

Short Abstract

The book of Ecclesiastes is a scripture that has been notoriously vexing and endlessly inspiring to Christians and students of Christianity through the ages, and it has been a standout text in the diachronic study of biblical reception. Nevertheless, there is no dearth of problems, questions, potential advances, and needful correctives that remain outstanding.

One such set of issues relates to the reception of the scripture in sixteenth century England. When the Tudor dynasty began, interest in Ecclesiastes was limited, mainly to humanist scholars and the upper echelons of English society. By the end of Elizabeth's reign, it had emerged as a focus of engagement, worldly application, and personal emulation for all, from puritan and conformist divines to London liverymen and independent craftswomen, from governing intellectuals like Francis Bacon to social outliers like the author(s) of *Hæc-Vir*. To date, the relevant historiographies have largely bypassed this arc of change.

The present thesis is an interdisciplinary study that identifies bands added to this arc of change by the generation of certain scripted prayers and sermons delivered c.1590 by the puritan ministers Henry Smith and George Gifford. Treating these materials as events of the imagination as well as texts, it also ascertains specific modes of their enduring influences, and argues that they were the vanguard of historically significant evolutions in the reception of Ecclesiastes that both deepened the scripture's role in English practical divinity and had wider, abiding effects on English thought and expression well into the seventeenth century. Refinements to current scholarship are also offered, such as further pruning to the origins of the Victorine (Hugh of St Victor) influence on Reformed exegesis of *vanitas*. Certain bibliographical correctives are suggested as well, such as the place and importance of *The Books of Homilies* in the pre-1590 reception of Ecclesiastes.

Abstract

The book of Ecclesiastes is an enigmatic text that is best known for its thematic proverb, *vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas* ('Vanity of vanities, all is vanity') (Eccles. 1:2 (V)), and for the poetic merisms that declare, 'To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven; A time to be borne, and a time to die...' (Eccles. 3:1-2 (AV)). For millennia the scripture has invited the faithful to know through it the changeability and cyclicity of all things, especially the vicissitudes that one can expect to endure over the course of one's life. It acknowledges and expands upon what people outside it know from their own experiences: change is both an internal and an external force; it occurs to us from within as often as it is foisted upon us from without. This shared experience of change has lent context and life to the scripture's distinctive terms and themes, the narrative elements which have played critical roles in the history of Christianity. Ironically, Ecclesiastes itself has, from time to time, had change foisted upon it, such as with the rethinking of the scriptures, and of Christianity as a whole, that came with the Reformation.

The patristic and medieval interpretive traditions, set mainly by Jerome and Bonaventure, read the scripture as decrying worldliness and intellectual curiosity, and as exalting the monastic withdrawal from temporal life. Other important, if lesser known, exegetes, such as Hugh of St Victor (12th century), further explored the boundaries of the *omnia* of *vanitas*; the Victorine view allowed for a level of mindful worldliness and value in human action, when undertaken with mindfulness of God and in appreciation for His gifts. By the 1540s, the book became firstly a matter for the humanists to revisit and retranslate, and secondarily it informed the consolation writing of prominent Henrician gentlemen in acute crises, notably Sir Thomas More and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. During the reigns of Edward VI, Mary, and Elizabeth, the archbishops of Canterbury took aphoristic threads from Ecclesiastes and wove them into the various official homilies that from 1547 onward were ordered 'to be declared and read by all parsons, vicars and curates, every Sunday in their churches where they have cure', to 'put away all contention, which hath heretofore risen through diversity of preaching'. The figure of the scripture's believed author, Solomon, was held to be one of regal and divine authority, of the source for both cautionary and reassuring life axioms, and yet whose life also signified the perils of carnality, idolatry, and disobedience. The king was to be looked upon with awe, alarm, or ambivalence, depending upon the direction the writer wished to take the reader, and in all cases the king was presented as detached and remote from 'the common sort'. The Jeromian and Bonaventuran interpretive

traditions, an inheritance that from c.1547 was intensely flavoured with Tudor authoritarianism, maintained their influences in England for most of the sixteenth century; the Victorine school of *vanitas* was not an important influence.

