

READING THE OLD TESTAMENT

Method in Biblical Study

John Barton

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AN EXAMPLE: ECCLESIASTES

Stars, I have seen them fall,
 But when they drop and die
 No star is lost at all
 From all the star-sown sky.
 The toil of all that be
 Helps not the primal fault;
 It rains into the sea,
 And still the sea is salt.

A. E. Housman, 'More Poems' in
The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman. London 1939

If the high counsels of the Lord of Thunder
 Seek'st thou to know with singleness of heart,
 Look to the highest of the heights of heaven,
 See where the stars still keep their ancient peace.

Boethius, *de philosophiae consolatione* iv. 6. 1-5,
 tr. Helen Waddell in *Medieval Latin Lyrics*. London 1929

Preliminary Reading

Ecclesiastes

G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London 1972), pp. 190-206, 226-37

A Sample Study

It is generally easier to grasp the essential differences between various methods of study if one sees them being applied to the same subject matter. With this in mind I shall try in this chapter to consolidate our discussion so far by showing how the various

methods we have been examining work in practice when they are applied to one comparatively short text, the book of Ecclesiastes or Qoheleth. Since in my experience discussions of biblical methods rarely use this book by way of illustration, there may be some advantage in choosing it for our purposes; it has hardly ever been a focus for serious controversy, and (by the standards of Old Testament study) not very much has been written about it. Nevertheless, the purpose of this chapter is by no means to present an original, or even a personal, interpretation of the book, but simply to see what has been or might be said about it if the methods so far discussed are applied. The reader is not being asked to accept one interpretation of the book rather than another, but only to take note of what is involved in deciding among the different interpretations made available by various kinds of criticism.

Most people who are familiar with Ecclesiastes will think of it as a rather pessimistic or even cynical book, expressing the conviction that very many of the normal activities of life are ultimately pointless and unsatisfying, and that death levels all differences. On the other hand, they may also think of it as a work rich in shrewd observations about human foibles, which puts forward a recipe for contentment in the midst of ultimate pessimism by stressing the need to accept that all things happen in an appropriate way and at an appropriate time: the most famous passage being, of course, 3:1-8, 'For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven; a time to be born, and a time to die . . .'. Despite the repeated assertion that 'all is vanity' (i.e. pointlessness, emptiness), the book ends with the advice to 'fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man' (12:13), thereby providing the title of one of the most popular books of moral advice and devotion of the seventeenth century (*The Whole Duty of Man*, 1658). But before the rise of critical scholarship this juxtaposition of scepticism and moralism was not, apparently, felt to be particularly puzzling or to require explanation: the mixture was simply part of the author's make-up.

Literary Criticism

The earliest critical discussions appeared when scholars trained in Pentateuchal studies began to notice inconsistencies and changes of

direction in Ecclesiastes reminiscent of those that had been found in the Pentateuch. Even if it was possible to read the book as fairly consistent, this meant playing down both some very sceptical passages (e.g. 3:19) and some very orthodox ones (e.g. 12:13), thus failing to do justice to either.¹ The assertion that 'one fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice' (9:2) is surely deeply subversive of basic Old Testament faith in divine justice and the moral ordering of the world; while 3:1-9, on closer inspection, proves in its context to be more nearly a statement of a rather gloomy determinism than a serene acceptance of the regular cycles of life and nature. On the other hand, the concluding verses of the book do not simply add a note of stern piety; they effectively undermine the book's message, by assuring the reader that 'God will bring every deed into judgment' (12:14). According to this, the free choices of men *do* matter to God, and the same fate does *not* befall all alike. With these observations the way was clearly open for some sort of 'literary' analysis similar to that which had proved so successful in handling the inconsistencies of the Pentateuch.

