ECCLESIASTES, BOOK OF: (back to article)

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Name and Authorship.

The name "Ecclesiastes"—literally, "Member of an Assembly," often thought to mean (after Jerome) "Preacher"—is the Septuagint rendering of the Hebrew "Ḳohelet," apparently as an intensive formation from the root "ḳahal," with which such forms as the Arabic "rawiyyah" (professional reciter) have been compared. The Hebrew word is given by the author of the book as his name, sometimes with the article (xii. 8, and probably vii. 27), but ordinarily without it: similar license is allowed in Arabic in the case of some common nouns used as proper names. The author represents himself as the son of David, and king over Israel in Jerusalem (i. 1, 12, 16; ii. 7, 9). The work consists of personal or autobiographic matter, with reflections on the purpose of life and the best method of conducting it. These, the author declares, were composed by him as he increased in wisdom, were "weighed," studied" corrected, expressed in carefully chosen phrases, and correctly written out (xii. 9, 10), to be taught to the people.The fact of the author describing himself in the foregoing style, together with his statements concerning the brilliancy of his court and his studies in philosophy (i. 13-17, ii. 4-11), led the ancients to identify him with Solomon; and this identification, which appears in the Peshiṭta, Targum, and Talmud (compare 'Er. 21b; Shab. 30a), passed unquestioned till comparatively recent times. The order of the Solomonic writings in the canon suggested that Ecclesiastes was written before Canticles (Rashi on B. B. 14b); whereas another tradition made their composition simultaneous, or put Ecclesiastes last (Seder 'Olam Rabbah, ed. Ratner, p. 66, with the editor's notes). The fact that Kohelet speaks of his reign in the past tense (i. 12) suggested that the book was written on Solomon's death-bed (*ib.*). Another way of accounting for it was to suppose that Solomon composed it during the period in which he was driven from his throne (Giṭ. 68b), a legend which may have originated from this passage. The canonicity of the book was, however, long doubtful (Yad. iii. 5; Meg. 7a), and was one of the matters on which the school of Shammai took a more stringent view than the school of Hillel; it was finally settled "on the day whereon R. Eleazar b. Azariah was appointed head of the assembly." Endeavors were made to render it apocryphal on the ground of its not being inspired (Tosef., Yad. ii. 14; ed. Zuckermandel, p. 683), or of its internal contradictions (Shab. 30b), or of a tendency which it displayed toward heresy—that is, Epicureanism (Pesiḳ., ed. Buber, viii. 68b); but these objections were satisfactorily answered (see S. Schiffer, "Das Buch Ḳohelet," Frankfort-on-the-Main, 1884). It was assumed that Solomon had taken the name "Ḳohelet," just as he had taken the name "Agur" (Prov. xxx. 1), as a collector (see, further, Eppenstein, "Aus dem Ḳohelet-Kommentar des Tanchum Jeruschalmi," Berlin, 1888); and probably the Septuagint rendering represents a theory that the name contained an allusion to I Kings viii. 1, where Solomon is said to have gathered an assembly.

Date.

As to the age of the work, there is an indication of the latest date at which it could have been written in the fact that Ben Sira repeatedly quotes or imitates it (Ecclus. [Sirach] xxvii. 26, from Eccl. x. 8, verbatim [comp. LXX.]; xviii. 5, from Eccl. iii. 14, inverted, probably for metrical reasons; xxx. 21, from Eccl. xi. 10; xxxiv. 5b, from Eccl. v. 9; xiii. 21, 22, after Eccl. ix. 16; xxxvii. 14, after Eccl. vii. 19; xxxiv. 1, after Eccl. v. 11; comp. "The Wisdom of Ben Sira," ed. Schechter and Taylor, Introduction, pp. 13 *et seq.*, and p. 26, note 2). Since Ben Sira declares himself a compiler from the Old Testament (xxiv. 28), whereas Ecclesiastes claims originality (xii. 9, 10), it seems certain, in the case of close agreement between the two books, that Ben Sira must be the borrower. This fact gives some date about 250 or 300 B.C. as the latest possible for the composition of the book in its present form; for this repeated

