoning, though always a bottom-liner, with what relief we fall upon him!

Daphne Merkin, 'Ecclesiastes: A Reading out-of-Season' (1987: 396–8)

Ecclesiastes speaks to people in tough binds, people with vendettas, a bone to pick, no dog to kick, the sour-grapers, the hurt, those who've never shucked off

their adolescent angst. In general tones the preacher speaks to the bummed-out. *All is weariness, the soul cannot utter it.*

Louise Erdrich, 'The Preacher' (1995: 235)

Qoheleth and Christianity

Everywhere Ecclesiastes, teaching us by dark sayings [*dī 'ainigmatōn*], sends us to the other life.

Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, c.510
(on 3:21, in Hirshman 1958: 143 n. 16)

'It reminds me,' said Elder Staples, 'of the sad burden of Ecclesiastes, the mournfullest book of Scripture; because, while the preacher dwells with earnestness upon the vanity and uncertainty of the things of time and sense, he has no apparent hope of immortality to relieve the dark picture. Like Horace, he sees nothing better than to eat his bread with joy and drink his wine with a merry heart. It seems to me the wise man might have gone farther in his enumeration of the folly and emptiness of life, and pronounced his own prescription for the evil vanity also. What is it but plucking flowers on the banks of the stream which hurries us over the cataract, or feasting on the thin crust of a volcano upon delicate meats prepared over the fires which are soon to engulf us? Oh, what a glorious contrast to this is the gospel of Him who brought to light life and immortality! The transition from the Koheleth to the Epistles of Paul is like passing from a cavern, where the artificial light falls indeed upon gems and crystals, but is everywhere circumscribed and overshadowed by unknown and unexplored darkness, into the warm light and free atmosphere of day.'

John Greenleaf Whittier, *My Summer with Dr Singletary*, c.1866
(in Whittier 1889: 5. 229–30)

Ecclesiastes, like the first part of Goethe's *Faust*, may, with the fullest justice, be called an apology for Christianity, not as containing anticipations of Christian truth . . . but inasmuch as it shows that neither wisdom, nor any other human good or human pleasure, brings permanent satisfaction to man's natural longings.

T. K. Cheyne, *Job and Solomon* (1887: 249)

[Ecclesiastes] pushes the logic of a non-Christian position with tremendous force, to all who feel keenly the misery of the world. More vividly than anything else in the Old Testament, it shows us how imperious was the necessity for the revelation of God in Christ.

A. S. Peake, *The Problem of Suffering in the Old Testament* (1904: 135)

Qoheleth and Justice

The author . . . was a pious Israelite . . . whose heart was greatly touched with the sufferings of his brethren, and who felt himself compelled to impart unto them his well-meant written counsel under these oppressions . . . He was . . . anxious, if not to remove, at least to *mitigate their misfortunes, by offering salutary precautions to his brethren for those fearful times.*

Georg H. A. Ewald, *Das Hohelied Salomo's überfeßt mit Einleitung*, 1826
(in Ginsburg 1861: 206)

. . . the book has been said, and with justice, to breathe *resignation at the grave of Israel*. Its author sees 'the tears of the oppressed, and they had no comforter, and on the side of their oppressors there was power; wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive.' [4:1–2] He sees 'all things come alike to all, there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked'. [9:2] Attempts at a philosophic indifference appear, at a sceptical suspension of judgment, at an easy *ne quid nimis*: 'Be not righteous overmuch, neither make thyself overwise! why shouldst thou destroy thyself?' [7:16] Vain attempts, even at a moment which favoured them! shows of scepticism, vanishing as soon as uttered before the intractable conscientiousness of Israel.

Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma*, 1873 (in Arnold 1968: 207)

Qoheleth has his place in the long history of the battle of the Jewish conscience against injustice in the world. He represents a pause in the struggle.

Ernest Renan, *L'Éclésiaste* (1882: 39–40; my tr.)

He has nothing of the flaming indignation of an Amos, nothing of the crusading spirit. He is not tough-minded. He cannot even blame corrupt officials: it is the system that is at fault, and the individual is helpless.

Millar Burrows, 'Kuhn and Koheleth' (1927: 96)

Here within the canon of Jewish Scripture . . . popular fatalism and pessimism were given forceful and fearless utterance. Here the creed of those who cried, 'Where is the God of justice?' found an eloquent voice, and the spiritual insights by which the seers of Israel had tried to illumine the age-long problem of evil faced derisive denial.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, *A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, 1938
(in Fosdick 1965: 181)

Ecclesiastes was struck by the fact that time and again, according to his experience, it is as if man lives in an ethically indifferent universe. Ecclesiastes believed that there was a God who had creative and boundless power, but that He often did not wish to intervene in human history at the appropriate time, or if He did