On the whole, however, early critics did not conclude that Ecclesiastes was composed of two or more separate sources, but preferred a hypothesis akin to what in Pentateuchal studies was known as the 'supplementary hypothesis': that a basic text had been supplemented by the addition of fragmentary extra material of a different character.² The original Qoheleth was a work of considerable though not wholly unacceptable scepticism, which had been touched up in places to bring it back within the orthodox fold by the addition of such verses as the conclusion, which we have already mentioned, and 3:17: 'I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked.' The first scholar to attempt a more radical analysis, which is recognizable as a piece of full-blown 'literary' criticism, was C. Siegfried.³ He, too, thought in terms of a basic text to which material had been added, rather than of parallel sources, as for the Pentateuch.⁴ Siegfried was convinced that the original Qoheleth was a very sceptical work indeed, so radical in its attack on normal Jewish piety that it would never have been accepted as canonical by either Jews or Christians.

According to Siegfried, Ecclesiastes passed through six separate

major 'recensions' or editions, and in each the additional material that changed the book's overall emphasis can be isolated and assigned with reasonable accuracy to a particular circle in post-exilic Israel – just as, say, the 'P' material in Genesis can be assigned to 'priestly' circles in the period of the second Temple. The version of Siegfried's theory that established itself most widely in Britain, however, was a simplification by A. H. McNeile,⁵ and it will make our task easier if we work with this: it preserves all the essential ideas of Siegfried's work, but greatly simplifies its details. McNeile made the labour of his readers even lighter by printing the sections of Ecclesiastes in different type-faces to mark the sources.

McNeile tries to establish three major stages in the redaction of Ecclesiastes. (1) His first editor is a scribe or 'wise man', the sort of person (or group) who taught in the schools of post-exilic Judaism where much of Proverbs was produced, and from which, indeed, Qoheleth himself had come – though he had surely been something of a renegade. The first editor has diluted Qoheleth's pessimism by inserting a number of innocuous proverbs – e.g. 4:5; 4:9–12; 8:1 – and adding comments which twist the original material in such a way that it supports stock 'wisdom' positions. (2) Secondly, a later editor has tried to save not just Qoheleth's acceptability within the 'wisdom' tradition (the system of common-sense platitudes represented in Proverbs or Ecclesiasticus), but also his religious orthodoxy as judged by the criteria of the Judaism current in the last couple of centuries B.C.: the religion of devout legal observance and absolute trust in divine justice and retribution. He has added highly theological material such as 11:9b and 12:1a, which qualify Qoheleth's advice to have a good time while one is young enough to enjoy it by reminding the reader of coming judgement by God; 8:2b, on the sanctity of oaths; and 7:26b, which ascribes deliverance from seductive women (a favourite theme of ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature) to the help of God. (3) Finally, an editor of a more prosaic sort has added the title (1:1) and, probably, the biographical note about the author in 12:9–10.

Already in trying to decide between the earlier theory of a basically unified book and McNeile's hypothesis of a three-fold redaction, we are confronted with the question how this work should be read, and hence with the question of genre, what *kind* of book it is. Scholars who take the work to be substantially unified do not see

any great problem in a book that contains both radical questioning of traditional religious values and more or less unquestioning acceptance of them: for them, 'wisdom literature' is a category broad enough to include such a work, and there is no need to explain it by resorting to theories of multiple authorship or redaction.⁶ After all, Proverbs itself contains passages that seem, taken out of context, scarcely less pessimistic than the gloomier parts of Ecclesiastes: see, for example, Proverbs 14:10 and 14:13. For McNeile, on the other hand, the inconsistencies are too great to permit such an interpretation, and the work is too puzzling to be understood as the work of a single author. It must therefore be seen as composite: an original, very radical work, which could best be described as a *parody* of a stock 'wisdom book', which has been forcibly turned into a conventional work of proverbial wisdom and then into a 'holy' book by successive redactional additions.

Overtly, the question to be resolved is whether certain verses or passages ought to be (in the traditional terminology) 'deleted' as later additions to the original text, and it is very tempting for a scholar who is aiming at scientific rigour in his work to say that this question must be decided *before* any attempt is made to interpret the work: first establish what the original book contained, and only then can you hope to say what Qoheleth himself meant. But to come to a decision about the original extent of the work, we must first decide the question of genre. Is the book possible or impossible as it stands? Could it have been read by its first readers as making coherent sense, or do the joins show through? Indeed, we must make some preliminary decisions about *content*, which according to a purist view of biblical method (as we find it in Richter) can be allowed to come up for consideration only when every type of critical method has already been applied. After all, the reason why McNeile felt forced to postulate a series of redactions was not just that this provided a better explanation of universally recognized inconsistencies than other methods could provide. It was at least partly because the inconsistencies seemed to him far more glaring than people had generally thought them. But then again, it was no doubt because explanations of biblical books in terms of glossing, redaction and revision were in the air that he allowed his initial sense that there were major inconsistencies such full rein. Once a critic has begun to formulate a 'source' or multiple-recension theory (or indeed any