borrowing implies that Ben Sira regarded it as part of his canon, which would scarcely contain any works that had been produced in his lifetime. With this fact the nature of Ben Sira's language, as preserved in Talmudic quotations, agrees; for such decided Neo-Hebraisms as עסק ("business"), שמא ("lest"), and הרשה ("authorize") are not found in Ecclesiastes, though, had they been in vogue in the author's time, he would have had constant occasion to employ them. He uses instead למה, חפץ (vii. 16, 17; also used in the Phenician Eshmunazar inscription), and היטליט. Though allusions to Ecclesiastes arenot common in the New Testament, Matt. xxiii. 23, R. V., "These ye ought to have done, and not to have left the other undone," seems clearly a reminiscence of Eccl. vii. 18. It is therefore necessary to reject all theories that bring the book down to a date later than 250 B.C., including that of Graetz, who regarded it as Herodian—in which he is followed by Leimdörfer (Erlangen, 1891), who makes Simeon ben Shetaḥ the author—and that of Renan, who places it somewhere before 100 B.C. These theories are largely based on conjectural interpretations of historical allusions, which, though often attractive, are not convincing. The Grecisms supposed to be found in the book are all imaginary (for instance, פתגם has no connection with φθέγμα the phrase "under the sun," which occurs so frequently, is also found in the Eshmunazar and Tabnith inscriptions, not later than 300 B.C., as the equivalent of "on earth"), and the suppositions as to borrowings from Greek philosophy which some have professed to detect are all fallacious (See Ad. Lods; "L'Ecclésiaste et la Philosophie Grecque," 1890).On the other hand, there is much in the language which, with the present knowledge of Hebrew, one should be disposed to regard as characteristic of a comparatively late period. H. Grotius, in the sixteenth century, collected about a hundred words and phrases of this sort occurring in the book; but several apparent modernisms may represent usages which must have been introduced into Palestine at an early period (*e.g.*, ש for אשר, and the abstracts in ות, both from Assyrian), or words which may have been largely used in ancient times (*e.g.*, "taḳḳen," "to correct," also Assyrian); and even in the case of some idioms which seem especially characteristic of late Hebrew, the likeliest account is that they were preserved through long ages in remote dialects (so "kebar," "already," occurring only in this book—apparently an old verb, "kabur," "it is great"; *i.e.*, "it is a long time since"; comp. the Arabic "ṭalama"); certain Persisms, however (פתגם, "account" [viii. 11], Persian "payghām"; פרדס, "park" [ii. 5], Zend "pairidaeza," Armenian "partez"), seem to provide a more certain clue; and that the book is post-exilic may be asserted with confidence, though how near the latest possible limit the date can be brought down can not be fixed with precision. Hence the Solomonic authorship (which few now hold) may be dismissed; nor indeed could the second king of the dynasty have spoken of "all which were in Jerusalem before me."Beyond the fact that Ḳohelet was uncritically identified with Solomon, it seems impossible to discover any connection between the two names. The interpretation of the word "Ḳohelet" as a substantive is purely conjectural; and though the phrase rendered "masters of assemblies," but more probably signifying "authors of collections," lends some color to the rendering "collector," it is not free from grave difficulty. As a proper name, however, it might be derived from "ḳahal" in one of the Arabic senses of that root, though its use with the article would in that case constitute a difficulty; finally, it might be a foreign word. The Talmud seems rightly to call attention to the importance of the past tense in i. 12; for one who says "I *was* king" implies that his reign is over: he must be speaking either as a dead man or as one who has abdicated. Ḳohelet is then either a fictitious person or an adaptation of some monarch, like Al-Nu'man of Arabic mythology (Ṭabari, i. 853), who, becoming conscious of the instability of the world, abandons his throne and takes to devotion. Similarly, Ḳohelet appears to pass from king to preacher, though it is not actually stated that he abandons his throne. The references to kings in all but the earliest chapters rather imply that the author is a subject; but this may be unintentional. The author's idea of a king would seem to be modeled on the monarchs of Persia, with kings and provinces subject to them (ii. 8); and the gardens with exotics (ii. 5) and irrigated parks (ii. 6) are likely to belong to the same region.The Israelitish name for God is nowhere employed, nor does there appear to be any reference to Judaic matters; hence there seems to be a possibility that the book is an adaptation of a work in some other language. This supposition would agree with the fact that certain of the idioms found in it are not so much late Hebrew as foreign Hebrew (*e.g.*, vii. 24, viii. 17, xii. 9); with the frequent use of the participial present

(*e.g.*, viii. 14); with the unintelligible character of several phrases which are apparently not corrupt (*e.g.*, iv. 17, x. 15, much of xii. 4-6); and with the want of sharpness that characterizes some of the aphorisms (*e.g.*, x. 9). Further, the verb אזן (xii. 9), which describes a process to which the author says he subjected his proverbs, should, on the analogy of the Arabic "wazan," refer to the numbering of syllables; and the following phrases, apparently meaning "searched out and corrected" or "carefully straightened," have the appearance of referring to metrical correctness, though their exact import is not easy to fix. Of any such formal technicality the verses of Ḳohelet bear no trace in their existing form; yet there are places where the introduction of words would be more intelligible if the author had a fixed number of syllables to make up (*e.g.*, xii. 2, "while the sun *or the light* or the moon or the stars be not darkened"). If this be so, the character of the idioms noticed (*e.g.*, xii. 9, "the wiser Ḳohelet became, the more did he teach") renders it probable that the language of the model was Indo-Germanic; and the introduction of the names "David," "Israel," and "Jerusalem," as well as the concealment of all names in the case of the anecdotes which the author introduces (*e.g.*, iv. 13-15, ix. 14-16), is with the view of accommodating the work to Jewish taste.

