

WORKS

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JAMES HAMILTON

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REV. JAMES HAMILTON, D.D. F.L.S.

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THE ROYAL PREACHER :

LECTURES ON ECCLESIASTES.

P R E F A C E.

IN the form of translations, expositions, and literary parallels, there is now connected with each book of the Bible a very extensive authorship ; and we might fill a little volume with a historical review of the illustrations of Ecclesiastes, from the Commentary of Jerome to the illuminated edition of Owen Jones.

Jerome tells us that his work originated in an effort to bring over to the monastic life a young Roman lady, Blesilla. This object gives an ascetic tone to every chapter, and many of his interpretations are so fanciful that alongside of them any modern Cocceius would be deemed sober and literal. For instance, applying to the Saviour the language of the second chapter, the "slaves," or men-servants there mentioned, he thinks are Christians afflicted with the spirit of bondage ; the "great and small cattle," are the simpletons and drudges of the Church—its "sheep and oxen," who, without exerting their reason or studying the Scriptures, do as they are bidden, but are not entitled to rank as men, etc. His own reason the learned Father freely exercised in his scriptural studies ; and he takes care to apprise his readers that his version

is the result of his independent research.¹ For this he has been curiously rewarded. The Council of Trent has declared his version "authentic," and has virtually decreed that henceforth Jerome's private judgment must be the judgment of Christendom. The most painful thing in his writings is the tone of litigious infelicity by which they are pervaded. It is a sort of formic acid which flows from the finger-points, not of our good Father alone, but of a whole class of divines; and, like the red marks left by the feet of ants on litmus paper, it discolours all his pages. But although we cannot subscribe to every rendering of the Latin Vulgate, and must demur to its author's principles of interpretation as well as his spirit, the zeal and industry of Jerome, and the curious information which he has transmitted, must always secure for his name a prominent place in the history of Biblical literature.

To the monk of Bethlehem, we have a curious contrast in Martin Luther. "Fathers and doctors have grievously erred in supposing that in this book Solomon taught contempt of the world, as they call it, meaning thereby contempt of things ordained and created. The creatures are good enough, but it is man and man's notions which Solomon pronounces vanity. But his expounders, forsooth! make it out that the creatures are the vanity, and that they themselves and their dreams are the only solidity! And thus from the Divine gold of our author they have forged their own abominable idols." And then, in that spirit of genial life-enjoyment with which the "Table

¹ "Nullius auctoritatem secutus sum;" "nec contra conscientiam meam, fonte veritatis omissa, opinionum rivulos consecraver."

Talk" and Merle D'Aubigné's History have made us so familiar, he states it as the true scope of Ecclesiastes: "Solomon wishes to make us tranquil in the ordinary on-goings and accidents of this existence, neither afraid of future days nor covetous of remote possessions;¹ as St. Paul says, 'careful for nothing.'" And then in a strain very different from that which sought to decoy Blesilla into a convent, and like the uncaged captive, which he really was, the Saxon swan² goes on to celebrate the joys of Christian liberty.

Since that period, versions and commentaries have appeared, sufficient to store a little library. In one thing they all agree. They all allow that Ecclesiastes contains many things hard to be understood. "Mea sententia inter omnia sacra scripta liber longe obscurissimus," says Mercer, the learned Hebrew professor in Paris University; "Le plus difficile de tous les livres de l'Écriture," re-echoes his still more learned countryman, Calmet. "Of all the Hebrew writings, none present greater obstacles to the expositor," is the preliminary remark of one of the most intelligent English translators, G. Holden; and even German clairvoyance acknowledges "Finsterniss" and "Dunkelheit." "Zwar hat das Licht der neuern Exegese die dunkle Wolke zertheilt, aber sie doch noch nicht in völlige Klarheit aufgelöst," was the confession of Umbreit thirty years ago, and it is still repeated by most of his critical successors.

¹ "Sine cura et cupiditate futurorum."

² Luther's crest was a swan, as those will remember who recall the narrative of Huss's martyrdom.

Not to enumerate the older works of Des Vœux (1760), L. Holden (1764), and Hodgson (1790), and the well-arranged and scholar-like publication of G. Holden (1822), two very good English translations of Ecclesiastes have lately appeared. Of these the most elaborate is by the Rev. T. Preston, of Cambridge, and is accompanied by the ingenious Commentary of Rabbi Mendlesohn (1845). The other, by Dr. Noyes of Boston, U.S. (1846), with less show of erudition, is clear and straightforward; but, like Mendlesohn, the American professor gives to the book an air of theological tenuity and mere worldly wisdom, which carries neither our conviction nor our sympathy.

In the *Presbyterian Review* (Edinburgh) for October 1846, there was inserted a brief but interesting paper on this book, ascribed, we believe correctly, to our friend, the Rev. A. A. Bonar. Full of fine fancy and delicate insight, its only fault is its shortness; and although we have taken another view of the book's purport and ground-plan, we could wish that its text were illustrated by a mind so rich in Eastern lore and Christian experience.

Our own labours were nearly ended before there came into our hands the *Biblical Repository* (New York) for April 1850, containing a lecture by Professor Stowe of Cincinnati. The plan of Ecclesiastes, as given by this ingenious expositor, is so nearly akin to that which will be found in the subsequent pages, that we feel bound to transcribe it:—"The method of the writer is the most vivid and effective that can be conceived. Instead of describing the various processes of thought and feeling