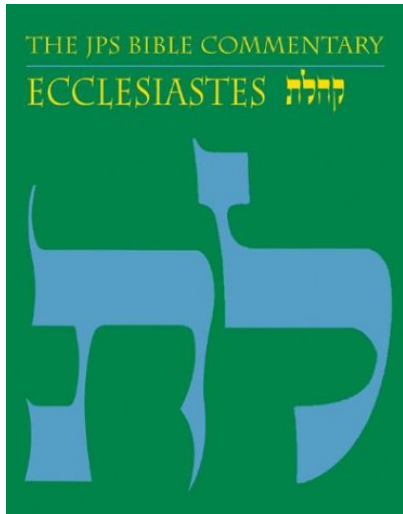


RBL 09/2007



Fox, Michael V.

Ecclesiastes: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation

The JPS Bible Commentary

Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004. Pp. xxxviii + 87. Cloth. \$34.95. ISBN 0827607423.

Thomas M. Bolin
Saint Norbert College
De Pere, Wisconsin

Michael V. Fox is no stranger to the book of Ecclesiastes. For the past generation, his has been a significant voice in the book's exegesis. This deceptively slim volume represents at once both a *tour de force* of a seasoned scholar's years of reading Ecclesiastes and a fitting entry point for any new reader of this fascinating biblical book.

In his introduction (ix–xxxv) Fox takes up the requisite issues of the authorship, dating, and the book's place in ancient wisdom literature, Jewish tradition, and modern scholarship. He also includes a bibliography and valuable discussions of Jewish interpretations of Ecclesiastes spanning two millennia, in addition to a selection of modern biblical scholarship. Besides commentaries by "the usual suspects" in Qohelet scholarship,¹ Fox also includes the fifteen-page treatment of the book in Martin Hengel's *Hellenism and Judaism* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 1:115–30, on which Fox will base much of his argument for Ecclesiastes' Hellenistic milieu.

Fox takes a cautious approach concerning any direct dependence of Ecclesiastes on similar literatures from within and outside of Israel, noting that if Ecclesiastes betrays any

1. I.e., G. A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908); H. Ginsberg, *Koheleth* (Jerusalem: Newman, 1961); R. E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC; Waco, Tex: Word, 1992); C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (AB 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997); M. V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

knowledge of another known ancient wisdom text, it would be the maxims of Ahikar. This does not prevent Fox from pointing out helpful similarities between Ecclesiastes and other ancient literatures, most notably the Egyptian instructions of Ani, Ptahhotpe, and Ankhsheshonq. Curiously, while Fox does note the striking similarity between the proverb in Eccl 4:8 and the Standard Version of the Epic of Gilgamesh, he does not treat the equally substantive points of contact between Eccl 9:7 and the advice of Siduri to Gilgamesh in the Old Babylonian recension of the Epic. Fox offers discussion of terms in Ecclesiastes he has identified as keywords (חלק, הבל, עשה, עמל, שמח, רעות רוח, רעיון רוח, חכמה, מותר, טוב, יתרון, יוטר, טובה). Most notable is Fox's translation of the crucial term הבל as "absurd."²

In an admirable example of Qohelet's own advice to "take hold of one without letting go of the other" (7:18) Fox notes: "Whereas earlier commentators found Koheleth's skeptical assertions difficult to accept at face value ... modern interpreters find it hard to credit him with his expressions of faith. Yet Koheleth's problem is precisely that he holds both to what he observes and to what he believes.... This is a dilemma shared by many believers (59). Fox's commentary is thus an ongoing, dynamic dialogue with the interpretive traditions of both Judaism and modern critical scholarship. This is most apparent in the number and nature of Fox's corrections to the NJPS translation of Ecclesiastes. No fewer than a dozen times are Fox's alternative translations prefaced by the description "better."³ Some of these retranslations offer a corrective to attempts by the NJPS to tone down some of Qohelet's more "heterodox" statements. For example, NJPS renders the imperfect verbs in 10:8–9 as simple futures, which makes the text read as if immoral behavior automatically results in a fitting, if not ironic, punishment for the evildoer. Fox, noting that for Qohelet it makes more sense to say, "[t]hese mishaps are hazards, not certainties" (69), retranslates the imperfects to read as *potential* outcomes to misbehavior rather than karmic inevitabilities. At other points, however, Fox offers a translation that results in a more traditional sense for the text, as at 12:1, where he argues for translating וזכר את־בוראִיך as "remember your Creator" in favor of NJPS "appreciate your vigor."⁴ Throughout Fox lets the language lead him and does not fall prey to choosing alternative translations for the sake of their novelty or consistently choosing the least-attested meaning of a word for the sake of its rarity. Of course, this kind of nuanced engagement with the tradition is an essential aspect of the tradition itself, and Fox

