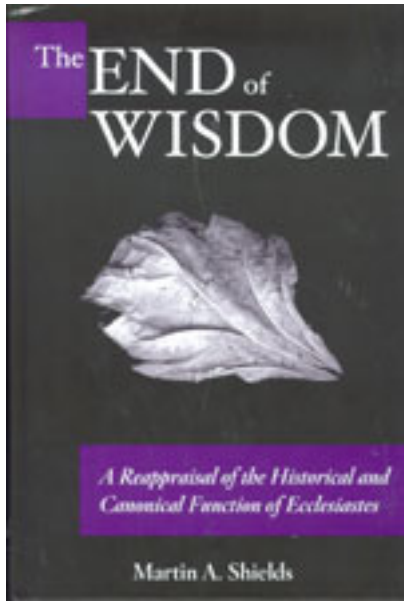


RBL 06/2009



**Shields, Martin A.**

*The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes*

Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006. Pp. xiii + 250.  
Hardcover. \$37.50. ISBN 1575061023.

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This study originated as a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Sydney, supervised by Ian Young. The “end” of wisdom in the book’s title signifies not wisdom’s aim but its demise.

Shields regards Qoheleth as most likely a historical figure (not a literary persona), the exemplary sage of his day, but Qoheleth is not responsible for the book of Ecclesiastes. This is the work of the epilogist of Eccl 12:9–14, who presents Qoheleth’s sayings with the aim of discrediting the ancient Israelite wisdom tradition. Shields likens this to present-day political sabotage where parties attack opponents by leaking to the public embarrassing information about their rivals. For Shields, Qoheleth’s teachings are damning words: the failure of Qoheleth’s wisdom reveals the bankruptcy of the Hebrew sapiential tradition itself. The epilogist’s work is not a secondary corrective to the foregoing material; rather, this editor-author documents Qoheleth’s teachings in the first place as a negative example, meant to prevent prospective students from following the wayward path of the sages. In Shields’s view, the entire aim of the book is to uphold a certain biblical orthodoxy, enunciated by the epilogist (“Fear God, and keep his commandments,” Eccl 12:13), consonant with the rest of the Hebrew Bible, but irreconcilable with Qoheleth.

The study begins with a review of explanations for the inclusion of Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Bible. Standard accounts are found wanting. The traditional notion of Solomonic authorship, Shields holds, is not sufficient cause for Ecclesiastes to have been preserved, nor would the book have been accepted by virtue of the epilogue alone. Modern critical efforts to read Qoheleth's words as orthodox, testing but not exceeding the limits set by the epilogue, are unconvincing. Likewise inadequate for Shields are attempts to discern dialogue, or exchange among multiple points of view, in Ecclesiastes. He rejects as well the view that the book belongs to a legitimate tradition of skepticism in the Hebrew Bible. This clears the way for Shields's novel solution: the book of Ecclesiastes is crafted to present scandal, an admonitory spectacle of Hebrew wisdom run aground. Using Qoheleth as a deterrent, therefore, is the original purpose of the work, and the same understanding contributed to Ecclesiastes' admission into the canon, even though, as Shields admits, the ancient witnesses to the contentious canonization process do not reflect such a notion (238).

The next chapter argues that the epilogist's effort to debunk wisdom teachings aligns with a predominantly negative attitude toward wisdom throughout the Hebrew Bible. Shields claims that "outside of the book of Proverbs, wisdom and those who practice it are almost universally decried," an overstatement, to be sure (7). Shields surveys the Hebrew Bible section by section, arguing with limited success that negative characterizations of wisdom outweigh the positive and that human wisdom is uniformly devalued; only God's wisdom is genuinely affirmed.

A following chapter attempts to locate Qoheleth within the history of the ancient Israelite "wisdom movement." Shields finds inadequate basis for dating Qoheleth by linguistic features, possible historical references in the book, and extrabiblical parallels, though he inclines toward a preexilic setting. He affirms the existence of an identifiable class of Hebrew sages to which Qoheleth belonged. Shields places Qoheleth in a broad historical trajectory beginning with the simplistic doctrine of Proverbs, to which Job reacts with greater sophistication and which Qoheleth then radically challenges. Finally, Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon reconcile wisdom with Torah. Unfortunately, these oversimplified characterizations help little to locate Qoheleth historically or socially.

