

## Solomon and Qoheleth

Stuart Weeks, Durham University

Various explanations have been advanced for the reading of Ecclesiastes at the Feast of Tabernacles, a practice that does not seem to have begun before the Middle Ages, and that has never been applied with great consistency even amongst the Jewish communities that adopted it. Such a reading is not mentioned in the minor tractate *Soferim* (xiv.3), which does list the reading of the other four Scrolls, and which is commonly dated to the eighth century; by the beginning of the eleventh century, on the other hand, all five Scrolls have been grouped together in Codex Leningrad (and probably also in the Aleppo Codex), even though they are not yet arranged there in the order of the festivals with which each was associated. It seems probable that Ecclesiastes was the last book to be drawn into a process which incorporated the reading of complete texts at each festival, following the model set by the use of Esther at Purim and Lamentations on the Ninth of Av. Those two books, of course, relate directly to the events that are being commemorated; the others do not, and their selection may have been driven more by their relative brevity than by any other consideration: Ecclesiastes, the last selected, is longer than the other Megillot, but still shorter than the remaining Ketuvim. If such practical and liturgical considerations created this group of books, however, it seems likely that the existence of the group came to influence the way in which each was understood. Both Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs, in particular, found themselves associated with texts that had a narrative structure and/or a close relationship with the broader narrative of Jewish history. With the rise of printing, this aspect of their context was further emphasized by the common practice of presenting the texts of, or commentaries on the Five Scrolls and the Pentateuch together. The two least specifically Jewish books of the Hebrew Bible, both of which had excited earlier controversy about their status, came in this way to find themselves set firmly within Judaism's account and commemoration of its past.

The narrative understanding of both books has, of course, a much longer history, through the connection of each, alongside Proverbs, to the life of Solomon. It is Ecclesiastes, rather than the other 'Solomonic' books, however, that has tended to be the most fertile ground for historical speculation, and that is not because it fits better with biblical accounts of Solomon's reign, but arguably because it fits rather worse. Solomon's famous wisdom suits the confident tone of Proverbs, and his no less famous love of women the erotic tone of the Song. There is no self-evident place in those accounts, however, for such disillusionment with the world as seems to be apparent in Ecclesiastes. Although it seems to commend piety and fear of God, moreover, admittedly alongside its more problematic calls to pleasure, the book also seems to portray itself as the work of a man late in life, who looks back on his accomplishments, and who admonishes the young—but Solomon's later years are the very years in which, according to the biblical histories, he was most worldly and least God-fearing. Since the book's attitudes to government and kings seem likewise discordant with the views one might expect

from Solomon, or any other king, its attribution to Solomon forced readers to suppose that the biblical accounts of Solomon's reign were telling only part of his story, and for some it clearly became necessary to create a new context in which a penitent Solomon could look back on the vanity of those worldly things to which he had once been drawn.

We see this pressure at work in a number of Jewish sources. The Talmud records (*b. Gittin* 68b) that Solomon, having brought the demon Asmodeus to Jerusalem, is hurled an enormous distance by him, and has to find his way back as a beggar, while the demon assumes his identity. There is a debate between authorities, the Talmud notes, as to whether he succeeded in regaining the throne, or remained a commoner. The Targum (at 1.12) tells a briefer version of the same story, with Asmodeus sent directly by God to punish Solomon, it is probably echoed in the Midrash Rabbah on the same verse, which alludes to Solomon having become a commoner after he was king, and elements of it are elaborated in subsequent Jewish legends about Solomon. Such stories, and others emphasising Solomon's penitence, were clearly known to exist by Christian writers in various periods. In his own commentary on 1.12, for instance, Jerome claims that 'The Jews say that this is a book of Solomon's doing penance, because having placed his trust in wisdom and wealth, he gave offence to God by (his) wives'.<sup>1</sup> Some, indeed, have survived only in Christian sources, and several later medieval Christian writers quote a Christian work, now lost, that cited unnamed 'Hebrew books' for a story that:

Solomon was dragged five times through the streets of the city by way of penitence. They say likewise that he went into the temple, which he had built, with five rods, and gave them to the experts in the law, so that he might be beaten with them. They, by mutual agreement, all said together that they would lay no hand on the Lord's anointed; then, frustrated by them, he brought about his own removal from the throne.<sup>2</sup>

These legends create a place for Ecclesiastes in the story of Solomon, but they also represent, at least in part, an attempt to affirm the fundamental piety of Solomon, whose later associations with magic,

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Aiunt Hebraei hunc librum Salomonis esse, paenitentiam agentis, quod in sapientia diuitiisque confisus, per mulieres offenderit Deum.' My translation. See Marcus Adriaen, 'S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Commentarius in Ecclesiasten', in *S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Opera I,1* (CChr Series Latina, 72; Turnhout: Brepols, 1959), p. 258.

<sup>2</sup> From cols. 658-59 of Philip de Herving, 'Responsio de Damnatione Salomonis', *PL* 203 (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1855), cols. 644-59: 'Aiunt libri Hebraei Salomonem quinquies tractum fuisse per plateas civitatis, poenitentia causa. Item aiunt eum venisse in templum quod aedificaverat cum quinque virgis, et dedit eas legisperitis ut verberaretur ab illis. Qui communi accepto consilio dixerunt, quod in unctum Domini non mitterent manum. Inde frustratus ab illis, a se ipso est depositus de regno.' My translation. On this, and other citations of the text, see pages 287-88 of David J. Halperin, 'The "Book of Remedies," the Canonization of the Solomonic Writings, and the Riddle of Pseudo-Eusebius,' *JQR* 72 (1982), pp. 269-92.

