

## A REVIEW ARTICLE

### *Ecclesiastes*

Reviewed by  
Robert V. McCabe<sup>1</sup>

*Ecclesiastes*, Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary, by Peter Enns. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011. 238 pp. \$25.00.

Peter Enns's commentary is a noteworthy addition to a growing number of commentaries on the book of Ecclesiastes. He earned a M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary (1989) and a Ph.D. from Harvard University (1994). He taught at Westminster from 1994 to 2008, initially as Associate Professor of Old Testament and, subsequently, as Professor of Old Testament and Hermeneutics (2005–2008). Along with Tremper Longman, he edited the *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, and Writings*.<sup>2</sup> In 2009 this volume received Christianity Today's "Award of Merit" and the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association's "2009 Christian Book of the Year" award in the Bible Reference and Study category. He is currently an Affiliate Professor in Biblical Studies at Eastern University in St. Davids, PA. While Enns is a well known author of many articles and books, he may be best known for his two controversial books: *Inspiration and Incarnation*<sup>3</sup> and *The Evolution of Adam*.<sup>4</sup>

Enns has written several articles and books on subjects related to Wisdom Literature, including Ecclesiastes. Baker published his *Poetry and Wisdom* in 1997. In this work, he provides over eight hundred annotated bibliographical entries on this subject. Besides editing *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, and Writings*, he also contributed an article to that volume, "Ecclesiastes 1, Book of." Because of his expertise in Wisdom Literature, Enns is well qualified to write a commentary on this biblical book.

---

<sup>1</sup>Dr. McCabe is Professor of Old Testament at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary in Allen Park, MI.

<sup>2</sup>Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008.

<sup>3</sup>Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005.

<sup>4</sup>Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012.

### OVERVIEW

Enns's commentary is part of the Eerdmans series, *The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary*, edited by J. Gordon McConville and Craig Bartholomew. The commentators in this series focus on past and present theological readings of biblical texts. In keeping with this objective, each commentary involves a paragraph-by-paragraph interaction with a biblical text. The commentaries further bridge the gap between exegesis and theology. *Ecclesiastes* is a significant model of this goal.

Enns's work is divided into five sections: "Introduction" (1–29), "Commentary" (30–116), "Theological Horizons of Ecclesiastes" (117–35), "The Contribution of Ecclesiastes to Biblical Theology (and the Contribution of Biblical Theology to Ecclesiastes)" (136–91), and "The Significance of Ecclesiastes for Theology and Praxis Today" (192–219). This is followed by a bibliography (220–27) and indexes of authors (228–30) and ancient literature (231–38). To facilitate using this commentary in research, a subject index would have been a beneficial addition.

In the introduction Enns discusses normal introductory issues for *Ecclesiastes*: subject, reason for writing, authorship, date, 12:13–14 as a key for the book, important lexemes for the theology of the book, and reading *Ecclesiastes* Christianly. In terms of authorship and date, the author of *Ecclesiastes* is a postexilic frame narrator, reflected by the third person of 1:1–11 and 12:8–14 (6, 16–22). The frame narrative encases the words of Qohelet (1:12–12:7). Qohelet is the frame narrator's literary fabrication to represent his theological emphasis (6, 17). In keeping with a postexilic author, Enns maintains that *Ecclesiastes* has a postexilic setting (18–19). The issues treated in the introduction are the presuppositions that undergird his exegetical and theological discussion.

The commentary proper comprises less than half of this work (86 of the 219 pages of actual text). The frame narrator summarizes Qohelet's monologue in 1:2: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (ESV). As opposed to the translation of *hebel* as "vanity" with the ESV as well as many other translations, Enns follows Fox's lead by translating it as "absurd."<sup>5</sup> As such, he maintains that 1:2 should be rendered, "Absolutely absurd,' says Qohelet. 'Absolutely absurd. Everything is absurd'" (31). In effect *Ecclesiastes* 1:2 serves as a thesis around which the commentary develops (5, 31, 43, etc.). His rendering of *hebel* as "absurd" gives a skeptical tenor to *Ecclesiastes*. Qohelet's anger with God also sustains this mood. In support of this cynical gist, Enns compares it with lament psalms expressing the "anger" of various psalmists against God (39–40). Though he acknowledges that lament psalms, with the exception of

---

<sup>5</sup>*A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 30–33.

