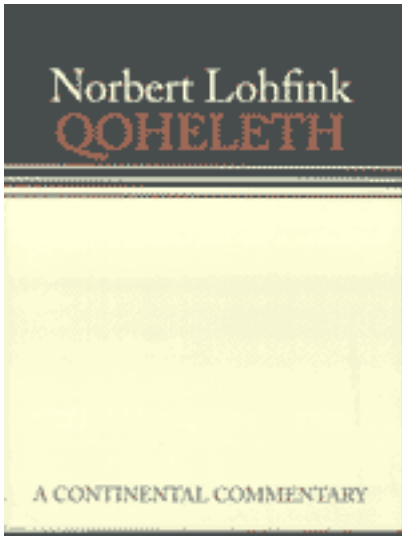


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Lohfink, Norbert

Qoheleth

Translated by Sean McEvenue

Continental Commentary

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In the preface to this commentary, Professor Lohfink advises the reader that this is not an “academic commentary” and that he was “not thinking of professors as readers” (vii). It is helpful to know this as one reads through this work, because it is certainly of a rather different character than, for example, Claus Westermann’s massive, three-volume work on the book of Genesis, which, nonetheless, appears in the same commentary series as the present work, a series beautifully published by Fortress Press. Given the parameters of the work—a commentary on a translation published as the *Deutsche Einheitsuebersetzung*—Professor Lohfink’s work nevertheless represents the valuable observations of a respected scholar. As is traditional with commentaries, Prof. Lohfink’s general observations are included in the introduction, consisting of seventeen pages, and as these comments tend to clarify the approach of the commentary as a whole, it is important in this review to make observations mainly about this section.

Lohfink dates Qoheleth “as late as possible” (4), noting that the Hebrew is akin to the Mishnah but that Sirach presupposes the existence of the work. Therefore, the early second century becomes his working assumption, near the transition from Ptolemaic to Seleucid rule, although Lohfink presumes the Ptolemaic setting almost exclusively. As for social setting, Lohfink’s limited but helpful comments suggest that Qoheleth arises in a time of “incredible enrichment of a small group of leading families and of the high

priesthood” (6) from an economic perspective but also an-in depth dialogue with Greek culture from a cultural perspective.

Lohfink’s literary approach to Qoheleth can be illustrated by his interesting outline of the book as a whole, which appears in “palistrophic form” as follows (8):

1:2–3	Frame
1:4–11	Cosmology (poem)
1:12–3:15	Anthropology
3:16–4:16	Social critique 1
4:17–5:6	Religious critique
5:7–6:10	Social critique 2
6:11–9:6	Deconstruction
9:7–12:7	Ethic (concludes with poem)
12:8	Frame

Placing the “religious critique” at the center, Lohfink sees Qoheleth as standing in the frontier (my term) created by the challenges of Greek culture to Hebrew tradition, that is, to negotiate a new Hebrew traditionalism in the light of the challenges of Greek theory and practice. Lohfink wonders if the program was entirely successful in Qoheleth but insists that we read the work as an attempt at this critical dialogue with surrounding culture. Further, Lohfink wants to see the work as a part of an education process, taking the frequently suggested (but, it must be said, highly speculative) view that the wisdom books were, in fact, texts for the education of Hebrew youth. Lohfink writes, “Most likely Proverbs continued to be used as a first-level text, and then Qoheleth for higher grades” (12), and later refers to the work in the context of “adult reeducation” (13). More helpful is the observation that Qoheleth was not intended for everybody but rather “for a determined age group from a specific social class” (13).

The cross-cultural nature of the work is an important theme for this commentary, which is stated most clearly when Lohfink argues that the “book of Qoheleth is the most transparent place, within the Bible, where Israel meets with Greek philosophy” (14). While I might suggest that the Wisdom of Solomon may have an edge on that claim, it certainly is a fruitful perspective for Lohfink’s continued analysis. The theological challenge of the book is related to this cross-cultural task. In the face of the frequent claim that Qoheleth represents a step in the direction of the loss of faith, Lohfink argues that the book attempts (what was for its time) a “modern” restatement of living faith that responds to the cross-cultural challenges of living in the Ptolemaic Empire.

The commentary itself, it must be said, reads somewhat sparingly, and the reader is understandably frustrated with the frugality of comments on such passages as 4:13–14: “Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king, who will no longer take advice. One can indeed come out of prison to reign, even though born poor in the kingdom” (NRSV). Here Lohfink makes the observation that “Qoheleth probably had in mind events that originally were either historical or legendary, familiar to his readers but not available to us” (73). On the other hand, there is considerable interest in the wisdom connections to so-called “Diaspora Hero Stories,” such as Joseph, and it would have been interesting to read Lohfink speculate further about the possible wisdom-folklore connections in relation to this passage. While we may indeed not know the specific story alluded to, the theme is certainly one of interest to wisdom literature and tales!

Again, in reference to 9:13–15 (“I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. There was a little city with few people in it. A great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man” [NRSV]), Lohfink observes, “The original readers will have recognized the event that is referred to. We do not know it” (124). Once again, there are likely thematic connections between this thought and individual proverbs such as the following, which appear to be share an interest in the “power” of wise learning as opposed to brute strength: “One wise person went up against a city of warriors and brought down the stronghold in which they trusted” (Prov 21:22 NRSV).

I note these two examples not so much in criticism of this work but rather to give some indication of the limitations of a commentary with nearly exclusive literary interests—and even then they are literary interests focused almost entirely on the forms of the book of Qoheleth itself, not exploring very far outside the chosen text. There are cross-references numbered in the margins of the translations, but there are few linguistic or historical critical observations that accompany the text.

As I stated at the outset of this review, it is true that we were told not to expect this kind of commentary by the author himself. That is fair enough. But the volume appears in the Continental Commentary series and thus will stand next to Westermann’s work on Genesis and Kraus’s work on Psalms. In my opinion, this work does not do sufficient honor to Norbert Lohfink’s scholarly work on Qoheleth and perhaps would have best appeared in another format. Still, Sean McEvenue’s work in making this available to a wider English-speaking world is to be much appreciated.