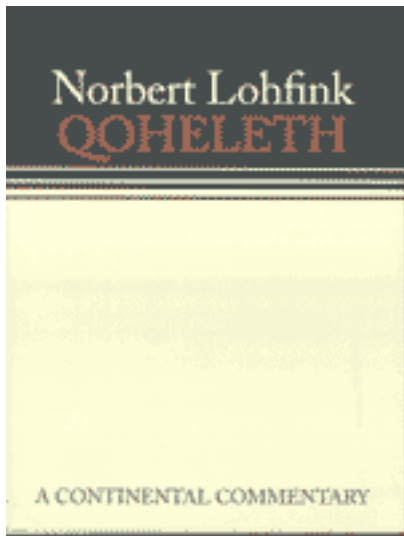


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Lohfink, Norbert

Qoheleth

Translated by Sean McEvenue

Continental Commentaries

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003. Pp. xviii + 158.
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This commentary has an odd *Sitz in dem Literaturgeschichte* of the influential 1980 German Qoheleth commentary by Lohfink. It falls midway between the German *Grundlage* of 1980 and Lohfink's current views, yet represents neither perfectly. Interestingly, Lohfink prepared a 1990 reworking of his 1980 work that never saw German publication. This unpublished German revision is the direct source from which McEvenue translated the 2003 English edition now under review. Still, in the preface Lohfink points out that, had he to write a new Qoheleth commentary at present, it would be substantially different from both the 1980 and the 1990/2003 editions.

An additional dynamic of Lohfink's original work was that it was explicitly intended to be read concurrently with the German *Einheitsübersetzung* of the Bible of 1980. This referential character of the original volume will be lost on the English reader. However, the newly translated text of Qoheleth included in the pages of this book offsets any major difficulties readers may encounter in this regard.

McEvenue's translation was done in close cooperation with Lohfink, with the Qoheleth text, however, translated afresh from the Hebrew by McEvenue, also in consultation with Lohfink. This ensures for the greater part a current English idiom. At times a slightly awkward sentence formulation or a seemingly dated form of expression hints at the fact

that this is, after all, a translated work. However, for the most part, the language use is good and the intended meaning clear.

Lohfink's approach to the book of Qoheleth is in tune with two modern trends. First, it takes the text as a whole seriously, rather than only indicating its constituent components. For readers strongly opposed to redaction-critical approaches, this work will provide some discomfort, though, since Lohfink works with the historical-critical insights as his basis of departure. The editorial work on the epilogue to Qoheleth, for instance, is pointed out as such. The point is, however, that Lohfink takes the full developmental process of the text seriously, up to and including the text as we now have it. Second, Lohfink subscribes to the current majority position among scholars that Qoheleth should be dated in the Hellenistic period (third century B.C.E.). The thoughts we encounter in Qoheleth, however, are not mere regurgitations of what may be called Hellenistic existentialism. Such a simplistic approach would not fit well with the content of this wisdom book, which is clearly at home, generally speaking, within the thought world we encounter in the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Qoheleth, however, enters into debate with the philosophy of Greece, even quoting views in order to then reinterpret or co-opt them. This is done by a peripatetic Palestinian philosopher, schooling the intellectuals in Jerusalem. Qoheleth offers the Jerusalem intelligentsia an alternative to becoming either fully Hellenized or drawing back completely from the Hellenistic world culture that had now encroached upon them both materially and philosophically.

The book is technically well presented, containing few errors only (such as "Othmas" rather than Othmar Keel on page ii). A brief preface by Lohfink and translator's note by McEvenue is followed by seventeen pages in which the traditional introductory issues relating to the book of Qoheleth are summarized, with Lohfink indicating the positions he takes. Then follows the new English translation of the Qoheleth text (19–34), printed on the page so as to indicate its nature as either prose or poetry.

Overall, the commentary on the text of Qoheleth is divided into nine sections: the Title and Prologue to Qoheleth (1:1–3); Cosmology in Qoheleth (1:4–11); Anthropology in Qoheleth (1:12–4:16); Social Critique (3:16–4:16); Religious Critique (4:17–5:6); Social Critique II (5:7–6:10); Deconstruction (6:11–9:6); Ethic (9:7–12:8); and the Epilogue (12:9–14). In this way, the at times bewildering complexity of the structure of Qoheleth—in this respect by no means unique among the wisdom writings—is made somewhat more straightforward for the modern reader.

The commentary proper is, generally, brief. In each instance, a section of the English translation is reprinted, again given in such a way as to indicate poetry or prose. Footnotes give additional information, where appropriate, and cross-references to other

biblical passages are included in the margins. These are instructive and easy to follow. After the translated Qoheleth text follows a discussion giving an overview of the pericope. To this are added notes on single or small clusters of verses, with occasionally some verses left without specific discussion if the meaning is above question. Footnote references, usually to ancient Greek authors, supplement the discussion. Where Hebrew and Greek words are used in the commentary, they are transcribed and immediately translated. All these aspects add up to make this commentary pleasing to use.

This commentary does not stand in the tradition of debating the minutiae of each and every aspect of language, cultural setting, intertextuality, meaning, theology, and application. By no means is it a popular work either, though. Rather, it is something in between: a valuable aid to researchers and an important work to use along with others for those engaged in preparations for sermons and study groups. For students, this is a first-rate introductory work.

It is a pity that the works of specifically M. Rostovzeff, whom Lohfink credits in the preface as one of the authors who had been most influential on his thinking, are not included in the select bibliography to this commentary. This would have made research easier for readers who become interested in exploring further Lohfink's thinking, particularly because the English translations of Rostovzeff's works first drew Lohfink's attention.