ECCLESIASTES

The Fear of God and Obedience to his Commands as a Roadmap to Happiness

ZONDERVAN

Exegetical Commentary

ON THE

Old Testament

A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

KNUT MARTIN HEIM

Daniel I. Block, General Editor

ZONDERVAN ACADEMIC

The brilliance of Knut Heim's work is his ability to move from the general and philosophical tenor of Ecclesiastes to the specific contextual factors that make the author, Qoheleth, not just a theoretical philosopher but a prophetic voice in his own day with wit, wisdom, and wile. This insight is vital for gaining a true understanding of what Ecclesiastes is all about.

—GEORGE ATHAS, Director of Research, Moore Theological College

Heim tackles Ecclesiastes with characteristic panache: Qoheleth is a skillful public orator, delivering his comedic oral "routine" to an audience and generating happiness and fear of God. His entertainment gives coping strategies for life—it is at once rhetorical, ambiguous, full of tension, indirection and political resistance. A refreshing read, and highly recommended.

—KATHARINE DELL, Professor of Old Testament Literature and Theology,
Faculty of Divinity, Cambridge University

Knut Heim reads Ecclesiastes as a subversive political work. With persuasive and entertaining rhetoric, Qoheleth seeks to present an alternative to Hellenistic culture. He propagates happiness in the framework of faith. This is a fresh perspective that sheds new light on this ancient and often enigmatic book.

—THOMAS KRÜGER, Professor Emeritus of Hebrew Bible, Universität Zürich,
Theologisches Seminar

Using his considerable expertise in rhetorical and imaginative exegesis, Knut Heim has made Ecclesiastes accessible and understandable to audiences of readers that have often found this biblical book enigmatic and even irrelevant. His translation and interpretation refuse to gloss over the book's Hebrew wit and wisdom with idiomatic English expressions and in so doing makes its wisdom accessible to a new generation.

—BRUCE C. BIRCH, Dean Emeritus and Professor Emeritus of Biblical Theology,
Wesley Theological Seminary

Knut Heim's *Ecclesiastes* offers a groundbreaking discourse-linguistic analysis that reframes Qoheleth as a subversive orator operating under imperial surveillance. Heim reclaims Qoheleth as a poetic prophet and orator, wielding humor and ambiguity as weapons of resistance. Combining rhetorical sophistication, philological precision, and historical insight, Heim illuminates the text's strategic ambiguity and performative design. This commentary is an essential contribution to wisdom scholarship and biblical rhetorical criticism.

—TOVA FORTI, Professor of Biblical Studies, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Heim delivers a fresh, vivid translation that brings out Ecclesiastes's rhetorical artistry and theological depth. His commentary provides profound insight and pastoral conviction, helping readers hear God's Word afresh and discover the wisdom and joy in fearing God.

—JEFFREY R. OETTER, Adjunct Faculty, Old Testament, Denver Seminary

A striking strength of this book is the way the author preserves the text's ambiguity and rhetorical uniqueness, while treating Ecclesiastes as a unified act of communication by paying attention not only to what Qoheleth says, but also to how he says it. He also provides fresh insights to biblical theology and to issues that resonate in our world today.

—RIAD KASSIS, International Director, Langham Partnership International

While many commentaries wearily recycle the views of others, Knut Heim strikes out boldly towards a view of Ecclesiastes as comically-nuanced political satire—a hidden transcript defending the faith against Ptolemaic-era assimilation. Rhetorically and hermeneutically sensitive, Heim's work offers a fresh, challenging and worthwhile study.

—RICHARD S. BRIGGS, Principal, Lindisfarne College of Theology

With expertise and humility, Heim contributes a fresh and innovative exposition of Ecclesiastes. His discourse analysis skillfully and patiently navigates tensions in the biblical text that other scholars are quick to resolve. The resulting insights have substantial explanatory power that enable the reader to negotiate the space between Qoheleth's positive message and its more skeptical outlook, paving a path forward to exist in the tension without forcing resolution. The outcome inspires both resilience and hope.

—CAMI BRUBAKER, Assistant Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew, Bethel University

Drawing on nearly thirty years of studying biblical wisdom literature, Knut Heim masterfully guides his readers through the complex world of Qoheleth. Heim provides a philologically precise and nuanced translation of the Hebrew text and pays close attention to detail in his exegesis without getting lost in it. As a skillful teacher with classroom experience in British and American contexts, Heim equips his readers with the competences they need to engage with this fascinating wisdom book. Anyone seeking greater insight into the theology of this biblical thinker will appreciate Heim's commentary on Qoheleth, as it offers a comprehensive, in-depth, and readable guide to a biblical book that has been debated for decades.

—BERND U. SCHIPPER, Professor of Hebrew Bible, Humboldt-University of Berlin

Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament

The Hebrew text is from Deuteronomy 31:11–13, which highlights the importance of "hearing" the voice of Scripture:

> When all Israel comes to appear before יהוה your God at the place he will choose, you shall read this *Torah* before them in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns—so they can *listen* and learn to fear יהוה your God and follow carefully all the words of this *Torah*. Their children, who do not know this *Torah*, must *hear* it and learn to fear יהוה your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess. (NIV, modified)

ZONDERVAN ACADEMIC

Ecclesiastes

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ECCLESIASTES

To my wife, the Most Reverend Hannah Caroline Faal-Heim
Bishop Emerita of The Gambia
Ecclesiastes 3:13; 9:7–10

Contents

Series Introduction

Prospectus

Modern audiences are often taken in by the oratorical skill and creativity of preachers and teachers. However, they tend to forget that the authority of proclamation is directly related to the correspondence of the key points of the sermon to the message the biblical authors were trying to communicate. Since we confess that "all Scripture [including the entirety of the OT] is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that [all God's people] may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16–17 NIV), it seems essential that those who proclaim its message should pay close attention to the rhetorical agendas of biblical authors. Too often modern readers, including preachers, are either baffled by OT texts, or they simply get out of them that for which they are looking. Many commentaries available to pastors and teachers try to resolve the dilemma either through word-by-word and verse-by-verse analysis or synthetic theological reflections on the text without careful attention to the flow and argument of that text.

The commentators in this series recognize that too little attention has been paid to biblical authors as rhetoricians, to their larger rhetorical and theological agendas, and especially to the means by which they tried to achieve their goals. Like effective communicators in every age, biblical authors were driven by a passion to communicate a message. So we must inquire not only what that message was, but also what strategies they used to impress their message on their hearers' ears. This reference to "hearers" rather than to readers is intentional, since the biblical texts were written to be heard. Not only were the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures composed to be heard in the public gathering of God's people but also before the invention of movable type, and few would have had access to their own copies of the Scriptures. While the contributors to this series acknowledge with Paul that every Scripture—that is, every passage in the Hebrew Bible—is God-breathed, we also recognize that the inspired authors possessed a vast repertoire of rhetorical and literary strategies. These included not only the special use of words and figures of speech, but also the deliberate selection, arrangement, and shaping of ideas.

The primary goal of this commentary series is to help serious students of

Scripture, as well as those charged with preaching and teaching the Word of God, to hear the messages of Scripture as biblical authors intended them to be heard. While we recognize the timelessness of the biblical message, the validity of our interpretation and the authority with which we teach the Scriptures are related directly to the extent to which we have grasped the message intended by the author in the first place. Accordingly, when dealing with specific texts, the authors of the commentaries in this series are concerned with three principal questions: (1) What are the principal theological points the biblical writers are making? (2) How do biblical writers make those points? (3) What significance does the message of the present text have for understanding the message of the biblical book within which it is embedded and the message of the Scriptures as a whole? The achievement of these goals requires careful attention to the way ideas are expressed in the OT, including the selection and arrangement of materials and the syntactical shaping of the text.

To most readers, syntax operates primarily at the sentence level. But recent developments in biblical study, particularly advances in rhetorical and discourse analysis, have alerted us to the fact that syntax operates also at the levels of the paragraph, the literary unit being analyzed, and the composition as a whole. Discourse analysis, also called macrosyntax, studies the text beyond the level of the sentence (sentence syntax), where the paragraph serves as the basic unit of thought. Those contributing to this series recognize that this type of study may be pursued in a variety of ways. Some will prefer a more bottom-up approach, where clause connectors and transitional features play a dominant role in analysis. Others will pursue a more top-down approach, where genre or literary form begins the discussion. However, we all understand that both approaches are required to understand fully the method and the message of the text. For this reason, the ultimate value of discourse analysis is that it allows the text to set the agenda in biblical interpretation.

One of the distinctive goals for this series is to engage the biblical text using some form of discourse analysis to understand not only what the text says, but also how it says it. While attention to words or phrases is still essential, contributors to this commentary series will concentrate on the flow of thought in the biblical writings, both at the macroscopic level of entire compositions and at the microscopic level of individual text units. In so doing we hope to help other readers of Scripture grasp both the message and the rhetorical force of OT texts. When we hear the message of Scripture, we gain access to the mind of God.

Format of the Commentary

The format of this series is designed to achieve the goals summarized above. Accordingly, each volume in the series will begin with an introduction to the book

being explored. In addition to answering the usual questions of date, authorship, and provenance of the composition, commentators will highlight what they consider to be the main theological themes of the book and then discuss broadly how the style and structure of the book develop those themes. This discussion will include a coherent outline of the contents of the book, demonstrating the contribution each part makes to the development of the principal themes.

The commentaries on individual text units that follow will repeat this process in greater detail. Although complex literary units will be broken down further, the commentators will address the following issues.

1. **Main Idea of the Passage:** A one- or two-sentence summary of the key ideas the biblical author seeks to communicate.
2. **Literary Context:** A brief discussion of the relationship of the specific text to the book as a whole and to its place within the broader arguments.
3. **Translation and Exegetical Outline:** Commentators will provide their own translations of each text, formatted to highlight the discourse structure of the text and accompanied by a coherent outline that reflects the flow and argument of the text.
4. **Structure and Literary Form:** An introductory survey of the literary structure and rhetorical style adopted by the biblical author, highlighting how these features contribute to the communication of the main idea of the passage.
5. **Explanation of the Text:** A detailed commentary on the passage, paying particular attention to how the biblical authors select and arrange their materials and how they work with words, phrases, and syntax to communicate their messages. This will take up the bulk of most commentaries.
6. **Canonical and Theological Significance:** The commentary on each unit will conclude by building bridges between the world of the biblical author and other biblical authors and with reflections on the contribution made by this unit to the development of broader issues in biblical theology—particularly on how later OT and NT authors have adapted and reused the motifs in question. The discussion will also include brief reflections on the significance of the message of the passage for readers today.

The way this series treats biblical books will be uneven. Commentators on smaller books will have sufficient scope to answer fully each of the issues listed above on each unit of text. However, limitations of space preclude full treatment of every text for the larger books. Instead, commentators will guide readers through ##1–4 and 6 for every literary unit, but full Explanation of the Text (#5) will be selective, generally limited to twelve to fifteen literary units deemed most critical for hearing the message of the book.

In addition to these general introductory comments, we should alert readers of this series to several conventions that we follow. First, the divine name in the OT is presented as YHWH. The form of the name—represented by the Tetragrammaton, יהוה—is a particular problem for scholars. The Jewish practice of rendering the Hebrew divine name in Greek as κύριος ("lord, Lord"=Heb. אֲדֹנָי, "Adonay") is carried over into English translations of the OT as "LORD," which represents Hebrew יהוה and distinguishes it from "Lord," which represents Hebrew אֲדֹנָי. But this creates interpretive problems because the connotations and implications of referring to someone by name or by title are quite different. When rendering the word as a name, English translations have traditionally vocalized יהוה as "Jehovah," which seems to combine the consonants of יהוה with the vowels of אֲדֹנָי. However, today non-Jewish scholars often render the name as "Yahweh," recognizing that "Jehovah" is an artificial construct.

Second, frequently the verse numbers in the Hebrew Bible differ from those in our English translations. Since the commentaries in this series are based on the Hebrew text, the Hebrew numbers will be the default numbers. Where the English numbers differ, they will be provided in square brackets (e.g., Joel 4:12[3:12]).

Third, when discussing specific biblical words or phrases, these will be represented in Hebrew font and in translation, except where the transliterated form is used in place of an English term, either because no single English expression captures the Hebrew word's wide range meaning (e.g., *ḥesed* for חֶסֶד, rather than "loving-kindness"), or when it functions as a title or technical expression not readily captured in English (e.g., *gōʾēl* for גֹּאֵל, rather than "kinsman-redeemer").

Daniel I. Block, general editor

Author's Preface and Acknowledgments

My fascination with Ecclesiastes began during my studies at the Freie Theologische Hochschule, Giessen, in 1986. Taking a course on Ecclesiastes with Dr. Richard L. Schultz (now at Wheaton College) changed my theology and my life. Until then I had wanted to become a missionary or an evangelist. From then on, it was clear that my calling from God was to study the poetry of the Old Testament and help the Church rediscover its riches.

A generous sabbatical granted by Trinity College Bristol in 2015 laid much of the groundwork for this commentary. A key discovery during this sabbatical concerned the *underdetermined nature* of the language in Ecclesiastes. Many thanks are due to colleagues, friends, and students at Trinity College Bristol and Denver Seminary, Colorado. Special thanks are also due to Rev. Peter Heim and his wife Dr. Erin Heim, who invited me to a show by standup comedian Jim Gaffigan. Attending this show had a profound impact on this commentary because it helped me to discover the humorous dimension of Ecclesiastes and drew my attention to its nature as the written record of a routine designed for performance before live audiences.

The substance of the commentary took shape in the spring semesters of 2017 and 2018 at Denver Seminary, when I had the privilege to study Ecclesiastes with two groups of exceptionally gifted students, who helped me finetune its main ideas. In week five of the spring semester of 2018, while preparing the lecture on Ecclesiastes 5 for that week, I read Thomas Krüger's comments on Ecclesiastes 5:7–8 in his *Qoheleth* commentary in the Hermeneia series. He highlighted how verse 8 can be read as a defense as well as a radical critique of governmental organization. This helped me discover the shift from *intentional ambiguity* in verse 8 to *calculated hyperambiguity* in verse 9, because here the monarch is mentioned in a statement that can be read equally as a defense and as a radical critique. It was at this point that I first understood the purpose of *underdetermination* in the language of Ecclesiastes. The resulting intentional ambiguity created *plausible deniability* in case the book's regime-critical potential were discovered by those it aimed to critique.

From here, the link via Jim Gaffigan to the humorous regime-critical routines of modern standup comedians under repressive regimes was a natural one, for here, too, underdetermined language provides plausible deniability to hide risky regime-critical comment. For the remainder of the semester, I began to interpret

the book through this lens, paying special attention to underdetermination, regime-critical potential, and humor. To my surprise, these could be found almost everywhere. I am grateful to the students in the class. While they initially remained skeptical, they asked great questions and offered numerous observations that helped me refine my approach and strengthen my arguments. By the end of the semester, I had become convinced that the book as we now have it is the written record of a speech sequence similar to the routines of modern standup comedians, who use the medium of comedy to critique problematic issues. This meant I had to rewrite the commentary in its entirety.

I owe special thanks to the editorial team of the Zondervan Evangelical Commentary on the Old Testament series, especially to Dr. Daniel I. Block, who in his capacity as its general editor invited me to contribute this volume to the series, and to Dr. Jason S. DeRouchie, whose meticulous attention to detail and sharp editorial insights helped me to sharpen my arguments. Special thanks are also due to the editorial team at Zondervan Academic, especially Katya Covrett and Lee Fields.

