

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

of all her industries. All classes now recognise a fact which they had been inclined to forget, namely, that there can be no real national prosperity while agriculture languishes. The depression, which we trust is now passing away, will not have been altogether a misfortune if it has led us to a truer and juster appreciation of the conditions under which future success must be achieved.

MIDDLETON.

ART. V.—DR. CHARLES WRIGHT'S "ECCLESIASTES."

The Book of Koheleth, commonly called Ecclesiastes. Considered in relation to Modern Criticism and to the Doctrines of Modern Pessimism, with a critical and grammatical Commentary and a revised Translation. The Donnellan Lectures for 1880-1881. By the Rev. CHARLES HENRY HAMILTON WRIGHT, D.D., Incumbent of St. Mary's, Belfast. Pp. 516. Hodder and Stoughton. 1883.

THE present generation has witnessed a rapid and prolific growth in England of critical treatises upon the various books of the Bible, so that this is a class of literature that has been very greatly developed within the last few years. Nor has the mysterious treatise of Koheleth, or Ecclesiastes, proved other than a fruitful field for speculations of this kind. The latest work on the subject is that by Dr. Wright, of Belfast, very favourably known by his recent Bampton Lectures on Zechariah. It may be said generally that there is one feature characteristic of all this class of literature, and that is an inability in the writers to appreciate the meaning of the word *therefore*. In the great majority of cases the conclusions confidently arrived at are in inverse ratio to the cogency and solidity of the reasons advanced in support of them. The number of facts relating to the formation of the Canon of the Old Testament and the composition of the several books of it, is singularly small; but for that very reason the multitude of theories put forth about it, and the variety of speculations advanced, is proportionately large. We have only to open Dr. Wright's book to discover an illustration of the truth of this remark.

"The men of Hezekiah," we are told on p. 4—who are only once mentioned in Scripture, at Prov. xxv. 1—"an important company, or College of Scribes, continued to exist as a Jewish institution for several centuries. It may have lasted, under some form or other, down to and during the period of the exile." Now, this is an apt specimen of the way in which conjecture is substituted and mistaken for historic fact. What is the *evidence*, we should like to ask, properly so called, for the unqualified statement that "the men of Hezekiah" con-

tinued to exist as a Jewish institution for several centuries? Hezekiah died about B.C. 698; Judah was carried away captive B.C. 588, or 110 years afterwards. Where, then, shall we place the "several centuries" during which the men of Hezekiah flourished as a Jewish institution? unless, indeed, we even expand the further conjecture immediately added with a timid condition, "It *may* have lasted, under some form or other, down to and during the period of the exile." Nay, rather, it surely *must* have done so, if it "continued to exist as a Jewish institution for *several centuries*." The fact is, we *know* nothing of these men of Hezekiah except what we are told in Prov. xxv. All the rest is conjecture, based upon the scantiest possible and least trustworthy tradition. But, then, where is the wisdom of representing this conjecture as an unquestionable historic fact, rescued from oblivion by the learning and investigation of the writer, who simply has the boldness to make the assertion?

As a further illustration of the unsatisfactory nature of reasoning which does not clearly distinguish between speculation and ascertainable fact, and of the eminently subjective character of all such reasoning, we may quote p. 6. Dr. Wright says:

Kuenen has indeed ably maintained that the whole story of "the men of the great synagogue," and of their work in reference to the Canon of the Old Testament, is a legend entirely devoid of any real historic truth. Professor Robertson Smith has adopted the same view, and regards Kuenen's arguments as conclusive. It has, in his opinion, "been proved in the clearest manner that the origin of the legend of the great synagogue is derived from the account given in Nehemiah viii., ix. of the great convocation which met at Jerusalem, and subscribed the covenant to observe the Law. It was, therefore, a meeting, and not a permanent authority. It met once for all; and everything that is told about it, except what we read in Nehemiah, is pure fable of the later Jews."

"Such a conclusion is, however," continues Dr. Wright, "not justified by the facts of the case," and so on. The fact is, that the principles of reasoning are vitiated on both sides by the tacit admission of assumptions that are mutually destructive. In the one case (which is Dr. Wright's), the statement of Rashi about the men of the great synagogue and their work is accepted as more or less historical; in the other (that of Kuenen and R. Smith), it is ruthlessly rejected, and resolved into a garbled version of what is related by Nehemiah. But who does not see that in this manner volumes may be written on either side, with a great parade of learning and ingenuity, and yet the net result be equally worthless as regards the amount of ascertainable fact. There is, however, reason to believe that many persons are imposed upon by this pomp and

circumstance of literary discussion, from which a certain amount of glory may accrue to the disputants, but very little real profit to the reader.

Dr. Wright has undoubtedly produced a very readable and learned book, though, for the reasons assigned, we are not sure that he has greatly added to what we know about Ecclesiastes. He rejects the traditional view of the Solomonic authorship,¹ and believes it to have been the work of the last of the prophets, not of course understanding Malachi by this phrase, somewhere between 444 and 196 B.C. He thus assigns a date for this treatise at least five hundred years later than the true one, supposing the book to have been the work of Solomon. Here, then, it would seem that we must have a crucial instance of the true value of much of the so-called modern criticism. The criticism, that is so boastful in the present day, must be unworthy of the name, which cannot decide within five centuries upon the date of a given work; and yet this is undeniably the case with Ecclesiastes. There are not wanting scholars of eminent learning, *e.g.* Pusey and others, who accept Ecclesiastes as the work of Solomon; and yet there are many more who assert emphatically that for linguistic and critical reasons the theory is absurd. Now surely if this were the case absolutely, it would be impossible for those scholars who do so to maintain the contrary. Some have placed Ecclesiastes as late as 150 B.C., while others regard it as at least eight centuries earlier. They cannot both be right. But the point to which we would draw attention is the questionable character of the criticism which would pronounce so confidently on the lateness of the date; for if this criticism were valid, there then would be no room for the opposite supposition to be maintained for one moment, whereas the contrary is an obvious fact. By all means let the lateness of Ecclesiastes be proved if it can, but let us be quite sure of the grounds on which it is proved, which are more subjective than those of mere grammar and language.