2. See Fox's detailed discussion in *A Time to Tear Down*, 30–42. For an alternative reading, see T. M. Bolin, "Rivalry and Resignation: Girard on Qoheleth and the Divine-Human Relationship," *Bib* 86 (2005): 245–59.

3. E.g., p. 16 at 2:6; p. 22 at 3:9; p. 36 at 5:10; p. 49 at 7:16–17; p. 74 at 11:5. See also Fox's general comments on his corrections to the NJPS translation on xxi–xxii.

4. Discussing Qohelet's attitude to vows and offerings at 4:17–5:6, Fox affirms that "Koheleth's observations, in spite of their subversive implications, never lead him to abandon prudence in religious principles" (32).

fittingly cites a talmudic text that refers to the “one shepherd” of 12:11 and that maintains that God speaks through *all* who study Torah—even those who hold erroneous opinions (b. Hag. 3b, discussed by Fox on 84).

As readers of Fox’s earlier works on Ecclesiastes know, he holds for the book’s literary unity, maintaining that it is the work of a single author who frames the words of the sage Qohelet. Furthermore, while most exegetes divide the book into two exactly equal halves whose center is at 6:6, Fox sees the major division occurring at 4:16, which concludes Qohelet’s observations on life (2:1–4:16), which is then followed by his advice on how to make one’s way in the world (4:17–11:6). The whole is framed by introductory (1:1–18) and concluding (11:7–12:8) remarks, along with the epilogue (12:9–14). Notably, Fox can maintain the book’s literary unity without recourse to minutely elaborate schemata or chiasmic structures. Thus, Fox admits that the arrangement of material in parts of the book “seems rather haphazard” (xvi) but can also affirm an overall cohesiveness to the book, as in how smaller units of material are grouped by the use of introductory phrases such as “I have also seen.” More importantly, Fox’s reading of Ecclesiastes results in more than the collection of random musings by a single author but rather a consciously arranged text that shows development in the author’s thought. Important to this way of looking at the book is Fox’s criticism as “highly misleading” (xxxii) any attempts to read some of the statements in Ecclesiastes as quotations or references to opinions that Qohelet cites in order to refute. For Fox, the book is not a summary of observations made at the end of an intellectual journey so much as the record of that journey itself⁵—and Fox convincingly traces how Qohelet’s thoughts on the worth of pleasure, the relative benefit of death over life, or the value of wisdom. What results is the story of a sage who boldly set out to discover the hidden meaning of the essentials of human existence, Kant’s trinity of *Gott, Freiheit, und der Seele*. Through a series of sobering observations and humbling experiences, Qohelet finally settles for the only wisdom available to human beings: a limited but realistic understanding of the bounded arena in which humanity is allowed to exercise its will and intellect.⁶

5. “It is important to read Ecclesiastes as a narrative, not simply as a collection of proverbs and epigrams each one of which can be understood in itself and is intended to be independently valid. We cannot assume that any one statement of Koheleth’s expresses the *book’s* teaching” (xiii). Here Fox notes Eric Christianson, *A Time to Tell* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

6. See “Koheleth has come a great distance from the man who set out ‘to study and to probe with wisdom all that happens under the sun’ (1:13). He is settling for a wisdom that can operate within the narrow confines of human comprehension” (73); and “[H]e has in fact discovered a wisdom, a more modest, pragmatic one—different from philosophical understanding [*sic*] of life he set out to seek” (82).

Early in his commentary Fox aptly notes that, “[u]nderstanding Ecclesiastes requires engagement, exploration, dissent, and rethinking—the very activities that characterize Koheleth himself.” In this work, Fox has provided for his readers an admirable model of the conscientious practice of each of these qualities.