other kind of theory), the evidence which can be held to point to it is likely to grow in weight in his mind. None of this is to say that McNeile was fudging the evidence to prove his case, but rather to point out yet again the inevitable element of circularity in all literary judgements. Ecclesiastes itself undoubtedly contains tensions – no one would deny that – but if we are aware of the possibility of multiple authorship, we are bound to feel less sure that there must be some way of resolving the tensions than we should if such a possibility had never occurred to us. Conversely, it is because the tensions, here and in other biblical books, genuinely do exist that scholars stumbled upon the idea of multiple authorship in the first place.

The circularity here must mean that there can be no possibility of constructing a knock-down argument – based on an assessment of the textual evidence that any unprejudiced reader would be *bound* to accept – to show that one or other of the theories we are examining is correct. In the end, informed intuition about what is likely and reasonable must decide. But the intuition must be informed, and is not at all above the reach of certain rational and empirical tests, provided it is understood that such tests are not a matter of infallible verification. For example, we have seen that the argument in favour of a position like that of McNeile comes down to a judgement about what is thinkable within the genre ‘wisdom book’. It is impossible, the suggestion runs, that anyone could have produced a single work which so mixed radical scepticism with conventional aphorisms. Obviously it will be relevant when assessing this suggestion to look at other examples of ‘wisdom’ in Israelite and related literatures and to see whether there are any precedents for such a mixture. If there are, we may want to conclude that the inconsistencies pointed out by McNeile are really evidence, not that Qoheleth is the work of more than one hand, but that the genre ‘wisdom book’ needs redefinition, that our competence in it was less perfect than we supposed. On the other hand, we may argue that the level of inconsistency is not so high as McNeile thought: that the tensions have been exaggerated. Some scholars, indeed, might wish to construct such a counter-argument by maintaining that the ‘consistency’ being demanded is not found in wisdom books or proverbs in any case; or even that it is not found generally in ancient Semitic cultures, being a ‘modern Western’ preoccupation.

They would probably point to (arguably) self-contradictory maxims such as Proverbs 26:4–5: ‘Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself; answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.’ All such arguments can be assessed and evaluated rationally; none of them constitutes ‘proof’ in a simple sense.⁷

Form Criticism

So far we have treated Ecclesiastes as the work of one or more ‘authors’ or ‘editors’ and have spoken of one or more ‘hands’ having been at work on it; in other words, we have been thinking of it as a literary work. But of course there are a good many proverbs or aphorisms in Ecclesiastes, and the proverb is widely held to be in origin an oral genre. So it is not surprising that Ecclesiastes, like other wisdom books, has been of considerable interest to form critics. K. Galling⁸ argued that one could divide it up (in much the way that Proverbs 10:1–22:16 can be divided up) into a large number of originally independent sayings. In this Galling did not in fact depart far from traditional, literary-critical estimates of the book’s composition, since he thought that Qoheleth himself was both the ‘author’ of all the independent sayings and also the editor who had collected them together. His suggestion nonetheless had very far-reaching consequences for the sort of discussion about consistency and integrity of genre that has just been surveyed, for he argued that Qoheleth had simply uttered or composed a great many sayings in traditional aphoristic forms, some conservative and some radical, and at a later time had collected them together, in no particular order, into an anthology. If this were so, we should be on a quite false trail in using the criterion of consistency of content in trying to come to a judgement about the literary growth of the book; for an anthology of sayings (even sayings by one man) need not display any consistency of viewpoint or even of theme at all.

