

**EXAMINATION OF THE
COMMENTARY ON
ECCLESIASTES IN THE
CAMBRIDGE BIBLE FOR SCHOOLS**

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Examination of the commentary on Ecclesiastes in the Cambridge Bible for schools by D. Johnston

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D. JOHNSTON

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EXAMINATION OF THE
Commentary on Ecclesiastes

IN THE CAMBRIDGE BIBLE FOR SCHOOLS

By D. JOHNSTON

AUTHOR OF 'A TREATISE ON THE AUTHORSHIP OF ECCLESIASTES'

Probe all things; hold fast that which is good

1 THESS. 5. 21

EDINBURGH
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1885

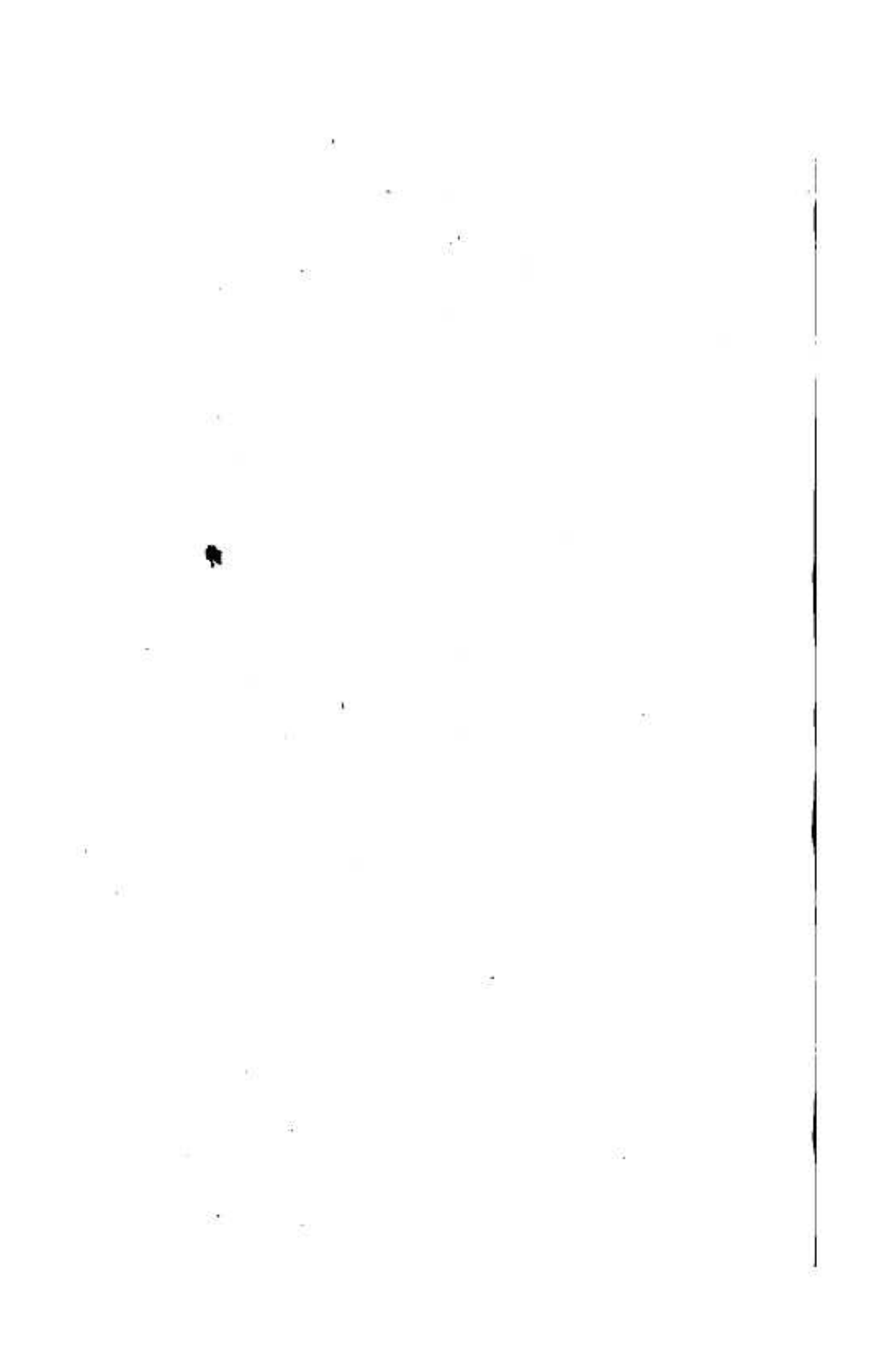


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EXAMINATION OF
THE COMMENTARY ON ECCLESIASTES,
IN THE CAMBRIDGE BIBLE FOR SCHOOLS.

