Katharine J. Dell

Interpreting Ecclesiastes: Readers Old and New

Critical Studies in the Hebrew Bible 3


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Katharine Dell has written a delightful short book on the book of Ecclesiastes that explores a reader-response approach that includes both the ancient and modern reader. The book thus represents the increasing popular interest in the reception history of biblical books. Dell’s conversation-partner (2–6) appears to be John Barton (The Nature of Biblical Criticism [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007]; idem, Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study, 2nd ed. [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1996]), who seems to assume the traditional historical-critical approach while simultaneously embracing both precritical and the newer “advocacy” approaches that could be labeled ideological criticism. Still, he insists that one must begin with the plain sense of the text before applying the newer methods (Dell, 5, cites Barton, Nature of Biblical Criticism, 159–64). Dell appears to be following his method but “muddies the water” concerning it. Throughout the book she shows how determining the “plain sense” of the text is not always easy and that our own subjectivities and historical contexts prevent us from truly doing this. This is why she criticizes those who disparage the precritical approaches (2–4), and she demonstrates that we can learn much from their interpretations, even if we as biblical scholars ultimately reject them. In this book Dell constantly shows how the newer readings are really not so new, that the questions they raise were often raised centuries ago, though often answered in a different way.
The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 is on ancient interpretations, while part 2 focuses on modern ones. Part 1 contains two chapters. One focuses on how Ecclesiastes became included in the canon, with discussion of the debate among the rabbis, the other on the favorite ancient interpretation of the book called contemptus mundi, or renunciation of the world, best argued by Jerome and popular among the monks. Dell helpfully describes this as a dualistic approach that can be divided into two perspectives: the first, by Origen and Jerome, involves the duality of the fallen world (“vanity”) versus the heavenly realm, later, with Luther, the duality of the human heart or humanity versus the heavenly realm. For Luther it was not so much the world that is vanity but the human heart. Luther’s particular form of dualism was intended to engage the world over against the monastic retreat from the world.

Part 2, on modern interpretation, is divided into four reading strategies: ecological, the related animal theological, liberationist or postcolonial, and feministic. What is new to the table here for many Ecclesiastes enthusiasts is Dell’s ecological and animal theological chapters. In the former she examines 1:4–7, 11:3–5, and 3:18–21 and argues that nature is distinguished from humanity and God, with nature not being oppressive but rather redeeming as instruments of God’s mysterious purposes. In the latter she seems to bring nature (or animals) and humans together again and explores Qohelet’s view of this relationship and the possibility of an afterlife for both in 3:19–21.

Dell’s interpretations of passages from Ecclesiastes are all reasoned and judicious, though one will certainly not agree with all of them, especially her view that Eccl 7:23–29 refers to Woman Wisdom and Folly, one inaccessible, the other a trap (92–94). However, the book is not without its weaknesses. The following criticisms concern Dell’s engagement with two scholars: Ruth Sandberg and Rasiah Sugiratharajah. Dell refers to (9) Sandberg citing (“Qohelet and the Rabbis,” in The Words of the Wise Are Like Goads: Engaging Qohelet in the Twenty-First Century, ed. Mark Boda, Tremper Longman III, and Christian Rata [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013], 40–41) one of Dell’s previously published articles, yet, she does not interact with the content of Sandberg’s article or her important book (Rabbinic Views of Qohelet, Mellen Biblical Press 57; Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1999]), both of which could have nuanced Dell’s views. Sandberg demonstrates that one of the chief reasons Ecclesiastes was accepted as canonical was because the rabbis found its teachings valuable, not just because of their assumption of Solomonic authorship and their tendency to allegorize the book’s contradictory teachings in harmonization with the Torah—Dell’s positions (17–36). Sandberg convincingly argues that the rabbis’ allegorizing of Ecclesiastes’s teachings is not their dominant modus operandi (“Qohelet and the Rabbis,” 37, 40–41, 43–48, and her book). Also, in the article Sandberg argues (37–38) that the rabbinic formula “rendering the hands unclean” should not be mistaken for
the canonical status of Ecclesiastes, instead of its inspiration, contra Dell (21), who seems to assume the correct view later on page 27.

Dell rightly cites (77–79) Sugiratharajah (*Voices from the Margin: The Bible in the Third World* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001]) in her introduction to postcolonial approaches among biblical scholars. She also appropriately cites (82) Elsa Tamez (*When the Horizons Close: Rereading Ecclesiastes* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000]) as an example of this perspective in connection with Ecclesiastes. However, Dell does not appear to be aware of Sugiratharajah’s own postcolonial reading of Ecclesiastes (*Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 80–81). In fact, it is in many ways the opposite of Tamez’s, and Dell she had included his as another example, it would have been a very significant juxtaposition. Tamez sees Qohelet as liberating, a renegade aristocrat who turned on his own social class (10–13, 17–18), while Sugiratharajah views Qohelet as oppressive, who as a member of the indigenous elite collaborated with the empire to subjugate his own people!

Determining Dell’s intended audience is difficult. The book is more about hermeneutics than it is about Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is simply Dell’s case study for the way hermeneutics works. Yet Ecclesiastes fans will find it interesting, especially the often-ignored ecological and animal theological readings of Ecclesiastes. Those interested in reception history will enjoy the book, though there are more comprehensive treatments, such as Eric Christianson’s *Ecclesiastes through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). Reader-response critics will also find it affirming. Advanced undergraduates and seminary students will be able to comprehend it easily.