Indeed, a committed form critic might well think Galling’s attachment to Qoheleth himself as the source of all the sayings was the sign of a rather faint heart, rather like Gunkel’s continuing belief in individual ‘psalmists’ even after he had shown that psalms were basically anonymous, cultic texts. Such a form critic might suggest

that many of the sayings were really old proverbs, with no authors, current in Israel from time immemorial, each having an interesting prehistory of its own.⁹ The inconsistency between many of them would then be evidence of diverse currents of thought within the movement known as 'Israelite wisdom', but would not point to any inconsistency in the mind of Qoheleth, who merely collected them all together. Still less could it form the basis for any literary-critical hypothesis about multiple recensions of the book.

Once again, a question of genre is at the forefront of the argument. A great deal rests on the analogy with works such as Proverbs 10–22. On the one hand we may argue: since there is no unity of theme or consistency of approach in Ecclesiastes, it must be a work of the same kind as Proverbs 10–22, i.e. an anthology of originally independent sayings. On the other hand, someone could reply (most readers of Ecclesiastes probably *would* reply) that Ecclesiastes is rather unlike Proverbs 10–22. It is impossible to read it without being struck by a certain common style, atmosphere and theological theme – the transcendence of God and the randomness of human existence; whereas Proverbs 10–22 seems to lack any kind of thematic unity. Consequently the inconsistencies that do occur cannot be explained on a form-critical basis, as only to be expected in this genre, but must have some other explanation.

But it is easy to see that a form-critical style of hypothesis could, in only slightly different circumstances, have considerable explanatory force. Suppose Proverbs 10–22 were the text being considered. How complicated that would seem, if approached with purely literary-critical presuppositions! But how simply it can be accounted for, once we have grasped the fact that maxims circulated *orally* in the ancient world, so that compilers of anthologies could set them down without regard for consistency or literary artistry. Most readers will feel that such a hypothesis is not very well suited to Ecclesiastes; but if it were, it would undoubtedly undercut a great many of our earlier discussions of the book and would mean that *both* McNeile *and* those opposed to him had quite misunderstood the kind of literature they were dealing with.

Redaction Criticism

Suppose, however, that we accept for the sake of argument that some theory of more than one edition of Ecclesiastes does most justice to the work; and that even if it contains some proverbs or aphorisms that had an independent, oral prehistory, these have been incorporated into the present form of the text intentionally, in order to alter its excessively radical tone, rather than merely as isolated units in a formless anthology. It will remain to ask what can be deduced from the text about the detailed intentions of the redactors. We have already said a certain amount about the broad aims of the first two redactors postulated by McNeile, and indeed there is a sense in which even in his literary analysis elements of what would now be called redaction criticism necessarily creep in – a further example of the practical impossibility of keeping all the methods in watertight compartments. But a good deal more than this can be extracted, if we look carefully at the differences the redactors have made to the original text simply by adding to it.

We may begin with the first, 'wisdom' redactor and look at what he has done in 4:7–12. Verses 7–8 make the point, very characteristic of Qoheleth himself, that all labour is pointless when there is no one to inherit the fruits of one's labours: why work to earn more than one needs to live, if there is no one to pass it on to? One might as well work less, and enjoy the extra leisure. Verses 9–12, however, which appear to come from the first redactor, make a very different point, although they use the same illustration: heavy manual labour. The point here is the much more commonplace one that 'many hands make light work'. The problem in being alone is not the profound one of having no one for whom to care, no goal which makes one's work meaningful and worthwhile, but the practical disadvantage that there is no companionship to ease one's immediate burdens and no physical help available when work becomes difficult or accidents happen. Where there *are* two people working together, they 'have a good reward for their toil'. This (a redaction critic will say) is surely not what Qoheleth meant. The problem in verses 7–8 is not lack of success or companionship, but pointlessness and 'vanity'. But by adding verses 9–12 the redactor largely draws the sting of this complaint, by constraining us to read the passage as a single whole. We are led to submerge the fleeting impression

that the author is speaking about the pointlessness of work in general under the conviction (which the later verses confirm) that he is simply reminding us that being alone is an evil and having company is a great good – indeed (v. 12b) if two's company, three are irresistible. Thus Qoheleth's words of profound desolation find themselves pressed into the service of a fairly banal conclusion, which is fully at home in the Israelite tradition of proverbial wisdom: life in the society of faithful companions is far better than lonely toil.