SINCE the *Treatise on the Authorship of Ecclesiastes*, was published, there has appeared, in the series of the Cambridge Bible for Schools, the volume on Ecclesiastes, by Dr. E. H. Plumptre, now Dean of Wells, who denies the Solomonic authorship, and assigns to Ecclesiastes a date between the years 240 and 181 before Christ. The widespread popularity of the series (not to speak of the eminence of the writer) is apt to give to the view he advocates, special weight and influence, quite irrespective of the intrinsic character of the arguments which he adduces. Hence a brief criticism of the volume may appropriately be appended to the *Treatise on the Authorship of Ecclesiastes*, as well as to the separately printed dissertation on "That which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet."

Dr. Plumptre adduces two main arguments in support of the position he occupies. (*A*) One is drawn from the discussion to which the Book of Ecclesiastes was subjected about two thousand years ago by the rabbinical schools of Hillel and Shammai; (*B*) and the other is

founded on sundry resemblances which Ecclesiastes is said to bear to the literature of Greek poetry and philosophy, as known and studied in Alexandria about the time of Philo.

Rabbinical Discussions.

(A) 'Absolutely,' says Dr. Plumptre in the second chapter of his Introduction to the Book of Ecclesiastes,

'Absolutely the first external evidence which we have of its existence is found in a Talmudic report of a discussion between the two schools of Hillel and Shammai as to its admission into the Canon of the sacred books. . . . Some took one side, some another. As usual, the school of Shammai "loosed," i.e. pronounced against the authority of the book, and that of Hillel "bound" by deciding in its favour. Different Rabbis held different opinions. So again another Talmudic tract, *Shab-bath*, reports that the "wise men wanted to declare Koheleth apocryphal, because its statements contradicted each other," and in the *Midrash Koheleth*, that they did so, because "they found in it sentiments that tended to infidelity." They were at last led to acquiesce in its admission by the fact that at least it began and ended with words that were in harmony with the Law.'

With reference to these ancient discussions Dr. Plumptre argues,

'It is scarcely conceivable that a book that had come down from a remote antiquity with the prestige of Solomonic authorship, and had all along been held in honour as the representative of his divinely inspired wisdom, could have been so spoken of. Such a discussion, in such a case, would have been an example of a bold criticism which has no parallel in the history of that period of Jewish thought.'

This reasoning belongs to that class of abstract arguments which, however plausible they may be, have little or no value in the absence of positive facts on which to rest. If the facts recorded in connection

with the rabbinical discussion have any weight, it is rather in favour of the Solomonic authorship than against it. Whatever the Jewish controversialists may have thought of the religious or ethical character of Ecclesiastes, none of them seems to have had so much as the shadow of a doubt of its Solomonic authorship. They evidently accepted *that* as an unquestioned and unquestionable fact. But could it have been possible for them to do so if in or shortly before their own lifetime an Alexandrian philosopher had written the book, and ascribed it to Solomon? And is it not morally certain that if such had been the origin of Ecclesiastes, the scale must have been decisively turned to the side of those who were for excluding it from the sacred Canon? It is easy to explain how, if Solomon really did write Ecclesiastes, the genuineness of the book did not necessarily place it beyond the reach of such discussion as that to which it was subjected by the Rabbis. But it is utterly impossible to explain how, if Ecclesiastes was *not* genuine, it could have been admitted into the Canon of Holy Scripture. Canonicity, though not necessarily proved by genuineness, must have been disproved by spuriousness. It appears from Proverbs 25. 1 that many of Solomon's Proverbs, though preserved in writing, were not admitted into the Canon till the days of King Hezekiah. And the history of Solomon's life and reign shows that he was the author of a vast amount of literature which laid no claim to canonicity. "He spake three thousand proverbs: and his songs