science, and demonology combined with the biblical accounts of his reign to make him an extremely ambivalent figure. Jerome's commentary on the closing verses of Ecclesiastes once again cites Jewish sources as raising the possibility that the book might seem worthy of obliteration, alongside 'other writings of Solomon that were left in the past and of which no memory persists.'<sup>3</sup> This encapsulates very well a Talmudic perception both that Solomon's works had once been controversial, and that not all had survived; 1 Kings 5:12 [ET 4:32] is cited in support of the fact that there had once been, after all, three thousand sayings, along with a thousand and five songs —vastly more than are to be found in the books now extant. Early Christian writers used a Septuagint text that spoke of five thousand songs, indeed, and a fragment of Hippolytus' commentary on Song of Songs interprets Proverbs 25.1 to suggest, similarly, that Hezekiah and his men had selected what was to survive from this original, much larger corpus.<sup>4</sup> Whilst both Jewish and Christian writers were willing to accept the value of the Solomonic books that had come down to them, it seems that they were also very happy to allow that not everything written by Solomon was equally valuable, and that by the first few centuries of the Common Era, this attribution was not taken automatically as a guarantee of authority or of value. Indeed, Solomon's reputation may have required validation from these writings, at least as much as they required the prestige of his name, and it has even been suggested that Ecclesiastes and the Song

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Aiunt Habraei cum inter cetera scripta Salomonis quae antiquata sunt, nec in memoria durauerunt; et hic liber oblitterandus uideretur': see Adriaen, 'Commentarius in Ecclesiasten', p. 360. The translation 'have become obsolete and are no longer on record' in Richard J. Goodrich and David J.D. Miller (eds.), *St Jerome: Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation, 66; New York and Mahwah NJ: Newman Press, 2012), p. 133, is misleading.

<sup>4</sup> '(καὶ) ποῦ αἱ βιβλοὶ; ἀναφέρονται γὰρ μόναι αἱ Παροιμίαι καὶ ἡ Σοφία καὶ ὁ Ἐκκλησιαστής καὶ τὸ ᾠσμα τῶν ᾠσμάτων ... ἐν δὲ ταῖς ἡμέραις Ἐζερίου τὰ μὲν τῶν βιβλίων ἐξελέγησαν, τὰ δὲ (καὶ) περιώφθησαν. ὅθεν φησὶν ἡ γραφὴ „αὗται αἱ παροιμίαι Σολομῶντος αἱ ἀδιάκριτοι, ἃς ἐγράψαντο οἱ φίλοι Ἐζερίου τοῦ βασιλέως“. πόθεν δὲ ἐξελέξαντο ἀλλ' ἢ ἐκ τῶν βιβλίων τῶν ἐγκειμένων ἐν αἷς λέγει ταῖς τρισχιλίαις παραβολαῖς καὶ πεντακισχιλίαις ᾠδαῖς; ἐξ αὐτῶν οὖν τούτων οἱ φίλοι Ἐζερίου σοφοὶ ὑπάρχοντες ἐξελέξαντο τὰ πρὸς οἰκοδομὴν τῆς ἐκκλησίας.' See G. Nathanael Bonwetsch and Hans Achelis (eds.), *Hippolytus Werke. 1. Bd Exegetische und homiletische Schriften* (vol. 1.1; Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte herausgegeben von der Kirchenväter-Commission der Königl. Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften; Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1897), p. 343, lines 3, 7-14; Paul Anton de Lagarde (ed.), *Hippolyti Romani Quae feruntur omnia Graece* (Leipzig: G. Teubner; London: Williams & Norgate, 1858), p. 200, §135. It is possible, in fact, that the Septuagint translator, cited by Hippolytus, was trying to express a similar idea through the use of ἐγράψαντο, which is not generally used of textual transmission, but which can be used in the middle, *inter alia*, for copying extracts from something for one's own use (e.g. Aristophanes, *Birds* 982, of an oracle from a book), or writing down something as it is performed aloud (Aristophanes, *Frogs* 151). The original meaning of the note in the Hebrew text is obscure.

of Songs became canonical ‘probably despite their attribution, and not because of it.’<sup>5</sup> It is certainly true that claims about Solomon’s penitence and reconciliation with God remained highly controversial within both Judaism and Christianity.

The supposed Solomonic authorship of books clearly had an effect, then, on understandings of Solomon, but it is more difficult to say just how it influenced the interpretation of the books themselves. To be sure, countless commentators across the centuries have sought to align the content of Ecclesiastes with the life of Solomon, and in particular taken the description of Qohelet’s works in chapter 2 as a summary of Solomon’s works. The scope for this has proved rather limited, however, and apart from attempts to link the difficult remarks about women in chapter 7 with Solomon’s love life, most of the connections drawn have been between Solomon’s experiences and the opinions advanced, rather than between more specific circumstances or events. Amongst the earliest Christian commentators, in fact, there is a certain resistance to biographical readings of a book in which Qohelet is perceived not only to be Solomon, but also a type of Christ. Although he tends to affirm the Solomonic writing, Didymus the Blind, in fact, goes so far as to pose the question ‘(Are the) “sayings of Ecclesiastes” on the writer’s own behalf?’, and to respond by observing that:

Properly speaking, the author of the divinely inspired scriptures is the Spirit which prompts something to be said, but it is assisted by a wise man. For the Spirit has not invisibly written the letters and put down the words, but breathes them into a soul. And it may be that Solomon is the one writing these things, or that some of the wise wrote them. And perhaps we should do better to align ourselves with this (latter), lest anyone think that the speaker is speaking these things about himself.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the fact that this inspired scripture has been mediated through a human writer should not lead us to understand it simply as that human talking about himself, and we might do better to think of it as an anonymous work. There is a consciousness here, often lost amongst more

---

<sup>5</sup> Marc G. Hirshman, ‘Qohelet’s Reception and Interpretation in Early Rabbinic Literature’, in James L. Kugel (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Midrash* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies, 2001), pp. 87-99, esp. 88.