From c.1590, Solomon was reappropriated and refigured in a corpus of Reformed publications - most notably in the printed sermons of Henry Smith, London, and George Gifford, Maldon - wherein the figure of Solomon was presented more in the sense of the character *kohleth*, the original Hebrew name of Ecclesiastes' author and main character. An accessible man who was distinguished by his 'preaching soule', the Calvinized Solomon was repentant, humbled among all the timeless elect, a member of the same salvific class as the average English parishioner and reader. And whilst he still spoke of *vanitas* in strong terms, its nature was conveyed more so in the Victorine sense; mindfulness and appreciation of the present value of God's gifts were made paramount. This revision of the voice in the scripture allowed the late Elizabethan authors - all clerical and lay puritans - to dynamically repurpose its entirety (quite literally, from c.1590 much more of the book was in transmission and reception, in contrast to the acontextual, clipped deployments that were dominant in earlier decades). After a century of it being simply another tool for the politico-ecclesiastical elite, Ecclesiastes was revitalised and made an essential text in godly practical divinity, used to help the puritan community come to terms with itself, with the certain uncertainties of their times, and, at a time which is distinguished by the Star Chamber trials of Thomas Cartwright *et al.*, with the ecclesiastical hostilities that the puritans still faced after decades of losing in their engagements with the episcopacy. Yet importantly, they did not transform it into an oppositional text; Smith, Gifford, and the others used Ecclesiastes to critique the imperfect reformation of their country, but their own relationships with Tudor officialdom were stabilized, or at least, not destabilized, by the criticisms in their engagements. Ultimately (and indeed, to some extent, unwittingly), the late Elizabethan puritans upended and everted the traditional interpretations of Ecclesiastes. At some point in the 1590s, Ecclesiastes had been transformed from a scripture for the winners in England to a scripture for the losers in England, and by the 1620s there was a relatively wide diversity of readings: as *vade mecum* for Christian worldliness; as a touchstone that elevated temporal enquiry and discovery; or, as scriptural wisdom that celebrated, rather than lamented, change, and that presaged the evolution of gendered social boundaries.

The Introduction refamiliarises the reader with Ecclesiastes and with its traditional, pre-Reformation interpretations; introduces the key consulted areas of early modernist,

literary, and reception scholarship, along with relevant biblical commentary; discusses the present researcher's interdisciplinary methodology, which attempted to treat each sermon as events of the imagination as well as texts. It sketches the foundations of its two main interrogatory themes – approaches to Solomonic authorship, and approaches to *vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas* – for the case studies of Henry Smith (Chapters 2 & 3) and George Gifford (Chapter 4). And certain other novel contributions are also signposted, for some items and aspects discussed in chapters 1 through 5 have escaped prior scholarly notice in seminal, but improvable, bibliographies and reception histories of Ecclesiastes; it is shown that the present thesis augments the contributions those vital pieces of scholarship have provided to students of the scripture and of the early modern world.

Chapter 1 is foundational to the case studies of the subsequent chapters. It surveys and compares several writings that were concerned with or that touched upon Ecclesiastes in manuscript or in print prior to 1589 (the year that George Gifford's series of *Eight Sermons* was printed in London). Prior to c.1590, the transmission and reception of Ecclesiastes was distinguished by its proverbiality; beyond the early humanist retranslations, most sources used Ecclesiastes programmatically in (religiously and culturally loaded) bits and pieces. The chapter establishes that, considering their ubiquity in the parishes per the royal mandate, the most important engagements with the scripture before c.1590 were to be found in *The Books of Homilies* (1547-1571). The clippings leveraged by England's politico-ecclesiastical elite were put toward keeping the lower estates compliant and loyal, especially via the invocation of the maxim, 'Wishe the king no evill in thy thought, and speake no hurt of the riche in thy privie chaumber...' (Eccles. 10:20 (BB)) in *An Homily Against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion*. Interpretive shifts rose with the advent of Reformed commentaries on the book that were printed in London in the 1580s. For example, in his 1585 translation of Jean de Serres' commentary, the puritan schoolmaster and grammarian John Stockwood echoed de Serres' concept that Eccles. 10:20 was Solomonic hyperbole, the argument being that the verse was rhetorical, not to be taken literally, and that it declared lawful the godly servants' reproof of princes, 'if their calling so require'. Such scholarly eversions of prior renderings of Ecclesiastes would find parochial voices in the popular sermons of Henry Smith and George Gifford.