Ultimate gratitude goes to the God who inspired the book of Ecclesiastes and helped me to understand it in a fresh way. I dedicate this work to my wife Hannah, who is living proof that there is nothing better than to eat and drink and enjoy life with one's spouse (Eccl 3:13; 9:7–10). Soli Deo gloria.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations for books of the Bible, pseudepigrapha, rabbinic works, papyri, classical works, and the like are readily available in sources such as *The SBL Handbook of Style* and are not included here.

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
ACEBTSup	Amsterdamse cahiers voor exegese van de Bijbel en zijn tradities Supplement Series
AEL	*Ancient Egyptian Literature*. Miriam Lichtheim. 3 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971–1980
AIL	Ancient Israel and Its Literature
ALBO	Analecta Lovaniensia Biblica et Orientalia
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
ANE	Ancient Near East
ANES	*Ancient Near Eastern Studies*
ANET	*Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Edited by James B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969
ANETS	Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies
AnOr	Analecta Orientalia
Ant.	Josephus, Flavius. *Jewish Antiquities*
ASOR	American Schools of Oriental Research
ASV	American Standard Version
ATD	Das Alte Testament Deutsch
AYBRL	Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library
BA	*Biblical Archaeologist*
BAR	*Biblical Archaeology Review*
BASOR	*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*

BASORSup	Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research Supplements
BBC	Blackwell Bible Commentaries
BBR	*Bulletin for Biblical Research*
BBRSup	*Bulletin for Biblical Research, Supplements*
BC	Before Christ
BCE	Before the Common Era
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BDB	Brown, Francis, S. R . Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
BGWC	The Bible in God's World Commentary Series
BHHB	Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Bible
BHK	*Biblia Hebraica*. Edited by Rudolf Kittel. Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1905–1906
BHQ	*Biblia Hebraica Quinta*. Edited by Adrian Schenker et al. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004–
BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Edited by Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983
Bib	*Biblica*
BibInt	*Biblical Interpretation*
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BibOr	Biblica et Orientalia
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament
BN	*Biblische Notizen*
BO	*Bibliotheca Orientalis*
BPC	Biblical Performance Criticism
BRL2	*Biblisches Reallexikon*. 2nd ed. Edited by Kurt Galling. HAT 1/1. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1977
BSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
BT	*The Bible Translator*
BWA(N)T	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten (und Neuen) Testament
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CAD	T*he Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*. Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956–2006
CTU	*The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hnai and Other Places (KTU: second enlarged edition)*. Ed. Manfried Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquín Sanmartín. Abhandlungen zur Literature Alt-Syrien-Palästinas und Mesopotamiens 8. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995. Text cited by number.

CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CBSC	Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges
CC	Continental Commentaries
COS	*The Context of Scripture*. Edited by William W. Hallo. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002
CurBR	*Currents in Biblical Research* (formerly *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies*)
DCH	*Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. Edited by David J. A. Clines. 9 vols. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993–2014
DDD	*Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. Edited by Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst. Leiden: Brill, 1995. 2nd rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
DTTM	*Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*. By Marcus Jastrow. 2 vols. 1903. Repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005
EA	El Amarna tablets, numbering found in William L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters.* Baltimore/London: John Hopkins University, 1992; and Shlomo Izre'el, *The Amarna Scholarly Tablets.* Cuneiform Monographs 9. Groningen: Styx, 1997
EB	Echter Bibel
EdF	Erträge der Forschung
EKKNT	Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
EncJud	*Encyclopedia Judaica*. Edited by Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum. 2nd ed. 22 vols. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007
ESTJ	*Encyclopedia of Second Temple Judaism*. Edited by Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Daniel M. Gurtner. 2 vols. London: T&T Clark, 2019
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GKC	*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. Edited by Emil Kautzsch. Translated by Arther E. Cowley. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1910
HALOT	*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm.Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999

HAT	Handbuch zum Alten Testament
HBS	Herders Biblische Studien
Hermeneia	Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible
HKAT	Handkommentar zum Alten Testament
HS	*Hebrew Studies*
HThKAT	Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament
HUCA	*Hebrew Union College Annual*
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
IBHS	*An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Bruce K. Waltke and Michael O'Connor.Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JB	Jerusalem Bible
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JNSL	*Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages*
Joüon	Joüon, Paul. *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*. Translated and revised by T. Muraoka. 2 vols. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1991
JPSBC	The JPS Bible Commentary
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
KAT	Kommentar zum Alten Testament
KBL	Koehler, Ludwig, and Walter Baumgartner. *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros*. 2nd ed. Leiden, 1958
KEK	Kritisch-exegeticher Kommentar über das Neue Testament
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LHBOTS	The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LUÅ	Lunds universitets årsskrift
LXX	Septuagint
Maarav	*Maarav*
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NEchtBKAT	Die Neue Echter Bibel Kommentar zum Alten Testament mit der Einheitsübersetzung
NET	New English Translation
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary Series

NJPS	*Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text*
NRSVue	New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition
NT	New Testament
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OT	Old Testament
OTL	Old Testament Library
pl.	plural
Readings	Readings: A New Biblical Commentary
SBJT	*Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*
SBLAB	Society of Biblical Literature Academia Biblica
SCSS	Septuagint and Cognate Studies Series
sg.	singular
Syr.	Syriac
TEV	Today's English Version
THOTC	The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
Vulg.	Vulgate
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testametnum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WO	*Die Welt des Orients*
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZECOT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament
ZTK	*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*

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Translation of Ecclesiastes

Philosophy of Translation

The commentary series encourages quite literal (or wooden) rather than idiomatic translation of the biblical text. This volume applies this commitment in a particular fashion.[1] First, the text of Ecclesiastes is often poetic. Much of it is also deliberately ambiguous. The reason for this is that the text is full of figurative language, which can be interpreted in several ways. Often words, phrases, and entire sentences and groups of verses are deliberately underdetermined and thus purposefully ambiguous. In the translation, I attempt to represent this openness to different meanings through a grammatically, syntactically, and semantically expressive and foreignizing translation that reflects, as much as possible, how a contemporary native speaker may have experienced the text when first hearing or reading it.

The aim of the translation is therefore not to render Qoheleth's oratory into smooth English. Since much of Qoheleth's original Hebrew is expressed in the unusual style of his humorous and underdetermined rhetoric, what sounds unusual, vague, and funny or strange in the original is translated to sound equally unusual, vague, or funny in English. This also helps modern readers of this commentary written in English language to remain aware that the text comes from a different place, time, and culture. The disadvantage of idiomatic renderings is that they already interpret the text, thus narrowing down the various options for understanding the text. As far as possible, I avoid encoding interpretations into the translation.

My translation is therefore semantically, grammatically, and syntactically expressive. Items in square brackets supply information that is implicit in the Hebrew and necessary for understanding but not discernible in English translation (e.g., "to pleasure [I said]: 'What can you achieve?'" in 2:2). Words and phrases in italics separated by a slash (e.g., "do not be *frightened/surprised* by the matter, for one official *watches over/watches out for* the one above him" in 5:8[9]) identify wordplays and similar phenomena, where the Hebrew has several meanings.

1. For more detail on imaginative translation, see Knut M. Heim with Jeffrey R. Oetter, *A Hermeneutic of Imagination: Unlocking Scripture's Full Potential* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2025), 111–26.

Translation

Ecclesiastes 1

1:1The words of Qoheleth, son of David, king in Jerusalem.

2"A mirage, nothing but a mirage," says Qoheleth,
"a mirage, nothing but a mirage. It's all a mirage."
3What profit is there for humans in all their hard work
with which they work so hard under the sun?
4A generation goes and a generation comes;
but the earth remains ever the same.
5The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hurries back to its origin,
from where it keeps rising.
6Going south and turning north,
turning, turnin', going, the wind;
and to its surroundings returns the wind.
7All streams go into the sea,
but the sea never fills up;
to the place where the streams go,
there they return, to go again.
8All these breathtaking things
humans cannot capture with words,
[. . .] the eye cannot be satisfied with seeing,
and [. . .] the ear cannot be filled with hearing.

9Whatever that is, that's what will be,
and whatever has been done, that's what will be done,
and there is nothing that's entirely new under the sun.
10Is there anything of which one can say:
"Look at this, *that* is new?"
It's already been there, a long time ago;
it's something that was there before our time.
11There is no memory of former events;
and even for the events that will happen,
there will be no remembrance with those who will be hereafter.

12I am Qoheleth.

I was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

[13]I set my heart on investigating and exploring by wisdom
everything that is done under the heavens—[and look]:
it is a dreadful task God gave humans to tackle!
[14]I saw all the doings that are done under the sun—and look:
everything is a mirage and a chasing after wind,
[15]what is bent cannot be straightened,
and what is missing cannot be counted.
[16]I spoke, I with my heart:
"I, look, I have expanded and I have added so much more wisdom
than all who have been before me over Jerusalem,
and my heart has seen an abundance of wisdom and knowledge."
[17]And I set my heart on understanding wisdom and on understanding
foolishness—and incongruity I discovered: that even this is a chasing
after wind!
[18]For with much wisdom, much resentment;
and adding knowledge adds pain.

Ecclesiastes 2

[2:1]I said to my heart:

"Come on then, let me test you by pleasure,
and you, see what is good!"—and look, this too was a mirage;
[2]to laughter I said: "[You are] to be praised,"
to pleasure [I said]: "What can you achieve?"
[3]I explored my heart
by stretching my body through wine
(all the while my heart guiding [me] by wisdom!)
and by grasping a state of irrationality
until I would see whether or not this is good for human beings to do under
heaven [for] the number of days of their lives.
[4]I made great my works:
I built myself houses,
I planted myself vineyards.
[5]I made myself gardens and orchards and planted in them fruit trees of
every kind.
[6]I made myself a cascade of ponds to irrigate a grove of lush trees.
[7]I acquired servants and maidservants,

and children of a house there was for myself;
also an increasing holding of cattle and sheep there was for myself,
so many more than anyone before me in Jerusalem.
[8]I even accumulated for myself silver and gold and the most treasured possessions of kings and provinces: I trained myself male and female singers, and what pleasures men, women with big breasts.
[9]And I became so much greater and richer
than anyone who had been in Jerusalem before me.
(Even so, my wisdom stood by me!)
[10]And nothing my eyes desired I withheld from them;
I did not deny my heart anything of all the pleasures
that my heart desired from all my hard work;
and that was my share from all my hard work.

[11]Then I faced all my deeds that my hands had done,
and the hard work at which I had worked so hard to do—
and look: It was all a mirage and chasing after wind,
and there was no success under the sun.

[12]And I faced to see wisdom and folly and irrationality, namely:
What will the man do who comes after the king?
Just what they have done before!

[13]And I saw that there is a success for wisdom over irrationality,
just as light has "success" over darkness;
[14]the wise has his eyes in his head,
while the fool keeps walking in darkness;
but I also discovered this:
for one destiny they are destined, all of them!
[15]And I said to my heart:
"To the same destiny as the fool I also am destined.
Why then did I behave so excessively wise?"
And I spoke to my heart:
"This also is a mirage,
[16]for the wise man will not be remembered any longer than the fool,
for in days to come everybody will already be forgotten—
and how the wise man dies with the fool!"

[17]And so I hated life,
for dreadful upon me seemed the deeds that are done under the sun,

for it is all a mirage and chasing after wind.
[18]And I hated all my achievements
for which I had worked so hard under the sun,
for I have to leave them to a man who will come after me:
[19] who knows whether he will be wise or a fool,
and [yet] he will control all my achievements
for which I have worked with so much effort and wisdom under the sun.
This also is a mirage.

[20]So, I turned to let my heart fall into despair over all the achievements
for which I had worked so hard under the sun,
[21]for it happens that a man—who has worked hard with wisdom, knowledge,
and skill—
must give it—his share!—to someone else who has not worked hard for it!
This also is a mirage and a great evil!
[22]For what will a man have for all his hard work
and for the striving of his heart,
that he was such a hard worker under the sun?
[23]For all his life was an excruciating task full of resentment;
even at night his heart could not rest.
This also, it is a mirage!

[24]There is nothing good in a human being who eats and drinks
and helps his throat to see good in his hard work!
This also I saw: That [the ability to do] this comes from the hand of God.
[25]For who can eat and who can enjoy *more than me/without him*?
[26]For to the man who is good before him,
he gives wisdom and knowledge and joy,
but to the sinner he gives [the] business to amass and to accumulate,
[only] to give [it] to the one who is good before God.
This too is a mirage and chasing after wind!

Ecclesiastes 3

[3:1]For everything there is a season;
a time there is for every matter under heaven.
[2]There is a time to give birth, but there is also a time to die;
there is a time to plant, but there is also a time to uproot what has been planted.
[3]There may be a time for killing, but there is also a time for healing;
there may be a time for demolishing, but there is also a time for building.

[4]There may be a time for weeping, but there is also a time for laughing;
there may be a time for lament, but there is also a time for dancing.
[5]There is a time for throwing stones, but there is also a time for gathering stones;
there is a time for embracing, but there is also a time to be far from embracing.
[6]There is a time for seeking, and there is a time for letting go;
there is a time for keeping something, and a time for throwing something away.
[7]There may be a time for tearing, but there is also a time for mending;
there may be a time for remaining silent, but there is also a time to speak out.
[8]There is a time for loving, but there is also a time for hating;
there may be a time for battle, but there is also a time for peace.
[9]What success has the doer from all his hard work?
[10]I saw the task that God gave humans to tackle.
[11]Everything he has made beautiful in its time—
he also has put eternity into their hearts—
only that no human can find out what God has done from beginning to end.
[12]I knew that there is no good in them,
except to seek happiness and to do good in their lives,
[13]and [I] also [knew] that any human who can eat and drink and see good in his hard work—that is a gift from God.

[14]I knew that everything that God does will remain forever;
nothing can be added to it; nothing can be taken away from it;
and God has done [this] so that [humans] will fear him.

[15]Whatever is now, it was before;
and that which will be, it has been before;
and God seeks out what is being pursued.
[16]And I saw something else under the sun:
in the place of judgment, there was wickedness;
and in the place of righteousness, there was wickedness.
[17]I said to my heart:
"God will judge the righteous just as he judges the wicked;
for there is a time for every matter and against every deed committed there."
[18]I said to my heart:
"For the sake of human beings, so that God would show them, so that they see:
'They are animals, they are like them.'"
[19]For there is the fate of human beings
and there is the fate of animals,
and there is one fate for them:

as this one dies, so dies that one.
And there is one spirit for everything,
and so, there is no advantage for human beings over animals,
for everything is a mirage.
[20]Everything is going to one place.
Everything came into being from the dust,
and everything is returning to the dust.
[21]Who knows whether the spirit of human beings is going upwards,
and whether the spirit of the animals is going down below the earth?
[22]And so I saw that there is nothing better for humans than to take delight in
what they do,
for this is their share,
for who will bring them to see into what comes after them?

Ecclesiastes 4

[4:1]Then I turned, and I saw all the instances of exploitation
that are committed under the sun.
And look: the tear of the oppressed,
and they do not have a comforter;
and the hand of their oppressors, strong–
and they do not have a comforter.
[2]And I praised luckier the dead, who have already died,
than the living who are still alive,
[3]and better off than both
is the one who has not yet come to be,
who will not see the evil deeds that are done under the sun.
[4]And I saw that all the hard work and all the skills
that are put into the things people do
that it springs from a man's envy of his neighbor.
This also is a mirage and a chasing after wind.
[5]The fool folds his hands—and eats his own flesh.
[6]Better one full hand with rest
than two full hands with hard work but chasing after wind.
[7]Then I turned, and I saw another mirage under the sun,
[8]the case of a single man without a companion.
He has no son or brother,
and there is no end to all his hard work;
even so, his eyes are not satisfied with [his] wealth,
and [he says]: "For whom am I working so hard

and depriving myself of [the] good [things of life]?"
This also is a mirage, and a dreadful task it is!

