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978-1-107-62397-2 - Ecclesiastes; or The Preacher
With Notes and Introduction by E. H. Plumptre
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WITH NOTES AND INTRODUCTION

BY

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EDITED FOR THE SYNDICS OF THE UNIVERSITY PRESS.

Cambridge :
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS.

London: CAMBRIDGE WAREHOUSE, 17, PATERNOSTER ROW.
Cambridge: DEIGHTON, BELL, AND CO.

1881

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107623972

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First published 1881
First paperback edition 2013

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-62397-2 Paperback

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PREFACE.

AMONG the many enigmas of the Old Testament the book of Ecclesiastes is pre-eminently enigmatic. It comes before us as the sphinx of Hebrew literature, with its unsolved riddles of history and life. It has become almost a proverb that every interpreter of this book thinks that all previous interpreters have been wrong. Its very title has received some dozen discordant interpretations. The dates assigned to its authorship by competent experts range over very nearly a thousand years, from B.C. 990 to B.C. 10. Not less has been the divergence of opinion as to its structure and its aims. It has been regarded as a formal treatise, or as a collection of unconnected thoughts and maxims, like the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, or Pascal's *Pensées*, or Hare's *Guesses at Truth*; or as a dialogue, though without the names of the interlocutors, after the manner of Plato; or like the discussions between the *Dotto* and the *Ignorante*, that form a prominent feature in the teaching of the Italian Jesuits, and in which the writer holds free debate with his opponents¹. Those who take the latter view are, unfortunately, divided among themselves as to which interlocutor in the dialogue represents the views of the writer, and

¹ See Ginsburg's exhaustive survey of the literature of Ecclesiastes in the *Introduction* to his Commentary. Herder may be named as the author of the Dialogue theory, but he has been followed by many others.

which those that he is seeking to refute¹. As to the drift of the book, we meet with every conceivable variety of hypothesis more or less skilfully maintained. Men have seen in it the confessions of the penitent and converted Solomon², or a bitter cynical pasquinade on the career of Herod the Great³, or a Chesterfield manual of policy and *politesse* for those who seek their fortune in the palaces of kings⁴. It has been made to teach a cloistral asceticism⁵, or a healthy life of natural enjoyment⁶, or a license like that of a St Simonian “rehabilitation of the flesh⁷.” Those who looked on one side of the shield have found in it a direct and earnest *apologia* for the doctrine of the immortality of the soul⁸; those who approached it from the other were not less sure that it was a polemic protest against that doctrine as it was taught by Pharisees or Essenes⁹. The writer aimed at leading men to seek the things eternal, or sought to draw them away from the cloud-land of the unknown that men call eternity. Dogmatism and scepticism have alike claimed the author as their champion. It has been made to teach the mysteries of the Trinity and the Atonement¹⁰, or to rebuke the presumption that speculates on those mysteries. It has been identified

¹ One school, *e.g.*, maintains that the seemingly Epicurean sentiments, another that the gloomier views of life, are stated only to be rejected (Ginsburg, *ut supra*).

² This is, I need hardly say, the current traditional interpretation of Jewish and Patristic and early Protestant writers (Ginsburg, *ut supra*).

³ Grätz, *Comm. on Koheleth*, p. 13.

⁴ Jacobi, quoted by Ginsburg, p. 186.

⁵ The view was that of Jerome, Augustine, and the whole crowd of Patristic and mediæval interpreters.

⁶ Luther, *Comm. on Eccles.* ⁷ Grätz, *Commentary*, p. 26.

⁸ So most Patristic and early Protestant scholars; and Hengstenberg and Delitzsch among those of our own time.

⁹ So emphatically Grätz, p. 28.

¹⁰ See the Commentaries of Jerome, Augustine, and others of the same school, as collected by Pineda.

alike with the Creed of Athanasius and with that of the Agnostic.

Think, too, for a moment of the varying aspects which it presents to us when we come in contact with it, not as handled by professed interpreters, but as cropping up here and there in the pages of history, or the lives of individual men. We think of Gelimer, the Vandal king¹, led in chains in the triumph of Belisarius, and, as he walked on without a tear and without a sigh, finding a secret consolation in the oft-echoed burden of "*Vanitas vanitatum! omnia vanitas!*" or of Jerome reading the book with his disciple Blæsilla, that he might persuade her to renounce those vanities for the life of the convent at Bethlehem²; or of Thomas à Kempis taking its watchword as the text of the *De Imitatione Christi*; or of Laud writing to Strafford when the policy of "Thorough" had broken down, and counselling him to turn for consolation to its pages³. We remember how Luther found in it a healthy *Politica* or *Æconomica*, the very mirror of magistracy and active life, as contrasted with that of the monks and friars who opposed him⁴; how Voltaire dedicated his paraphrase of it to Frederick II., as that of a book which was the king's favourite study⁵. It has, in the history of our own literature, been versified by poets as widely contrasted as Quarles and Prior. It has furnished a name to the "Vanity Fair" of Bunyan and of Thackeray; and the latter in a characteristic poem⁶ has moralized his song on the theme of its *Mataiotēs Mataiotētōn*. Pascal found in it the echo of the restless scepticism which drove him to take refuge

¹ Gibbon, c. XLI.