<sup>6</sup> ‘ἐπερ(·) [ῥήμα]τα ἐκκλησιαστοῦ ἐκ προσώπου τοῦ συγγραφέως; κυρίως μὲν ἐπὶ τῶν θεοπνεύστων γρ[αφ]ῶν συγγραφεὺς ἐστὶν τὸ πν(εῦμ)α τὸ ὑποβαλὼν αὐτὸ λαληθῆναι, ὑπηρετεῖται δὲ ὑπὸ τινος [σο]φοῦ. οὐδὲ γὰρ τὸ πν(εῦμ)α ἀοράτως ἐχάραξεν τὰ γράμματα καὶ τὰς λέξεις ἔθηκεν, ἀλλ’ ἐνπ[νεῖ] ψυχῇ τινι ταῦτα. καὶ ἥτοι αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ γράφων αὐτὰ ὁ Σολομὼν ἢ τῶν σοφῶν τινες ἔγραψαν αὐτά. καὶ τάχα μᾶλλον τούτῳ ἀρέσκομεν, ἵνα μὴ δόξῃ τις περὶ αὐτοῦ λέγειν τὸν λέ[γο]ντα ταῦτα.’ From the Tura Papyrus, p. 7, lines 9-12; see Gerhard Binder and Leo Liesenborghs (eds.), *Kommentar zum Ecclesiastes (Tura-Papyrus), Teil I.1: Kommentar zu Eccl. Kap. 1, 1-2, 14 (Einleitung, Text, Übersetzung, Indices)* (Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlungen, 25; Bonn: Rudolf Habelt, 1979), pp. 17-19. My translation of the Greek.

enthusiastically biographical writers in post-medieval times, that too close an identification of ideas as the product of individual human experience has to be reconciled with any belief that those ideas arose through divine inspiration.

Perhaps the most significant effect of Solomonic attribution, in fact, has been the perception that each book belongs to a corpus of work, within which chronological or biographical distinctions may become flattened, and the contents read in the context of the corpus as a whole. The Council of Carthage, in 397, recognized five books of Solomon as canonical for the African church, a number which presumably included not only the book of Wisdom, but also the book of Ecclesiasticus—a work that is specifically attributed not to Solomon but to ben Sira. Despite numerous reminders from the time of Augustine onward, many Christians seem not only to have confused this book with Ecclesiastes (an error to which library catalogues are still prone), but to have taken it as a work of Solomon, or at least as an edited collection of Solomon's words.<sup>7</sup> The perception which we have already noted, that the canonical works were merely a selection from amongst Solomon's writings, meant that the authenticity of the Solomonic attribution could be maintained even when strong distinctions came to be drawn between canonical and apocryphal, or deuterocanonical books.

By the early seventeenth century, indeed, a number of writers show less interest in the canonical status or inspiration of the various books, than in the personal wisdom of Solomon, portrayed as a sort of philosopher-king. Joseph Hall, in 1609, published a work called *Salomons Divine Arts, of 1. Ethickes, 2. Politickes, 3. Oeconomicks: That is; the Government of 1. Behaviour, 2. Common-wealth, 3. Familie. Drawne into Method, out of his Proverbs & Ecclesiastes. With an open and plaine Paraphrase, upon the Song of Songs* (London: Eleazar Edgar and Samuel Macham), but it is later, in 1677 that the classic early example of such works appeared, in the form of a book the French title of which means 'The Counsels of Wisdom, or a collection of the sayings from Solomon which are most necessary for a man to conduct himself wisely, with reflections on those sayings.'<sup>8</sup> Published initially in French, this book presents sayings, principally from Ecclesiastes, but also, indiscriminately, from Proverbs, Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus, paraphrases them, and then reflects upon their significance for the ways in which we should live our lives, so that Solomon becomes conscripted as a Christian moral

---

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 17.20 writes 'Salomon ... Prophetasse etiam ipse reperitur in suis libris, qui tres recepti sunt in auctoritatem canonicam: Prouerbia, ecclesiastes et canticum canticorum. Alii uero duo, quorum unus sapientia, alter ecclesiasticus dicitur, propter eloquii nonnullam similitudinem, ut Salomonis dicantur, obtinuit consuetudo; non autem esse ipsius non dubitant doctiores; eos tamen in auctoritatem maxime occidentalis antiquitus recepit ecclesia.'

<sup>8</sup> *Les Conseils de la sagesse, ou le recueil des maximes de Salomon les plus necessaires à l'homme pour se conduire sagement, avec des reflexions sur ces maximes.* (Paris: Mabre-Cramoisy, 1677).

teacher. This work, and a sequel that came to be presented as its second volume,<sup>9</sup> went through multiple editions in French throughout the following century, and it was translated into English and German four times each, Latin at least three times, Dutch and Spanish twice, Swedish, Italian, Polish, Greek, Portuguese, and Russian.<sup>10</sup> By any standards, this was a very successful book, and it illustrates the public willingness, across various religious traditions, to accept the idea of a broad Solomonic corpus embodying the wisdom of one man, that could be treated in effect as a single source.

