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Bartholomew, Craig G.
Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory

Analecta Biblica

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Dan Fredericks
Bellhaven College
Jackson, MS 39202

This is a commendable study from an epistemological perspective including considerable breadth and depth concerning the history of OT hermeneutics, with special attention given to the interpretation of the notoriously troublesome book of Ecclesiastes! Bartholomew describes and critiques the route from pre-critical to post- modern hermeneutics in OT studies, while attempting to show how that route has left its trail in Qoheleth studies. His assessment of the dying yet still prevalent historical-critical hermeneutic is that it is neither "objective" nor does it respect the historical reality of the reader. By emphasizing the hermeneutical role of the reader, Bartholomew endorses "prejudiced" readings as not only inevitable but as a religious responsibility, particularly for the Christian.

There is an optimism in Bartholomew that sees an opportunity for progress in biblical hermeneutics. The relativistic pluralism in post-modern hermeneutics can provide a roundtable for vigorous debate about biblical texts that is based mainly on two correctly positioned rhetorical concerns: religious belief and appropriate critical analyses. He cautions against seeing these concerns as polar, but rather as the prior guiding the latter. Agreement around that table is not the objective of Bartholomew's optimism; he hopes instead that the Christian can depart from the discussion with an informed and better-honed Christian hermeneutic.

Chapter One is a philosophical survey that includes Kantian dualism which bifurcates one's experience of faith and one's empirical historicism. Bartholomew sees interpreters such as Gadamer and their capitulation to this dualism as helpful, as long as the subjectivism of faith is tethered to the traditions of the interpreting community. Chapter Two surveys 2300 years of Qoheleth interpretation, emphasizing the impact of source-criticism on Qoheleth, especially on the predominant practice of separating the epilogue (12:9-14) as the work of a different author. The epilogue eventually becomes Bartholomew's hermeneutical linchpin. Chapter Three continues the survey of the

interpretation of Qoheleth by highlighting readings affected by modernity. For Bartholomew, these are encouraging yet still inadequate attempts at a "comprehensive biblical hermeneutic" which should engage both historical and religious interests of the reader. Chapter Four becomes more microscopic by assessing those specific modernist approaches that are more comprehensive since they consider the historical, literary, and religious aspects of the text, such as canonical, structuralist, and "new critical" theories. Chapter Five presents Sternberg's poetics and Fox's frame-narrative readings as models that take literary genre more seriously than previous interpreters do. The determining role of Qoheleth's epilogue for Fox's interpretation resets the bar for holistic rhetorical analysis as far as Bartholomew is concerned, though he disagrees with much of Fox's exegesis.

Chapter Six commends post-modernist hermeneutics for its radical break from historicism, though the extremes to which some of these approaches go to snub rationalism are unacceptable to Bartholomew. The hermeneutical theories that consciously position themselves "somewhere" outside of a non-existent objective center are attractive analogs for Bartholomew's nonnative principle of religious prejudice (faith), which allows the reader a significant role again in interpretation. Chapter Seven draws the line however on the irreconcilable divide between post-modernism and a "Christian perspective." Contrary to a purely subjectivist approach to interpretation, "the Christian perspective" presupposes itself to be "public truth," not private truth that is relevant only to those who espouse it. Bartholomew then sets out to begin developing a Christian interpretation of the OT and Qoheleth that is consistent with the message of the OT itself. The book ends with a Conclusion, a quite thorough bibliography, and typical indices.

Bartholomew posits the use of a "Communication Model" in which the text itself is the focus of interpretation and the reader is involved in a new communicative event when meeting the text. In this model there is an implicit author which is the personae through whom the human author wishes to be heard. There is also an implicit reader which is the anticipated personae the implicit author is trying to get to agree with itself. Of course the reader is the one who defines both of these implied entities, but it is only through the written text that the reader can responsibly determine what the human author's implicit personas probably are. Through literary, genre, structural analysis, and the many other critical tools available, the reader can best discover the meaning of the text in this communication model.

The historical and epistemological survey of OT hermeneutical theory is presented well enough by Bartholomew, as are the parallel assessments of Qoheleth in particular. However, a cohesive chain of reasoning is missing that demonstrates that Bartholomew's own interpretation uses a new and better-blended methodology, and that a "Christian" hermeneutic was necessary. At the end of the day, Bartholomew's interpretation of Qoheleth is built on the presumptions that the fictional autobiographical genre is probable (not a singularly Christian view), that the implied author was torn between the enigma of

God's gift of joy but life's awful *hevels* (also not an exclusively Christian view), and, on the presumption that the only tentative resolution of this enigma is found in one's faith in God's sovereignty as Creator (an OT theme before Christ). Bartholomew's preferred "Christian worldview" is transformational Christian, reformed theology. However, this "prejudice" is hardly necessary to arrive at the conclusions above, nor hardly restrains a Christian reformed exegete like Longman to interpret Qoheleth in a diametrically opposite direction than Bartholomew. Bartholomew's interpretation (without the reconstruction of the historical setting) is very similar to typical conservative Christian interpretations, where the faithful find a solution between their depression about the tragic human condition, and, the virtues of wisdom and joy, in obedience and the fear of God.

Bartholomew sets out to demonstrate that a Christian worldview is the required perspective from which the Christian should unabashedly interpret the OT and its individual books. His strategy is to show how the development of hermeneutic theories from pre-critical to historical-critical to post-modernism would help the Christian exegete to approach the meaning of Qoheleth in a more educated and comprehensive manner. He ably surveys the many determinative perspectives and presuppositions behind all modern and post-modern readings. In this way he provides a comfort zone to those who perhaps have felt guilty as scholars bringing personal religious presuppositions into the academic process of interpretation when all along even rationalistic theories have had their own inevitable biases. However, Bartholomew stops short of hoping for a hermeneutical methodology that is incumbent on all exegetes.