² Hieron. *Præf. in Eccles.*

³ Mozley, *Essays*, I. p. 60.

⁴ Luther, *Præf. in Eccles.*

⁵ Voltaire, *Œuvres*, Vol. X. p. 258 (ed. 1819).

⁶ Thackeray, *Ballads and Tales*, 1869, p. 233.

from the uncertainty that tormented him apart from God, in the belief that God had revealed Himself, and that the Church of Rome was the witness and depository of that revelation¹. Renan, lastly, looks on it as the only charming work—“*le seul livre aimable*”—that has ever been written by a Jew, and with his characteristic insight into the subtle variations of human nature, strives to represent to himself St Paul in his declining years—if only he had been of another race and of another temperament, *i.e.* if he had been quite another Paul than we have known—as at last discovering, *désillusionné* of the “sweet Galilean vision,” that he had wasted his life on a dream, and turning from all the Prophets to a book which till then he had scarcely read, even the book Ecclesiastes².

It will be seen from the *Introduction* to this volume that I am not satisfied to rest altogether in any of these conclusions. I can honestly say that I have worked through the arguments by which the writers have supported them and have not found them satisfy the laws of evidence or the conditions of historical probability. It lies in the nature of the case that, as I have studied the book, month after month, I have felt its strangely fascinating and, so to speak, zymotic power, that side-lights have fallen on it now from this quarter and now from that, that suggestive coincidences have shewed themselves between its teaching and that of other writings in Hebrew, or Greek, or later literature, that while much remained that, like parts of St Paul’s Epistles, was “hard to be understood” (2 Pet. iii. 16), much also seemed to become clear. The “maze” was not altogether “without a plan,” and there was, at least, a partial clue to the intricate windings of the labyrinth. It

¹ Pascal, *Pensées*, Vol. I. p. 159, ed. Molines.

² Renan, *L’Antéchrist*, p. 101.

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PREFACE.

II

will be seen, in the course of the *Introduction* and the Notes that follow, that I have consulted most of the commentaries that were best worth consulting. It is not, I think, necessary to give a complete list of these or of other books which I have, in the course of my labours, laid under contribution, but I cannot withhold a special tribute of grateful admiration to the two works which have most helped me—the Commentary of Dr Ginsburg, the result of many years of labour, and characterized, as might be expected, by an exhaustive completeness; and that by Mr Tyler, which, though briefer, is singularly thoughtful and suggestive, and to which I am indeed indebted for the first impressions as to the date and character of the book, which have now ripened into convictions.

Those convictions I now submit alike to students and to experts. They will clash, it may be, in some points with inherited and traditional opinions. I can but hope, however, that those who are drawn to the study of the book may find in what I have written that which will help them to understand it better than they have done. They will find in it, if I mistake not, that it meets, and, we may believe, has been providentially designed to meet, the special tendencies of modern philosophical thought, and that the problems of life which it discusses are those with which our own daily experience brings us into contact. They will learn that the questions of our own time are those which vexed the minds of seekers and debaters in an age not unlike our own in its forms of culture, and while they recognize the binding force of its final solution of the problems, “Fear God and keep His commandments,” on those who have not seen, or have not accepted the light of a fuller revelation, they will rejoice in the brightness of that higher revelation of the mind of God of which the Christian Church is the

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inheritor and the witness. If they feel, as they will do, that there is hardly any book of the Old Testament which presents so marked a contrast in its teaching to that of the Gospels or Epistles of the New Testament, they will yet acknowledge that it is not without a place in the Divine Economy of Revelation, and may become to those who use it rightly a *παιδαγωγὸς εἰς Χριστόν*—a “schoolmaster leading them to Christ.”

BICKLEY VICARAGE,
Oct. 23rd, 1880.

CONTENTS.

	PAGES
I. INTRODUCTION.	
<i>Chapter I.</i> The Title	15—19
<i>Chapter II.</i> Authorship and Date	19—34
<i>Chapter III.</i> An Ideal Biography	35—55
<i>Chapter IV.</i> Ecclesiastes and Ecclesiasticus	56—66
<i>Chapter V.</i> Ecclesiastes and the Wisdom of Solomon	67—75
<i>Chapter VI.</i> Jewish interpreters of Ecclesiastes...	75—87
<i>Chapter VII.</i> Ecclesiastes and its Patristic interpreters.....	88—97
<i>Chapter VIII.</i> Analysis of Ecclesiastes	97—101
II. TEXT AND NOTES.....	103—230
III. APPENDIX.	
1. Koheleth and Shakespeare	231—249
2. Koheleth and Tennyson	250—261
3. A Persian Koheleth of the twelfth century ...	262—268
IV. INDEX	269—271

* * The Text adopted in this Edition is that of Dr Scrivener's *Cambridge Paragraph Bible*. A few variations from the ordinary Text, chiefly in the spelling of certain words, and in the use of italics, will be noticed. For the principles adopted by Dr Scrivener as regards the printing of the Text see his Introduction to the *Paragraph Bible*, published by the Cambridge University Press.