

**A GENTLE CYNIC: BEING A
TRANSLATION OF THE BOOK OF
KOHELETH COMMONLY KNOWN AS
ECCLESIASTES STRIPPED OF LATER
ADDITIONS ALSO ITS ORIGIN, GROWTH
AND INTERPRETATION**

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A Gentle Cynic: Being a Translation of the Book of Koheleth Commonly Known as Ecclesiastes Stripped of Later Additions Also Its Origin, Growth and Interpretation by Morris Jastrow

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A GENTLE CYNIC
BEING THE BOOK
OF ECCLESIASTES



MORRIS JASTROW, JR.

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TO
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YALE UNIVERSITY
AND
JAMES ALAN MONTGOMERY
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

FOREWORD



HIS work is an endeavor to place before a general public, and in popular form, the results of the critical study of the Old Testament as applied to a single book in the collection. I have chosen the book commonly known as Ecclesiastes, because of the intensely human interest attaching to this specimen of the ancient literature of Palestine.

The designation "Ecclesiastes", to be taken in the sense of one who addresses an Ecclesia *i.e.*, an assembly, is an attempt on the part of the Greek translator of the book to render the Hebrew word Koheleth (pronounced Ko-hâ-y-leth), which is the name assumed by the author of the book, and the underlying stem of which means to "assemble." Since the author, however, wanted us to regard Koheleth as a proper name, why translate it at all? Ecclesiastes is a harsh and forbidding title for a book that is marked by a singular lightness of touch, and I have therefore retained throughout this work the name Koheleth for the book, and have chosen "A Gentle Cynic" as an appropriate designation to describe both the character of the book and the author, who has concealed his personality behind a *nom de plume*.¹

¹ See p. 65.

A GENTLE CYNIC

The book is not only intensely human, it is also remarkably modern in its spirit. Koheleth belongs to the small coterie of books that do not grow old. It does not follow that such books are to be placed among the great classics of world literature, though in some instances they do enjoy this distinction, as in the case of the Book of Job and the Quatrains of Omar Khayyam, which are likewise remarkably modern. Nor is the reverse proposition true that all the great classics have a modern flavor. The spirit of Homer is that of antiquity, whereas that of Horace is modern. Molière is intensely human, but because he reflects so exclusively the foibles of his days, he does not make the strong appeal to the modern world as does Shakespeare, who is human *and* modern. Of two authors who are contemporaneous, one may remain modern and the other not, though both may be reckoned among the great. Witness Goethe and Schiller, the former speaking to the present age in a way that the latter does not.

Koheleth is modern, because with great literary skill he deals with those aspects of human life which are always the same. He is almost brutally frank in holding the mirror up to life. For all that, he is neither a scoffer nor a pessimist. He loves life and has intense sympathy with the struggles and sufferings of humanity, but he smiles at the attempts of zealous reformers to change human nature or to improve a state of things, which (as he believes) follows logically from the conditions under which

FOREWORD

mankind carves out its career. Koheleth is not a cold and severely logical philosopher, intent upon building up a system of thought, but an easy-going dilettante who unfolds in a series of charming, witty and loosely connected *causeries* his view of life, as gained by a long and varied experience.

The defects of his attitude towards life are so apparent that they need hardly be pointed out. He does not pose as a guide to be followed, nor does he help us in solving the problems of life. He would be willing to confess that he has no solution, because—and this is perhaps his chief defect—he sees no *aim* in life, no goal towards which mankind is tending. Koheleth is serious in what he says, though he always speaks with a slight ironical smile on his lips, but he does not want us to take him *too* seriously, just as he himself does not want to take life too seriously. The human interest of the book is all the more intense because of its main conclusion, that life itself is a paradox. Life is made to be enjoyed, and yet enjoyment is “vanity.”

It is a strange book to have slipped into a sacred collection. This would never have happened had the book been permitted to remain in the form which the author originally gave it. Instead of taking Koheleth as he was, the attempt was made by those who did not approve of his tone and of his attitude to twist his thought to conform to the conventional views and beliefs of the age. How this