9 Two are better than one
because they have good reward for their hard work.
10For if they fall, one can lift up his companion.
But pity the one who is on his own.
When he falls, there is no one else to lift him up.
11Furthermore, if two lie down together,
then they can warm each other;
but for the one on his own:
how can he generate warmth?
12And while one on his own is easily defeated,
two together can make a stand;
and a threefold cord cannot be torn quickly.
13Better a child, poor and wise,
than a king, old and a fool, who does not know any more how to be warned.
14For from prison he had come to be ruler,
even though he had been born poor in his kingdom.
15I saw all the living, who go about under the sun,
with the second child who had come to stand in his place.
16There was no end to all the people,
to all before whom he was.
Even so, those who will come after him will not appreciate him,
for this also is a mirage and a running after wind.
4:17[5:1]Watch your feet when you go to the house of God;
and draw near to listen rather than to give sacrifice like the fools do:
for they have no knowledge of doing evil.

Ecclesiastes 5

5:1[5:22]Do not be quick with your mouth,
and do not rush your heart to bring out a matter before God,
for God is in heaven, but you are on earth!
Therefore, let your words be few!
2For a dream comes through many tasks,
and the voice of a fool through many words.

2. Hebrew 5:1–19 corresponds to 6:2–20 in English.

[3]When you have made a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it,
for there is no *pleasure/right time* among the fools.
What you have vowed, fulfill!
[4]Better you do not take a vow at all than vow and not keep it!
[5]Do not let your mouth sin against your body,
and do say before the messenger: "It was unintentional!"
Why should God become angry about your voice
and destroy what your hands have established?
[6]When dreams multiply, and mirages, and many words, then fear God!
[7]When you see the oppression of the poor
and justice and equity denied in the province,
do not be *frightened/surprised* by the matter,
for one official *watches over/watches out for* the one above him,
and there are more officials above them.
[8]Yet gain from the land, it is meant for everybody;
even the king is served by a field!
[9]He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver;
and who loves luxury? No gain!
This also is a mirage.
[10]When the good grows, then those who eat it increase.
So what profit is there for him who owns it,
except for the gazing of his eyes?
[11]Sweet is the sleep of the slave,
whether little he eats or much.
But the fullness of the rich permits them no sleep.
[12][Then] there is the case of a particularly sickening evil that I saw under the sun:
wealth hoarded by its owner to his own misery!
[13]Namely, this wealth was lost in a bad business,
and then he fathered a son,
and there is nothing in his hand at all.
[14]Just as he left his mother's womb, naked will he return,
leaving exactly like he had come;
and he cannot take anything for all his hard work,
nothing to carry in his hand.
[15]This also is a sickening evil, just like it:
As he came, so he will leave;
so what success [is there] for him,
that he works so hard for [nothing but] the wind?
[16]Indeed, all his days in darkness he eats,

and resentment increases, and his sickness, and frustration.
17See, then, what I have seen as something good, what is beautiful:
[for everyone] to eat and to drink and to see good in all his hard work
he works so hard under the sun
during the number of the days of his life which God has given him;
for that is his share.
18[I have] also [seen]:
every human being to whom God has given wealth and possessions and whom
he has enabled to eat from it,
and to accept his share and to find enjoyment in his hard work—
it is a gift from God!
19For he does not often remember the days of his life,
for God keeps him occupied with the joy of his heart.

Ecclesiastes 6

6:1There is an[other] evil that I have seen under the sun;
and it is manifold on humans:
2[the case of] a man to whom God has given wealth and riches and honor,
and there is nothing lacking for his throat of all the things that he craves;
but God has not given him the autonomy to consume it,
because *someone else/a foreigner* devours it.
This is a mirage; a moral disease this is.
3If a man fathered a hundred children
and lived many years,
and if the days of his years were many,
but his throat is not filled from this good,
and even [if] a grave there was not for him,
then I would say that a stillborn baby is better off than him!
4For in a mirage it comes,
and into darkness it departs,
and in darkness its name is shrouded;
5also: the sun it has not seen or known,
and yet it has found rest, more than him.
6 And if he should live a thousand years twice, but he cannot see goodness—
do they not all go to one place?
7All the hard work of the man is for his mouth,
yet the throat is never filled.
8For what advantage to the wise man over the fool,
[and] what [. . .] for the poor who know how to advance *in life/against the living*?

[9]Better the seeing of the eyes than the wandering of the throat!
This, too, is a mirage and a chasing after wind!
[10]Whatever has happened, its name has already been called;
and it is known what that is;
and that a man cannot win a case against one who is stronger than him.
[11]For it is true: "the more words, the more elaborate the mirage."
What advantage for the man?
[12]For who knows what is good for the man,
in this life, for the number of days of the life of his mirage,
which he has made like the shadow which [. . .]
[and] who will tell the man what will be after him under the sun?

Ecclesiastes 7

[7:1]Better a name than good oil,
and the day of death than the day of his birth.
[2]Better to go to a house of mourning
than to go to a house of feasting,
for that is the end of every human being,
and the living should take it to heart.
[3]Better resentment than laughter,
for through a bad face the heart will become good.
[4]The heart of wise people is in the house of mourning,
but the heart of fools is in the house of joy.
[5]Better to listen to the rebuke of a wise person
than a man who listens to the song of fools.
[6]For like the sound of thorns under the pot,
so is the laughter of the fool.
And this also is a mirage!
[7]For the oppression can fool a "wise" man,
and a gift can destroy a heart.
[8]Better is the end of a *word/matter* than its beginning;
better a patient wind than a high wind.
[9]Do not hurry in your spirit to become vexed,
for vexation lodges in the lap of fools.

[10]Do not say, "How is it that the former days were better than these?"
for it is not out of wisdom that you inquire about this!
[11]A good thing is wisdom with an inheritance,
and an advantage for those who continue to see "the sun."

Introduction to Ecclesiastes

The Fear of God and Obedience to His Commands as a Roadmap to Happiness

Title of the Book and Authorship

The title of the book consists of six words in the Hebrew. The English translation here reads: "The words of Qoheleth, son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1). And in 1:12 the speaker introduces himself with the words "I am Qoheleth. I was king over Israel in Jerusalem."

The author's description as "son of David" and "king in Jerusalem" suggests Solomon, but the alias "Qoheleth" suggests an anonymous figure. The pseudonym designates an anonymous royal figure from the line of David whose name and actual identity is deliberately obscured.

This would have been obvious to the live audiences who attended Qoheleth's spoken-word performances, in a time much later than the lifetime of Solomon. They would have only known Solomon as a prominent figure from a distant past in their country's history. For later readers of the book, however, awareness of this soon faded, and the royal aspects of his description captured the imagination.[1]

The debate over the identity of the author of the book of Ecclesiastes is thus a relatively recent one. From antiquity until the eighteenth century, virtually all readers, interpreters, preachers, and commentators were unanimous that the author was Solomon, the son of David, who was king over all Israel in Jerusalem from 971–931 BCE. This identification seemed natural, for the one son of David who was king in Jerusalem over all Israel was indeed Solomon. He is the only one who fits this description, as the kingdom of Israel was split into North and South at the beginning of the reign of David's grandson Rehoboam. Yet this virtual unanimity is surprising because the author is not named as Solomon, but as Qoheleth (a name or title that

1. Cf., e.g., Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 43–44.

appears nowhere else in Scripture), in contrast to the book of Proverbs, the Song of Songs, and Ps 72. The textual evidence for such authorial attributions is presented in the table below.

				לִשְׁלֹמֹה by/for Solomon		Ps 72:1
			בֶּן־יִשָׁי׃ son of Jesse	דָּוִד of David	כָּלוּ תְפִלּוֹת ended are the prayers	Ps 72:20
				אֲשֶׁר לִשְׁלֹמֹה׃ which is by/for/ about Solomon	שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים the Song of Songs	Song 1:1
	יִשְׂרָאֵל׃ of Israel	מֶלֶךְ king	בֶּן־דָּוִד son of David	שְׁלֹמֹה of Solomon	מִשְׁלֵי the Proverbs	Prov 1:1
				שְׁלֹמֹה of Solomon	מִשְׁלֵי the Proverbs	Prov 10:1
אֲשֶׁר הֶעְתִּיקוּ אַנְשֵׁי חִזְקִיָּה מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה׃ which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, arranged				שְׁלֹמֹה of Solomon	גַּם־אֵלֶּה מִשְׁלֵי these also are proverbs	Prov 25:1
בִּירוּשָׁלִָם׃ in Jerusalem		מֶלֶךְ king	בֶּן־דָּוִד son of David	קֹהֶלֶת Qoheleth	דִּבְרֵי the words of	Eccl 1:1
בִּירוּשָׁלִָם׃ in Jerusalem	עַל־ יִשְׂרָאֵל over Israel	הָיִיתִי מֶלֶךְ I was king		אֲנִי קֹהֶלֶת I am Qoheleth		Eccl 1:12

The data presented in this table suggest the following considerations about Solomonic authorship:

Virtually all modern Bible translations assign Ps 72 to Solomon, translating the expression לִשְׁלֹמֹה in Ps 72:1 with "Of Solomon" (e.g., NRSVue, NIV), in analogy with numerous other psalms where the nonseparable preposition לְ- in the expression לְדָוִד serves as a so-called *lamed auctoris* and indicates Davidic authorship (e.g., Ps 37:1). However, as the second row in the table shows, the psalm ends with a postscript (v. 20 in the Hebrew) that states, "The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended," and thus seems to assign Davidic authorship to Ps 72, despite its opening phrase, which apparently names Solomon as the psalm's author.[2] If both statements are taken at face value, there is a direct contradiction between the beginning and the end of

2. Attempts to explain the phrase as a colophon from an earlier edition of Davidic psalms and not a conclusion to this psalm, such as Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1998), 98; C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 63–64; Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 15 (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 272, seek to solve one problem (an apparent tension between the beginning and the end of the psalm) by creating another problem (a statement in v. 20 that does not actually apply to the psalms that it appears to describe).

the psalm. In a canonical interpretation, however, v. 20 suggests a reinterpretation of the expression לִשְׁלֹמֹה in v. 1, so that the preposition לְ- retains its more usual meaning, "for." The psalm is presented as a composition of David (with v. 20) for his son Solomon (with v. 1): "For Solomon. O God, give your justice to the king, and your righteousness to the king's son!" The psalm is portrayed as an intercession of David for his son Solomon. While the title in Ps 72:1 *appears* to assign Solomonic authorship to the psalm, the postscript forces a reinterpretation: the psalm is an intercession by David for his son Solomon.

The opening phrase in Song 1:1 (third row in the table) states: "The Song of Songs, which is by/for/about Solomon." Again, virtually all modern Bible translations take the phrase to indicate Solomonic authorship, even though the phrase is worded quite differently than Ps 72 or Prov 1:1, arriving at translations like: "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's" (NRSVue). While the identification of Solomon as the Song's author is traditional and has remained until recently uncontroversial, the meaning of the Hebrew expression אֲשֶׁר לִשְׁלֹמֹה is ambiguous, since the inseparable preposition לְ- can identify Solomon as the composer ("by Solomon"), it can indicate that the Song was composed "for Solomon," and it can suggest that the Song was "about Solomon," since he is one of the characters mentioned in the Song (3:7, 9, 11; 8:11–12). While the title of the composition may assign authorship to Solomon, this is not the only interpretation.

The most unambiguous attribution of Solomonic authorship appears in Prov 1:1 and 10:1. Even so, Proverbs is a compilation of seven different parts, really a collection of collections. First there is a collection of lectures attributed to Solomon, interspersed with various speeches (1:1–9:18). Second, there is a collection of proverbs (10:1–22:16) attributed to Solomon in 10:1. Third, there is a collection of proverbs (22:17–24:22) attributed to a group of unnamed wise men in 22:17. Fourth, there is another collection of proverbs (24:23–34) attributed to a group of unnamed wise people (24:23). Fifth, there is a further collection of proverbs attributed to Solomon but collected by courtiers during the reign of Hezekiah (25:1–29:27). Sixth, there is a collection of sayings and reflections attributed to Agur, son of Jakeh (30:1–33). Seventh, there are the sayings of Lemuel, really a brief lecture he received from his mother (31:1–9) plus an extended poetic character portrait of an ideal wife (31:10–31). At first sight, then, the title appears to assign the entire book to Solomon, son of David, even though significant parts of it manifestly were not authored by him, as subtitles to later parts demonstrate. To reconcile these apparent contradictions, notable Proverbs scholar Bruce Waltke explains:

> An anonymous final editor appended Collections V–VII (= 25:1–31:31) to Solomon's collections I–IV (= 1:1–24:34). Judging by biblical analogues, he allowed the original heading attributing the work to Solomon (1:1) to stand as the title of his

> final composition because Solomon is the principal author of the sayings (chapters 1–29) and the most distinguished author of his anthology. . . . This final editor, the real author of the book, not of its sayings, probably lived during the Persian period (ca. 540–332 BCE) or in the Hellenistic era.[3]

Waltke's explanation highlights two circumstances that are relevant for the identification of Qoheleth. First, Waltke considers that the final editor of book of Proverbs and author of the book in its final form may have operated as late as the Hellenistic era, the period that we suggest for the composition of Ecclesiastes.[4] Second, while Waltke succeeds in explaining why the attribution to Solomon in Prov 1:1 should not be considered a false claim, it also indicates that biblical attributions of authorship were not meant to be as factual as modern claims to authorship. Consequently, the designation and descriptions of the main speaker in the book of Ecclesiastes may be as allusive and indirect as the title in Proverbs. A comparison between the authorial attributions in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes confirms this.

Rows 4, 7, and 8 in the table demonstrate significant overlap between Prov 1:1 and Eccl 1:1. Three of the six words in Eccl 1:1 appear in identical fashion and sequence in Prov 1:1 (בֶּן־דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ). A further two words in Ecclesiastes are synonymous to or coreferential with their respective counterparts in Proverbs (דִּבְרֵי, "words of," and מִשְׁלֵי, "proverbs of"; יִשְׂרָאֵל, "[over] Israel," and בִּירוּשָׁלִָם, "in Jerusalem"), and they also appear in the same sequence. The substitution of Qoheleth (קֹהֶלֶת) for Solomon (שְׁלֹמֹה) in the authorial attribution thus is significant. While Eccl 1:1 was intentionally composed to conform with Prov 1:1, the different authorial attribution stands out.

The similarities between Prov 1:1 and Eccl 1:12 and the similarity between Eccl 1:1 and Prov 1:1 explain why the identification of Qoheleth with Solomon seemed so natural to earlier generations of readers. The comparison also clarifies, however, that the change from Solomon (שְׁלֹמֹה) in Proverbs to Qoheleth (קֹהֶלֶת) in Ecclesiastes was deliberate and significant. If the person who wrote the title in Eccl 1:1 wanted his readers to think that its author was indeed Solomon, then why did he not say so? The substitution of one word—שְׁלֹמֹה for קֹהֶלֶת—would have been enough: דִּבְרֵי שְׁלֹמֹה בֶן־דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ בִּירוּשָׁלִָם, "the words of Solomon, son of David, king in Jerusalem." Ecclesiastes never names Solomon as its author or main speaker; he was never intended to be identified as the book's author or main speaker.[5] This is also supported by the note in 1:16 that refers to several kings over Jerusalem before Qoheleth, "clearly excluding a Solomonic reference."[6]

3. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 36–37.

