THE MODERN READER'S BIBLE: A SERIES OF WORKS FROM THE SACRED SCRIPTURES PRESENTED IN MODERN LITERARY FORM ECCLESIASTES AND THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

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The modern reader's Bible: a series of works from the sacred Scriptures presented in modern literary form ecclesiastes and the wisdom of solomon by Richard G. Moulton

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RICHARD G. MOULTON

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Trieste

The Modern Reader's Bible

Wisdom Series

Ecclesiastes

The Wisdom of Solomon

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A SERIES OF WORKS FROM THE SACRED SCRIPTURES PRESENTED IN MODERN LITERARY FORM

ECCLESIASTES

AND

THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY

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INTRODUCTION

I

THE present number of the Modern Reader's Bible unites in a single volume the biblical *Ecclesiastes* and the apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon*. It is essential that the two works should be studied together. While they have their respective places in the development of Wisdom literature, yet from the two works previously introduced they stand separated by a gulf as wide as that between primitive and modern thought. *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiasticus*, with all their force and beauty, belong to Hebrew literature; the writings now to be considered form a part of that world literature which is independent of time and nation. In their thought the two works are contrasted to the extent of being antagonistic. But this antagonism is itself a unity; we have here Semitic religious tradition and speculative Greek thought struggling together over the supreme human problems of immortality and Divine providence. No literary styles could be more unlike than those of *Ecclesiastes* and *Wisdom*. The one carries to an extreme the indefinite suggestiveness of Hebrew; in the

other there is a minuteness of analysis that goes beyond that of classical Greek philosophy. Yet the two agree in casting a spell of fascination over every reader; a spell nowise diminished by the fact that in *Ecclesiastes* every second sentence is a literary puzzle, nor by the rebellious spirit with which the reader of *Wisdom* follows the plunges of his author from passages of the noblest eloquence to subtilties of inference or analogy which delight to delay an argument in full course. Such agreement and contrast make reason enough for studying *Ecclesiastes* and *Wisdom* together; a more important reason yet is the fact that a leading point in their interpretation is the question whether one of the two is not a veiled answer to the other.

Our consideration of these works is at the outset encountered by a critical obstacle of an unusual kind. I have said, in the opening volume of this series, that I consider it unnecessary to introduce historic questions of authorship and date in an edition that aims only at literary appreciation. But obviously an exception must be made where a mistaken view of authorship has been allowed to come in as a disturbing force, and throw a false colour over the interpretation of a classic. This I believe to have been the case in regard to the traditional view that *Ecclesiastes* was written by King Solomon. In this question all the considerations from which authorship is usually inferred — local and historic colour, position in literary development, minutiæ of language which fix the date of a

book as clearly as handwriting betrays the age of a manuscript — all are on one side, and point to a period of writing centuries later than Solomon. On the other side there is only a single argument. But this is an argument which, if it could be maintained, might outweigh all the rest: for it is the plea that the book itself distinctly asserts that Solomon is its author. If this be true, he would be a bold critic who would run counter to such an assertion, and proclaim a work like *Ecclesiastes* to be a literary fraud. What I desire to show is that, when the whole is carefully studied, the words supposed to proclaim the Solomonic authorship are capable of an entirely different interpretation.

As a preliminary to all interpretation the exact literary form of the work must be settled. *Ecclesiastes* is not a book with a continuous argument, but is a miscellany of wisdom: made up of a number of reasoned compositions, such as I designate essays, and also strings of disconnected brevities — maxims, epigrams, unit proverbs. In these respects the work agrees with *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiasticus*; but it has one important point of difference from them. In *Ecclesiastes* the essays, though each is an independent composition, unite in a common drift of thought; and they are further bound into a unity by a prologue and epilogue. This again is what we might expect. The entirely isolated observations which make up the matter of *Proverbs* were, in *Ecclesiasticus*, found so far drawn to-