The *Conseils de la sagesse*, incidentally, is interesting in another respect. It is now generally attributed to the little-known Michel Boutauld, but it was published anonymously, and in his preface the author portrays himself as a man exiled to a lonely place, where he is able, at least, to share the sort of environment in which Solomon had been able to do his thinking. Solomon loved to be alone, he claims, and he would retire at the end of the day to his house at Hetta, outside the city, to wander amongst the woods, rocks and streams, which would eventually inspire in him a contempt for mortal things. Of course, this is itself another illustration of interpretation shaping an account of Solomon, unusually turning him into a suburban commuter, but the more interesting point is that this book seems almost universally to have been attributed by early readers to Nicolas Fouquet, the fabulously wealthy and extravagant Superintendent of Finances in France under Louis XIV, who suffered a sudden and spectacular fall from grace, eventually finding himself imprisoned in the fortress of Pignerol, and cut off from his previous life.<sup>11</sup> This identification, which may have contributed much to the popularity of the book, clearly rests not solely on the author's own vague mentions of his solitude, but on an association with Solomon's fall, to which he makes no reference himself. Even in modern scholarship, there has been a perceptible tendency to make links between works on Ecclesiastes and the lives of their authors: the poetic paraphrases by Henry Howard and Matthew Prior, to take the most notable examples, have both been associated, on very slender grounds, with the periods when

---

<sup>9</sup> *La Suite des 'Conseils de la sagesse', ou du recueil des maximes de Salomon les plus nécessaires à l'homme pour se conduire sagement, avec des réflexions sur ces maximes* (Paris: Mabre-Cramoisy, 1683). Also published in the same year in Lyon by Hilaire Baritel, as volume 2 of *Les Conseils*.

<sup>10</sup> On the complicated history of publication, see Stuart Weeks, *The Making of Many Books: Printed Works on Ecclesiastes 1523-1875* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2014), pp. 69-70.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., *The Counsels of Wisdom. Or a Collection of such Maxims of Solomon as are Most Necessary for the prudent Conduct of Life. With Proper Reflections upon them. Written originally in French by Monseigneur Fouquet, Sometime Lord High Treasurer of France, in the Reign of Lewis XIV. Done into English by a Gent. With some Account of the Illustrious Author* (Oxford: Sheldonian Theatre, 1736). The translator of this English version, J. Leake, remarks on p. xv that he is, 'inform'd by the best Intelligence from abroad, that 'tis indisputably allow'd all over France, to be authentic, and the work of Monsr. Fouquet.'

each man faced disgrace.<sup>12</sup> Writers who identify themselves with Solomon seem to be drawn, ineluctably, into a story of rise, fall, and redemption that owes more to the human need for such patterns than to anything in the texts.

Of course, even before Fouquet had fallen, the very notion of Solomonic authorship was under attack, at least with respect to Ecclesiastes. If we discount the comments of Didymus (which were, anyway, lost to earlier commentators, and only recovered in 1941 with the discovery of the Toura papyri), the earliest serious questioning of the tradition was probably by Hugo Grotius (Huig de Groot), in 1644, who took the book to be a collection of opinions propounded by different sages, deliberately attributed to Solomon, but with a vocabulary that was clearly later.<sup>13</sup> On the basis of a passage in the *Table Talk*, Christian Ginsburg suggested long ago that Martin Luther, in fact, had much earlier attributed the book to ben Sira, and that view has more recently been affirmed by Craig

---

<sup>12</sup> Christian D. Ginsburg, *Cohleth, Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes: translated from the original Hebrew, with a commentary, historical and critical* (London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1861), p. 166, claims that ‘Having experienced the vanity of all things, by being suddenly hurled from a high position of honour and trust to a state of degradation, the celebrated Matthew Prior betook himself, from a fellow-feeling, to write upon the adventures of the royal preacher, and produced the admirable poem, *Solomon on the Vanity of the World*’; in his own preface to the poem, however, Prior says that he had written the poem many years before, and not found the time to revise it while he was still heavily engaged in public service. See his ‘Solomon on the Vanity of the World. A Poem in Three Books’, in *Poems on Several Occasions* (London: Jacob Tonson and John Barber, 1718), pp. 382-506, esp. the seventh and eighth pages of the (unpaginated) preface. On Howard, see Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Malden MA, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 47-49.

<sup>13</sup> Hugo (Huig de Groot) Grotius, *Annotata Ad Vetus Testamentum. Tomus I.* (Paris: Sebastian & Gabriel Cramoisy, 1644). See especially p. 521, where he presents the linguistic argument that was to be the staple of subsequent debates: ‘Ego tamen Solomonis esse non puto, sed scriptum seriùs sub illius regis, tanquam pœnitentia ducti, nomine. Argumentum eius rei habeo multa vocabula, quæ non alibi quàm in Daniele, Esdra & Chaldæis interpretibus reperias’. Less commonly noted are his remarks on pp. 539-40 about 12.11, which link the book with Zerubbabel: ‘id est, qui hæc colligerent, ac sub persona Solomonis in unum corpus congererent, mandatum habuere ab uno pastore, id est, ut puto, Zorobabele, qui, ob res tenues Iudæorum, & Persici imperij reverentiam, regem se dicere non ausus, quanquam inter suos pro rege habebatur, nomen usurpavit modestius pastoris.’ That is, the verse refers to a collection of materials and their attribution to Solomon mandated by Zerubbabel, who did not dare to take the title of king, but was known amongst his supporters by the more modest title of ‘shepherd’. Grotius then takes 12.12 to be addressed to Abiud (cf. Mt. 1.13). Curiously, the link with Zerubbabel has recently been affirmed independently by J.P. Weinberg, ‘Authorship and author in the ancient Near East and in the Hebrew Bible’, *HS* 44 (2003), pp. 157-69, esp. 167-68. A little-known attempt was made sixty years after Grotius to link Ecclesiastes with Joshua the son of Jehozadak: see Hermann von der Hardt, *Jesu Jojadae, summorum inter Judæos pontificum filii et fratris, Cohleth prosopopeia Salomonis, omnium opinione obscurissimum librum, dilucide et curate ex linguae indole, historia et antiquitate* (Helmstedt: G.W. Hammii, 1714).