Chapters 2 & 3 discuss several works written by Henry Smith, lecturer at St Clement Danes, London. Smith's immense popularity was rooted in his eloquence – as described by literary scholar Walter Davis, his preaching was 'an intense liturgical mimesis' – and these chapters expand upon the view of Smith as a reconciler of English Calvinism with Homeric

and Elohistic mimesis. Smith had expressly used his encounter with Ecclesiastes as a guide for the discernment of his own vocation, and his pastoral agenda was noteworthy for its groundbreaking, thorough personalisation of that scripture and its author. In his scripted prayers, and in three main sermons, Smith repeatedly allegorised Solomon to present him as elect, repentant, regenerate, and one who stood in true affinity with any parishioner and reader who repented likewise. And Smith's rhetoric on *vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas*, which comes forth as in the Victorine vein (conceiving *vanitas* in three heads or species, with an emphasis on the faultiness of humankind or *vanitas culpae*), urged his flock to counter *vanitas* with their remembrance of God and of the value of His gifts. Smith's preaching of the scripture was a stark departure from that which people had received from *The Books of Homilies* and other prior sources, and considering his print history, his engagements with Ecclesiastes surely were among the most widely received in England before c.1650.

Chapter 4 discusses the *Eight Sermons* (printed 1589) on Eccles. 1 - 5, written by George Gifford, pastor at All Saints with St Peter, Maldon. Gifford was a popular figure in Essex who early in his career had earned infamy with Archbishop Whitgift and Bishop Aylmer as a leading voice in the conferencing (*classis*) movement. Yet from about 1590, Gifford had achieved an equilibrium with Canterbury and London, so this chapter contextualizes Gifford's ecclesiastical evolution as coinciding with the exegetical and homiletical shifts that he helped inaugurate with the *Eight Sermons*. Gifford seems to have gleaned from it a new direction for his own vocation, as thereafter his pastoral agenda was noteworthy for its methodical, *lectio continua* delivery of difficult scriptures that had been avoided previously by English divines, e.g. Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. He saw the ideal parish as a community imbued with a Reformed sort of scholasticism and believed that the godly deserved to access such challenging texts through the dutiful studies and ministrations of their pastor. As did Smith, Gifford's keys to accessing the (notoriously inaccessible) text was the careful, persuasive unlocking of Solomon and *vanitas*. Gifford too had a Victorine flavoured view of *vanitas*; the elect had to acknowledge their faultiness and forgetfulness and counter them with godly mindfulness. He, like Smith, emphasised that Ecclesiastes itself was a sermon-like testimonial, one delivered by an elect, repentant, and regenerated man, the nuanced character of *kohleth*. Gifford's analysis emphasized the feminine gendered essence of the term in the original Hebrew and cast Solomon as an 'Ecclesiasticall person' who was the epitome of earnestness, possessed of the 'soule of a preacher', his lack of ordination notwithstanding. This aspect, along with other structural, expressive, and substantive commonalities between their works, suggest that Gifford was heavily influenced by Jean de

Serres' *Learned Commentarie* (translated 1585 by John Stockwood, as noted above). Gifford's preaching, like Smith's, was a stark departure from that which people had received *inter alia* from *The Books of Homilies*. His *lectio continua* series evinces what may have been the most rigorous, and surely the most voluminous, parochial preaching of Ecclesiastes delivered in Tudor England.

Chapter 5, 'The Riches of *Salomons House*', takes its title from Francis Bacon's ideal institution of learning, which, as Bacon said in *The New Atlantis*, would be dedicated to 'the knowledge of Causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible'. This chapter surveys select works from the remaining years of the sixteenth century and into seventeenth century to c.1650 and draws out connections between them and the preceding case studies. It is suggested that late Elizabethan engagements with the scripture, with Henry Smith and George Gifford in the vanguard, not only impacted later, theological writing that was directed precisely at Ecclesiastes, but that they also impacted how key early modern thinkers confronted the wider intellectual, critical, and aesthetic enquiries of the seventeenth century.

The thesis' contributions to the field of diachronic reception history are suggested in the conclusions for chapters 1 through 5, and the thesis closes with an Assize and Epilogue that draws together its arguments and conclusions, and suggests answers to the question of why the book of Ecclesiastes emerged as a scripture that was quite important to puritan divines like Henry Smith and George Gifford c.1590.