

**A COMMENTARY
ON THE BOOK OF
ECCLESIASTES**

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A commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes by Loyal Young

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A

COMMENTARY

ON THE

BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES.

BY THE

REV. LOYAL YOUNG, D.D.,
PASTOR OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BUTLER, PA.

WITH

INTRODUCTORY NOTICES,

BY THE

REV. A. T. MCGILL, D.D.,
PROFESSOR IN PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY,

AND THE

REV. M. W. JACOBUS, D.D.,
PROFESSOR IN THE WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, PA.

"The excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life to them that have it."
ECCLESIASTES vii. 12.

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INTRODUCTORY NOTICES.

From the REV. ALEXANDER T. MCGILL, D.D., Professor of Ecclesiastic, Homiletic, and Pastoral Theology, in the Seminary at Princeton, N. J.

I HAVE been favoured with an opportunity of looking over the manuscript of Dr. Young's Commentary on Ecclesiastes. An early and long acquaintance with him, and the sterling qualities of his mind, would have prompted me to say, that nothing which he may venture to publish can be without value and interest to the church. But a perusal of this work gives me a higher estimate of his qualifications, than any previous partiality had presumed.

It is eminently judicious; and enlivened with originality of thought, vivacity of expression, and practical pungency, which must make it popular and useful; while it will be acknowledged as able and solid—a valuable contribution to sacred criticism.

A peculiar charm of the work is that unity, with which he gathers the many difficult passages of this book to one purpose—a point of convergence, where everything is luminous and intensely interesting. And whether the judgment of the reader is convinced or not, that he has found in this central theme a key for the solution of every difficulty, it is enriched by the interpretation; and satisfied also, that this remarkable book is a sheaf, to be tied up somewhere, and carried by one great principle worthy of Divine inspiration.

I could wish, that the modesty of the Author had not imposed on his ability and originality a *form* for this Commentary, so artificial—merely because it has been found successful by others upon other books of the Bible. The mould ought to have been made original as the exegesis. The most enigmatic portions of the Old Testament, and the most dogmatic portions of the New, can hardly be cast into the same forms of analysis, without an excess of ingenuity.

But this is only a matter of taste. And if the work be made in this

form more instructive to the majority of readers, it is the best form, after all, and another claim which the Author has earned, to the favour and gratitude of all that love the oracles of God.

ALEXANDER T. MCGILL.

May 16th, 1864.

From the REV. MELANCTHON W. JACOBUS, D.D., Professor of Oriental and Biblical Literature and Exegesis, in the Western Theological Seminary.

THERE is a Jewish tradition that the Book of Ecclesiastes was one of those Scriptures which was not to be read by any one under the age of thirty years. This tradition itself is only an expression of the difficulty which the book has given to ancient interpreters. The questions of its plan, authorship, date, and general object, are questions which are not settled by the increase of expositions—nor is it necessary that they should be.

Herder has said, "That it is best to make as free a use of the book as possible, and let its individual parts serve us for that purpose," without binding it to a definite plan. He has also said, "I do not know any book in the Old Testament, which describes more fully, more convincingly or more concisely the whole sum of human life, with all its changes and vanities, its occupations and plans, its speculations and pleasures, and at the same time that which alone is real, lasting, progressive, and rewarding."

This is quite the view taken of the book by Dr. Young in this practical Commentary. One can see with "half an eye," that all the ejaculations of "*Vanity of Vanities*" with which the book abounds, belong to a certain phase of life, as held in contrast with another and better. It is, therefore, a most superficial estimate of the doctrine, that understands it as teaching a refined Epicureanism. This is that mode of living which the author testifies against—and this, it would seem, out of his own deep and bitter experience.

If the book is to be read as a formal sermon from the text which Dr.

Young finds to be the key of the whole, then we are to understand the Preacher, as highly experimental, adducing his own earlier life as a practical trial of what is *wisdom* and what is *vanity*; and so addressing himself to his hearers in a most practical discourse. The book has been compared by some to the *Pensées* of Pascal and the *Confessions* of Augustine.

The author seems to record his own life-struggles—to think aloud for the benefit of his hearers. He appears as one reasoning with himself, and brings forward to view the processes by which he arrived at wise conclusions. It would be, therefore, a sad mistake to understand the workings of his worldly heart, here interspersed, as though these were the teachings of the book or the doctrines of Inspiration. The instruction is to be found in a careful study of the whole Book, and an analysis of its conclusion. As the Book of Job, the debate must be heard throughout, and the truth gathered from the results that are reached. This is expressed at the close of the Book: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter. Fear God, and keep his commandments," &c.

This Book of Ecclesiastes has plainly an affinity with the Book of Proverbs and with the Song of Solomon; and points to the Practical Wisdom and to the Personal Wisdom, who is also the Personal Word. This fact would go the whole length of fixing the authorship upon Solomon; though from Grotius to Hengstenberg great names have held otherwise. *Luther* understands the teaching of the book to be, "that with gratitude we should use the gifts and allotments of God, which are bestowed upon us with his benediction only, that we have a tranquil and quiet heart, and a mind filled with joy, content with the word and ways of God."

