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Duncan's "Ecclesiastes" (Book Review)

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Book Reviews



Duncan, J. A. (2017). *Ecclesiastes*. Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries. Nashville: Abingdon Press. \$39.99. ISBN 9781501837579

According to the publisher, “The Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries provide compact, critical commentary on the books of the Old Testament for the use of theological students and pastors.... In addition to providing basic information and insights into the Old Testament writings, these commentaries exemplify the task and procedure of careful interpretation to assist students of the Old Testament in coming to an informed and critical engagement with the biblical texts themselves.” In this commentary on *Ecclesiastes*, Julie Ann Duncan, associate professor of Old Testament and director of the Master of Theological Studies at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, has ably met and exceeded this objective.

The commentary follows the structure established for the series. The biblical text is divided into cohesive portions, and each portion is discussed in depth under three rubrics: literary analysis, exegetical analysis, and theological and ethical analysis. Duncan uses this structure to create a great advantage, enabling the reader to hear the voice of *Qoheleth*, the enigmatic author of *Ecclesiastes*, and to engage with it.

Literary analysis places *Ecclesiastes* in the context of wisdom literature both within and outside the biblical tradition. Duncan shows how *Qoheleth* follows some typical patterns in wisdom literature, and how this illuminates his teaching. Repeatedly, Duncan’s literary analysis makes clear how *Qoheleth* understands the typical teaching of wisdom literature that correlates blessing with following the will of God, and *Qoheleth*’s frustration that his observations of life are so often at odds with this established wisdom.

Duncan’s exegetical analysis of each portion is careful and thorough, without getting bogged down in technical details. Duncan neither shies away from textual ambiguities nor tries to resolve them. She presents various interpretive options, defends her preferred choice, and enables the reader to wrestle with the often paradoxical text. *Ecclesiastes* makes repeated use of two phrases: *vapor* (often translated “vanity”) and *chasing after wind*. Duncan’s exegetical excursions on these two phrases (pp. 3 and 38) are extremely enlightening, and do a great deal to make *Ecclesiastes* more understandable.

Duncan’s theological and ethical analysis of each portion of text summarizes *Qoheleth*’s teaching in a way that emphasizes and clarifies his unique perspective. Throughout, Duncan’s writing is engaging and accessible. This excellent commentary is highly recommended for all libraries.