4. In his *Table Talk*, Martin Luther dated Ecclesiastes even later: "Thus he [i.e., Solomon] did not himself write the book, but it was composed at the time of the Maccabees, by Sirach." The quote is from Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 44.

5. So also Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 46.

6. Robert D. Holmstedt, John A. Cook, and Phillip S. Marshall, *Qoheleth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*, BHHT (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 47.

The other descriptions in 1:1 and 1:12 inform Qoheleth's original audiences and later readers that the speaker whose words they are about to read was a person of significant means, influence, and intellectual capacity, comparable in some loose sense to the legendarily wise Solomon. This at once allusive and elusive scheme achieved two purposes. First, it laid claim to the fact that the speaker, a descendant of David, may be a "messiah" who had the capacity to save his people from foreign rule. Second, it ensured the speaker's anonymity, in case the written collection of his speech fell into the wrong hands.

Since the word Qoheleth functions as a pseudonym and a title all at once,[7] this commentary will use that designation in transliterated form throughout, to distinguish the speaker of the words in the book from its title, Ecclesiastes. "Ecclesiastes" is, of course, itself a transliteration of the designation for its main speaker from Greek Ἐκκλησιαστής.

The transliteration identifies the presenter whose oration makes up the body of the book as קֹהֶלֶת. The word "Qoheleth" is a transliteration of how the word would have been pronounced in Hebrew. It is a *qal* feminine participle of the verb קהל. The *qal* of the verb does not appear elsewhere, and so we can only infer its meaning from its use in the *niphal* and *hiphil*, where it means "to assemble." Its particular form, a feminine singular participle, identifies his professional or well-established social role as a speaker at group gatherings. Most of the traditional renderings of the term in translations therefore are variations on the theme "leader of the assembly," "speaker in the assembly," or even "assemblyman" (Jarick).[8] Hence, it is transliterated from the Greek as *Ecclesiastes* in Latin, and translated as "Preacher" in English, "Prediger" in German, "Predicador" in Spanish, and so on. By contrast, the English also has "Ecclesiastes" and the French uses "L'écclesiaste," transliterations from the Latin, and the Italian CEI translation has "Qoélet," a transliteration of the Hebrew.

Within the Bible, the word Qoheleth only occurs in Ecclesiastes. It hides the identity of the person addressed by this title. It is a pseudonym, a "literary ploy to draw a veil of mystery over the main character of Ecclesiastes."[9] As a newly coined designation, it describes the book's speaker as a public orator similar to the famous rhetoricians of contemporary Greek culture. Since he has performed the book's contents orally in a quasi-professional capacity, the designation Qoheleth is used both as the speaker's nickname and as his professional title, much like a professional smith in English is sometimes called "Smithy," as if that were his name (analogous to "Qoheleth" here and in 1:12; 7:27; 12:9, 10), and sometimes referred to as "the smith,"

7. A translation of the word as "Teacher," with capitalization, has been chosen by some modern Bible versions, most notably NIV. However, the title is nowhere else used for teachers, and Hebrew has several other words for teachers.

8. John Jarick, "Ecclesiastes Among the Comedians," in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, ed. Katherine J. Dell and Will Kynes, LHBOTS 587 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014).

9. Doug Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 84–85.

using the title for his profession (analogous to "the *qoheleth*," only in 12:8; in Hebrew the article is typically not used with proper names as is commonly done in Greek).

The words of Qoheleth make up almost everything in the book. They are introduced in the third person at its beginning (1:1–2), with v. 2 reporting his thesis statement that everything is a mirage, with the brief comment "says Qoheleth." In the middle (7:27), a short section from 7:27–8:1 is marked as the words of "Lady Qoheleth," also by means of a brief comment "says Qoheleth," but this time with a feminine form of the verb אָמְרָה, "says," indicating that the speaker in this brief sequence takes on the persona of a woman.[10] At 12:8, his thesis statement—that everything is a mirage—is repeated, again with a brief quotation report. Here, at the end of his speech sequence, the designation is formulated slightly differently—as "says *the* qoheleth" (12:8)—to reflect his role as a public orator in a more prominent way. Compare the comment above about "Smithy" (nickname) versus "the smith" (profession). All the explicit statements about Qoheleth's activities describe him performing the contents of the book viva voce, in spoken form. As a written record of Qoheleth's speech, it begins with a formal introduction of his performance in 1:1 and concludes with an editorial comment that evaluates and recommends the work in its written form to a later generation of readers (12:9–14). This creates a narrative frame around it that provides background information to guide the book's readers in their interpretation of the written record of Qoheleth's spoken words.[11]

Date and Historical Context

What were the historical circumstances that prompted the composition of the speech now issued in written form in the book of Ecclesiastes? The language of the book as well as numerous references to sociopolitical circumstances suggest the final decades of the third century BCE.[12] For this reason, the majority of recent commentators believe that the book was composed in Jerusalem in the second part of the third century BCE.[13]

10. Cf. the comments on 7:27–8:1 and 8:2.

11. Cf. the discussion of the "frame narrator" in the introduction and the commentary on 12:9–14.

12. Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 19, Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 94. Notable exceptions to this dating are Daniel C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language: Re-evaluating its Nature and Date* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1988); Choon Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 20–21; Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Seow dates the book in the Persian period, from the second half of the fifth to the first half of the fourth centuries, Fredericks contemplates a date as early as the eighth or seventh centuries.

13. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 46. Bartholomew has a substantial review of scholarly literature that aims to date Ecclesiastes on linguistic grounds, that is, according to how well distinctive features of the language of Ecclesiastes fit into given historical periods (*Ecclesiastes*, 48–54). In the end, he agrees with Longman's verdict that the book cannot be dated on the basis of its language alone (*Ecclesiastes*, 53–54). However, he concludes on the basis of the social setting reflected in Ecclesiastes that it dates from the Hellenistic period (*Ecclesiastes*, 54–59).

External evidence shows that the book in its written form existed by around 175–150 BCE, as a fragment of the book from this period is preserved in a manuscript found in Qumran (4QQoh[a] [=4Q109]). There is also some indication that the book of Ben Sira (written in the second century BCE) knew of and indirectly responded to some of its contents.[14]

The political context to which the book responds appears to be a period of foreign rule over Judea under the Ptolemaic Dynasty of Greek rulers in Egypt. This rule lay heavy on the land. During the wars of succession between Alexander the Great's generals (321–301 BCE), which lasted twenty years, Ptolemy I had forcibly taken the Judean capital no less than four times, resulting in the deportation and resettlement of a sizeable number of Judeans to Alexandria in Egypt. According to the Letter of Aristeas §§173–181, this is where the Pentateuch was translated into Greek under Ptolemy II (285–246 BCE).

As the decree on the declaration of livestock and slaves issued by Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–246) in 260 BCE, the story about Joseph son of Tobiah in Josephus, and the use of royal Ptolemaic money as the only legal tender in Egypt, Cyrenaica, Cyprus, and Coele-Syria (to which Judea belonged) demonstrate, the Judean population was "very quickly incorporated into two realms of the Hellenistic world: administration and commerce."[15] What is more, Judea constantly remained at the receiving end of Greek military might, with no less than five wars, the so-called Syrian wars being fought between the Ptolemies in the South and the Seleucids to the North of Judea from 274–271, 260–253, 246–241, 221–217, and 201–200/198 BCE.

The political administration was that of a hyparchy (ὑπαρχεία), with Judea and the other local entities of Samaria, Galilee, Idumea, and Ashdod being part of the larger region of Syria and Phoenicia. The Ptolemies entrusted the local government to the high priest, who, as overseer (προστάτης), conducted the affairs of Judea for the Ptolemaic king together with the priesthood and the elders of Jerusalem. This gave Judea a certain amount of political self-administration and independence for some of the period, although of course the payment of taxes to the Ptolemies was part of their duties.

With the pro-Seleucid high priest Onias II's refusal to pay these taxes during the third Syrian war (246–241 BCE), Joseph ben Tobiah (ca. 240–218 BCE), a lay citizen, took over the tax lease and the role of overseer.

Krüger summarizes the passages in Ecclesiastes that reflect most directly on political circumstances during the period:

14. Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 19; see also the literature cited in note 133. The following paragraphs draw heavily on Krüger's excellent discussion of the historical circumstances in the time of Qoheleth (ibid., 19–21).

15. R. Bohlen, "Kohelet im Kontext hellenistischer Kultur," in *Das Buch Kohelet: Studien zur Struktur, Geschichte, Rezeption und Theologie*, ed. Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, BZAW 254 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 257–58, cited in English translation in Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 20.

> With the (quite critically drawn) picture of a "king over Israel in Jerusalem," Qoh 1:12–2:26 perhaps also brings to mind contemporary local potentates like the Tobiads or the high priests. Qoheleth 4:13 and 10:16–17 perhaps allude to the discussion between partisans of the Ptolemies and the Seleucids in Jerusalem. And 10:5–7 could reflect experiences of the ascent of the "nouveaux riches," which become graphic for us in an exemplary way in the presentation of the Tobiad Joseph in Josephus (cf. *Ant.* 12.157–236). In any case, in dealing with the king (and his local representatives), 8:1–9 and 10:4 advise extreme caution. And when 9:14–18. tells of the siege of a little city by a great king, this can also awaken memories of the crusades of the Ptolemies against Jerusalem and through Jewish territory.[16]

The Greek overlords initiated a number of agricultural innovations through the introduction of new plants and technologies, such as contour farming and irrigation techniques, leading to an "economic boom" of sorts. The payment of taxes was arranged through local tax leaseholders (τελῶναι). Such positions were granted to those who promised the king the highest income. The system carried no risk for the absentee king, for any tax shortfalls had to be covered from the leaseholders' own capital. In turn, this arrangement ensured that the tax obligations were enforced brutally by local tax officials like the infamous Joseph ben Tobiah. Ultimately, the local population benefited little from the economic upsurge, while the foreign regime and local collaborators prospered at their expense.[17] The socioeconomic situation is captured well in the words of Tcherikover:

> The crafty and resourceful tax-collector, the powerful and unscrupulous businessman, was the spiritual father of the Jewish Hellenizing movement, and throughout the entire brief period of the flourishing of Hellenism in Jerusalem, lust for profit and pursuit of power were among the most pronounced marks of the new movement.[18]

Royal officials, organized in three tiers, controlled the system: "In the province the *oikonomoi* at the head of the hyparchies oversaw the state revenues. They were subordinate to the *dioiketes* for all of Syria and Phoenicia, who in turn were responsible to the *dioiketes* in Alexandria."[19] As Krüger correctly notes, "In Qoh 5:7–8 this system seems to be precisely described and criticized."[20]

This is the socioeconomic and sociopolitical situation to which Qoheleth's speech responded, albeit indirectly. We will explore next the reasons for this indirection.

16. Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 20.

17. Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 20–21.

18. Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 142; Stephan De Jong, "Qohelet and the Ambitious Spirit of the Ptolemaic Period," *JSOT* 61 (1994): 91.

19. Bohlen, "Kohelet im Kontext hellenistischer Kultur," 259, cited in Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 21.

20. Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 21.

Language and Style, Genre, Rhetorical Design and Intention

The general aim of the ZECOT series is to help the readers of the commentary "to hear the messages of Scripture as biblical authors intended them to be heard." In this commentary, this aim is executed with special attention to the book's function as an aide-mémoire for oral presentation before live audiences. Qoheleth's message was intended to help his audience navigate very specific sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and socioreligious circumstances. Despite the specificity, however, similar circumstances persist throughout history and into the present day.

As a piece of literature, Ecclesiastes is one of the most enigmatic pieces ever produced. Qoheleth, who presents the material from 1:2–12:8 in spoken form (cf. 1:2; 7:27; 12:8), is a skillful public speaker and a master of concealment who hides the true meaning of his spoken routine behind underdetermined language, ciphers, ambiguous allusions, and other kinds of double meanings through numerous wordplays and amphibologies (entire phrases with two or more meanings). Almost everything in his routine—from individual words to short expressions and phrases to medium length speech segments and larger spoken sequences—can be understood in several different ways, as the history of the book's interpretation demonstrates.[21]

This commentary, in line with the design of the series in which it appears, pays special attention to Qoheleth as a public orator. Consequently, we will employ the full range of discourse-linguistic tools to observe how he presented his materials in spoken form to achieve a larger rhetorical and theological agenda. The book is the written record of a discourse that was composed to be performed audibly, in one sitting, in front of live audiences. It was designed to be heard and observed in the form of live performances, not just seen in written form on a scroll. Qoheleth would originally have performed his routine as it now appears in the book. With 4,170 words (including the editorial appendix in 12:9–14, which was not part of his original oratory), a performance of the whole would have lasted about forty minutes.

As we observe Qoheleth's spoken routine, we will also pay attention to the passion and urgency with which Qoheleth presented his speech sequence to impress its message on his hearers' ears. It is "the text itself that is our best informant as to how it should be read."[22]

In the face of attractive religious and cultural alternatives under foreign rule,

21. Cf. Brennan W. Breed, "Biblical Scholars' Ethos of Respect: Original Meanings, Original Texts, and Reception History of Ecclesiastes," in *Reading Other Peoples' Texts: Social Identity and the Reception of Authoritative Traditions*, ed. Ken Brown et al., LHBOTS 692 (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 212–36.

22. Timothy L. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet: A Text-Linguistic Approach to Reading Qohelet as Discourse* (Maastricht: Shaker, 2006), 5.

Qoheleth aimed to promote loyalty to traditional Jewish beliefs and cultural values. His faith was orthodox, grounded in the fear of God. To achieve this objective, he employed a wide repertoire of rhetorical strategies. As befits the intercultural situation, Qoheleth used many of the tools and strategies of Greek rhetoric, including humor, as the similarities between many of his soundbites and those of famous Greek comedians demonstrate.[23] These include the special use of new words, phrases, and figures of speech. They also include the selection of themes and ideas that were particularly relevant to the situation under foreign rule. They include the arrangement of these in a sequence that builds in slow-burning fashion from general observations on social injustice (beginning with 3:16–22) to the motivational climax at the end of the routine (12:1–7). And they also include how he shaped the presentation of those ideas, especially the skillful deployment of underdetermined language to create plausible deniability and the clever use of humor to ridicule the perspectives of those whom he targeted in his routine.

The language of Ecclesiastes is in many ways unique in comparison with other parts of the Old Testament. Most prominent is the underdetermined nature of its language, leading to intentional ambiguity not only at the level of words, expressions, and entire phrases, but also at the level of the syntax of longer sentences, verses, paragraphs, longer sequences, and Qoheleth's speech sequence as a whole. His speech, recorded in written form, consists of shorter speech segments that often flow into each other without direct connections or transitions. At the same time, there is nonetheless also a sense of continuity, with fluid transitions from one part to the next.[24] In this regard, Qoheleth's discourse is similar to the routines of modern stand-up comedians.[25] Each part has an important meaning and message on its own, yet the sequence as a whole means more than the sum of its parts. His speech has a powerful overall message to which each part makes an important contribution, without all the parts being connected in directly logical fashion.

Over the centuries and into the present day, the book of Ecclesiastes has received wildly divergent interpretations. The reason for this fascinating phenomenon lies in the nature of the book itself. Standard features of the language system, peculiarities of Qoheleth's language and style, and issues of genre and intention are inseparably intertwined.

23. Jarick, "Ecclesiastes Among the Comedians."

24. Is it possible that the frequent introduction of "case studies" through the stereotypical expression יֵשׁ, "there is" has the same function as the stereotypical transitions from one gag to the next in the stand-up routines of modern comedians?

25. Cf. the comment by Stuart Weeks in his recently published commentary on Ecclesiastes: "Qohelet is not a comedian, but his monologue resembles many modern stand-up routines, moving as they do through different topics with a mixture of anecdotes, one-liners and maybe even poems" (Weeks, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ecclesiastes, Volume 1: Introduction and Commentary on Ecclesiastes 1.1–5.6* [London: T&T Clark, 2020], 13, with reference to a proposal for a paper on "Hyper-Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes," which I subsequently delivered at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Denver). While we developed our views independently, there is much overlap despite slight differences in detail.

Much in the book is calculatedly ambiguous.[26] Why? The answer appears when we uncover the *hidden* motivations for its unique nature. In the discussion of the book's historical context, we have seen that the book was produced during the explosive sociopolitical circumstances under foreign rule exercised by the Greek Ptolemaic kings in Egypt. Historical data reveal that the apparent invincibility, cultural sophistication, and economic prowess of the Greeks exerted a strong pull toward assimilation on the various populations under Greek rule, resulting also in the Hellenization of the Judean population.[27]

While many have recognized that Qoheleth is *ambivalent* about a wide range of religious and philosophical issues, it is not until fairly recently that its profoundly and purposefully *ambiguous* nature has been appreciated and explored.[28] As Ingram notes, "whether or not readers are convinced that I have demonstrated that Ecclesiastes is fundamentally ambiguous, there can be no doubt that this biblical book has been read in markedly different ways throughout its history, and especially among scholars over the last twenty or so years." [29] Drawing on Derrida's interpretive concept of deconstruction, he suggests that "the plurivocity of the text which Deconstruction reveals opens the text to the possibility of different readings and prepares the way for a reader-oriented approach to the text."[30] He further explains his strategy for the interpretation of Ecclesiastes: "I will explore something of its *plurivocity*, because it does seem that any *univocal* reading strains under the pressure of *other voices crying out to be heard*."[31]

I agree with Ingram's identification of the fundamentally ambiguous nature of the book, but I disagree with him over the reasons for this multivalence. As we shall see throughout the commentary, the voices in the book, though more than one, are always Qoheleth's own. He has formulated most of his pronouncements in intentionally *underdetermined* fashion. Ingram correctly notes that "ambiguity encourages readers to play an active role in determining meaning,"[32] but the reasons for Qoheleth's deployment of ambiguity are not what Ingram thinks they are. Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes is not an end in itself but rather the consequence of a strategy of indirection. Qoheleth uses hidden transcripts to mislead part of his audience into

26. The fullest exploration of this phenomenon to date is Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*.

27. Cf. esp. Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden: Von den ältesten Zeiten bis in die Gegenwart, Band 2/2* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 197–266; Martin Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1969). This insight also governs an important article by Stephan de Jong that I discovered after this commentary had been completed. He poses the following hypothesis: "Qohelet developed his thoughts in view of the ambitious spirit of a specific group, namely that of the Jewish aristocratic circles influenced by the Hellenistic culture" (De Jong, "Qohelet and the Ambitious Spirit of the Ptolemaic Period," 90).

28. Cf. the distinction between "ambiguous" and "ambivalent" in Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*, 11–12.

29. Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*, 37.

30. Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*, 36.

31. Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*, 36–43, here 37; emphases added.

32. Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*, 37.

thinking that he says one thing, when in reality he means something else—a hidden second meaning only available to those in the know.

Speaking about the "infrapolitics" of subordinate groups, Scott demonstrates that the powerless often employ what he calls hidden transcripts in which "the meaning of the text . . . is rarely straightforward; it is often meant to communicate one thing to those in the know and another to outsiders and authorities."[33] We now turn to explore this second meaning.

Against the background of foreign occupation, Qoheleth takes a stand against Hellenization, an indiscriminate adoption of the foreign Greek culture into all aspects of Judean life, such as economy, religion, and the pursuits of leisure and social life. To keep his real, seditious intentions hidden from the watching eyes and the listening ears of the foreign regime and its informers,[34] he employs strategies of indirection that in more recent times have been most prominent among stand-up comedians.

Short of outright rebellion, one of the most potent means of resistance under oppressive rule is the tongues of the comedians with their veiled yet pointed allusions to current affairs, which are specific enough for the insider audience to recognize the reference to real-life events while carefully concealing what the talk is really about behind underdetermined language.

Such talk is predominantly humorous, making the audience laugh about the foreign occupiers and about themselves, with the repertoire ranging from mild irony to gallows humor, from self-deprecation and self-irony to biting sarcasm and outright ridicule of the other. Humor is both a pressure valve for repressed resentment and an escape hatch for suppressed outrage. The release of laughter can heal sore wounds of humiliation, bring release from pain, restore hope, bolster morale, and kindle resistance.[35] Throughout the commentary, we will encounter numerous occasions where Qoheleth's words, heard in this context, are sidesplittingly funny, despite their often-somber tone. We are dealing with political satire.[36] The book of Ecclesiastes is resistance literature.

Ingram's claim that ambiguity encourages readers to play an active role in *choosing between several possible meanings* is essentially correct,[37] but in contrast with Ingram, I believe that on most occasions where several different meanings are possible—and

33. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 184.

34. These would, in the main, be Judean sympathizers who have already bought into the alien culture and are benefiting from their collaboration with the foreign overlords.

35. Cf. esp. Jacqueline A. Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007).

36. On the subversive potential of comedy, see also Melissa A. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Scott, *Hidden Transcripts*, esp. 162–65; Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*.

37. Cf. Ingram: "my aim in this book is specifically to study possibilities for interpretation of Ecclesiastes, not necessarily with the aim of finding a single unified meaning, but rather with the goal of exploring the range of possible meanings of the book" (Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*, 36–37).

these are the various meanings that usually command the attention of religious readers and academic commentators—there exists also an altogether different, hidden meaning that only rarely makes the page. Those who miss the hidden references to current events and overlook the humorous dimensions of the work fail to notice the sociocritical and seditious elements in Qoheleth's language.

A prominent and crucial term in Qoheleth's oratory demonstrates the existence of this hidden dimension: the catchphrase תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, "under the sun." Occurring no less than twenty-nine times, it describes the topic of Qoheleth's musings. Despite its crucial importance here, it is unique to Ecclesiastes. By contrast, its companion catchphrase—תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם, "under the heavens"—appears only three times in the book (in 1:13; 2:3; 3:1), but eight times in the rest of the Bible (Gen 1:9; 6:17; Exod 17:14; Deut 7:24; 9:14; 25:19; 29:19; 2 Kgs 14:27), where it refers to the geographic location under the sky or to life on earth. The two phrases are almost universally assumed to mean the same thing and taken at face value, with "sun" referring to the solar body in the sky, "the heavens" referring to the sky, and the preposition "under" taken as a spatial qualifier, indicating the realm on earth. Consequently, it enjoys paraphrases like "life on earth" and "the universality of human experience."[38] The phrase is taken to be an idiom, and rightly so. However, an idiom means more than and often something different from the sum of its individual parts.[39] Against the historical background of foreign rule under the Egyptian Ptolemaic kings, therefore, I propose that the phrase is a cipher for Egypt: "under the sun" means "subject to the Egyptian foreign regime."

This can be demonstrated with the use of the word "sun" in Egypt. First, "the Sun" was a common epithet for the Egyptian pharaohs who, as head of state, represented Egyptian rule, at home and abroad. Second, cross-cultural correspondence addressed to the Egyptian pharaoh regularly names the monarch as "the Sun."[40] This ingratiating address was a customary title for the Egyptian kings. Not surprisingly, the address "My Sun" is found in numerous letters addressed to Egyptian pharaohs,[41] and this identification is explicit in one of the Amarna letters, EA 155, 5, 47: "the king is the Eternal Sun." Third, the Ptolemaic kings all carried the designation "son of the Sun" in their official throne cartouches. For example, the name of Ptolemy I reads: "King of the South and North, Setep-en-Ra-Meri-Åmen, son of the Sun, Ptulmis."[42]

38. For the former, see Aarre Lauha, *Kohelet* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 33; Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 37. For the latter, see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 104, Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 66.

39. P. H. Matthews, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 169; Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 106.

40. Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 66.

41. Smith mentions EA 45, 49, 60, 61, 78, 83, 85, with reference to EA 55; *CTU* 2.39.1, 3, 5.

42. E. A. Wallis Budge, *Egypt under the Saïtes, Persians, and Ptolemies* (Oosterhout: Anthropological, 1968), 179.

Fourth, all Ptolemies assumed the identity of and were worshiped as gods, a circumstance that would have antagonized Jewish sensibilities, provoked religious opposition, and made them a target for anti-Hellenistic activism. Fifth, a likely objection to this argument is in fact evidence in its favor. The objection may be raised that the similar phrase "under the heavens"—which in Qoheleth clearly seems to refer to the same entity as "under the sun"—does refer to nothing else but "life on earth" or the like. In response, my identification of the idiom as a cipher, a covert allusion, makes an innocuous alternative formulation like "under the heavens" a necessity for reasons of plausible deniability. Qoheleth needed a way out in case the authorities ever caught on to his hidden meanings, and this alternative formulation served as his verbal alibi. Sixth and finally, it must be admitted that the argument presented here is far from conclusive and in the absence of certainty, some might say, the traditional understanding ought to be preferred. In response, this is precisely the point. Qoheleth has covered his verbal and literary tracks so well, he could not be nailed for sure, then and now. So again, a circumstance that appears to weaken my argument does in fact strengthen it.

In conclusion, Qoheleth had to be careful, and this is why his oratory is so multivalent. As a public orator he addressed the explosive situation of his time, even using some of the techniques of Greek rhetoric, as Jarick has demonstrated.[43] Qoheleth's aim was to counteract the popularity of Hellenistic culture and religion, whose allure was all the stronger for the coercion of Greek military might and the promise of fortune for those who collaborated with the foreign regime. For example, the insidious tax system enforced by unscrupulous tax lease holders like Joseph ben Tobiah brought immense wealth to Judea, for a time at least.[44]

I want to develop the distinctive quality of this commentary's approach in conversation with a passage in Lohfink's commentary. As we shall see, I agree with many of his points but depart on some because of my identification of the genre of Qoheleth's work described and demonstrated above. Here is the passage:

> [The book of Qoheleth] recommends actions that correspond to the special location of [his audience] within a general situation that they, from their place in Jerusalem, could hardly have influenced. It recognizes that God wants justice for humankind; it calls the evil of this world by name, without fear; it is driven by hunger for justice and well-being; but it does not propose a revolutionary utopia. Rather it suggests some political-economical options and otherwise tries only to show how individuals might take some reasonable steps. It is the book of a teacher and thinker, not of a prophet or guerrilla warrior.[45]

43. Cf. Jarick, who proposed that "the book of Ecclesiastes can be seen as having been structured along the lines of ancient Greek public speech" ("The Rhetorical Structure of Ecclesiastes," in *Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Jarick, LHBOTS 618 [London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016], 208).

44. Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, 197–266.

45. Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 13.

While agreeing with much of Lohfink's position, I will elaborate on his points one by one. (1) While Lohfink follows the near universal approach to analyze Qoheleth's composition as a *literary* work, I will explore it as the written record of an essentially *oral* piece, *composed and recorded for delivery to live audiences*. (2) I agree with Lohfink's proposal that the book was written in reaction to Hellenizing influence. Qoheleth's speech aimed to promote a via media that preserved the essentials of Judean faith and religious praxis while adopting the best of what the new culture offered.[46] (3) In doing so, however, he presents a scathing critique of the negative aspects of Greek influence, which included economic, legal, and political systems of exploitation. Qoheleth indeed emphasizes that the Judean God wants justice for all, but for him the divine mandate for justice *also applies here and now, in the Judea of his time under Ptolemaic rule*. Qoheleth indeed calls evil by its name, yet not only the evil of this world in general *but the evils that occur here and now, in Judea under foreign rule*. Qoheleth indeed is driven by hunger for justice and well-being, *but it is also a hunger for justice and well-being for the Jewish population under the oppressive foreign regime*. Qoheleth indeed does not propose a revolutionary utopia, *but he covertly calls out the foreign oppressors and their manipulative-coercive practices and presents a barely concealed rallying cry for his compatriots to resist the allure of foreign values in matters religious, social, and economic*. (4) I agree with Lohfink's insight that Qoheleth offers political-economic options for coping with the vicissitudes of life in general, *but these options also present coping strategies for rising above foreign coercion*. (5) Consequently, Lohfink's comment that Qoheleth "otherwise tries only to show how individuals might take some reasonable steps" does not capture what he really wants to achieve. (6) Finally, then, Ecclesiastes is not only the book of a teacher and thinker but also the written record of a poetic prophet, an accomplished public orator who employed his formidable skills in an explosive amalgam of rhetorical schemes and devices borrowed from the traditional arsenals of Hebrew eloquence and Greek rhetoric in a new way to fight a guerrilla war of the mind.

Reception History

A detailed review of the history of the interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes (twenty-three pages) appears in a recent commentary by Bartholomew.[47]

46. Lohfink notes that what was positive about Greek culture "needs to be assimilated, but in such a way that it not be necessary to send the children to a Greek school; in such a way also that future generations will continue to come to the temple, not so much in order to offer sacrifices (the heathen also do this), but rather to listen when there are readings from the Torah and the Prophets, and to grow in the *fear of God*. That message is to be read in the center of the book. It reveals its purpose" (Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 9). The tag "center of the book" references 4:17–5:6[5:1–7].

47. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 21–43.

The book-length review by Christianson provides a very helpful review through the centuries.[48]

A clear picture emerges: Premodern readings, which broadly speaking continued into the nineteenth century, display a certain uniformity held together by three shared premises—Solomonic authorship; the understanding of the keyword הֶבֶל, woodenly, "breath," against the anticipation of an afterlife; and an awareness of the tensions within the book.[49]

Modern readings, by contrast, display an ever-increasing fragmentation of interpretative results, with divergent understandings of the book as a whole as well as almost every one of its parts.[50] Bartholomew summarizes:

> Despite [the] polarization with respect to the message of Ecclesiastes, a certain consensus has emerged out of a historical-critical interpretation of Ecclesiastes. Very few scholars nowadays defend Solomonic authorship; most regard Ecclesiastes as written by an unknown Jew around the late third century BCE. Most scholars regard the book as a basic unity with the exception of the epilogue.[51]

In addition to the rejection of Solomonic authorship, the modern phase of the book's interpretation is also characterized by a huge variety of translations and interpretations of the keyword הֶבֶל.[52] What does this mean for the state of modern scholarship on the book? Bartholomew continues:

> With the possible exception of the discernment of different voices/strands in Ecclesiastes, all three assumptions that Murphy identified as common to precritical interpretation of Ecclesiastes have been undermined by historical criticism. However, as regards Ecclesiastes's structure, message, and relationship to OT traditions and to international wisdom, there is no consensus.[53]

The present commentary seeks to build on valuable insights from all phases of the book's interpretation and apply them in fresh ways. First, I agree with the modern insight that the book's author and the first-person speaker in the book is not Solomon but an unknown orator who, for didactic purposes, assumes a Solomonic persona, only to parody it. Second, following pre-modern interpretations, I translate the word הֶבֶל uniformly with the term "mirage" throughout the book, taking its literal

48. Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

49. Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, WBC 23A (Dallas: Word, 1992), xlix–l. Murphy is followed by Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 22.

