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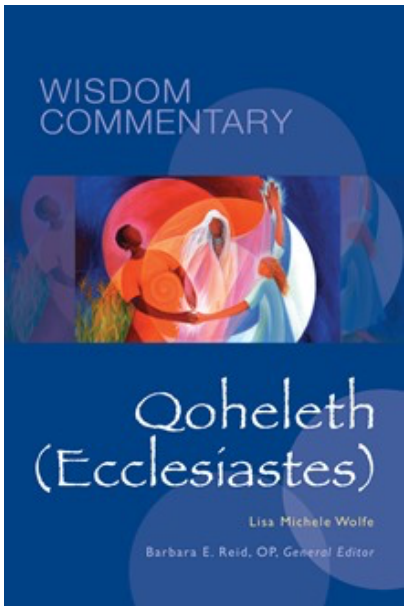


**Lisa Michele Wolfe**

***Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes)***

Wisdom Commentary

Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2020. Pp. lxxii + 203. Hardcover. $39.95. ISBN 9780814681237.

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This commentary is part of a multivolume series that is distinguished by the fact that it is the first such series dedicated to fully incorporating feminist hermeneutics and exegesis into the standard historical, philological, and theological elements of the commentary genre. As such, it represents an important and long-awaited step in incorporating newer reading approaches into the old ones with a view to acknowledging that the long-maintained divide between historical criticism and the Other (whether it be literary, postcolonial, feminist, womanist, or queer analyses) is long overdue to being closed up for good in our field. As noted in the series foreword, these volumes aim to "sabotage (hopefully) the established hierarchy but … not topple it." Rather they seek "to integrate more fully, to introduce another viewpoint" (xix).

The series as a whole and Wolfe in this volume engage with Audre Lorde's programmatic essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House."[1] For Wolfe, Lorde's maxim must be qualified, in part because the aim of this feminist commentary is not to dismantle but to expand and therefore to use the older methods as "raw material" to "create

1. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 110–14.

new tools" (xliii).[2] In what follows, I want to highlight primarily some important overall contributions of this commentary to the already voluminous literature on Ecclesiastes. Let me say at the outset that this is an excellent and essential commentary on Ecclesiastes and that this series should be added to the group of commentaries that biblical scholars all regularly consult.

Given that commentaries are grounded in philology, Wolfe's approach to translation is noteworthy. Although admitting that, "if pressed," she accepts Michael V. Fox's translation of הבל as "absurdity" (lii), Wolfe wisely decides to leave the term untranslated and transliterates it throughout the commentary. Of greater importance, I think, is her analysis of language for people used in Ecclesiastes (lvi–lxi). Wolfe begins with a simple but too-often-overlooked question of exactly whom Qoheleth has in mind when he describes the human condition, and she answers it by examining every occurrence of both אדם and איש in the book. She notes that, of the ten occurrences of איש, two (1:8, 7:5) might reasonably be construed to include either men or women. More notably, in her examination of Qoheleth's use of אדם, Wolfe shows that only about half of the over forty instances of אדם in Ecclesiastes can be read as referring to both men and women. For any scholars who teach the Bible in translation and who use the NRSV in their courses, this kind of analysis is a helpful reminder of the complexity of biblical translation and the need for careful language work in class preparation. A one-to-one translational approach of *ish* = "man" and *adam* = "human" runs the risk of neglecting the need for those engaged in scholarship (as opposed to ecclesial contexts) "to learn the most likely meaning of words in their own time, regardless of the gender bias they exude" (lvii; see examples on 7, 74, 77, 83). Inclusive translations, then, not only can mask the text's erasure of women but also contribute to it.

The standard form of the commentary in biblical studies includes not only a near-encyclopedic discussion of prior scholarship but also the commentary writer's own exegetical decisions, now given magisterial weight by virtue of all the philological, historical, and theological work demonstrated in the commentary's very small type. The image here is of a funnel: a wide vista that gradually narrows down to the scholar's decision.[3] This commentary series in general, and Wolfe in particular, helpfully inverts this model. She notes more than once that she intends to multiply viable interpretive options rather than narrow them down. Consequently, readers of this commentary begin each section or exegetical question from an interpretive position that is consistently broadened by Wolfe's careful and wide-ranging discussion. Pedagogically, this empowers readers to

2. See detailed discussion of Lorde's call and its role in biblical studies in Hsien Wan Wei, "Re-examining the Master's Tools: Considerations on Biblical Studies' Race Problem," in *Ethnicity, Race, Religion Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts, and in Modern Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Katherine M. Hockey and David G Horrell (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 219–30, http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780567677334.0021.