Psalm 88, have a note of trust in God and the psalmists receive an “answer in the here and now,” Qohelet’s audience is set up “for a much longer period of unsettlement” (156). Enns’s interaction with the Hebrew text, rather than an English translation, is a helpful aspect of this commentary. His objective, however, is not to write an exhaustive commentary that focuses on grammatical forms, but one that focuses on germane issues and motifs. By using this approach, his commentary is well suited for a broad target audience of pastors, students, and Christian leaders. While his consultation with key sources that also take a skeptical view of Ecclesiastes is useful, it would have been helpful for him to interact with sources taking the opposite view.<sup>6</sup>

In line with the objective of this series of commentaries, Enns bridges the gap between his exegesis of the text (30–116) and theology in the latter portion of his book (117–219). As noted above he arranges his later discussion in three sections. With the first section, Ecclesiastes’s theological horizons, nine motifs are treated. A couple of examples will illustrate his discussion. With the first motif, “How Does One Know? Life ‘under the Sun,’” Qohelet demonstrates that “there is very little we can know with certainty, and what one does know collapses into absurdity” (119). In short, Qohelet is a skeptic. As indicated in the presentation of another theme, “God, the Problem: Injustice and Unpredictability,” Qohelet shows his overall dissatisfaction and anger against God (123).

With his second section, Ecclesiastes’s contribution to biblical theology and vice versa, Enns initially places Ecclesiastes within the framework of biblical wisdom, followed by its place in the broader context of the OT’s redemptive-historical message, and finally its relationship to Christ and the church. In placing this book in the context of wisdom, Enns primarily focuses on Ecclesiastes’s relationship with Proverbs and Job. These three books are united in their overarching concept that “in the end it is all about who God is and what is required of his people” (148). As Ecclesiastes relates to the broader stream of the redemptive-historical message found in the OT, it, with Qohelet’s bitter lament towards God, serves as a counterpoint to Israel’s dominant understanding of God as creator, redeemer, holy, etc. Qohelet functions as a messenger through which the postexilic community bitterly complains against God for having abandoned them. Because of the frame narrator’s admonition to postexilic Israel in 12:13–14 to continue fearing God and keeping his commandments, they are reminded of their continued connection to God (166). Finally, in expanding the horizons to the NT, Enns argues that Qohelet

---

<sup>6</sup>For example, Graham S. Ogden (*Qoheleth*, 2nd ed., Readings: A New Biblical Commentary [Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007]), Craig G. Bartholomew (*Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009]), and Daniel C. Fredericks (“Ecclesiastes,” in *Ecclesiastes & the Song of Songs*, by Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, Apollos Old Testament Commentary [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010]).

to some extent represents the anguish that results from divine rejection: “They give believers a glimpse—only a glimpse—of the hopelessness and despair of Christ’s passion” (171).

In the third section, Ecclesiastes’s significance for theology and practice in our day, Enns notes two ways this book influences our contemporary world. The first relates to what it has to say about the nature of Scripture. Enns argues that Ecclesiastes, as well as Job and the lament psalms, serve as a counterpoint in Scripture revealing a believer’s suffering, despair, and questioning of God (156–57, 164, 200, 207). In short, Qohelet’s counterpoint is its persistence in querying divine justice and goodness (164). The second way this book impacts us is its call for honesty in the journey of faith (209–12).

### OBSERVATIONS

I will make four observations about this commentary. First, Enns’s fluid and nontechnical style of writing minimizes the tedious nature of reading that more technical commentaries may have. As noted earlier, the fact that his commentary develops key issues and motifs assists in making his work readable.