50. See the comments by Ingram, above.

51. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 39–40.

52. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 39. Cf. also Douglas B. Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet's Work* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), Russell L. Meek, "Twentieth- and Twenty-First Century Readings of Hebel (הֶבֶל) in Ecclesiastes," *CurBR* 14 (2016).

53. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 40.

meaning "breath" into account. Nonetheless, I follow modern insights into metaphor theory in proposing that in Ecclesiastes and elsewhere in the Old Testament הֶבֶל is used as a well-established metaphor to refer to the visual phenomenon of mirages to describe illusory cognitive ideas. Third, I propose to resolve the perceived tensions and different voices in the book with recourse to a discourse-linguistic approach that identifies it as the written record of a speech composed to be performed to live audiences, with the oratory's ambiguity resulting from its subversive nature, which demands underdetermination and humor as rhetorical strategies.

Intertextual Issues

The book of Ecclesiastes shares themes with other texts from the ancient world. A convenient compendium of essays exploring the book's intertextual relations within the bible can be found in a 2014 volume entitled *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, edited by Katharine Dell and Will Kynes.[54]

In the first part of the volume, Ecclesiastes is explored in dialogue with the rest of the Hebrew Bible, with special reference to Gen 1–11, Num 15, the Deuteronomic law of vows, the relationship of the Solomonic fiction to the depiction of Solomon in 1 Kgs 1–11, as well as Isaiah, Jonah, Ps 140, Job, Proverbs, Song of Songs, and intratextual issues (inner-textuality) within Ecclesiastes itself.

In the second part of the volume, intertextual relations are explored with regard to ancient Near Eastern literature, the Greek comedians, Ben Sira, Wisdom of Solomon, apocalyptic concepts in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the NT.[55] The reception history of Ecclesiastes is covered in four contributions on the use of the book of Psalms in Ecclesiastes Rabbah, and the interpretation of Ecclesiastes in the works of Augustine, Kierkegaard, and modern literature.

This volume is testament to the huge popularity of Ecclesiastes through much of history. It also bears witness to the wide interest that many of the prominent themes in Ecclesiastes have enjoyed in the ancient and modern world. It also shows that Ecclesiastes is not as removed from the rest of the of the OT as many commentators have thought in the past.

Of particular interest is an essay by John Jarick. Setting questions of familiarity and dependence aside, he presents a comparison between similar statements in Ecclesiastes and a number of Greek comic poets, especially Aristophanes and

54. Katharine J. Dell and Will Kynes, *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014).

55. For a brief review of literature on Ecclesiastes in its ancient Near Eastern context, see also Knut M. Heim, "The Phenomenon and Literature of Wisdom in Its near Eastern Context and the Biblical Wisdom Books " in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. III/2: The Twentieth Century–from Modernism to Post-Modernism*, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 590–91.

Menander. Jarick's comparison lends weight to my interpretation of Ecclesiastes as political satire.[56] Picking up on the editorial note regarding Qoheleth's "words of pleasure" in 12:10, he demonstrates that many of Qoheleth's pronouncements may have "a certain comedic hue," that they "can be seen to chime with notes struck in the Athenian theatre." In consequence, he concludes, "perhaps reading Ecclesiastes alongside the comic poets of ancient Greece really can bring a different perspective to bear on the supposedly world-weary aspect of the book."[57] His comparison may indeed "encourage readers to hear Ecclesiastes's pessimistic ponderings differently, as the similarities in theme, imagery and language with the Greek comedians cause that ancient laughter to echo in their ears."[58]

Canonical Significance

Many scholars believe that the book of Ecclesiastes took pride of place in the discussions of the Council of Jamnia in 90 CE. Does it "make the hands unclean?"[59] That is, should the book be included in the canon of sacred scripture for Jews? The dispute over its status concerned its apparently "secular" character, apparent internal contradictions, and statements that seemed to promote heretical thought, such as 1:3 and 11:9. The fact, already mentioned above, that a manuscript of Ecclesiastes was found among Dead Sea Scrolls discovered at Qumran suggests that the community who treasured these texts considered Ecclesiastes as authoritative well before the Christian era.[60]

A range of early Christian sources that included Ecclesiastes among lists of scriptural texts, such as the Bryennios Canon (second century CE), the lists of Epiphanius (second century?), the list of Melito of Sardis (third century), the list of Origen (third century), and the list of Jerome (fourth century) indicate also that it was accepted widely and early among Christians. The earliest Christian work on the entire book, from the late third century, was Gregory Thaumaturgos's paraphrase.[61]

Despite its canonical status, Christians struggled with how the book can be

56. This is quite different from Bartholomew's understanding of irony as a literary characteristic of Ecclesiastes; cf. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 79.

57. Jarick, "Ecclesiastes Among the Comedians," 187.

58. Jarick, "Ecclesiastes Among the Comedians," 177.

59. For detailed discussion of this phrase and its significance, see Roger T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 278–83. For a different take on the role of Jamnia in the canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures, see Jack P. Lewis, "Jamnia after Forty Years," *HUCA* 70-71 (1999-2000): 233-59 and Lewis, "Jamnia Revisited," in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Henrickson, 2002), 146-62. Lewis demonstrates that, while there is evidence that the canonicity of Ecclesiastes was indeed being discussed by contemporary Jewish authorities, the evidence also shows that uncertainty over its status continued for a considerable time.

60. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 19–20.

61. For the text, see John Jarick, *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).

"useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone . . . may be equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16–17). This struggle is already in view from earliest times, as the rarity of references or allusions to Ecclesiastes in the NT reveals. The only possible quotation appears in Romans 3:10: "there is no one who is righteous, not even one." It appears to refer to Eccl 7:20: "for there is no man on earth (so) righteous [כִּי אָדָם אֵין צַדִּיק בָּאָרֶץ] that he (only) does good and never sins [אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה־טּוֹב וְלֹא יֶחֱטָא]." Possible allusions include Romans 1:21 and 8:20, where the word "futility" is the same word ματαιότης that the Septuagint uses to translate הֶבֶל. The contrast between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world in 1 Cor 1:20–22 may have been inspired by the critique of wisdom in Ecclesiastes.[62] In a fascinating and theologically rich essay, Bartholomew explores the broader *intertextual* relations between Ecclesiastes and the NT, but this does not compensate for the fact that Ecclesiastes is one of the least quoted OT texts in the NT.[63]

In more recent times Anthony Thiselton, for example, muses: "Such texts as Job, Ecclesiastes, and the parables do not function *primarily* as raw-material for Christian doctrine. . . . Their primary function is to invite or to provoke the reader to wrestle actively with the issues, in ways that may involve adopting a series of comparative angles of vision."[64] Bartholomew similarly claims: "Ecclesiastes is one of those books that force us to wrestle with very difficult questions that are pursued relentlessly. In the process, it leads us back to the starting point of faith, but this time to know more fully. Faith, we might remind ourselves, is a gift, but Ecclesiastes reminds us that it is not cheap."[65] On a more positive track, Rick Hess considers the book a possible stepping-stone toward faith:

> Ecclesiastes becomes first and foremost a pre-evangelism tract designed to "connect" with all those (moderns, postmoderns, nihilists, etc.) who seek meaning in this life but cannot find it. It is an existential book sharing the experiences of one who has also searched for this meaning but not found it in this world. It lies in remembering one's creator and in fearing God, themes that lead to the rest of the Scriptures. Therefore, Ecclesiastes becomes for the searcher the means of access to the Bible. It is the first step to salvation, not the last gasp of one who has tried "all that" and found no value in it."[66]

62. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979), 588.

63. Craig G. Bartholomew, "The Intertextuality of Ecclesiastes and the New Testament," in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, ed. Katharine J. Dell and Will Kynes, LHBOTS 587 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014). Bartholomew covers several fascinating intertextual aspects, including "eating and drinking" (p. 234) and "celebration of the ordinary" (pp. 236–37).

64. Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 65–66; emphasis original.

65. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 20.

66. Richard D. Hess, *The Old Testament: A Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 492–93.

I agree with this assessment, as far as it goes. There is no doubt that the book has functioned in this manner for many, not only for those who have encountered the Christian faith for the first time but also for those who have discovered that a more simplistic and naïve kind of faith in which they had grown up did not prove true to reality. Ecclesiastes can and does indeed function in this way at the level of its non-subversive "official" meaning.

Beyond this, however, there is also a second meaning, as the detailed interpretation of one passage after another will demonstrate. This hidden and subversive meaning appeals to the community of faith in Qoheleth's time. It combines with the "official" meaning to produce a message that is extraordinarily rich in theological meaning, has the capacity to strengthen its readers' faith in the midst of adversity, and proves enormously fruitful for practical Christian living today. We will explore this potential of the book as we consider its theological and practical message(s).

Theological and Practical Message

There is a wide spread of opinion on the theology and the practical message of Ecclesiastes. On the one hand, a significant minority maintains that the book's protagonist is an orthodox teacher with a positive view of life.[67] On the other hand, a strong majority advocates that Qoheleth is a disillusioned skeptic who challenges orthodox beliefs. "Commentators remain polarized as to whether Ecclesiastes is fundamentally positive, affirming joy, or basically pessimistic."[68] Bartholomew notes that these divergent positions "fall into the trap of levelling Qoheleth toward his *hebel* pole, or toward his *carpe diem*-affirmation-of-joy pole." He concludes: "This is to ignore the literary juxtaposition of contradictory views that is central to the book and the life-death tension it embodies."[69] The interpretation of Ecclesiastes as resistance literature in the form of political satire presented in this commentary enables us to appreciate both of these poles equally. It enables interpretations that do not veer toward either one of the poles, or hover somewhere in the middle, but navigate the deep waters at both extremes.

The sociopolitical situation of the Jewish struggle for the survival of their sociorelligious identity under foreign rule leads to a rhetorical strategy that fully affirms the illusory nature of life "under the sun," that is, under foreign rule, *while at the same time* promoting a positive, hopeful outlook on life conducted within the trajectory of Jewish religion and tradition. Although Bartholomew has not taken the subversive nature of Qoheleth's code talk into account, his position is a good starting point for our exploration:

67. Cf. the literature listed in Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 31n119.
68. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 93.
69. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 93.

> Ecclesiastes thus exhorts Israelites struggling with the nature of life's meaning and God's purposes to pursue genuine wisdom by allowing their thinking to be shaped integrally by a recognition of God as Creator so that they can enjoy God's good gifts and obey his laws amid the enigma of his purposes. . . . In this way Ecclesiastes is an exhortation to be truly wise in difficult and perplexing situations.[70]

Once we approach the matter from a discourse-linguistic perspective, however, three interpretive consequences arise: we need to explore discourse-linguistic markers that reveal Qoheleth's intention, we need to explore God-language throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, and we need to focus on the sociopolitical background under foreign occupation that Qoheleth seeks to address.

First, we will pay attention to imperatives and other volitives in the book of Ecclesiastes. In the written record of a speech that was composed to be performed before live audiences, the most important discourse-linguistic markers for identifying what the speaker intended to achieve are volitives—i.e., verb forms with imperatival force, especially imperatives and jussives—that the speaker uses to tell his audience what he wants them to do upon hearing his speech.

Second, we will explore the God-language in Ecclesiastes. Our exploration will have two parts. On the one hand, we will look at the surface meaning of all the statements in Qoheleth's speech that mention God, including the epilogue. On the other hand, we will explore in greater depth the concept of the "fear of God," the most important conception developed in the book's language about God.

Third, we will use the insights gained from the previous two surveys to identify the practical message of Qoheleth's speech in the real-life situation that he sought to address. This helps us to recognize that the "difficult and perplexing situations" mentioned in the quote from Bartholomew above are not the vicissitudes of life in general, but the oppressive sociopolitical and economic conditions under foreign rule.

Imperatives and Other Volitives in Ecclesiastes

There are thirty-six verses with imperatives, jussives, cohortatives, or infinitives absolute that function as volitives in the book of Ecclesiastes: 1:10; 2:1; 4:17; 5:1, 3, 5, 6, 7[5:2, 4, 6, 7, 8]; 7:9, 10, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 21, 23, 27, 29; 8:2, 3; 9:7, 8, 9, 10; 10:4, 20; 11:1, 2, 6, 8, 9, 10; 12:1, 12, 13. Three features of these volatives stand out: their distribution, their most prominent themes, and their humorous nature. The content of what Qoheleth commands his audiences to do reveals three important themes—God-language, carpe diem, and practical advice on coping with foreign occupation.

70. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 95.

If the characterization of Qoheleth's speech as a humorous routine is correct, we would of course also expect that at least some of these directives are of a humorous nature, and this is indeed so. Not surprisingly, humor is especially the case with the volitives that offer advice on coping strategies vis-à-vis the foreign regime.

The content and distribution of these volitives is striking and significant. First, with the exception of the final verse in ch. 4, the only two volitives in the first four chapters of the book (eighty-three verses!) are not addressed to Qoheleth's audience[71] and are therefore not part of his persuasive scheme. This means that Qoheleth waits until he has completed well over one third of his speech (80 of the 213 verses in the speech from 1:3–12:7, that is almost 38 percent) before he begins to tell his audience what he really wants them to do.

Second, in the remainder of the speech, volitives are highly concentrated in key thematic sections. There are three main concentrations, five minor concentrations, and a very small bundle of isolated volitives. We begin with the main concentrations.

The first main concentration of volitives appears in the Practical Interlude 2 (4:17–5:6[5:1–7]). This is by some distance the most theological passage in the speech, and it also has one of the highest concentrations of volitives, eleven in eight verses.[72] Two circumstances combine to demonstrate that commending the fear of God to his audience is the most important purpose of Qoheleth's speech: (a) the first and highest concentration of volitives coincides with the central theological passage in the speech; (b) the end of the passage and the final and thus climactic volitive in the sequence explicitly instructs Qoheleth's audience to fear God: "When dreams multiply, and mirages, and many words, then fear God" (5:6[7])! For this reason, the concept of the fear of God will need to receive extended treatment below.

The second main concentration of volitives appears in the Reflection on the Universality of Death (9:2–10). Again, a proliferation of volitives coincides with a prominent theme,[73] for this passage contains the sixth carpe diem passage in Qoheleth's speech (9:7–10). Qoheleth instructs his audience actively to enjoy life in the sure knowledge that such enjoyment has God's full support: "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine *with a glad heart/with a good conscience*, for God has already approved what you do" (9:7)! This second main concentration thus focuses on another important theme in Qoheleth's speech, namely the promotion of happiness, and it does so within a theological framework (9:7b).

71. The call to attention in 1:10 is a quotation of someone whose claim Qoheleth dismisses in the same verse, and 2:1 is Qoheleth's ironical appeal to his "heart" to do its best in the mock experiment of the Solomonic caricature. Neither of them is addressed to Qoheleth's audience. The final verse of ch. 4 does, of course, contain an imperative, but this appeal introduces the string of volitives at the beginning of ch. 5, and so it belongs with what follows.

72. The first four of these contain more than one (two in 4:17[5:1], three in 5:1[2], two in 5:3[4], two in 5:5[6]), with the final two containing one each.