3. This is different from the use of a funnel (משפך) as a simile for study found in Pirkei Avot 5.15

think through these various meanings, rather than leading them through a display of erudition that ends in an expert opinion. Take, for example, the thorny question of Qoheleth's "identity," a place of rich interpretive activity over the centuries. Here is Wolfe in the opening paragraph of the commentary proper, discussing the superscription in Eccl 1:1–3

> Qoheleth's introduction in this opening verse invites a list of questions that we will struggle with throughout the book: superscription or frame-narrative; persona or person; female/feminine or male/masculine; monarch or sage; assembler or philosopher.… I will entertain a variety of these possibilities below, leaving room for readers to make their own conclusions by refraining from gendering Qoheleth, providing historical context from more than one time period, and digging around for hints on all these issues. (1)

This is not to say that Wolfe does not arrive at well-argued conclusions on Ecclesiastes, because she most assuredly does. The difference is that she puts her voice alongside of, rather than in the place of, other interpretive voices. This is seen also in the contributions of other authors included throughout the volume: Ora Brison on the book's canonical status, Marie Turner on the ecological crisis in light of Qoheleth's view of the natural world as persistent and unchanging, Funlola Ojohede on the justified indifference of African women to Qoheleth, Mercedes García Bachmann on the message of Eccl 9:7 to the marginalized, and Athalya Brenner-Idan offering a revised and abridged version of her gendered reading of the poem in Eccl 3:1–9.[4] There are also excerpts from the Mishnah and the Malleus Maleficarum, which uses Eccl 7:25 as a prooftext for witch-hunting. Alongside this one finds the kinds of questions and issues all commentaries deal with concerning the text's date, its text traditions, and discussion of meaningful text-critical and philological issues. For example, Wolfe follows most scholars in dating Ecclesiastes to the Ptolemaic period but also makes a case that the book's epilogue is not from a separate author. She gives the poem on times in Eccl 3 a close reading, noting that modern translations of the *qal* active לֵדֶת in 3:2 as a passive (i.e., "to be born") erase the women who, at the proper time, do the bearing of children. In a detailed discussion of Eccl 7:26–28 (111–16) she concludes that Qoheleth is talking first about the Foolish Woman and the Wise Woman as seen in Proverbs

Ecclesiastes is, not surprisingly, a favorite biblical text in the post-Enlightenment era. Qoheleth is viewed as a sort of philosophical forerunner of modern critics of religion, for some a proto-existentialist. Ecclesiastes is the biblical book for those who might be

4. Athalya Brenner, "The Case of Qoheleth 3.1–9," in *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. A. Brenner and F. van Dijk Hemmes (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 133–55.

uncomfortable with religion. But, as Wolfe makes so clear, our fascination with Qoheleth as the Bible's "bad boy" has focused too much on the fact that he was bad and not enough on the fact that he was a boy. Wolfe's careful reading of Ecclesiastes breaks our fascination with Qoheleth's seeming heterodoxy and reveals the overlooked places where women would be in Qoheleth's world, for example, in the people on whom Qoheleth would have relied to provide him with food, drink, sex, and care for the dead. Nowhere is this more evident than in the passages where Qoheleth recommends pleasure. Many scholars have seen Qoheleth's advice to enjoy the pleasures of the table, the tavern, and the bed as the positive kernel in the husk of Qoheleth's pessimism, with some commentators going so far as to describe a "theology of joy" at work in Ecclesiastes. Wolfe reminds us that the very ability to offer and to follow this advice to rejoice in material pleasures (or, as Qoheleth also does, to point out that they are *hevel*) are themselves privileges limited to a few that often come at the expense of many unseen others. Even Qoheleth's envy of the dead is revealed to be an expression of an elite male with the means and time to ponder such morose thoughts but who will also not have to be engaged in the tasks of corpse preparation or mourning. Wolfe observes, commenting on Eccl 4:1–3, "For a wealthy, powerful individual to blithely and briefly criticize the lives of the oppressed and then move on to complain that everyone would be better of dead trivializes the lives of those who suffer" (64).

Nevertheless, Wolfe also sees in Qoheleth's privileging of experience over tradition "a canonized model for reading suspiciously" (14) that offers unintended support to feminist readers. She also notes that "women resonate all too well with the injustices Qoheleth so meticulously articulates" (138). However, Wolfe is also clear about the limited usefulness of this aspect of Ecclesiastes, noting that, despite the ability of Qoheleth to offer biblical support for women questioning the tradition, his misogyny makes the book dangerous for women as well (122). What Wolfe does brilliantly throughout the commentary is to turn the book's unflinching critique of tradition back onto Qoheleth himself and use those vehement challenges as the tools by which she dismantles the sage's misogynist house.

It is a pretty strong indicator that a book is important and well-done if, after you finish reading it, you immediately want to have a conversation with the author. That was my experience of reading this commentary. One of the many things I would have brought up in such a conversation is to ask Wolfe's thoughts on the parallel between Eccl 9:7–9 and the Old Babylonian recension of the Epic of Gilgamesh, particularly on how the advice in the Babylonian text is placed in the mouth of a woman, Siduri, while in Ecclesiastes it is given

by Qoheleth.[5] Further, the issue of the loss of the woman sage as its speaker is something that deserves more attention.

With an impressive array of tools at her disposal—both from the master's house and from those who have been left outside of it—Lisa Michele Wolfe takes Qoheleth at his word and invites us to look with her at the consequences. It is at once a bracing and a rewarding experience.

5. Nili Samet traced a possible path of this passage from the Epic to Ecclesiastes in "The Gilgamesh Epic and the Book of Qoheleth: A New Look," *Bib* 96 (2015): 375–90.