

Reading Ecclesiastes 'Epilogically'

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Summary

The epilogue of Ecclesiastes tells the reader how to understand the book, but at first sight its summary is far off the mark. However the epilogue does display a surprising degree of lexical and thematic uniformity with the body of the book, and when its message is taken seriously as a guide to reading, the results are both coherent and compelling. This article is an appeal to modern readers to treat the epilogist with more respect.

I. Introductory Matters

In the quest to pin down the message of Qohelet,¹ the epilogue (12:9-14) is perhaps the most unexplored of regions. This is primarily because it tends to be perceived as a later addition² and—worse—one which 'introduces wholly alien categories.'³ The aim of this article is to challenge the second of these assumptions on both formal and thematic grounds, and to present instead an epilogue which, together with 1:1-2 and 12:8, provides the reader with the book's own key to the message it sets forth. The two main vehicles for this challenge will be a lexical study of the epilogue, and an exegesis of

TynBul 48:1 (1997) p. 68

Ecclesiastes 7:23-8:1 which is guided by the agenda the epilogue provides us. But first some structural observations are required.

The structure of Ecclesiastes is elusive: for example, formal and thematic procedures yield quite different structural units.⁴ The one convincing structural feature is the 'frame' of 1:1-2 (or 3) and 12:8-14, through which a 'frame narrator' or 'epilogist' presents to his readers the ideas and experiences of the person Qohelet.⁵ This frame narrator presents himself as the transmitter (not the creator) of Qohelet's words. We have argued in an earlier article⁶ that the most natural way to read such a frame-structure is as a double frame consisting of an outer frame (1:1 and 12:9-14) which mentions Qohelet by name and ...

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