THE IDENTIFICATION AND USE OF QUOTATIONS IN ECCLESIASTES

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One of the most important aspects of the study of the wisdom of Qoheleth is the problem of its relationship to the earlier wisdom of the Old Testament, particularly as represented in the gnomic or proverbial literature collected in Proverbs x-xxix.¹ The problem may be expressed in the following way: did Qoheleth regard himself as an exponent of "wisdom" in the same sense as the authors of the book of Proverbs? Was it his purpose to oppose the teaching of his predecessors in its entirety, or merely to modify certain aspects of it? Do the occasional apparently contradictory statements in the book show him to have been himself subject to doubts or contradictions, or was he rather quoting older sayings only to refute them? Or are we to follow some of the older critics and regard certain verses as having been added to the original text by interpolators?²

Some progress towards the solution of these problems may perhaps be obtained by looking again at the question of the supposed quotations of earlier wisdom sayings in the book of Qoheleth and at the way in which they fit into their contexts. However, the identification of such quotations constitutes a problem. Some sayings in the book certainly stand out from their contexts as sayings which are self-contained: they make good sense on their own. But are they in fact quotations from earlier literature, or were they composed in traditional fashion by Qoheleth himself? Can one distinguish between two


²As maintained especially by C. Siegfried, Prediger Salomonis und Hobestied (Göttingen, 1898²), and E. Podechard, L'Ecclesiaste (Paris, 1912).
kinds of such sayings: quotations, and original compositions by the author of the book?

In this essay it is not possible to attempt any major contributions to the solution of the many unsolved problems of the book. What I wish to undertake is some discussion of these putative quotations. It is to Robert Gordis that we owe most of our insights into the use of quotations in the Old Testament books and particularly in Qoheleth. One question, however, he left open as probably insoluble: in his book *Koheleth—The Man and his World. A Study of Ecclesiastes* he wrote: "Whether Koheleth is quoting proverbs already extant, or composing them himself, is difficult to determine." If in fact there is no way of identifying Qoheleth’s quotations, any attempt to draw conclusions about the way in which he used them is obviously doomed from the start. What are the possibilities? The kind of sayings which we are discussing might be quotations from some earlier written or oral collection, or quotations by Qoheleth of sayings composed earlier by himself, or passages in which he dropped the discursive style which he mainly employed in his book, and reverted to that of the more conventional wisdom writer. If they are actual quotations of sayings composed by someone other than himself, they may be from an earlier age—contemporary, for example, with the sayings in Prov. x-xxix, many of which must probably be dated in the period of the monarchy—or they may be sayings composed by Qoheleth’s own contemporaries. In view of all these possibilities it is indeed probable that the question of authorship—that is, Qoheleth’s or another’s—will not be capable of solution in all cases. Nevertheless it may be possible to point to some sayings where Qoheleth’s authorship is highly improbable: where we are, in other words, almost certainly dealing with quotations by him of sayings composed by others. If this can be done even in a few cases it will be possible to consider the reason for his employment of them and the use to which he put them.

In order to bring my remarks within the compass of this essay I propose here to confine myself to one type of saying: the single sayings...

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