ECCLESIASTES AS WISDOM: 
CONSULTING EARLY INTERPRETERS

by

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There is nowadays a renewed interest in the way different generations have read texts, and in what that tells us about the presuppositions and methodologies of those who read them and about the continuing interpretation of the text itself. In Jewish tradition the exegetical comments of ancient interpreters have continued to be read alongside the text and so have played an important role in shaping the way texts are read today. In the Christian tradition the dominant feeling seems to be that, although there may be value in consulting the church fathers, for example, later interpretations have tended to supersede those of earlier commentators. This is particularly true methodologically. For example, when one looks at the dominance of the allegorical method throughout the medieval period one cannot avoid the feeling that the hermeneutic alone led to radical distortions in interpretation of biblical texts. This is not a new feeling. Luther\(^1\) writing on Ecclesiastes labelled the contributions of his predecessors "miserable commentaries" and blamed them for perpetuating distortions which had concealed the "real meaning" of the book. Nowadays, whilst we would be unlikely to dismiss the work of our predecessors as "miserable commentaries", nevertheless there is still a certain distancing of ourselves from early interpreters and a definite divide between pre- and post-critical scholarship. I wonder if we might try to close that gap by looking at the methodologies or presuppositions of ancient commentators and at the issues with which they were concerned, and by asking if the older interpretations in any sense illuminate current debate. It may be that the insights of ancient exegetes prove

\(^1\) "Annotationes in Ecclesiasten" in Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe 20: 1-203 (Weimar 1898); E. tr., "Notes on Ecclesiastes", Luther’s Works 15 (St Louis 1972), pp. 3-187.
to be no more than interesting curiosities. However, we may ask if there has been any continuity or homogeneity of interpretation that may illuminate our efforts today. If there is, is any weight to be given to traditional approaches or have any unified thoughts that we might find been merely the result of misinterpretation building upon misinterpretation?

There is a trend in modern scholarship to regard Ecclesiastes, along with Job, as very much on the fringes of the main wisdom exercise. This is the literature of protest that dared to challenge the easy optimism of early proverbial wisdom. The author of Ecclesiastes is not just sceptical; he is pessimistic in the extreme, having given up the possibility of a meaningful relationship with God and advocating a resigned cynicism about life. If this is wisdom it is wisdom at its limits. However, this radical book was toned down in the process of canonization. The usual argument put forward by scholars is that two factors secured for the book entry to the canon, a book which should, because of its sentiments, never have been there. The first factor is the misinterpretation of the book’s sentiments by those who canonized it. One view is that this involved misinterpretation of the whole book because of the contradictions contained within it, whereby more pious sentiments are ranked alongside more pessimistic ones. So R. Gordis writes, "Koheleth’s characteristic style helps to explain how the book managed to enter the Biblical canon. Matter of fact readers, unaware of his unconventional use of a religious vocabulary or his citation of proverbs for his own special purposes, would find the book replete with sound orthodox sentiments." An alternative view is that the epilogue echoes traditional teaching about God and therefore functioned to enable readers to find more orthodox sentiments in the book than might otherwise have been the case, a view espoused, for example, by S. Sheridan. The second factor that

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