73. Verse 9:7 contains two imperatives, v. 8 two jussives, and vv. 9 and 10 one imperative each. Three of the six verses contain volitives, with v. 6 having two.

The third main concentration of volitives occurs at the climactic end of the speech, the section entitled How to Enjoy Life from Beginning to End (11:7–12:7) in the commentary below. Again, the prominence of volitives coincides with a thematic emphasis,[74] for the passage combines the topics of the two earlier main concentrations, theology and the enjoyment of life. This, the seventh and final carpe diem passage, which climactically concludes Qoheleth's speech, contains two references to God. The first appears in 11:9, with the invigorating claim that God will hold humans accountable for all the good things that they have *not* enjoyed in their lives. The second appears in 12:1a, with its emphatic final instruction in the speech to "remember" God before it is too late (12:1b–7).

A review of the three main concentrations of volitives has demonstrated that Qoheleth wanted to promote happiness within a framework of faith among his audience. This demonstrates that an exploration of the message of Ecclesiastes that takes the text's discourse-linguistic markers seriously will need to take full account of the text's theological purpose. Equally, the pursuit of happiness forms an integral part of the text's practical message.

We now turn to the minor concentrations of volitives, which also exhibit characteristic thematic and formal emphases. There are five minor concentrations of volitives, plus three isolated volitives that share a common theme. These minor concentrations tend to display at least two of the following three characteristics: coping strategies regarding foreign occupation, God-language, and humor. We begin with Eccl 7, which is composed of no less than three minor concentrations, taking up the entire chapter.

The first minor concentration appears in the Practical Interlude 4: Instructions on Coping with Bereavement (7:1–14). Its second part (7:9–14) contains five instructions,[75] and while this is not immediately obvious, these instructions are presented in the context of human casualties resulting from a violent clash between Qoheleth's Jewish community and the occupying foreign regime (cf. Explanation of the Text for 7:1–14 and Explanation of the Text for 8:10–14). In this context God is mentioned twice. Ecclesiastes 7:13 provides a theological explanation for the political situation, revealing that the foreign occupation results from divine judgment. Similarly, 7:14 claims that all circumstances under foreign control, whether good or bad, originate with God. It then goes on to urge Qoheleth's audience to make the best of all of these circumstances, no matter what. This first minor concentration, then, commends religiously informed strategies for coping with foreign occupation. The first minor concentration displays two of the three characteristics mentioned above: coping strategies regarding foreign occupation and God-language.

74. Four of the five verses contain volitives, with two jussives in v. 8, three imperatives and one jussive in v. 9, two imperatives in v. 10, and one imperative in 12:1, eight volitives in all.

75. Four of the six verses contain volitives, with one prohibition (jussive + negative particle) each in vv. 9 and 10, one imperative in v. 13, and two imperatives in v. 14.

The second minor concentration appears in the Practical Interlude 5, which commends strategies for coping with the lack of direct correlation between acts and their consequences (7:15–22).[76] Again this is not immediately obvious, but foreign interference with the Jewish community's values had made life unpredictable (cf. Explanation of the Text for 7:15–22). Qoheleth calls for moderation and balance in people's responses to foreign occupation (7:16, 17, 18, 21), with the promise that those who fear God will be able to overcome these kinds of challenges (7:18c). In this second minor concentration, then, Qoheleth again presents religiously motivated strategies for coping with prevailing sociopolitical circumstances. The second minor concentration also displays two of the three characteristics: coping strategies regarding foreign occupation and God-language.

The third minor concentration appears in Qoheleth's Reflections on Research Impact from Preceding Case Studies, which presents humorous reflections on the case studies presented earlier in the speech (7:23–8:1). These reflections are saturated with biting sarcasm aimed at Hellenizing Jews in Qoheleth's community, whose aspirations are exposed as ridiculous and unrealistic (cf. Explanation of the Text for 7:23–8:1). The concentration of volitives is relatively weak, only three volitives in eight verses, but they are significant at the discourse level of Qoheleth's speech.[77] In highly stylized, identical formulations—"See, this I have found" (vv. 27, 29)—Qoheleth humorously calls his audience's attention to the fact that after all the experimentations and case studies earlier in the speech, his female alter ego, Lady Qoheleth, had only been able to find a single man among a thousand who had obtained success, and no woman at all (7:27). By contrast, what she has found is that despite God's design of humans as "straight," they have "sought for many schemes," another humorous dig at Jewish Hellenizers (7:29). The third minor concentration displays all three characteristics: coping strategies regarding foreign occupation, God-language, and humor.

The next two minor concentrations of volitives appear in Eccl 8 and Eccl 11. In both cases the concentrations are relatively weak, yet significant.

The fourth minor concentration appears in the Practical Interlude 6, an instruction on how to respond to the abuse of royal power (8:2–9). Again, the concentration of volitives is relatively weak, only three volitives in eight verses,[78] but they follow the pattern we have already observed, presenting coping strategies on how to deal with the foreign regime in ironic fashion. All three volitives have an amusing and entertaining effect (8:2–3), for they seem to commend loyalty to the foreign monarch while at the same time ironically and humorously undermining it (cf. Explanation of the Text

76. Four of the eight verses in this concentration contain volitives, all of them prohibitions (jussives + negative particle). Verses 16 and 17 have two each, and vv. 18 and 21 have one each.

77. There is a cohortative in v. 23, which is not directed to Qoheleth's audience. There are two imperatives in vv. 27 and 29.

78. There is an imperative in v. 2 and two prohibitions (jussive + negative particle).

for 8:2–9). Motivation for the recommended behavior is again religiously grounded (8:2b, 6). This fourth minor concentration, then, also presents strategies for coping with prevailing sociopolitical circumstances, it also comes cloaked in humorous and ironical inversion of what it feigns to commend, and it motivates the commended behavior with religious arguments, thus displaying all three characteristics.

The fifth minor concentration appears in the series of Instructions on Risk-Taking (11:1–6). With four volitives in six verses,[79] the concentration of volitives is slightly stronger, and this is significant. Again, the deeper meaning of the passage is not obvious, for it is hidden behind platitudes (cf. Explanation of the Text for 11:1–6). What appear to be generic observations and broad commendations on life are in reality snapshots of the internal dialogue in Qoheleth's community about the risks and opportunities in their response to foreign rule. He challenges his community to take decisive action and resist foreign demands (11:1, 6) yet to spread the risks of retaliation (11:2). He also encourages his audience with the prospect of divine providence and rich rewards (11:5–6) but ridicules common objections in the process (11:3–4). This fifth minor concentration also follows the pattern we have observed in these minor concentrations: strategies for coping with sociopolitical challenges, humor, and religious motivation. All three characteristics of the pattern are present.

A review of the five minor concentrations of volitives confirms one of Qoheleth's purposes that we have already encountered in the investigation of the major concentrations above: the aim to promote religious beliefs and behavior. Additionally, our review reveals two further objectives of Qoheleth's speech: the intention to provide coping strategies to help his community respond well to the challenges of foreign occupation and the intention to entertain through the prolific use of humor.

Consequently, an exposition of the message of Ecclesiastes that takes the text's discourse-linguistic markers seriously needs to pay attention to Qoheleth's intention to offer—in a covert, underhanded way—mechanisms for coping with the dire sociopolitical circumstances under foreign occupation. Equally, the function of humor in Qoheleth's speech and his intention to entertain form an important part of the text's practical message.

A small bundle of isolated volitives, just three in number, also deserve attention, as they support the two intentions just mentioned.

Only three volitives in the entire speech appear in isolation, all prohibitions in the form of jussives plus negative particle (10:4, 20). Although not part of a concentration, they fit thematically with the fake commendation of loyalty to the throne in 8:2–3, part of the fourth minor concentration of volitives discussed above. Again, it is not immediately obvious, but they also commend coping strategies vis-à-vis the foreign

79. There is one imperative each in vv. 1, 2, and 6, and also a prohibition (jussive + negative particle) in v. 6.

regime, presented again in covert fashion (cf. Explanation of the Text for 9:13–10:4 and Explanation of the Text for 10:16–20). As before, Qoheleth's instructions can be heard both as promoting conformism and as ironically inciting opposition to the foreign regime. In fact, 10:4 follows hard on the heels of an extended joke, and the two instructions in 10:20 are formulated with biting sarcasm.

In this miniature bundle of volitives, then, two characteristics of the pattern observed for the minor concentrations appear: humor and covert instructions for coping with sociopolitical challenges.

The analysis of the three main concentrations of volitives, then, highlights that Qoheleth wants his audience to enjoy life within the religious framework of traditional Jewish faith, epitomized in the instruction to "fear God" (5:6[7]). The analysis of the five minor concentrations of volitives and the three isolated prohibitions complement the picture. Here we found three consistent themes: strategies for coping with the challenges of foreign occupation, God-language, and humor.

The message of Qoheleth's speech, then, can be extrapolated from the kinds of things he asks his audience to do. First, he urges them to buy into a program of attitudes and behaviors that promote true happiness. Second, he commends to them the essence of the Jewish faith and its traditional value system, epitomized in the concept of the fear of God. The combination of these two goals, the promotion of happiness within the framework of traditional Jewish faith, is clearly designed to offer a viable alternative to the prospect of a hedonistic kind of happiness through the accumulation of wealth which the foreign overlords dangled before the eyes of would-be Jewish collaborators. Third, Qoheleth commends a series of coping mechanisms and strategies to help the population respond constructively to the challenges of foreign occupation, especially where foreign demands clashed with Jewish sensibilities. Fourth, Qoheleth's use of humor in his instructions reveals that he aimed to recruit members of the audience for his cause through entertaining them in thought-provoking fashion.

Finally, a brief look at the final three volitives in the book. While they do not appear in Qoheleth's speech, they are presented in the Epilogue as an editor's authoritative summary of Qoheleth's message ("the end of the matter: all has been heard," 12:13a).

The book's Epilogue, which consists of an evaluation of Qoheleth's work (12:9–11) and concluding instructions (12:12–14), contains three imperatives. In v. 12 the editor warns Qoheleth's readers, who now engage his work in written form, against the cultural influence of foreign writings (cf. the Explanation of the Text for 12:9–14). Verse 13 contains two imperatives that the editor explicitly presents as a summary of what Qoheleth had originally aimed to achieve among his live audiences: "God you shall fear, and his commandments you shall keep" (12:13b–c)!

It appears, then, that the editor reduced the four intentions that we have discovered in Qoheleth's instructions to two—cultural resistance and fear of God.

Taken together, these findings support the main hypothesis of this commentary, namely, that Qoheleth's speech aims to present to his audience a programmatic alternative to the program of Hellenization imposed by the foreign regime. It presents a viable alternative to find a deeper kind of happiness built on Jewish cultural and religious virtues (Eudaimonia) rather than a superficial, instant gratification through the accumulation of material goods (Hedonia) that the foreign occupiers were promising.[80]

Our brief analysis of the volitives in the epilogue brings this general picture into a sharper focus. The three imperatives in the Epilogue (12:12–13) provide the editor's thematic summary of and hermeneutical key to Qoheleth's speech in its written form. Significantly, 12:12 takes up the cultural import of Qoheleth's sociopolitical instructions in the minor concentration of volitives, while 12:13 takes up the theological emphasis of Qoheleth's instructions in the main concentrations of volitives. He even clarifies what was implicit in Qoheleth's instructions throughout: fear of God is not only an inner disposition but includes ethical behavior, obedience to the traditional Jewish values expressed in divine commands. What is missing from the epilogist's summary is the sense of humor so prominent in Qoheleth's original work, as well as the positive encouragement to enjoy life. If our reconstruction of the editor's historical situation is correct (cf. Explanation of the Text for 12:9–14), this is not at all surprising.

In light of the prominence of the fear of God and the promotion of happiness in the preceding discussion, we shall now turn to explore the God-language in Ecclesiastes.

God-Language in the Book of Ecclesiastes

We will explore language about God under two headings: The Portrayal of God in Ecclesiastes, focusing on the surface meaning of statements in Qoheleth's speech and the Epilogue that mentions God, and The Fear of God in Ecclesiastes, exploring in greater depth the most important conception developed in the book's language about God.

The Portrayal of God in Ecclesiastes

The following analysis of the portrayal of God in Ecclesiastes cannot explore all the subtleties of meaning in the texts that talk about, mention, or allude to God. These are presented in the Explanations of the Text in the commentary. Here we offer an initial orientation that is, as much as is possible, free from interpretive

80. On the difference between Eudaimonia and Hedonia, see esp. Veronika Huta, "Eudaimonia," in *Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, ed. Susan David et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 237–49.

preconceptions and simply presents the raw material of the text. The purpose of this mode of presentation is to give the reader, as it were, a bird's-eye view of the evidence from a vantage point free from interpretive constraints. A certain amount of overlap between this and the preceding exploration of volitives is unavoidable, since God-language is such a prominent feature of the volitives in Qoheleth's speech. Nonetheless, the different focus of the presentation here ensures that what follows complements rather than simply repeats earlier observations.

God the maker. He has made everything "beautiful in its time" (3:11). Everything he has made "will remain forever" (3:14). God has made good and bad days (7:14), that is, he has ordered general living conditions for humans and possibly the specific circumstances of Qoheleth's audience in such a way that the intermingling of "good" and "bad" seasons is integral to human experience (cf. also 3:1–8). Employing a structural metaphor to express an ethical disposition, 7:29 claims that "God made human beings straight," even though "they have sought for many schemes."

God as savior. Ecclesiastes 7:25–26 indicate that someone who is considered right with God will be rescued from the snares of a dangerous woman. One who fears God is able to overcome wickedness and folly/dangerous circumstances (7:18).

God acts with purpose. "God has done [this] so that [humans] will *fear him*" (3:14, emphasis added). God seeks out what is being pursued by human beings (3:15). God permits injustice and delays judgment "For the sake of human beings, so that God would show them, so that they see: 'They are animals'" (3:18). God keeps certain human beings occupied with the joy of their heart (5:19[20]). God has made good and bad days (7:14), that is, he has ordered general living conditions for humans and possibly the specific circumstances of Qoheleth's audience in such a way that the intermingling of good and bad seasons are integral to human experience (cf. also 3:1–8), with the intent of preventing humans from predicting their lives' trajectories (so that a person "cannot find anything that will come after him," 7:14). A deeper insight into the purpose of God's doing reveals that, as a consequence of the divine design, human beings "cannot find" (= "find out") what is done "under the sun," however hard they try (8:17). Because the righteous and the wise are in the hand of God, they do not (cannot?) know everything that lies in their future (9:1).

God as judge. Qoheleth's moral universe is far from random. Rather, he claims, "God will judge the righteous just as he judges the wicked; for there is a time for every matter and against every deed committed there" (3:17), that is "under the sun" (3:16). As already mentioned, in Eccl 8:10–14 Qoheleth also tackles a thorny theological question—the explanation for the pervasiveness of systemic evil. He opposed the conclusion that there is no justice at all with recourse to a divine passive, expressing his firm belief that eventually "it will turn out well for those who fear God," while "it will not turn our well for the wicked . . . because he has not walked in fear before

God" (8:12–13). God will eventually act justly—in retribution against the criminals and vindication for the vulnerable.

God and uncertainty about the future. God "has put eternity into [human] hearts" (3:11), he has arranged the lifespan of human beings (5:17[18]), and he has made good and bad days (7:14). Yet God has constrained human knowledge about the future. Qoheleth highlights the counterintuitive and challenging purpose behind the divine modus operandum: "See the work of God," he says, "for who can straighten what he has made crooked?" (7:13).