Bartholomew.<sup>14</sup> The book which Luther is describing, however, is said to ‘contain much useful information about how a household should be run. Furthermore, it is like a Talmud, drawn together out of many books’:<sup>15</sup> by no stretch of the imagination is this a recognizable description of Ecclesiastes, a book on which Luther had himself lectured, and which has little or nothing to say about household affairs. It seems likely that the record of this conversation has confused Ecclesiastes with Ecclesiasticus—especially since, as Scott Jones has recently noted in an article that effectively refutes such claims about Luther’s opinion, this is very similar to Luther’s description in his preface to Sirach, which dates to the same period; at best, it has conflated two separate discussions.<sup>16</sup> In any case, it is the views of Grotius that are noted, and generally opposed by subsequent commentators. What happened next, however, seems not to have been any general debate about the question, but some slow changes to the way in which Solomon’s authorship was understood. Writing in 1685, primarily in response to Richard Simon’s radical suggestions about other biblical texts, Jean le Clerc seems very relaxed about Grotius’s suggestion: ‘If this conjecture is true, as it could be then this book would be just a *jeu d’esprit* on the part of some of those who had been in the Exile.’<sup>17</sup> He also speaks of another scholar whom he understands to believe that the book is Sadducean, but talks at somewhat greater length about theories which believe the book to be a dialogue, and the methodological problems that they pose. Such theories continued, indeed, to be proposed throughout the following century and beyond, and it is very clear that for many scholars who had no interest in denying Solomonic authorship, that authorship nevertheless implied either something much closer to editorship, or some quite sophisticated literary juxtaposition of different viewpoints. Joseph Sutcliffe’s Wesleyan commentary of 1834 is by no means a radical work, but it argues that ‘Chohelath’ means ‘one who has collected the systems of moralists ... It comprises a review of life in

---

<sup>14</sup> Ginsburg, *Cohelath*, pp. 145-46; Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> The passage reads in full: ‘So hat er selbst das Buch, den Prediger, nicht geschrieben, sondern ist zur Zeit der Maccabäer von Sirach gemacht. Es ist aber ein sehr gut Buch und angenehm, darum, daß es viel seiner Lehre hat, wie man sich im Hausregiment halten soll. Dazu so ists wie ein Talmud aus vielen Büchern zusammen gezogen, vielleicht aus der Liberey des Königes Ptolemäi Euergetis in Egypten.’ See Ernst Kroker (ed.), *D. Martin Luthers Werke Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Werke. Tischreden, 1. Band* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1912), p. 207, lines 18-22.

<sup>16</sup> See Scott C. Jones, ‘Solomon’s Table Talk: Martin Luther on the Authorship of Ecclesiastes’, *SJOT* 28 (2014), pp. 81-90, esp. 84.

<sup>17</sup> Jean. Le Clerc, *Sentimens de quelques theologiens de Hollande sur l’histoire critique du Vieux Testament, composée par le P. Richard Simon de l’Oratoire. Où en remarquant leas fautes de cet auteur, on donne divers principes utiles pour l’intelligence de l’Ecriture Sainte* (Amsterdam: Henri Desbordes, 1685), p. 273: ‘Si cette conjecture est veritable, comme elle le pourroit être, ce Livre ne sera qu’un jeu d’esprit de quelques-uns de ceux qui avoient été dans la Captivité.’



which five speakers at least are introduced: the disgusted courtier—the philosopher—the stoick—the epicure—the preacher. Hence it abounds with variation of opinion, with discordant sentiments, and systems at issue with one another.’<sup>18</sup>

As with so many issues, the question of authorship was to become more divisive, and it featured prominently in the scandal surrounding Samuel Davidson’s *The Text of the Old Testament Considered*, which came to a head in England in 1857.<sup>19</sup> Many influential conservatives, however, Hengstenberg not the least among them, had already disavowed Solomonic authorship,<sup>20</sup> whilst the inclination of most revisionist scholars was to date the book later, but to accept that it had from the outset been presented as a work by Solomon, so that, as Robert Lowth had put it in the previous century, the author was writing ‘under the persona of Solomon.’<sup>21</sup> Indeed, that remains in essence the position of most scholars today, and Solomon is now commonly rejected as author of the book, but accepted as protagonist. More precisely, in fact, it would be true to say that the majority of commentators believe that Qohelet, the named protagonist of the book, takes on the mantle of Solomon temporarily, in the first two chapters of the book, so that the author speaks in the voice of his creation, Qohelet, and Qohelet in turn speaks for a while in the voice of Solomon—a solution which is complicated, but which is able to encapsulate the aspects of Qohelet traditionally read as Solomonic alongside those that seem to imply he is a commoner.

It is important, however, to ask whether we need such complexity, and whether this explanation is required. Throughout the many centuries during which Solomonic authorship was largely taken for granted, it was possible to make the book suit the life of Solomon by changing his biography, even if this was a bit like making a jacket fit by lengthening one’s arms. Unless we date the various legends

---

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Sutcliffe, *A Commentary on the Old and New Testament: in which the Sacred Text is Illustrated with Copious Notes, Theological, Historical, and Critical; with Improvements and Reflections at the End of Each Chapter. In Two Volumes* (vol. 1; London: Holdsworth & Ball and J. Mason, 1834).

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Davidson, *The Text of the Old Testament Considered; with a Treatise on Sacred Interpretation, and a Brief Introduction to the Old Testament Books and the Apocrypha* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts, 1856). The issue of authorship is dealt with on pages 786-89. Regarding the scandal, see Weeks, *The Making of Many Books*, 148-49.

