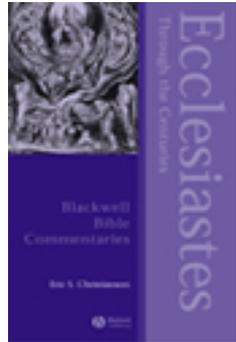


○ **REVIEW OF ERIC S. CHRISTIANSON,
ECCLESIASTES THROUGH THE CENTURIES
 (OXFORD: BLACKWELL, 2007)**

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The book of Ecclesiastes has engaged the imaginations of countless readers from antiquity to the present. Eric Christianson's *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries* takes readers on a rich tour down many significant streams of Western interpretation of this fascinating biblical book. *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries* belongs to Blackwell's series of commentaries focusing on reception history, and it is a delightful addition thereto.

Christianson opens the volume with over a dozen pages of 'testimonia', selected quotations spanning two centuries of Ecclesiastes interpretation. These quotations give readers a sense of the wide variety of readings the book has enjoyed. Christianson then provides a brief 'history of reception histories' and a lengthy (over 60 pages) overview of reading strategies in what he labels the pre-modern (up to 1500), early modern (1500–1800), and modern (1800 onwards) periods. Readers will be justly impressed with the breadth and acuity of Christianson's presentation. Christianson quotes extensively from his sources, but his survey of interpretative approaches goes well beyond a mere catalogue of examples. Christianson ably finds and brings to light the common strands within the various interpretations evident in each of these broad periods. For example, Christianson shows that 'refutation of the vanity of the world' was a key theme in pre-modern, especially Christian, readings of Ecclesiastes, which in some ways gave way to an appreciation of the book's 'scepticism' in the Renaissance and its 'realism' in later modernity.

The periodisation sketched above will immediately make evident to *The Bible and Critical Theory* readers one notable aspect of the commentary: except for Jewish and Christian commentators of classical antiquity and the medieval period, Christianson does not venture much outside of the North Atlantic (European and American) cultural frame. To be sure, that cultural frame is home to the bulk, by far, of Ecclesiastes's reception history, and Christianson's treatment of that material is extremely rich. However, a significant missing element is the reception of Ecclesiastes in Eastern Asia. Christianson devotes a few pages at the end of the introduction to comparative studies, but he focuses almost entirely on European fiction and poetry. He does mention,

in passing, John Jarick's comparative study of the book of Ecclesiastes and the *I Ching*, (Jarick 2000) and Graham Ogden's *Readings* commentary, (Ogden 1987) in the conclusion of which Ogden urged more attention to comparative study between biblical and Asian wisdom literature (though Christianson does not mention this). Otherwise, however, the reception of Ecclesiastes in Asian and other non-Western contexts is lacking.

Upon plunging into the commentary proper, readers may be surprised to find almost fifty pages devoted to a single verse, Ecclesiastes 1:2. Upon finishing Christianson's treatment of the *vanitas* theme suggested by this verse, however, readers will be glad of the sustained attention. Many readers will intuitively assent to the claim that the saying 'vanity of vanities, all is vanity' has exercised a cultural power out of all proportion to its length. In this section of the commentary, Christianson shows how this state of affairs came to pass, and he teases out the different 'spins' that interpreters have put on Qoheleth's 'vanity' judgement over the years.

The remainder of the book of Ecclesiastes must, of necessity, receive less pervasive attention than does Eccl 1:2 (all of Eccl 3:6–6:12, for example, is treated in barely a dozen pages). Yet the quality of Christianson's presentation does not suffer. For each section of text, Christianson identifies several salient trends in Ecclesiastes interpretation and traces these through time. He often follows a chronological sequence within each section, but has no compunctions about breaking with this general pattern when to do so better illuminates the text under consideration.

Readers of *The Bible and Critical Theory* will appreciate the fact that Christianson does not restrict himself to clerical and scholarly reception of Ecclesiastes, but gives more attention to the book's impact on art, drama, literature, music, and poetry. Moreover, Christianson does not restrict himself to 'high' culture, but also attends to Ecclesiastes's appearances in popular media (including, of course, Pete Seeger's 'Turn! Turn! Turn!'). Christianson's treatments might well inspire readers to think of additional expressions of Ecclesiastes in history and the arts – such as Savonarola's 'bonfires of the vanities' and Tom Wolfe's similarly-named novel, or the invocation of Eccl 3:18 at the end of the *X-Files* episode 'Fearful Symmetry' – and to ask to which trends or themes in the interpretation of Ecclesiastes such cultural echoes belong.

Christianson closes the volume with a well-considered, if brief, 'hermeneutical postscript'. Reflecting on what has gone before, Christianson notes that Qoheleth's *personality* has actually been more forceful in Ecclesiastes's reception history than any particular *message* that one might derive from the book, except for the *vanitas* theme. Many readers have identified with a single literary sage, but have generated quite diverse results from this encounter. Finally, Christianson reflects a bit on the value of reception histories for the discipline of biblical studies; one benefit worthy to be highlighted is the expansion of the web of interpretations to which biblical scholars might attend.

Christianson's study of Ecclesiastes's cultural impact is rich and rewarding. Christianson beautifully exposit the material that he treats, and suggests by brief reference some other avenues of fruitful exploration. In these ways, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries* serves both as an excellent treatment of the title theme and a good model for other reception histories to follow. The book may be heartily recommended, without reservation.

REFERENCES

- Jarick, John. 2000. 'The Hebrew Book of Changes'. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 90: 79–99.
- Ogden, Graham. 1987. *Readings*. Sheffield: JSOT Press.