The stages of reflection and experience here expressed are those through which many a mind has passed, in reaching the gospel conclusions. This is only a forewhispering of that Gospel in which Life and Immortality are brought to Light—*Life that is Life*—Life as dignified and illuminated by the revelation of immortality. "In Him was Life, and the Life was the Light of Men." And there is no true Light, however boasted, apart from this Divine and Eternal Life revealed and offered in Jesus Christ. This is WISDOM. Many a one has so found it: and the piercing outcry, "ALL IS VANITY," has led to the conclusion of the whole matter: "Fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."

This portion of Scripture, as was intended, has a wonderful adaptedness to all times and people; and its valuable lessons, as expounded by the author of this Commentary, will be found eminently fitting for the day in which we live. No age has required a more earnest and authoritative inculcation of a high morality in distinction from worldliness and self-seeking. No people has more needed those lessons of heavenly wisdom, which point to the future life as the proper aim of men. Dr. Young has treated the words of the great preacher in this practical and popular light. And we pray that through his expositions here, these inspired words of the wise man may be found as goads, and "as nails fastened by the Masters of Assemblies, which are given from *One Shepherd.*"

M. W. JACOBUS.

September 25th, 1863.

PREFACE.

SOLOMON is one of history's brightest luminaries. Among the stars of the first magnitude, he stands out in dazzling brilliancy. In his age, science was but in its infancy, it is true. In Egypt and in the East were wise men; and in Tyre, ship-building and other arts had arrived at some perfection. Several names of wise and learned men are mentioned in sacred history as co-eval with Solomon. But he was wiser than all of them,—wiser than Ethan the Ezrabite, and Heman, and Chalcol, and Darda. "And his fame was in all nations round about." He was sagacious in all his intercourse with men. His plans for enriching his kingdom were maturely formed and energetically executed. He managed to bring almost the whole commerce of the world into his territories. By navies and caravans the wealth of the nations was brought to his door. With many of the modern sciences he was unacquainted. But had he lived in our day, with his curious and investigating mind, he might have been the rival if not the superior of our ablest philosophers. He was a poet, a proverb-maker, a botanist, and a horticulturist. It would almost seem that he anticipated some of our modern discoveries in anatomical science, or was inspired to do so. (See remarks on Chapter xii. verses 3, 6.) As a ruler he had great tact and a sound judgment; having sought wisdom from God. "Give me," said he, "a wise and understanding heart." Till laid aside by his social relations, Solomon was also great in goodness. He was inspired to write three of the sacred books. His prayer at the dedication of the temple was sublime in humble simplicity. And he was a "Preacher." One of his sermons has come down to our time, being inspired. As moved by the Holy Spirit, he delivered the messages of life.

The term "preacher" (original *Cobeloth*) signifies one that collects

the people, i. e., for addressing them. It appears then that this Book of Ecclesiastes is one of Solomon's sermons *preached*. That it was also *written out* appears from chapter xii. verse 10. "The Preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth." This sermon is also a treatise on *moral philosophy* of a practical kind; and the oldest philosophical treatise extant. Those who teach moral philosophy should not pass by unnoticed this remarkable production. It is Hebrew philosophy. In its inspired eminence, let it take its place among and above all the ancient philosophies of Greece. Let it eclipse, as it does, the teachings of Plato and Socrates and Aristotle. It is not the philosophy of "the porch," but of the sanctuary. It is not the philosophy of Epicurus, though some have branded it as teaching the sentiments of that philosopher. It is not the earnest student, but the superficial reader, that will discover anything Epicurean in the treatise. What then are the teachings of this Book?

SCOPE.

The following views are suggested to the intelligent reader as the design and teachings of Ecclesiastes:

This Book of Ecclesiastes is a discourse or sermon of Solomon. It is about the length of an ordinary modern sermon. Though a sermon, it is not quite as methodical as some modern sermons, but far more so than many others. Like modern sermons, it commences with a text or theme for discussion. When or where uttered, we are not informed. There are reasons for supposing that it was delivered in the presence of the foreign wise men and princes, who, like the queen of Sheba, came from the utmost parts of the earth to hear his wisdom. "There came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom." (1 Kings iv. 34). Standing up in the presence of his curious and learned auditors, as Paul did in Athens at a later day, he spoke of God, of his counsels, and of a future judgment. And, indeed, on a careful inspection, this sermon and Paul's address to the Athenians have strong points of resemblance. Both are to us now revealed theology; but they are discourses on natural theology. Paul pointed to the altar erected "to the unknown God." Hence, he directs his hearers to God, who made the world and giveth life; to God's purposes; and finally to the judgment. So Solomon pointed to nature; to the rising and setting sun, the shifting breeze, the running rivers (i.