If we examine the other insertions made by this redactor, we shall see that they generally have much the same effect: not only do they correct Qoheleth's pessimism and scepticism by the message they themselves convey, *they also force the reader who is trying to extract a coherent meaning from the end-product to read the words of Qoheleth himself as far less radical than they seem if taken alone.*¹⁰ Redaction criticism, thus applied, makes it plain that the same words can have a different meaning if they stand in a different context – a vital point for the understanding of all texts, to which we shall return¹¹ – and that it is only by attending closely to the work of the redactor that we can discover how the text ought appropriately to be read. Hence redaction criticism has consequences for exegesis: once again, we cannot say, Get the exegesis right *first*, and *then* go on to ask about the intentions of the redactor. The process of understanding is not so simply linear.

The second redactor (assuming that McNeile is correct) has sought to transform the still fairly secular wisdom book that reached him from the two-stage development just described into a piece of religious wisdom, somewhat after the manner of Ecclesiasticus. The transformation he has achieved can best be seen in 11:9—12:14, the concluding section of the work. If we remove the small portions likely to be his contribution, we find that the original text takes on a dramatically different sense. The additions are 11:9b, 11:10b and 12:1a; and without these the text reads:

Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart and in the sight of your eyes [i.e. 'wherever your fancy takes you']. Remove vexation from your mind, and put away pain from your body, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh,

when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them'; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened . . .

A haunting reminder that life is short, certainly, but a clear invitation to enjoy what one can: *carpe diem*, in fact. There is nothing here about God, no attempt to set the advice to enjoy life within a larger religious or moral context, no suggestion that the remembrance of coming death (and judgement) should make the reader sober in his enjoyment of the pleasures life affords: only an injunction to live while one can.

Now it is clear enough that the insertion of the second redactor's fragmentary half-verses completely changes the course of the passage. We now have a profound reflection on the brevity of life and its inevitable end in divine judgement, and the author's advice is to enjoy *what God gives*, for as long as he gives it; to remember that man is made for joy as well as for judgement, but at the same time to remember the God to whom, in the end, his spirit will return; and so to savour the pleasures of life, not unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly, but reverently, discreetly, soberly and in the fear of God. The recognition that death and judgement are coming is not to blight present joys, but to deepen them and make them more serious, and so more truly satisfying.

It is not surprising that the work as it left the second redactor should have struck many writers in the past not as an incentive to hedonism, but as a model of poetic reflection on the transitoriness of all human affairs and a spur to moral endeavour and piety in the pursuit of the 'whole duty of man'. One of the greatest works inspired (at least in part) by its ideas is Samuel Johnson's *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, whose pattern of thought, though naturally tinged with Christian sentiments, represents a by no means strained or unnatural reading of the book as we now have it; and it can well serve to make one realize how great must have been the achievement of the second redactor, considering the materials which (if McNeile is correct) he had before him:

Where then shall Hope and Fear their objects find?
Must dull Suspence corrupt the stagnant mind?
Must helpless man, in ignorance sedate,
Roll darkling down the torrent of his fate?
. . . Enquirer, cease, petitions yet remain,

Which heav'n may hear, nor deem religion vain.
 Still raise for good the supplicating voice,
 But leave to heav'n the measure and the choice.
 . . . Pour forth thy fervours for a healthful mind,
 Obedient passions, and a will resign'd;
 For love, which scarce collective man can fill;
 For patience sov'reign o'er transmuted ill;
 For faith, that panting for a happier seat
 Counts death kind Nature's signal of retreat.
 These goods for man the laws of heav'n ordain,
 These goods he grants, who grants the pow'r to gain;
 With these celestial wisdom calms the mind,
 And makes the happiness she does not find.

To a book which can be read in this way the last verse forms a fitting climax, and instead of being a platitude it takes on a certain profundity: 'Fear God, and keep his commandments . . . for God will bring every deed into judgement, with every secret thing, whether good or evil' (12:13-14). The apparent cynicism or scepticism (it was real, of course, for Qoheleth himself) has ceased to be an ultimate value and has become, we may say, penultimate: not an attitude to be encouraged for its own sake, but a temperamental disposition which prepares one to take seriously the fact that God alone is the really worthwhile end of human life, and all merely human pursuits ultimately unsatisfying.