Dr. Wright has spoken slightly of a work² which has dealt in a very exhaustive manner with the evidence from language, viz. the anonymous "Treatise on the Authorship of

¹ In his introduction Dr. Wright says: "It is not, I confess, without some feelings of regret that I have felt myself constrained, by the evidence adduced by modern critics, to abandon the traditional view of the Solomonic authorship of the Book of Ecclesiastes. But I do not consider the canonical character of the book, or its Divine inspiration, to be at all affected by the abandonment of a theory at variance with the linguistic features of the book, as, well as with internal evidence, and with the statements of its epilogue, when rightly understood."

² Published by Messrs. Macmillan and Co., and known to be written by the Rev. David Johnston, of Hurray, Scotland.

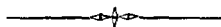
Ecclesiastes," and has said that Professor Stanley Leathes has "incautiously" observed that "the force of this evidence, so far as it goes, seems to be irresistible." "These critics," the writer continues, "seem to forget that the argument on which they rely proves too much. By the same line of argument the Book of Wisdom and the Book of Ecclesiasticus may with equal reason be ascribed to Solomon." But the fact is this is too summary a way of dealing with an argument that has been worked out with great fulness of detail by Mr. Johnston, and the force of which arises from its cumulative evidence and gradually increasing cogency. Before deciding on this question—as to which we ourselves agree with Dr. Leathes—we would counsel all students to peruse the work of Mr. Johnston. It is, moreover, one thing to note indications that appear to confirm a traditional conclusion, and quite another to press these indications into a proof of something for which there not only is no evidence, but for which there is evidence to the contrary. No amount of correspondence between Proverbs and Ecclesiasticus, if it existed, could prove the latter book to be by Solomon, seeing that it is ostensibly written by the son of Sirach; while with regard to the so-called Wisdom of Solomon, the points of contrast are no less striking than those of similarity between it and the traditional works of Solomon, and the existence of the "results" assumed by Dr. Wright has first to be shown, in this case as they have been shown in the other by the Scottish critic.

The book of Dr. Wright is not so much a commentary upon Ecclesiastes as a commentary upon its commentators, and the meagreness of positive results at which the author arrives is altogether in keeping with its generally discursive and discussional character. The only part of Ecclesiastes which is treated at large is the last chapter, in a thesis which appears to have been delivered at Cambridge. Then follows a new translation of the whole book, with a critical and grammatical commentary on the text. It is a hazardous thing to attempt a new translation of Ecclesiastes, as the following passage selected casually may serve to show (ch. vi. 10) :

That which has been, long ago has its name been pronounced, and known is that which a man shall become ; and he cannot contend with Him who is stronger than he. For there are many words which increase vanity ; what profit (are they) to man ? For who knoweth what is good for man in life, during the number of the days of the life of his vanity, for he spends them as the shadow ? For who can point out to man what shall be after him under the sun ?

We question whether the English reader will find this a rendering preferable to the Authorised Version, or discover so much additional light in it as will induce him to substitute the one for the other.

There is a great deal of learning in this book, and it is carefully got up. Dr. Wright has ably contrasted the Pessimism of "the sacred Jewish philosopher" with that of Schopenhauer and von Hartmann, pessimists whose conclusions are destructive not only of faith, but of morality. The author of Ecclesiastes is vainly claimed as a precursor by this school, whose writings, beginning to be read in England, are one of the saddest phenomena of the present time.



ART. VI.—ODD CORNERS OF THE MASTER'S VINEYARD.

LORD, what wilt Thou have me to do? is a question which everyone must ask, if they really feel that they are not their own. But the answer to the question is not always evident, for the various circumstances of varied lives make it impossible to lay down any fixed laws as to what can or ought to be done by each individual. The object of the present paper is to suggest some "odd corners" in which opportunities of usefulness may have passed unnoticed.

Take first the case of the Christian man of business. His time is very fully occupied, his hours are late, and, except on Sunday, it seems impossible for him to undertake any real Christian work, and possibly on Sunday his own need of rest may render it more than ordinarily difficult for him to teach or visit, while it may well be that he feels the hours of that day are all too little to be devoted to his family. Is there any "odd corner" for him? It may be taken as an ascertained fact that those who have most to do are those who may most thoroughly be trusted to undertake any work of real importance, for they know both how to value and to economise time; and not unfrequently they have a machinery in their hands which enables them to carry out business other than their own with far less trouble than it would cost a private individual. May we not look to our Christian men of business to relieve the clergy of much of their finance business and account keeping? The writer of this paper has the honour of the acquaintance of a man of business whose time seems to be completely filled up, and yet he has managed to utilise the machinery at his command in such a way as to enable him to undertake, and admirably to carry out, the duties of treasurer to a large Church Missionary Association. Such men also are