Contents.

In Ecclesiastes there are some continuous sections of considerable length: (1) Ḳohelet's autobiography, i. 12-ii. 26; (2) a statement of the doctrines of determinism and Epicureanism, ix. 1-12; (3) a description of death, xii. 1-8. The rest of the book is in short paragraphs or isolated aphorisms; and the author in xii. 11, 12 declares that the aphoristic style is superior to the continuous discourse—a doctrine which in modern times has been associated with the name of Bacon. In the autobiography the author states that he experimented with various forms of study, pleasure, and enterprise, in the hope of finding the meaning of the endless chain of phenomena, but that heabandoned them in disgust. The morals that he draws, however, appear to be inconsistent; since, while some verses encourage the theory that pleasure is the summum bonum, others seem to warn youth against any such view. This inconsistency, which could probably be paralleled from the works of Oriental pessimists like Omar Khayyam and Abu al-'Ala of Ma'arrah, attracted attention, as has been stated, in early times; but the various attempts that have been made to bring the author into harmony with himself are too subjective to be convincing. Thus some would regard all the edifying passages as interpolations (so Haupt, "Oriental Studies," pp. 243 *et seq.*); others would regard the Epicurean passages as to be read with interrogations (so some rabbis), while it has also been suggested (by Bickell, "Der Prediger") that the sheets of the book have been displaced. None of these opinions can be received without external evidence. It seems more probable, therefore, that the author expresses the varying sentiments of different moods, just as the second of the writers mentioned above alternates between orthodoxy and blasphemy.After his personal history the author proceeds to give illustrations of more general experiences. In these he speaks as a subject rather than as a king; he cites the prevalence of injustice in the world, for which he had some tentative solutions (iii. 17, 18); later, however, he relapsed into the Epicurean conclusion (iii. 22), accentuated by further observation into pessimism (iv. 1-4). At this point he proceeds to introduce a variety of maxims, illustrated by anecdotes, leading up to the conclusion (vii. 17) that the plan of the universe is incomprehensible. Chapter ix. formulates the doctrine that men's actions and motives are all foreordained, and advises gaiety on the ground that whatever is to happen is already fixed, and that there will be no room for activity in the grave. This is emphasized by anecdotes of the unexpected happening (11-16). There follows another series of maxims leading up to a poetical description of death, and, after some observations on the value of the aphorism, to the assertion that the substance of the whole matter is "Fear God and keep his commandments, . . . for God shall bring every work into judgment" (xii. 13-14).The felicity, wisdom, and profundity of many of the aphorisms probably endeared the book to many who might have been displeased with the Epicurean and pessimistic passages. Yet without the idea that Ḳohelet was Solomon one could scarcely imagine the work ever having been included in the canon; and had it not been adopted before the doctrine of the Resurrection became popular, it is probable that the author's views on that subject would have caused his book to be excluded therefrom. Mystical interpretation of the book began fairly early (see Ned. 32b); and the work was a

favorite source of citation with those rabbis who, like Saadia, were philosophers as well as theologians.Bibliography: See, besides the commentaries of Hitzig, Delitzsch, Volck-Oettli, Siegfried, and Wildeboer, the following: Ewald, *Poetische Schriften des Alten, Testaments*, iv.; Renan, *L'Ecclésiaste*, Paris, 1882; Graetz, *Koheleth*, Breslau, 1871; C. H. H. Wright, *The Book of Kohelet*, London, 1883; Bickell, *Kohelet*, 1886; Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes*, Cambridge, 1881; Tyler, *Ecclesiastes*, London, 1874; Wünsche, *Bibliotheca Rabbinica, Midrash, Koheleth*, 1880; Cheyne, *Job and Solomon*, London, 1887; also the following monographs on special points: Haupt, *The Book of Ecclesiastes (Oriental Studies of the Philadelphia Oriental Club)*, 1894; Euringer, *Der Masoratext des Kohelet*, Leipsic, 1890; Köhler, *Ueber die Grundanschauungen des Buches Kohelet*, Erlangen, 1885; Bickell, *Der Prediger über den Wert des Daseins*, Innsbruck, 1884; Schiffer, *Das Buch Kohelet Nach der Auffassung der Weisen des Talmuds und Midrasch*, 1884; Renan, *Histoire du Peuple d'Israel*, vol. v., ch. xv.; Piepenbring, *Histoire du Peuple d'Israel*. For further bibliography consult Palm, *Die Qoheleth Litteratur*, Tübingen, 1888; and Siegfried, *Commentary*, pp. 25-27.J. Jr. D. S. M.