Beyond Redaction Criticism

Now the reader may well share my own feeling at this point, that such a statement of the meaning of Ecclesiastes in its final form is all very well, but that it is doubtful how far it can really be called redaction criticism. First, and rather superficially, we may suspect that there is some danger of the redactor's disappearing in the manner described in the last chapter. The unity of theme, the subordination of pessimism to a higher religious sentiment, is so successfully achieved, that one begins to wonder whether the separation into an original text and two or three redactional strata was really justified in the first place. It is, of course, possible to construct a secular or even anti-religious work by judiciously removing little

pieces, as in the analysis of 11:9—12:14 above; but it is hard to feel much confidence that one really is reconstructing an earlier stage in the history of the text, when the finished product reads so smoothly.

This point, however, could easily be exaggerated. There undeniably are passages where the text contains quite sharp inconsistencies, or proverbial sayings very loosely anchored in context, but supplying rather conventional wisdom that is hard to reconcile with the more sceptical utterances elsewhere in the book. And this makes it entirely sensible to think in terms of several redactors. Indeed, a much more serious objection may begin from this very observation. Even if 11:9—12:14 evinces very careful and successful redaction, there are many other places in the work where one can hardly feel that the redactor has reshaped Qoheleth's meaning with the degree of subtlety and profundity to be seen in that rather impressive peroration. For example, in 5:4 the 'religious' redactor may certainly be said to 'temper' Qoheleth's scepticism about the notice God takes of what men do, by insisting that he does care about the fulfilment of vows. But it seems more natural to me to say that he is flatly contradicting Qoheleth, rather than subtly modifying him. It would be hard to argue that Qoheleth's near-agnosticism is being taken up into any kind of higher unity here, as we have argued it is in 11:9—12:14. The same may be said of 3:17, which simply denies what in 3:19 is asserted, that God makes no distinction between the fate of beasts and men, good and evil. There is certainly a redactor at work in these places, but it is difficult to make a case for regarding him as a creative genius, or to argue that he has a message of his own which is expressed through the redaction.

All this suggests that redaction criticism probably cannot establish a profound meaning in the final text of Ecclesiastes. The attempt to read a whole book, as opposed to its component parts, seems once more to have come to nothing. And yet there have always been enthusiastic readers of Ecclesiastes who thought they knew what they were reading. And many of them have felt that, taken overall, the book does indeed have some such meaning as Johnson captured in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. Could we do justice both to professional critics and to ordinary readers if we said that Ecclesiastes *does* indeed have some such meaning, and yet that there never was an author or 'redactor' who gave it such a meaning by consciously writing or reordering it with that in mind? Could the text

mean what we have taken it to mean, without anyone having *meant* it?

If the reader is prepared to contemplate such an idea, two possible lines of approach may suggest themselves. (1) First of all, one may well ask *why* so many readers of Ecclesiastes (Johnson would be a good example) have read it as a statement of the pointlessness of merely human aims *by contrast with* divine providence, even though no author or redactor intended this and the original author intended almost the opposite. Little reflection is needed to convince one that it was because they were reading the book as part of Scripture, interpreted through the Judaeo-Christian tradition of belief in providence, retribution, divine justice and so on. These were the themes they were prepared to find in a biblical book; these provided the context of expectations within which they read it.

Now many critics in the past, when biblical criticism of a historical sort was carrying all before it, would have said that this mode of reading was precisely the error from which the historical-critical method could set us free: it could give us 'the original Ecclesiastes', undistorted by later tradition. I hope I have shown that this aim is not so simply achieved as they supposed. But may it not be that it was in any case a false ideal, at least in its claim to a position of exclusive privilege? It has begun to look as though Ecclesiastes really does mean what (say) Johnson thought it meant, in some sense or other of 'mean'. Perhaps we could say that this is its meaning 'within the canon of Scripture', and that such a meaning does not need anyone to 'mean' it. It is the meaning the book is constrained to have by being set within the context of a corpus of religious literature belonging to a certain tradition. There would be an analogy here with the way particular passages within a work may be constrained (by their redactors) to have a certain new meaning, when they are placed in juxtaposition with new material composed for the purpose. Just as, to revert to an example discussed above, Ecclesiastes 4:7-8 means something different once 4:9-12 is tacked on to it, so we may say that the whole book of Ecclesiastes means something different once it is placed in a canon, or corpus, which operates with certain theological ideas about providence and judgement.

Such an idea, I believe, is not manifestly absurd, but it is difficult to evaluate. We should need, for example, to ask questions about

genre and competence: what kind of work is 'part of a canon'; how do you decide with what conventions such a book operates, and what sorts of question it is appropriate to ask of it? At all events, this way of looking at the meanings of biblical books is now being seriously proposed as an approach that ought to take over the supremacy that has until recently been given to 'historical' ways of reading the text (redaction criticism being the most recent example), in which the critic is looking for the intentional meanings implanted in the text by its authors or editors. The 'canonical approach' associated with the name of B. S. Childs seeks instead the *canonical* meaning, and in the next two chapters we shall try to show in more detail what this may be. Our discussion of the finished form of Ecclesiastes may be useful as a foretaste of the kind of thing that is in store.

(2) Secondly, however, some people may wish to go even further than this in abandoning the historical dimension and its interest in authors and compilers. It may be said that Ecclesiastes has the overall meaning we have attributed to it irrespective of what the compiler meant *and* irrespective even of the context in which it stands: the meaning can simply be read off from the book, without going into questions of authorship, history of composition, literary context or any other issue extrinsic to the words of the text itself. We may say that to be competent in reading literature is, precisely, to be able to find thematic and artistic unity within literary works. Once a book exists as one work, the task of criticism is to read it within conventions that will ensure it does have a coherent content. Thus the evidence that Ecclesiastes means what we have suggested is simply that it can be read consistently in this way, and that it cannot be read consistently in any other way. Considerations about what the putative author or redactor may or may not have meant are strictly beside the point.

This way of looking at literature is likely to strike few chords in the hearts of English readers, who inherit a long tradition of asking historical questions about all literature, not just the Bible, and who will very naturally suspect that on such principles you can make a book mean anything you like. There are clear signs, however, that an approach which adopts some such guiding principles is making serious headway in biblical studies. Its source lies in French literary 'structuralism', which we have already encountered in passing and

laid under contribution for the term 'literary competence'. It will require some much more detailed exposition if we are even to begin to do it justice. But I hope that, by approaching it as I have, I may have led the reader to see that it deals with possibilities that may well suggest themselves unprompted to a thoughtful student of more conventional biblical criticism; and so that it will get a fair hearing as a very sophisticated and conscientious attempt to resolve the question how literary competence may be attained in biblical literature.

Further Reading

- M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, vol. i (London 1974), pp. 115–28
 J. L. Crenshaw, 'The Eternal Gospel (Eccl. 3:11)' in *Essays in Old Testament Ethics* (J. Philip Hyatt. In Memoriam), J. L. Crenshaw and J. T. Willis, eds. (New York 1974), pp. 23–55

THE CANONICAL APPROACH

Oh that I knew how all thy lights combine,
 And the configurations of their glorie!
 Seeing not onely how each verse doth shine,
 But all the constellations of the storie.
 This verse marks that, and both do make a motion
 Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie:
 Then as dispersed herbs do watch a potion,
 These three make up some Christians destinie:
 Such are thy secrets, which my life makes good,
 And comments on thee: for in ev'ry thing
 Thy words do finde me out, & parallels bring,
 And in another make me understood.
 Starres are poore books, & ofentimes do misse:
 This book of starres lights to eternall blisse.

George Herbert, 'The Holy Scriptures (II)'

Preliminary Reading

- E. B. Mellor, ed., *The Making of the Old Testament* (Cambridge Bible Commentary on the *New English Bible*. Cambridge 1972), pp. 105–201
 J. Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London 1973), pp. 1–34, 150–67

Back to the Canon

In the last two chapters I have tried to create a feeling of unease with the historical-critical approach to the Old Testament. All its methods – literary, form and redaction criticism – can take us some