<sup>20</sup> Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, ‘Ecclesiastes,’ in John Kitto (ed.), *A Cyclopædia of Biblical Literature* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1845), pp. 593-97.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Lowth, *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum: Praelectiones academicae Oxonii habitae: subjicitur metricae Harianae brevis confutatio: & oratio Crewiana* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1753), p. 239: ‘Etenim una est universi operis forma, unum et simplex argumentum, De rerum humanarum Vanitate, sub persona Salomonis, in perdifficili quæstione dubitantis, in utramque partem disputantis, et ex ancipiti cogitandi cura sese tandem expedientis.’

about Solomon's penitence much earlier than any other evidence permits, however, it becomes very difficult to see why there is so little correspondence between the contents of Ecclesiastes and the biblical account of his life. Even in chapter 2, so often presented as the Solomonic showpiece, the only action listed by Qohelet which is said also to have been done by Solomon is the building of buildings (their nature unspecified in the case of Qohelet): the activities and acquisitions listed all relate to the establishment of a substantial business and household, not to the undertaking of public works, and all are explicitly for Qohelet's own benefit—indeed, it is the realization that others will get to enjoy them which subsequently so upsets him. In the course of the account, he also notes that he came to possess the private wealth of a king (2.8),<sup>22</sup> which would be a curious thing for any actual king to say, and expresses an ignorance about his successor (2.19) which would be no less curious for any man who, like Solomon, had a known heir. The only possible reference to Qohelet's kingship is in 2.12, but that verse is obscure and possibly corrupt, while the Septuagint translator goes out of his way to avoid finding any royal allusion in it.<sup>23</sup> The only thing that is specifically Solomonic, furthermore, is a supposed reference to concubines in 2.8, but proposals to read the obscure שדֶּה וּשְׂדֹת in that sense are motivated largely by a desire to align the account with Solomon, so the expression can hardly be used as evidence for such alignment.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, outside chapter 2, some scholars have found material that can be read in the light of the story of Solomon,<sup>25</sup> but there is general acknowledgement both that nothing demands such a reading, and that some of what Qohelet says is difficult to reconcile with it. Whether the epilogue to the book is original or not, furthermore, it shows no inclination to identify Qohelet with Solomon, and depicts him rather as one among many writers. There is, in the final analysis, nothing in Ecclesiastes that would push us toward that identification apart from the few details, scattered coyly in the first and twelfth verses of chapter 1, that combine to point that way and that are echoed, perhaps, by subsequent references to Jerusalem in 2.7 and 2.9.

---

<sup>22</sup> On the meaning of סִגְלָה, see pages 378-79 of Stuart Weeks, 'Notes on Some Hebrew Words in Ecclesiastes,' in James K. Aitken, Jeremy M. S. Clines, and Christl M. Maier (eds.), *Interested Readers: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David J. A. Clines* (Atlanta: SBL, 2013), pp. 373-84.

<sup>23</sup> The problematic הַמֶּלֶךְ is rendered as τῆς βουλῆς, as though it were the Aramaic מֶלֶךְ.

<sup>24</sup> See Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism* (LHBOTS, 541; New York & London: T&T Clark, 2012), p. 25, n. 32.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. Eric S. Christianson, *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes* (JSOTSup, 280; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); Y.V. Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth* (BZAW, 369; Berlin & New York: de Gruyter, 2006).

It is difficult, on the other hand, to ignore those details or to write them off as secondary additions. Certainly, an erratic use of the definite article with the obscure epithet ‘Qohelet’ points to some uncertainty in the tradition about whether it is a proper name or a title, and this may well reflect a partial attempt to reconcile the protagonist’s self-description as Qohelet with the book’s assertion that he is actually Solomon, by making him ‘(Solomon) the Qohelet’. There is also an oddness about both the way in which Qohelet speaks of being ‘king in Jerusalem’ (1.1 MT), a strange expression which has no parallel, and the claim in 1.12 that **הייתי מלך**. Exhaustive discussions of the latter have shown that we need not understand this to be asserting that Qohelet has ceased to be king (which is the way the Targum takes it), but it only really reads naturally if we give it an ingressive sense and connect it with the following verse: ‘when I became king ... then I set my heart’.<sup>26</sup> Such a reading also explains the position of the verse, but it makes the additional details ‘over Israel in Jerusalem’ seem irrelevant and intrusive, as though the beginning of an account had been conscripted to become a self-introduction. Surprisingly few scholars have suggested that the details identifying Qohelet as Solomon in both verses are secondary,<sup>27</sup> and it is certainly true that if they have been added, then they were added very early: **הייתי מלך** is affirmed by 4QQohelet<sup>b</sup> (line 3),<sup>28</sup> so Qohelet was a king, at least, before this manuscript was written in the first century BCE or CE. Not only was the Septuagint aware of them, moreover, it may even have sought to enhance them: ‘Israel’ appears in 1:1 as well as 1:12 in the Greek, allowing the first verse to identify Solomon by itself. Clearly, it would not have been difficult to associate Qohelet with Solomon by adding just a few words to two verses, and hardly anything would have to be stripped from the book to make Qohelet a commoner, or even a gentile. It is only their superficiality<sup>29</sup> and their slight awkwardness, however, that offer any actual basis for

<sup>26</sup> So, e.g., Thomas Krüger, *Kohelet: (Prediger)* (BKAT, 19; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), pp. 124-26. See Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 22-23.

<sup>27</sup> But see, e.g., George Aaron Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), p. 67, where ‘Son of David’ is rejected in 1.1, and many scholars have considered 1.1 as a whole to be the work of an editor, based on 1.12. Rejections of 1.12 are less common, but see, especially Gustav Bickell, *Der Prediger über den Wert des Daseins: Wiederherstellung des bisher zerstückelten Textes, Uebersetzung und Erklärung* (Innsbruck: Wagner, 1884), p. 10, where ‘I became king over Israel in Jerusalem’ is rejected as the work of a ‘pseudo-Solomonic’ interpolator, and the support for Bickell’s position on pages 252-53 of Paul Haupt, ‘The Book of Ecclesiastes’, in *Oriental Studies. A Selection of the Papers read before the Oriental Club of Philadelphia 1888-1894* (Boston: Ginn & Co, 1894), pp. 242-78.

