

GEORGE ATHAS, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (The Story of God Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020). Pp. 400. Hardcover. US\$40.

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With *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, George Athas provides his own contribution to the Story of God Bible Commentary series. Unique to this commentary is situating both *Ecclesiastes* and *Song of Songs* in the Greek era. The introductions explain why Athas believes *Ecclesiastes* was written under the hopelessness of the Ptolemaic occupation in the 220s BCE., and *Song of Songs* under the pressures of Hellenisation in the final days of the Seleucid occupation in the 160s BCE. The second part in each section, “Explain the Story,” both tackles important exegetical questions but also shows how the historical context shapes the text and our interpretation of it.

Athas uses the introduction of *Ecclesiastes* as well as the “Listen to the Story” sections to spell out his suggestion of a Davidic descendant writing in the 220s under Ptolemaic rule in the context of the chief priest Onias II’s misjudged leveraging of the Seleucid kingdom and the devastating impacts that had on the Jewish people. Athas does not suggest an identity for Qohelet beyond a Davidic descendant, but suggests they were still aware of their royal blood and, while they were not a king, were things to have run differently they might well have been. They write as one who would be king according to God’s promise, yet with no hope of being king because of circumstance. This enables them to evaluate the foreign rulers and local leaders such as Onias and Joseph Tobias and to point out their many failures. The book’s *hebel* motto thus outweighs any provisional *carpe diem* statements as God has shown himself unwilling to intervene and help his people.

The background to *Song of Songs* are the actions of Jason and Menelaus, along with Antiochus’s response in removing the special religious status of the Jews. The Solomon character represents pressures of Hellenisation, the shepherd boy Yhwh, and the woman Israel who desires to be loyal to Yhwh but is fighting a losing battle against Hellenisation. This historical specificity makes for an engaging reading of the *Song* as a story, situating it in a time and place of extreme pressures, and also explains the need for oblique allusions to refer to people, places and God. While not all interpreters will agree with this reading, Athas has set a new standard in suggesting and demonstrating the viability of quite a precise dating.

When it comes to structure, I was disappointed that none of the recent advances in *Ecclesiastes* studies made any impression on this book (on this, see my own *Seeing what Qohelet Saw*). Athas makes brief mention of the frame, which he believes to be late, but in agreement with Qohelet. Otherwise, he has essentially broken the book up into preaching units, suggesting instead that “[t]here is no clear literary seam between these stages. The whole movement gives a sense of uncontrolled, heavy descent into darkness and oblivion, capturing perfectly Qohelet’s sense of the fate of humanity and, more particularly, the

Jewish nation” (41). In *Song of Songs* Athas makes a strong case for the different speakers throughout, but this doesn’t noticeably impact the structure; the focus remains on the story.

Evidently, however, structure is not Athas’s concern; where this commentary breaks new ground is its consistent application of the historical specificity. Dating *Ecclesiastes* to the Ptolemaic era was foreshadowed in his 2019 *Biblica* article on 4:13–16, building on Barbour’s 2012 monograph, as well as Schunck’s 1959 article which suggested that it would be natural for details of the era to be hidden within the book. Athas demonstrates how an understanding of the key movers of the second half of the third century BCE. brings much more clarity to the otherwise ambiguous declarations and descriptions. To approach the book with such specificity is not one taken by any major commentary series I have yet come across, as most take the author and date to be unknowable beyond someone some vague time period within the Second Temple period, and this will be where future interaction to this book should come in response. What is unclear is whether the jury, who have essentially decided the date cannot be known, will be swayed to reconsider their agnosticism. That is, while this approach to dating seems plausible, the ambiguities and lack of any explicit referents in the text makes it doubtful whether this will be taken up beyond being referred to as a fascinating conjecture.

When it comes to the “Live the Story” sections of *Ecclesiastes*, a dichotomy is drawn between “Qohelet liv[ing] in a ‘BC’ world” (162), and us, who “live in an ‘AD’ world” (193). Now, of course this is true, but the way it is emphasised does raise some important canonical questions of what it means to read Scripture on its own terms. Again, this is not to say Christians cannot or should not read the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus, but to draw a distinction in the way Athas has diminishes the testimony of *Ecclesiastes* on its own. According to this pessimistic reading, Qohelet affirms that life truly is meaningless, but Jesus tells him he is wrong. The way Athas squares this circle is to insist that Qohelet views the world under the sun, whereas Jesus views the world under the heavens (under the heavens being the viewpoint only available to God); Qohelet’s view is provisional, Jesus’ is complete. If we met Qohelet today, “we might wish to point [him] to Jesus” (193). All that being said, this book is unashamedly a Christian reading of Scripture, and demonstrates one way to do so for those (probably the majority) who do read *Ecclesiastes* pessimistically.

This new commentary is essential reading for anyone studying *Ecclesiastes* or *Song of Songs* as it presents and shows in practice what it looks like to read these books as from a specific time and place; Athas’s wonderful storytelling throughout reveals both *Ecclesiastes* and *Song of Songs* to be telling consistent and coherent stories. Reading this book should be an encouragement to all readers to open up *Ecclesiastes* and *Song of Songs* again and with fresh eyes.

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