Abstract

QOHELET: POSTCOLONIAL SOLOMON

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Without question, the book of Ecclesiastes is one of the most unusual books in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. Noted for its skepticism about life, knowledge, wisdom, and a host of other topics, Ecclesiastes has been examined particularly in scholarship on account of the voices in the text. The voice of the main speaker, Qohelet, and the editors/writers of Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 have been the subject of a great deal of the scholarship. This thesis argues that the book of Ecclesiastes, written in the third century BCE in Ptolemaic Judah, assumes the voice of Solomon, one of Israel’s legendary monarchs. The book itself is a critique of Solomon and the nature of kingship, and the unusual feature of the text is that it draws imaginatively on this master figure of wisdom. Qohelet, the speaker in the text, purposefully invites us to consider the legendary figure of wisdom speaking to a third-century BCE audience in Judah. In that way, Solomon/Qohelet speaks to a new age—an age where the Ptolemy have established a kind of control in Judah and are working through local officials to enforce their policies, collect their taxes, and hold the power of rule. Writing in the Second Temple period, Qohelet takes one of Israel’s most intriguing figures: Solomon. In one sense, Qohelet becomes a mimic—a particular designation of postcolonial criticism—of the kind of ruler that Judah is currently facing.
The historical Solomon’s intriguing qualities had been noted by the Deuteronomistic Historian and Chronicler as one whose own colonial practices in the building of the Temple and empire upon the backs of the people are a situation similar to slavery. Qohelet revalues the work of that legendary Solomon through mimic of the voice as leading to חבל (vanity or futility). In that way the Solomon of the past not only has a reconfigured heritage, but in the mouth of Qohelet, Solomon can provide suggestions for survival, self-monitoring, and quiet resistance that will promote the well-being of those in third-century Ptolemaic Judah.

The introduction to this thesis not only sets forth the assertion about the role of Qoheletian discourse, but also suggests how postcolonial criticism can provide a vital new understanding of this text. Qohelet himself is a kind of proto-postcolonial writer. He does provide suggestions for survival in this world. This thesis suggests that Qohelet provides the whispers toward a postcolonial future that remains unrealized in the text. Much of that activity would have to wait until additional force from outside was applied during the second century BCE under Seleucid control.

Chapters one, two, and three examine sections of the book and trace those whispers of postcolonial understanding. Central to those efforts are understanding time and choice in action. Perhaps even more central are the ideas of feasting and the enjoyment of labor as resistance against colonial oppression. The enjoyment of labor and the insistence upon feasting suggest that the postcolonial age begins as a whisper in the mind long before it could become a reality after revolutionary activity. The conclusion reasserts the key points of the thesis and finds a global text synthesis of the ideas presented by Qohelet and the other two voices in the text.
In this thesis, pessimism is thus understood less as a loss of faith than as a coming to terms with the reality of the day. Qohelet through his refashioned Solomon provides the kind of wisdom for living necessary in a later time. Life will be uncertain, but he finds the strength to suggest the vital components for survival in the world of Ptolemaic Judah.
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