Although small in size, Thomas M. Bolin’s *Ecclesiastes and the Riddle of Authorship* is big in ideas. Bolin sets out to show that how the reader imagines and constructs the author shapes how a book is interpreted. In this context this means readers of Ecclesiastes have often reframed the character of Qohelet identified in Ecclesiastes 1:1-2, 12, 7:27, and 12:8-10 to resolve problems with, and in, the text. The first problem arises simply from the fact that the author is identified by name (or title), “The words of Qohelet, the son of David, king in Jerusalem,” but no record of such a king is found in the Bible or any other source. Given that some readers have imagined the term “Qohelet” as a title rather than a name, some other identifiable figure might fit the description. This has led generations of readers to hunt for the “actual” identity of Qohelet by using data provided in the book to help confirm their respective conclusions. In a circular way, once Qohelet is identified, the data provided by Ecclesiastes is then read back into the biography of the actual author helping to strengthen the tie.

In five chapters, Bolin discusses different constructions of Qohelet although none is necessarily exclusive to any category. In chapter 1, Bolin explores the popular view that Qohelet and King Solomon were one and the same. In chapter 2, the depiction of Qohelet as a king is explored. The third chapter detours slightly to explain how the reader’s need to find coherence within a book and between books by the same author, or within the defined biblical collection, shapes assumptions about both the author and the meaning of a work. In the case of Ecclesiastes, this means that readers have made assumptions about whether the book agreed or disagreed with other biblical books on matters of theology; was internally consistent; and, in the case where Solomon is identified as the author, was consistent with the depictions of him in Kings and Chronicles, and with the content of Proverbs and Song of Songs. The fourth chapter explores the competing depictions of Qohelet as saint or sinner, and finally, in chapter 5, the construction of Qohelet as a philosopher is examined.

Methodologically, Bolin relies heavily on Michel Foucault’s important discussions of authorship and Brennan Breed’s work on reception history. Both are good choices, although in the years since Foucault wrote, many scholars have tried to apply his ideas to religious texts (for example, Jorge Gracia) and Bolin might have drawn on some of these newer studies. By focusing on the construction of the author, Bolin intends to examine what it is about the text of Ecclesiastes that inspired the reading: the bit of sand in the oyster that stirred the development of the pearl. “When doing reception history the potentialities
of the text, and not the contexts of the readers, guide the analysis” (p. 11). As a result, he tries to avoid arranging interpretations based on chronology, religion, or medium. Rather they are gathered for their response to a shared textual concern. The Septuagint assumes that the word “Qohelet” refers to one who gathers or assembles. Bolin would fit the role. Just in examining the depiction of Qohelet as Solomon, Bolin discusses *The Arabian Nights*, rabbinic midrash, Talmud, Targum, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, the *Odes of Solomon*, Josephus’s *Antiquities*, *The Greek Testament of Solomon*, Origen, Isaac Ibn Ghayyat, Jerome, Didymus the Blind, and Gregory of Nyssa. He moves comfortably through the sources, across time, space, and language. The sequence here largely reflects their appearance in the chapter. By drawing on these figures, Bolin does successfully show the exegetical contours of Ecclesiastes and introduces the readers to the tremendous breadth of Ecclesiastes’s readers. However, the effort to include such a wide variety of commentators leads to uneven treatment. So, in chapter 5, the reader is informed that “Jerome, Dionysius of Alexandria, and Isaac Ibn Ghayyat all read Ecclesiastes as a book of natural philosophy.... Samuel Ibn Tibbon, a medieval Jewish commentator on Ecclesiastes, considered Qohelet to be as much of a philosopher as Aristotle” (p. 107). This information basically fills the gap between the chapter’s introduction to philosophy and ancient Israel, and Bolin’s own comparison of Ecclesiastes with Greek thought. I give away my own interests by noting that the commentaries of Ibn Ghayyat and Ibn Tibbon are readily available. They do not appear in the bibliography, but Bolin might have offered examples of what it was about Ecclesiastes that led them to read it as philosophy. This would have strengthened the volume and brought the chapter more in line with the others to support the primary thesis. This aside, his efforts to cover as much material as he has are remarkable.

Bolin concludes the volume with an apologia, “I intend this book to be a first attempt and a roadmap for future scholars to take up” (p. 125). The critique that follows is offered in the hopes of continuing the conversation. The first is a methodological concern. It is not intended to disparage *Ecclesiastes and the Riddle of Authorship* in any way but grows naturally out of what Bolin has done successfully. The question is what place to give interpretations that rely on translations in reception history. If the goal of the project is to show the contours of the biblical book, those contours are masked by the translation and the commentary is a further step removed. According to Bolin, “in places one can see that the LXX (Septuagint) not only translates the Hebrew text of the Bible into Greek, but mends it to bring it more in line with Greek philosophical thought.... The LXX version of Qohelet presents a host of fascinating problems. It is a rigid translation that consistently renders the same Hebrew word with the same Greek word every time, regardless of context” (p. 106). Since many of the church fathers relied on the Greek text and did not, or could not, comment on the Hebrew, does their work really show the contours of the book of Ecclesiastes? Given Bolin’s description, the Hebrew and Greek versions of Ecclesiastes are two different books and the commentaries on them diverge as a result. The question needs to equally be raised concerning those who relied on the Vulgate (see, for example, Bolin’s discussion of Gregory the Great, pp. 69-70). Bolin is clear throughout when an author is citing from or commenting on the Greek or Latin text. What is missing is a discussion of how these types of writers should be dealt with given the gap between them and the source material. They certainly deserve to be a part of the story but those who build on Bolin’s work will need to consider this issue further.

All of us who engage in reception history take a remarkable risk. The research requires venturing into disciplines and fields for which we were not trained and in which others specialize. Bolin successfully shows the value in taking such risks. The yield is that the material drawn from antiqui-
ty, the Middle Ages, and modernity is gathered, sifted, and explained to support a persuasive thesis. In the case of rabbinic literature, Bolin offers numerous and careful close readings. However, he makes a number of technical errors and offers some claims that can only be made because of the limited set of data he chose or because he only looked at a single version of a narrative, perhaps in the Babylonian Talmud but not in the Palestinian version.

Among the technical errors two should be noted. First, he frequently cites the Targum to Qohelet as evidence for early rabbinic views on Ecclesiastes. The Targum most likely postdates the Babylonian Talmud and reworks the earlier source material. As a result, using this particular Targum to highlight textual issues in Qohelet is a complicated task given its efforts to rework and anthologize rabbinic sources. Bolin writes, “The earliest extant interpretations of Ecclesiastes, in rabbinic literature, already assume Solomon to be the author” (p. 21). To prove his point he cites the Targum 1:1. He would have been better mentioning the earliest extant sources that include this view: Tosefta Yadayim 2:14 claims Solomon wrote it from his own wisdom and Sifre Deuteronomy 1:1 claims he uttered it under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Both are available in translation with explanatory annotation.

The second issue relates to the citation of rabbinic sources. Rarely is the source of any of the citations or translations indicated. Further, in the case of Ecclesiastes Rabbah Bolin refers to the verse of Ecclesiastes cited rather than the location in the midrash. On page 22 he cites a source discussing the desire of some sages to remove Ecclesiastes from circulation as Ecclesiastes Rabbah 11:9 because the verse is cited therein. But the text is from the very beginning of the midrashic volume at Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:4 in most editions. This makes tracing Bolin’s sources difficult.

Bolin presents the rabbis’ Solomon as wise, sinful, and ultimately repentant. The texts he cites largely support this view. The difficulty is that the texts cited are not a representative sample. Concerning the interpretation of Ecclesiastes in rabbinic literature Bolin argues that rabbinic efforts to interpret Ecclesiastes in a way that reconciled it with the Torah and resolved its inner contradictions was only done because the rabbis believed Solomon to be the author. The conclusion is problematic on a number of accounts (but not entirely wrong). The Tosefta explains that Ecclesiastes was merely Solomon’s own wisdom and not divinely inspired. The sages could have certainly left the contradictions unresolved and blamed them on Solomon’s shortcomings. Further, other rabbinic sources suggest that Ecclesiastes might encourage heresy and they could rely on the Bible’s depiction of Solomon's sinfulness to justify such a claim. Saul Lieberman, in fact, suggested the rabbis included the book in the canon despite its attribution to Solomon.[1] Ultimately the issue needs a more expansive and nuanced discussion than Bolin provides. Because some rabbis believed that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes under the influence of the divine spirit, they assumed it had to agree with the Torah in its teachings, and they therefore sought to remedy any contradictions between the two. Others argued otherwise.

To make this point more substantially, examining Bolin’s discussion of B. Rosh Hashanah 21b is valuable. The Talmud describes Solomon trying to use his own intellect to judge cases rather than following Deuteronomy 19:5’s prescription that the testimony of two witnesses are required. A heavenly voice comes into the narrative to remind Solomon of his legal responsibility. Here Solomon appears to be chastised for his haughtiness as Bolin correctly explains (pp. 93-94). However, Song Rabbah 1:10 commends Solomon for being able to judge without witnesses as in the famous “divide the baby case.” Where Bolin’s source compares Solomon to Moses and the former appears lacking, the second source compares Solomon to God and finds a certain kind of parity.
Additionally, Bolin contests Suseela Yesudian-Storfjell’s description of rabbinic exegesis as depicting the man, Qohelet, as King Solomon, who is a “pious student and teacher of Torah” (p. 35). The only real issue is that Yesudian-Storfjell should have indicated that this is among the things rabbinic literature does with Ecclesiastes. In addition to the variety of rabbinic depictions Bolin presents of Solomon (as composing writings that contradict Torah, as knowing science and magic and having the ability to control demons, as having engaged in deathbed repentance for a sinful life, as a sinner who imagined himself as a second Moses, and as one whom God ultimately removed from the throne), there is a substantial collection of sources that support Yesudian-Storfjell’s position. Tractate Shabbat in the Babylonian Talmud 56b records the claim that anyone who maintains that Solomon sinned is making an error. Tractate Yevamot in the Babylonian Talmud 21a indicates that the Torah was like a basket without handles until Solomon came along and used Ecclesiastes 12:9 as the prooftext. According to Song Rabbah 1:8, before Solomon invented the (rabbinic) parable, Torah could not be understood and he merited composing the three books under the influence of the Holy Spirit precisely because he had taught Torah to the assembly of Israel.

Rabbinic literature from the tannaitic and amoraic periods, Palestine, and Babylon shows that the sages both loved and hated Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Proverbs, and loved and hated Solomon. Recourse to his biography led them to believe he could both compose heretical ideas from his own wisdom and receive divine inspiration to compose embellishment for the Torah. This may be why the Talmud describes Hezekiah and his entourage as having written the book (B. Baba Batra 15a and Avot the Rabbi Natan A & B include multiple explanations of Hezekiah’s role). Adding Hezekiah’s imprimatur secured both the piety of the Ecclesiastes and of Solomon, the “prophet-king,” who shared it originally.

Ultimately, none of this should take away from what Bolin has accomplished. He has certainly set out the roadmap he intended, and it will offer good guidance for those who continue down this path.

Note