Shields turns then to the epilogue, Eccl 12:9–14. It is a single unit, directly representing Israelite orthodoxy, placed at the end of the book so that prospective students, inclined to pursue wisdom, will be drawn in by the intriguing character of Qoheleth but finally set straight toward "obedience, not the misguided wisdom of the sages" (109). The final and longest section of the book is an exegesis of Eccl 1:1–12:8, effectively a mini-commentary, reading Qoheleth's words through the epilogist's eyes as conceived by Shields (110–235). This section is reasonably well-informed by the critical literature, and it pursues some

questions in great detail, but it is not always clear how the particulars relate to Shields's larger argument. Every section of the commentary proceeds, tendentiously at times, toward the conclusion that Qoheleth's words are in conflict with the "biblical teaching" upheld by the epilogist.

It is often observed in studies of Ecclesiastes that—perhaps because of the book's tensions and ambiguities—commentators tend to project upon Qoheleth their own worldviews and dispositions.<sup>1</sup> We peer into the murky depths of Ecclesiastes and glimpse, lo, our own faces. Shields clearly has no inclination to fashion Qoheleth in his own image, but perhaps he takes a parallel path in overidentifying with the epilogist, resulting in a regrettably one-dimensional reading of Ecclesiastes.

Shields invokes ardently the biblical orthodoxy that he sets against Qoheleth, dwelling on "a God who reveals and redeems, who chooses people and cares for them, ... a God who has revealed his will in his commands to his people, ... the God who intervenes in human history, ... the God of Israel [who is] benevolent and just" (1, 97, 128, 170). These are undeniably major theological motifs of the Hebrew Bible, but the very notion of orthodoxy is an ill-fitting imposition. What is the benefit of holding Qoheleth to this inapt standard? Why not embrace the richly variegated theological and intellectual makeup of the Hebrew Scriptures, including the distinctiveness of Ecclesiastes?

The present study aims not to interpret Ecclesiastes for its own sake but to explain its embarrassing presence in the Bible, and perhaps also to defend cherished religious values from Qoheleth's scrutiny. It is an effort infused with some pathos, because Shields takes offense at Qoheleth: "Qoheleth's analysis and conclusions are incompatible with the teaching of the remainder of the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, this incompatibility is not merely benign but in many instances is confrontational and offensive to any reader who is favorably disposed toward biblical teaching" (235).

Does Ecclesiastes display Hebrew wisdom in its worst moment, imploding for all to see? Or does Ecclesiastes represent the best qualities of the Hebrew wisdom literature: critical discernment, bracing honesty, above all persistent self-critique, a melding of integrity and

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1. E.g., James L. Crenshaw, "The Perils of Specializing in Wisdom: What I Have Learned from Thirty Years of Teaching," in idem, *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions: Collected Writings on Old Testament Wisdom* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995), 595–96; Carol A. Newsom, "Job and Ecclesiastes," in *Old Testament Interpretation: Past, Present, and Future* (ed. James Luther Mays et al.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 189–90; and especially Christina Spaller, *Die Geschichte des Buches ist die Geschichte seiner Auslöschung: die Lektüre von Koh 1,3–11 in vier ausgewählten Kommentaren* (Exegese in unserer Zeit 7; Münster: Lit Verlag, 2001), a probing comparison of the commentaries on Eccl 1:3–11 by A. Lauha, N. Lohfink, D. Michel, and T. Krüger.

humility that, after all, is not so far from the genuine pieties inculcated elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible? I concur with the generations of readers, devout or skeptical, who have taken the latter option. If however, Shields is right, and the epilogist really did compose Ecclesiastes in an effort to neutralize Qoheleth's influence, the rich reception history of Ecclesiastes gives a clear verdict: that effort was in vain.