Second, he provides an interesting connection between the exegesis of Ecclesiastes and theology. His extended theological discussion (117–219) as an outgrowth of his exegesis (30–116) enhances the value of this work. Not all will agree with some of Enns’s theological observations such as “the only certain knowledge Qohelet seems to give us is that everything is absurd, not just the things we cannot know, but the very things we *can* know” (119). However, many will find his theological discussion intriguing.

Third, a limitation of this commentary is that much of it is built on the assumption of a postexilic date. For example, Enns maintains that “in the case of Ecclesiastes, mainly because of linguistic factors, a postexilic context is presumed—although it is hardly fair to expect such a general affirmation to have significant exegetical payoff at every turn. Nevertheless, assuming a postexilic context will, I hope to show at relevant points, yield some very profitable readings” (27). He again illustrates this assumption in reference to the theology of this book: “Since Ecclesiastes was written sometime in the postexilic period, we must consider this period to understand the theology of the book. Although a postexilic date for Ecclesiastes is about as firm a conclusion as one can achieve in biblical scholarship, the specific era during that period remains debated” (164).

Fourth, Enns’s argues that the *carpe diem* texts,<sup>7</sup> rather than celebrating life,<sup>8</sup> are resignations to the absurdities of life. In reference to

---

<sup>7</sup>These passages are 2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20 (Heb. 5:17–19); 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:9–12:1.

<sup>8</sup>An example of this celebratory note is 9:7: “Go, eat your food with pleasure, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart, for God has already approved your work.”

the first enjoyment-of-life passage in 2:24–26, he argues that, rather than interpreting this text as a positive response to the anguish expressed in the preceding verses, it has “a tone of deep resignation” (49). He further describes this motif as expressing notes of “despair” (73) and dependency (96). Unfortunately, he does not consider the alternative to this pessimistic view of the *carpe diem* texts, namely, that these texts actually mean what they say: enjoy the basic benefits of life for this is a gift from God. As 3:13 states: “Every man should eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his toil—it is a gift of God.” This is to say, the *carpe diem* texts are Qohelet’s recommendations, based on God upholding his creational design from Genesis, to God’s people while living in an enigmatic, sin-cursed world.<sup>9</sup> What undergirds Qohelet’s supposed cynicism in the enjoyment-of-life passages is Enns’s skeptical interpretation of the book’s overall message, especially his take on *hebel*. This term is a catchword in Ecclesiastes that is used thirty-seven or thirty-eight times. The frame narrator, in agreement with Qohelet, uses *hebel* five times in 1:2 and three in 12:8 to summarize the book’s overall message at the beginning and end of this book. Following Fox, as previously noted, Enns supports rendering *hebel* as “absurd” because life is, in the words of Fox, “contrary to reason.”<sup>10</sup> But if everything is absurd, how can qualitative distinctions be made in this semantic category? For example, if “everything is absurd” (1:2, 12:8), how can Qohelet say something is better than something else, as he does in 9:16: “Wisdom is better than strength”? My point is this: how is it logically possible for wisdom to be better than strength if both are absurd?<sup>11</sup> In my opinion, it would have been helpful for Enns to interact with, or at least acknowledge, the possibility that *hebel* might be used with an alternative nuance, such as “enigmatic”<sup>12</sup> or “fleeting.”<sup>13</sup>

Between the readable nature of his commentary, interaction with the Hebrew text, and theological application, Enns provides an engaging connection between exegesis and theology. While some may have reservations with Enns’s skeptical approach to the message of Ecclesiastes as well as with other details of his commentary, this should not negate the contribution he has made to Qohelethine studies.

<sup>9</sup>See Ogden (*Qoheleth*, 52–54) and Bartholomew (*Ecclesiastes*, 353–58).

<sup>10</sup>*A Time to Tear Down*, 34.

<sup>11</sup>See Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 48.

<sup>12</sup>Ogden (*Qoheleth*, 21–26) and Bartholomew (*Ecclesiastes*, 105–7).

<sup>13</sup>Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 46–54; or his earlier work, *Coping with Transience* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 18–32.