<sup>28</sup> Eugene Ulrich, ‘110.4QQoh<sup>b</sup>’, in *Qumran Cave 4 XI: Psalms to Chronicles* (DJD, 16; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 227, pl. XXVI: **הללתי הייתי מלך**].

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Haupt, ‘The Book of Ecclesiastes’, p. 253: ‘The references and allusions to Solomon... are so scanty that it is hard to believe the original author meant to assume the mask of the famous king of

suggesting that the details linking Qohelet with Solomon are secondary, and although myself I doubt their authenticity, there are no strong grounds for emendation.

To retain the link with Solomon in 1:1 and 1:12, though, is not necessarily to accept that these verses invite us to think of Qohelet's life as the life of Solomon, not least because they themselves refrain from any outright statement on the matter. The very indirectness of the identification which they offer, indeed, is a curiosity in itself, without any obvious parallel in other ancient literature, and if the details are secondary, then this characteristic may be a product of some redactor's desire not directly to confront the book's existing attribution of its material to Qohelet. If they are original, on the other hand, then this may be a matter of genre and convention: pseudepigrapha are a commonplace of ancient literature, but the adoption of a known figure as protagonist generally brings with it an expectation that readers will understand the text through the eyes of that figure. Ancient pseudepigraphy, in other words, is not a matter simply of borrowing the authority attached to some name and then ignoring the identity that comes with it, but of adopting a perspective: to withhold the name 'Solomon' may, accordingly, reflect a desire to give the readers a generic cue, and possibly even to associate the book with a nascent Solomonic corpus, but not to impose on them a requirement to read Qohelet's words in the light of what they know about Solomon. If so, we are being told that the book is Solomon-*ish*, not Solomon-*ic*.

In any case, we do not require the complicated notion of a Solomonic persona in Ecclesiastes, and this interpretation may, in fact, be an obstruction to the proper understanding of the book. Modern scholars who view this link as, in essence, a literary device, have not felt free to use Ecclesiastes as a source in its own right for the story of Solomon, and in this respect they are quite unlike their predecessors, who, as we have seen, interpreted the book with relative freedom and then adjusted that story to fit. Instead, it is the story of Solomon that has become fixed, and interpretations have had to adjust in order to meet expectations engendered by that story. This has had a particular impact on the second chapter, which is commonly viewed now as a sort of royal pastiche, because if the point of that chapter is taken to be Qohelet's promotion of his status and his affinities with Solomon, then it becomes easy to lose sight of its role as the catalyst for his subsequent enquiries: having created a massive and self-sustaining business for himself (not palaces and monuments for his people and his dynasty), Qohelet comes to realise that it will remain when he has gone, and that none of it is really his—a realisation that profoundly affects and explains his view of the world elsewhere in the book. Such a reading is not dissimilar to many older understandings, which is unsurprising, because it is, on the face of it, just what the text itself suggests. It sits unhappily, however, beside the events and circumstances of Solomon's reign as recounted in 2 Kings, and, accordingly, the idea that Qoheleth is

---

Israel. Nor does the author of the epilogue appear to know anything of this assumption. After the second chapter there is no allusion to Solomon whatever'.

modelling himself on Solomon here has tended both to suppress such a line of interpretation, and, arguably, to leave chapter 2 with little role to play in the book as a whole. When Solomon was taken to be the author, Ecclesiastes could re-shape Solomon's story, but when Solomon became merely a persona, then interpretation of the book became constrained by that story.

In its own distinctive way, Ecclesiastes is indeed a book driven by a narrative, but this narrative is the story that Qohelet tells about his own intellectual journey, not the very different biblical narrative of Solomon. Correspondingly, to return briefly to the point at which we started, it might not be a bad thing for us to detach that book from stories about Solomon or theories about wisdom literature, and to consider it more often amongst the other Megillot, with their very different stories and celebrations of the individual. It can hardly be denied that the associations with Solomon and with the story of Israel have helped to foster a rich tradition of storytelling about that king, and if we lose the sense of narrative in this book, with its provocative anti-hero and its troubling reflections on experience, then we lose something important about its meaning and character. We should surely, therefore, welcome any contextualization of the work which reinforces that sense. If we are to let it tell its story, however, then we have at the same time to let it speak either in the voice of Qohelet or in that of a Solomon, posing as Qohelet: by trying to combine the two, or by speaking of a Qohelet who poses as Solomon, we gain the advantages of neither one. When it freed itself from older ideas about Solomonic authorship, ironically enough, modern scholarship imposed upon itself the much heavier chains of a Solomonic persona, and unwittingly gave the Solomonic attribution much greater power to constrain interpretation than it could ever have wielded previously.

