

School of Religion

Faculty Publications and Presentations

Liberty University

Year 2006

Review: The End of Wisdom: a
Reappraisal of the Historical and
Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes

Donald L. Fowler
Liberty University, dfowler@liberty.edu

mentioned in one paragraph (2:5–10), and nothing is said about her except that she finds Moses and adopts him as her son. But even by the time of Philo, she had been supplied with a name and a full history, and there develops an entire discussion about her character and motivations. She has also been represented in art. Three of these pictures, one each from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and twentieth centuries, are shown, and their elements discussed. Other characters and events that appear in the narrative receive similar treatment.

The second thing Langston makes clear is that the Bible can be, and has been, appropriated to support any number of causes, even those that might be considered mutually contradictory. For example, at the time of the Civil War, Henry Ward Beecher of Brooklyn, New York depicted the Northern cause in terms of the Israelites caught between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea. A few months later, Benjamin Morgan Palmer of New Orleans, Louisiana “compared the Confederacy’s situation to that of the fleeing Israelites” (see pp. 144–47 for quotations from the sermons). Interpretations of the Ten Commandments have been used to support segregation and to critique Hitler’s Nazism (pp. 210–13).

The book is full of interesting information, gathered from an impressive variety of sources; the bibliography itself is some 25 pages long. But I am unclear as to who these commentaries are intended for, beyond the vague statement in the editor’s preface that it is “a much-needed resource for all those interested in the influence of the Bible on Western culture.” The academic in biblical studies might find some useful material here. The college instructor who teaches the history of western civilization might find some useful material here. The educated reader might find the material interesting, but is not likely to pay the publisher’s price for the privilege. In short, as interesting as it is, I find myself unable to recommend the book. It is a book, and ultimately a series, without an audience, except in some limited section of academic esoterica.

Benjamin Shaw
Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Greenville, SC

The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes. By Martin A. Shields. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006, 250 pp., \$37.50.

The book of Ecclesiastes (hereafter referred to as Qoheleth) has often provided its readers copious difficulties over both its teachings and its text. No consensus has ever emerged among scholars concerning its interpretation. Martin Shields’s novel approach is that the epilogist (the author of 12:9–14) employed the teachings of Qoheleth to draw the audience away from traditional (or wayward) Wisdom ideas. “In using Qoheleth’s words to disclose the failings of speculative wisdom, the epilogist presents a unified work possessing a specific overarching purpose of deterring prospective students of speculative wisdom from embracing the wisdom movement and pointing them to their religious heritage, which offered a way out of the senseless and futile world of the sages” (p. 238).

Shields understands “Wisdom” to be a religious world view that can successfully provide answers to life’s mysterious events, both good and bad. In this view, the sage can know how to effect God’s blessings and bring prosperity upon himself. The epilogist used Qoheleth’s sayings (1) to promote the idea that it is impossible to make sense of God’s activities; and (2) to offer instead an alternative in 12:9–14 to Qoheleth’s “all is senseless.” For the epilogist, the proper approach is not in speculative wisdom but in fearing God and keeping His commandments. This is not to say, however, that he is presenting an epilogue that is simply juxtaposed to Qoheleth’s main work; rather, “the voice

of the epilogist also intrudes into the work in Qoh 1:1-2; 7:27; and 12:8" (p. 47). Nonetheless, the vast majority of Qoheleth belongs to Qoheleth, and in Shields's view the epilogist put the sage's teachings into the present form.

The author concluded that the sages misread teachings about wisdom: "In a history of this sort, the beginnings lie in the wisdom of Proverbs, whose terse nature readily permits a naïve, mechanistic (mis)interpretation of the world" (p. 238). At a later period (pre-exilic also?), books like Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon as well as pharisaical Judaism emphasized instead the study of Torah (p. 238). As Shields admits, however, the literary evidence in the Hebrew Bible for such a historical development is scant. Nonetheless, even into NT times, it was still commonly held that when people experienced misfortune, it was because of sin (Luke 13:1-5; John 9:2); that is, the retribution principle applied indiscriminately.

In order to read Ecclesiastes (i.e. Qoheleth and the epilogist) in this fashion, Shields must emphasize a consistent contrast between the teachings of Qoheleth (i.e. 1:3-12:8) and the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Since Qoheleth is discrediting the idea that knowing wisdom, which is grounded in the retribution principle ("the world operates via an underlying moral order," p. 239), can make sense of life's experiences, then his teachings are read in nearly every case as antithetical to the wisdom of Proverbs. This reading has led to what seems to be some forced exegesis in parts of his commentary. For example, Shields consistently renders the common word for "evil or calamity" (over 30 times in noun form in the book) as "evil" rather than "calamity." In so doing, he creates an image of a God who is deterministic and (by Shields's reading) who does evil. His persistence in choosing "evil" over "calamity" ignores the fact that the prophetic literature contains specific examples where God is the author of "calamity" (but not evil) as in Isaiah 45:7: "The one forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity" (NASB). Lamentations reflects the same tradition: "Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?" (Lam 3:38 NASB). Another example of an interpretation that seems forced on the text is Shields's interpretation of "fear." In order to situate Qoheleth outside the Wisdom tradition, Qoheleth's frequent reference to "fear" is consistently interpreted as a non-productive and negative word. However, given the fact that "fear" is one of the epilogist's two behaviorisms for relating properly to God, it is difficult to believe an ordinary reader would have been able to recognize such a distinction in the same book. If indeed Qoheleth had given these common wisdom vocabulary and/or themes new contexts, one would have thought his message could have been delivered more effectively by utilizing other vocabulary. By employing common wisdom language, Qoheleth's real message, according to Shields, has consequently been obscured until the present.

In conclusion, Shields delivers his thesis well and his exegesis alone is worth the price of the book. He interfaces with all the major commentaries and authors on the book. The author chooses in most cases to work with the Masoretic text rather than emend the sometimes obscure Hebrew of Qoheleth. While I am not convinced by Shields's central thesis, the volume is a welcome addition to the works on this difficult book. Using the book would have been made easier and more efficient if a bibliography had been added. When an author was cited who had previously published multiple works on Qoheleth, it became laborious to track one's way through the citations to find the full bibliography (especially for journals).

With this criticism set aside, however, the book is a must for anyone who works with the Hebrew text. Shields is to be congratulated for his contribution to the challenging task of understanding Qoheleth.

Donald Fowler
Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA