

**A HOMILETIC COMMENTARY
ON THE BOOK OF
ECCLESIASTES, WITH CRITICAL
AND EXPLANATORY NOTES**

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A Homiletic Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes, with Critical and Explanatory Notes by
Thomas H. Leale

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BY

REV. THOMAS H. LEALE.



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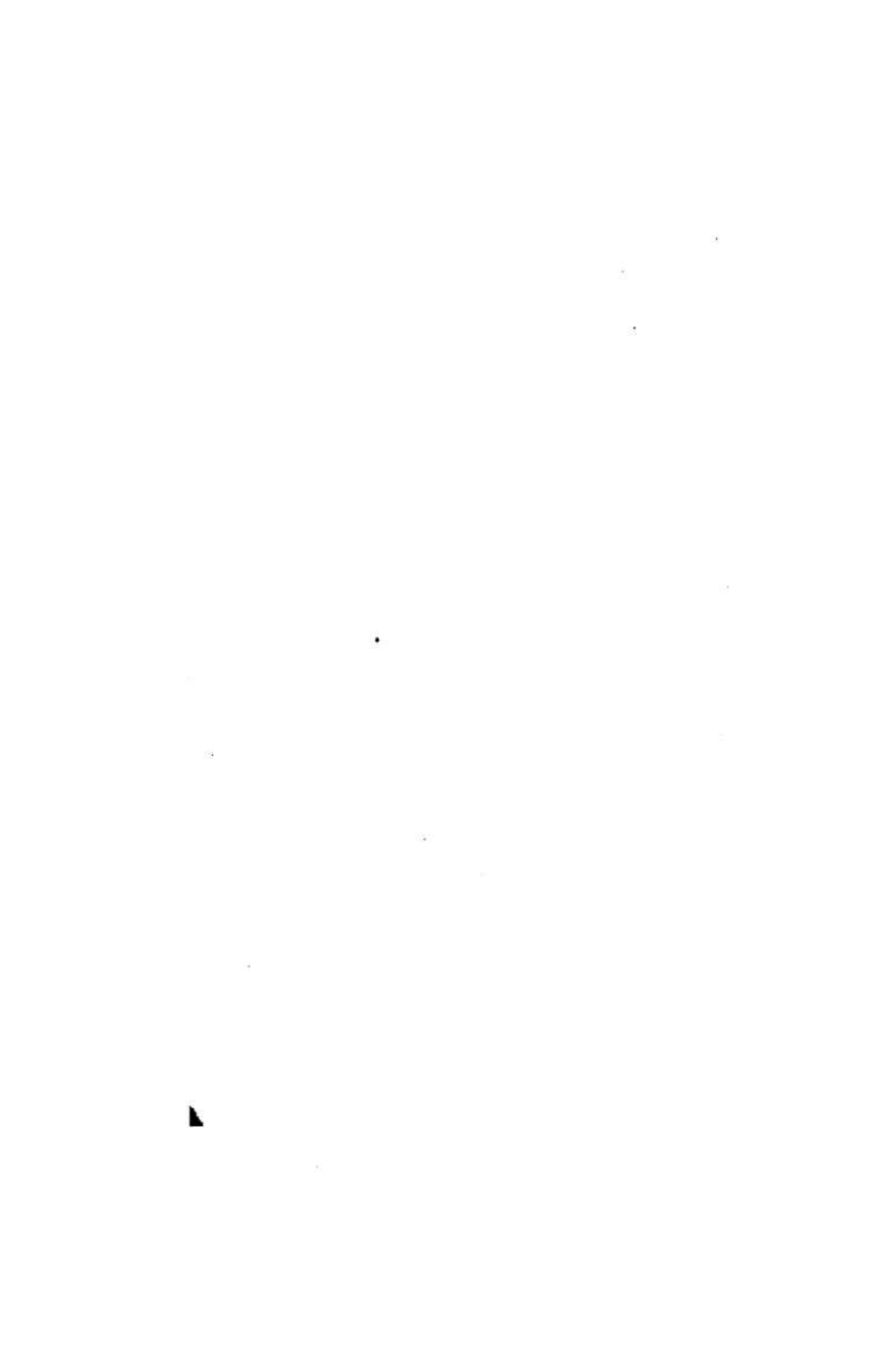


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HOMILETIC COMMENTARY

ON

ECCLESIASTES.

Introduction and Preface.

ECCLESIASTES is the Greek name given to this Book by the SEVENTH, as the interpretation of the title *Kohélet*, which it bears in the Hebrew Canon. The meaning of this designation is, on the whole, well represented by the equivalent term, "The Preacher," which our Translators have supplied. The Authorship is generally ascribed to Solomon. But the adventurous spirit of modern criticism has sought for reasons of dissent from this view. These are founded chiefly upon some peculiarities in the Author's language—such as the employment of so many Aramaic words—and upon its representation of Jewish national life, which, it is alleged, is not a fitting description of the joyous times of Israel's most prosperous and magnificent king. It is, therefore, suggested that the Book was written by some Jew of a later age, who, in order to invest it with importance, assumed the name and style of Solomon. But such literary expedients, though employed by other nations, were not the usual practice of the Jews, and whenever resorted to, were discouraged. To us, the excess of evidence weighs in favour of the view that Solomon was the writer. The Jews have always regarded this Book as his production, as such it was received by the early Christians, nor did any one dispute this opinion before Grotius. In the Superscription "The Preacher" proclaims who he is, and the illustrations, evidently drawn from scenes of life in which he was the chief actor, correspond with all that we know of the manner of his life. His restless activity in building and planting, his severe strictures upon women, his unwearied pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, and his endeavours to instruct the Church by means of short and pointed sayings, clearly identify the writer with Solomon. This Book bears internal evidence that it was written after his repentance. Such a nature as his would fall an easy prey to the seductive influence of the talents and riches of other nations. Solomon imitated their splendour, adopted their social customs, and even their idolatrous rites; or—as we think more strictly—became indifferent, regarding all religion as equally true. We have here the history of the struggles of his soul through perplexity, doubt, and trial, till he found true peace

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at last in the ways of duty, quiet submission to the Divine will, and in waiting for the Judgment, wherein Eternal Justice will be asserted. The record of the closing years of Solomon's life is not assuring. But when 600 years had passed away, and history could calmly survey his life without the prejudice and complication of near events, Nehemiah speaks of him as of one who was safe in the infinite charity of his God. Chiding his people for seeking alliances with heathen nations, he asks, "Did not Solomon, King of Israel, sin by these things? yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God" (Neh. xiii. 26). The prophecy uttered by Nathan before his birth gives strength to this pleasing hope—"I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men. But my mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took it from Saul" (2 Sam. vii. 14, 15). All carelessness in the voyage of life does not end in complete wreck.

"For I have seen a ship in haven fall,
After the storm had broke both mast and shroud."

The great lessons of this book are obvious—The insufficiency of earthly things to confer solid happiness. Riches, talent, and genius, cannot put us in possession of the Supreme good. We are to enjoy the bounties of Providence with thankfulness; and though it be difficult to preserve a calm mind in the present disjointed condition of the world, we must patiently submit to the fixed order of things, and wait for the end. We are to serve God from our youth, and be guided in our opinions and conduct by "the words of the wise"—*i. e.*, by the inspired writers. The chief difficulty is to reconcile some statements in this Book with the teaching of Scripture, and indeed with itself. Thus, the immortality of the spirit of man is both asserted and denied. The righteous and the wicked are represented as sharing an equal fate, and yet as having different portions in the Judgment. Some of these conflicting statements can be brought into harmony by supposing that the Author changes his point of observation. As seen by man, wisdom, goodness, and all our glory end with the grave. But, observed from the standpoint of the Divine idea and purpose, man has a nobler destiny. Some expositors say, that here we are taught the vanity of all things apart from Godliness, and, on this principle, regard each separate statement as true. Others represent it as a discussion between Solomon and several opponents. But, in our judgment, the plan and structure of this Book are most clearly seen if we consider it as a dramatic biography, where Solomon depicts in fervid words the scenes of his own life; and is, for the time, what he describes. He is sceptic, voluptuary, and philosopher by turns. He indulges his capricious temper in the most diverse ways, as if he quitted every entertainment upon the first sensations of disgust. All these were but different experiences of the same mind—human life as observed in the changing moods of a soul of intense feeling and power. A book constructed on this principle must contain some statements not true in themselves, and at

INTRODUCTION AND PREFACE.

variance with its main conclusion. In the relation of his experience and long observation, the writer shows a power for deep reflection upon the saddest truths of life, and the solemn mysteries by which we are bounded on every side. It is eminently a book for practical men; teaching how to use life wisely and well. In a sacred writer, whose chief theme is the miseries of human life, and the evil and folly of sin, we naturally look for some reference to Christ, the fount of consolation; and to the glory of that world where the sufferings of the righteous will be swallowed up in a sea of infinite pleasure. But we have to keep in mind that the Scriptures are not a collection of detached parts, having no relations of dependence; but an organic whole, consisting of different members. We cannot therefore expect to find the same things everywhere; for the higher the organism, the less we have of the repetition of parts; as we see by a comparison of vegetable and animal structures. The Bible does not increase by deposit—one layer mechanically placed upon another—but it is unfolded as a principle of life by an inner law of organic growth. Resignation is the chief remedy here proposed to relieve the distress of contemplation, or the present disorder. And do not the writers of an advanced revelation exhort us to walk by faith, and not by what is seen? The Gospel itself does not completely dispel the darkness which surrounds us here, and we must await the solution of all painful mystery in the disclosures of eternity. In the meantime, only the mind in harmony with the Divine mind can have true peace, and enjoy the Supreme good.

In accordance with these views of the inspired writer's plan and purpose, we have given our interpretation in a style adapted to homiletics. We have aimed to be brief and suggestive, to trace the principal lines of thought, leaving to others the last strokes and finishing touches. We have consulted the best expositors, and by illustrations and extracts from many able writers, have endeavoured to make this work answerable to its design.