- Adriaen, M. 'S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Commentarius in Ecclesiasten', in *S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Opera I,1* (CChr Series Latina, 72; Turnhout: Brepols, 1959).
- Bartholomew, C.G. *Ecclesiastes* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).
- Barton, G. A. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908).
- Bickell, G. *Der Prediger über den Wert des Daseins: Wiederherstellung des bisher zerstückelten Textes, Uebersetzung und Erklärung* (Innsbruck: Wagner, 1884).
- Binder, G., and L. Liesenborghs, (eds.), *Kommentar zum Ecclesiastes (Tura-Papyrus), Teil I.1: Kommentar zu Eccl. Kap. 1, 1-2, 14 (Einleitung, Text, Übersetzung, Indices)* (Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlungen, 25; Bonn: Rudolf Habelt, 1979).
- Bonwetsch, G. N., and H. Achelis (eds.), *Hippolytus Werke. 1. Bd Exegetische und homiletische Schriften* (vol. 1.1; Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte herausgegeben von der Kirchenväter-Commission der Königl. Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften; Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1897).
- Boutauld, M. *La Suite des 'Conseils de la sagesse', ou du recueil des maximes de Salomon les plus nécessaires à l'homme pour se conduire sagement, avec des réflexions sur ces maximes* (Paris: Mabre-Cramoisy, 1683).
- *Les Conseils de la sagesse, ou le recueil des maximes de Salomon les plus nécessaires à l'homme pour se conduire sagement, avec des réflexions sur ces maximes* (Paris: Mabre-Cramoisy, 1677).
- *The Counsels of Wisdom. Or a Collection of such Maxims of Solomon as are Most Necessary for the prudent Conduct of Life. With Proper Reflections upon them. Written originally in French by Monseigneur Fouquet, Sometime Lord High Treasurer of France, in the Reign of Lewis XIV. Done into English by a Gent. With some Account of the Illustrious Author* (Oxford: Sheldonian Theatre, 1736).
- Christianson, E.S. *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes* (JSOTSup, 280; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).
- *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries. Malden MA, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell, 2007).
- Le Clerc, J. *Sentimens de quelques theologiens de Hollande sur l'histoire critique du Vieux Testament, composée par le P. Richard Simon de l'Oratoire. Où en remarquant les fautes de cet auteur, on donne divers principes utiles pour l'intelligence de l'Ecriture Sainte* (Amsterdam: Henri Desbordes, 1685).
- Davidson, S. *The Text of the Old Testament Considered; with a Treatise on Sacred Interpretation, and a Brief Introduction to the Old Testament Books and the Apocrypha* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts, 1856).

- Ginsburg, C.D., *Cohēleth, Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes: translated from the original Hebrew, with a commentary, historical and critical* (London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1861).
- Goodrich, R. J., and D.J.D. Miller (eds.), *St Jerome: Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation, 66; New York and Mahwah NJ: Newman Press, 2012).
- Grotius, H. (Huig de Groot), *Annotata Ad Vetus Testamentum. Tomus I* (Paris: Sebastian & Gabriel Cramoisy, 1644).
- Hall, J. *Salomons Divine Arts, of 1. Ethickes, 2. Politickes, 3. Oeconomicks: That is; the Government of 1. Behaviour, 2. Common-wealth, 3. Familie. Drawne into Method, out of his Proverbs & Ecclesiastes. With an open and plaine Paraphrase, upon the Song of Songs* (London: Eleazar Edgar and Samuel Macham, 1609).
- Halperin, D.J. 'The "Book of Remedies," the Canonization of the Solomonic Writings, and the Riddle of Pseudo-Eusebius', *JQR* 72 (1982), pp. 269-92.
- Hardt, H. von der *Jesu Jojadae, summorum inter Judaeos pontificum filii et fratris, Cohēleth prosopopeia Salomonis, omnium opinione obscurissimum librum, dilucide et curate ex linguae indole, historia et antiquitate* (Helmstedt: G.W. Hammii, 1714).
- Haupt, P. 'The Book of Ecclesiastes', in *Oriental Studies. A Selection of the Papers read before the Oriental Club of Philadelphia 1888-1894* (Boston: Ginn & Co, 1894), pp. 242-78.
- Hengstenberg, E.W. 'Ecclesiastes,' in *A Cyclopædia of Biblical Literature* (ed. John Kitto; Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1845), pp. 593-97.
- Herving, P. de 'Responsio de Damnatione Salomonis', *PL* 203 (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1855), cols. 644-59.
- Hirshman, M.G., 'Qohelet's Reception and Interpretation in Early Rabbinic Literature', in James L. Kugel (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Midrash* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies, 2001), pp. 87-99.
- Jones, S.C. 'Solomon's Table Talk: Martin Luther on the Authorship of Ecclesiastes', *SJOT* 28 (2014), pp. 81-90.
- Koh, Y.V., *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth* (BZAW, 369; Berlin & New York: de Gruyter, 2006).
- Kroker, E. (ed.) *D. Martin Luthers Werke Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Werke. Tischreden, 1. Band* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1912).
- Krüger, T. *Kohelet: (Prediger)* (BKAT, 19; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000).
- Lagarde, P. A. de (ed.) *Hippolyti Romani Quae feruntur omnia Graece* (Leipzig: G. Teubner; London: Williams & Norgate, 1858).
- Lowth, R. *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum: Praelectiones academicae Oxonii habitae: subjicitur metricae Harianae brevis confutatio: & oratio Crewiana* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1753).

- Prior, M. *Poems on Several Occasions* (London: Jacob Tonson and John Barber, 1718).
- Sutcliffe, J. *A Commentary on the Old and New Testament: in which the Sacred Text is Illustrated with Copious Notes, Theological, Historical, and Critical; with Improvements and Reflections at the End of Each Chapter. In Two Volumes* (vol. 1. London: Holdsworth & Ball and J. Mason, 1834).
- Ulrich, E. '110.4QQoh<sup>b</sup>', in *Qumran Cave 4 XI: Psalms to Chronicles* (DJD, 16; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 227, pl. XXVI.
- Weeks, S. *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism* (LHBOTS, 541; New York & London: T&T Clark, 2012).
- 'Notes on Some Hebrew Words in Ecclesiastes,' in *Interested Readers: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David J. A. Clines* (ed. James K. Aitken, Jeremy M. S. Clines, and Christl M. Maier ; Atlanta: SBL, 2013), pp. 373-84.
- *The Making of Many Books: Printed Works on Ecclesiastes 1523-1875*. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2014.
- Weinberg, J.P. 'Authorship and author in the ancient Near East and in the Hebrew Bible.' *HS* 44 (2003), pp. 157-69.