God the giver. God gives the ability to enjoy the good things of ordinary life (2:24–25; 3:13), he gives wisdom and joy (2:26), he redistributes material goods from sinners to the righteous (2:26). He gives challenging tasks to human beings (3:10–11). God has predetermined (given) the lifespan of human beings (5:17[18]). God grants resources for enjoyment and enables contentment with constraint of ambitions and enjoyment of labor as a gift (5:18[19]). But despite his provision of resources for human flourishing, he sometimes apparently withholds the opportunity for humans to consume these because he allows others to snatch them from their owners (6:2). God has given human beings "hard work" to do during the days of their lives "under the sun" (8:15).

God's anger is only mentioned once. He is said to become angry over feeble excuses for non-compliance with oaths (5:6[7]).

The fear of God. In 7:17–18 Qoheleth counsels ethical and epistemic moderation, on the grounds that fearing God will give people the capacity to overcome obstacles. In the face of the systematic perversion of justice in his day, Qoheleth affirms his certainty that, in the long run, "it will turn out well for those who fear God" (8:12c). By contrast, however, "it will not turn our well for the wicked . . . because he has not walked in fear before God" (8:13). In this, he declares the traditional *theologoumenon*, "fear of God," to be the decisive criterion for divine judgment, employing assertions that express the standard Judean belief in a direct connection between deeds and their consequences—reward for the righteous (Godfearers) and punishment for the wicked (those who do not fear God). In fact, he declares the impression that crimes go unpunished on principle, prompted by the observation of pervasive injustice without immediate consequences, to be a mirage (8:10, 14), a statement that frames the entire reflection.

Qoheleth's instructions concerning God. Qoheleth's speech also includes a high number of instructions on how humans should relate to God. He advises his listener to watch his feet on the way to worship (4:17). He also urges the worshiper to carefully prepare what he presents to God so that he can keep his public prayer in the house of worship brief (5:1[2]). The rationale for these instructions either lies in the spatial distance between worshiper and God, or is grounded in the different status that God and worshiper occupy in the social hierarchy ("for God is in heaven, but you are on earth," 5:1[2]d–e). Those who have made a vow to God are urged to fulfil it

(5:3[4]). In circumstances where the numbers of dreams, words, and sensory illusions increase,[81] the hearer is advised to fear God (5:6[7]). Readers are also encouraged to invest in diverse ventures (11:2) because the ways in which God will respond to human endeavors is as mysterious as the causes for prenatal human survival (11:5).[82]

In a concluding and climactic series of eight instructions that present a virtual "theology of happiness," Qoheleth urges his audience to remember that they are not only accountable to God for the wrong they have done but also for the good they have not done or enjoyed in their life (11:9). The series and the entire routine conclude with the instruction that his audience should always seek to please God (12:1), and the series as a whole is given urgency with a dramatic description of impending obstacles to happiness (12:2–7), a magnificent propheto-poetic masterpiece that brings Qoheleth's routine to a dramatically stunning theological conclusion: in the affirmation that in human death "the dust [returns] to the earth, just as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (12:7), God emerges as the origin and destiny of human life.

God and carpe diem. God is mentioned in most of the seven carpe diem passages. Only in the second passage, the briefest of all (3:22), God is not mentioned. In the first passage, 2:24–26, God enables human satisfaction from the fruits of their labor (24). The rhetorical question in v. 25, in fact, implies that the ability to enjoy the fruit of one's labor can only come through divine gift, a truth illustrated with the claim that God rewards "good" people with wisdom, knowledge, and joy through redistributing wealth from sinners to them (26). Similarly, in the third passage, 3:13 claims that any human's capacity to "eat and drink and see good in his hard work" is "a gift from God." In the same manner, the fourth passage, 5:17–19[18–20], also claims that every human being whom God has given wealth and possessions *and* enabled that person to enjoy them *with contentment* can only do so because that "is a gift from God" (5:18[19]h). The fifth passage, 8:15, is somewhat different, because here it is the days of people's life under the sun that God is said to have given, but even so, Qoheleth commends eating, drinking, and enjoyment. In the sixth passage, 9:7–10, Qoheleth instructs his audience as follows: "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine *with a glad heart/with a good conscience, for God has already approved what you do!*" (9:7, emphasis added on the concluding clause). This strongly worded affirmation of divine approval is tempered with a complementary statement in the final carpe diem passage (11:9). There Qoheleth reminds his audience that they are

81. "Sensory illusions" is my translation for the Hebrew הֲבָלִים; see the discussion of הֶבֶל in the Explanation of the Text for 1:3.

82. Or, the beginning of prenatal life in the womb. This phrase is almost universally interpreted in a negative way. The two interpretive options I present in the main text and in this footnote are not positive interpretations of an otherwise negative statement, as the interpretive consensus might suggest. Rather, it simply presents two understandings of what the text says and leaves the (positive or negative) interpretation of that statement to the detailed explanation of the text in the main part of the commentary.

not only accountable to God for the wrong they have done, but also for the good they have not done or enjoyed in their lives. Against the gloomy canvas of life "under the sun," then, God emerges as the "giver of good gifts" par excellence, as the Giver of Joy, and Qoheleth as his Preacher of Joy.[83]

The combination of the carpe diem theme and God-language demonstrated here complements the findings from the preceding exploration of volitives. Qoheleth's God is not a killjoy, but the true source for happiness for all who are willing and able to resist the lure of foreign interests. Again, we have found that the concept of the fear of God is central to Qoheleth's talk about God in his speech. Since it has been understood in widely different ways, we now turn to an in-depth discussion of the concept and its significance for Qoheleth's message.

The Fear of God in Ecclesiastes

The concept of the "fear of God" is Qoheleth's equivalent for the traditional "fear of the Lord" elsewhere in the OT. Fear of God is mentioned six times in Qoheleth's own routine (3:14; 5:6[7]; 7:18; 8:12–13 [3x]), and once in the epilogue (12:13), and he employs three other expressions—"To the man who is good before him" and "to the one who is good before God" in 2:26 and the instruction to "remember your creator" in 12:1—to refer to conduct in line with the fear of God.

There are three important questions that need to be addressed to appreciate the significance of the fear of God for Qoheleth. First, what does the phrase mean? Second, what is the relationship between its occurrences in Qoheleth's own words and its mention in the epilogue? Third, how important is fear of God for Qoheleth's discourse and the book of Ecclesiastes as a whole? As usual, these questions have been answered very differently by commentators.

1. What does the phrase "fear of God" mean? According to Longman, the "fear of the Lord" in Proverbs "breeds humility and signals a willingness to receive instruction from God." Consequently, "fear of the Lord inevitably leads to obedience. The one who fears God will follow the advice that God imparts" in the book of Proverbs. Specifically, "this fear is not the fear that makes us run, but it is the fear that makes us pay attention and listen. Fear of the Lord makes us humble."[84] Longman thinks that Qoheleth's take on this concept is different from the fear of the Lord in Proverbs and even the fear of God in the epilogue to Ecclesiastes. Rather, Qoheleth "is advocating not the kind of fear that leads to obedience but rather the kind of fear that would lead a person to run away and hide."[85]

83. Roger N. Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *JSOT* 7 (1982): 87–98.

84. Tremper Longman, *The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 13.

85. Longman, *Fear of the Lord*, 41. Longman argues at length for this distinction in Tremper Longman, "The 'Fear of God' in the Book of Ecclesiastes," *BBR* 25 (2015):13–22.

The position of Fox is more nuanced. On 3:14, he notes: "Whoever has the wisdom to recognize this will fear God and share the humility epitomized in the confession of the psalmist: 'My times (*'ittotay*) are in your hand' (Ps 31:16)."[86] In other words, "Fearing God means accepting one's own limitations."[87] In 5:6[7], fearing God "is the antithesis of the negligence implied by thoughtless vowing and vain excuses."[88]

Murphy emphasizes the incomprehensibility of God: "Qoheleth's understanding of what it means to fear God seems to flow from the mystery and incomprehensibility of God. If one cannot understand what God is doing (3:11; 8:17; 11:6), and indeed if one does not perceive either divine love or hatred (9:1), reverential fear is in order (cf. 3:14; 5:6)."[89]

Bartholomew, in contrast with Longman, equates Qoheleth's understanding of fear of God with the fear of the Lord in Proverbs. Commenting on 5:6[7], he notes:

> One should "fear God." This conclusion summarizes the entire passage. Here again Qohelet is one with Proverbs in his approach to wisdom. Proverbs makes the fear of God the beginning of wisdom and repeatedly exhorts its reader in this direction. Fear of God describes an attitude of holy reverence toward God and a creaturely openness to being instructed by him.[90]

In this context, he approvingly cites Whybray:

> There is no reason to suppose that for him the fear of God . . . differed from that which is found in such texts as Deuteronomy: obedience, love, service, worship . . . conformity to God's moral commands . . . avoidance of sin . . . honest conduct . . . —in short, the reverence for, and the worship of God, characteristic of sincere Yahwists.[91]

Like me, Bartholomew interprets Ecclesiastes against Greek influence in the third century. Where he differs is in focus. While I see this influence in the general tendency toward Hellenization in all aspects of culture, due in particular to economic incentives, Bartholomew focuses on epistemology:

86. Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 213.

87. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 213.

88. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 233. He does not comment on fear of God in 7:18 and 8:12–13, but his comments on 12:13 are instructive: "The theme of fear of God belongs to traditional (pre-Sira) Wisdom, but keeping his commandments diverges from it insofar as it speaks of a revelation of the divine will. The postscript goes beyond earlier Wisdom Literature and, like Ben Sira, explicitly subordinates wisdom to the Law. That does not make vv. 13–14 'alien to everything Qohelet has said thus far' (Crenshaw, p. 192). Vv. 13b–14 do stand outside of Wisdom epistemology, but Wisdom Literature, including the book of Qohelet, does not repudiate divine revelation of commandments; that is simply not its province" (Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 361).

89. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lxvi.

90. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 207.

91. R. N. Whybray, "Qoheleth as a Theologian," in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, ed. A. Schoors, BETL 136 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 264–65.

> Ecclesiastes seems to have been written for third-century Israelites who lived in a period when Yahweh's promises seemed to have come to nothing and there was little empirical evidence of his purposes and promises. The Israelites were exposed to pervasive Greek thought and culture at this time, and a common temptation especially among the more educated was to apply a sort of autonomous Greek epistemology to their experience of desolation, leading many of their young people to conclude that God's purposes in the world are inscrutable and utterly enigmatic.[92]

Against this reconstructed background, Bartholomew proposes that "Ecclesiastes is crafted . . . as an ironical exposure of such an autonomous epistemology that seeks wisdom . . . without the glasses of the fear of God."[93] He continues:

> Qoheleth puts himself into the shoes, as it were, of the autonomous worldview and applies it to the world he observes and experiences, but only in order to show that it leads again and again to enigma rather than truth. . . . The resolution of this paradox is found in the fear of God (rejoicing and remembrance), which enables one to rejoice and apply oneself positively to life in the midst of all that one does not understand, including especially death.

And the following lines explore how Bartholomew interprets Qoheleth's understanding of the fear of God:

> Ecclesiastes thus exhorts Israelites struggling with the nature of life's meaning and God's purposes to pursue genuine wisdom by allowing their thinking to be shaped integrally by a recognition of God as Creator so that they can enjoy God's good gifts and obey his laws amid the enigma of his purposes.[94]

Bartholomew's understanding of the fear of God in Ecclesiastes is very similar to mine. Where we differ is the particular aspect of the Greek challenge to Jewish identity and culture that Qoheleth's campaign is seeking to address. For Bartholomew, the challenge is epistemological. For me, it encompasses all aspects of Jewish culture—religion, cultural values, and economics.

Krüger's position is even closer to mine. In his discussion of the relationship between God and human beings, he notes:

> The appropriate attitude of human beings toward God is the fear of God. . . . It is not simply identical with the usual practice of religion but leads rather to critical

92. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 94.
93. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 94–95.
94. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 95.

> participation in this practice: listening to God and confessing one's guilt before God, as expressions of fear and respect before God, are religiously more valuable than sacrifices and prayers, vows and dreams. Because people who fear God know their shortcomings and accept the contingency of time as God's judgment, *they expect no reward from God:* the fear of God has its own value.[95]

Krüger captures well Qoheleth's comments in 3:14, 5:6[7], and 7:18. Where I disagree is the phrase in italics, for Krüger seems to ignore 8:12b–13, which expresses another, crucially important nuance of Qoheleth's understanding of the fear of God: "I also know that it will turn out well for those who fear God when they fear from before him, and it will not turn out well for the wicked and his days will not lengthen like a shadow, because he has not walked in fear before God." For many, these statements appear to make surprisingly traditional claims about retributive theology that are deemed out of line with Qoheleth's general outlook. Two arguments counter these objections.

First, as I demonstrate throughout this commentary, Qoheleth is more orthodox and traditional than it appears on the surface level of his pronouncements.[96] Second, Qoheleth adds the important nuance of time lag into his pronouncements about retributive justice, as the context in 8:12a indicates: "when a sinner does evil things a hundred times but lives a long life." In conclusion, the fear of God does reckon with reward from God (contra Krüger), but it does so in a nuanced way that acknowledges and affirms that the connection between fear of God and divine reward is more indirect, contingent on time and sociopolitical circumstances.

2. What is the relationship between fear of God in Qoheleth's own words and its mention in the epilogue? Again, interpreters' opinions differ wildly. They range from interpretations that understand 12:13–14 to be a *correction* of Qoheleth's views (e.g., Longman) to the view that they provide foolproof guidance for the correct interpretation of the book (Bartholomew). In the discussion of volitives in Ecclesiastes above, I have demonstrated that the epilogue's instruction accurately summarizes and of necessity simplifies the message of Qoheleth's speech. Below, in the Explanation of the Text for 12:9–14, I will present a more extended argument to this effect.

3. How important is fear of God for Qoheleth's discourse and the book of Ecclesiastes as a whole? Admittedly, six mentions of the fear of God may not appear very strong evidence for its importance. Two main arguments nonetheless suggest that it is crucial for Qoheleth's message.

First, the idea appears almost as frequently as the carpe diem theme, which appears seven times and whose importance for the message of Qoheleth is undisputed.

95. Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 2, italics added.

96. Cf. also Jason S. DeRouchie, "Shepherding Wind and One Wise Shepherd: Grasping for Breath in Ecclesiastes," *SBJT* 15.3 (2011): esp. 8, 14–15.

Second, the fear of God and similar expressions appear at key positions or play crucial roles in Qoheleth's speech.

(1) The first occurrence in 2:26 appears at the end of the Solomonic persona's experiment, Qoheleth's first case study, which has a paradigmatic function for his entire discourse and thus plays a crucial role for the remainder of his speech. Part of the conclusions from the experiment (2:24–26), the phrases "to the man who is good before him" and "to the one who is good before God" refer to a person whom God rewards with enjoyment (2:25), and they are contrasted with "the sinner," from whom God withholds happiness (2:26). The expressions employed here do not mention the concept fear of God explicitly, but nonetheless evoke it.

(2) The second occurrence in 3:14 appears in the analysis of the findings from Qoheleth's second case study (3:1–15), which also has a paradigmatic function because it highlights that God has designed human life in this way precisely to foster fear before God: "and God has done [this] so that [humans] will fear him" (3:14).

(3) The third occurrence in 5:6[7] appears in one of the theological heart-pieces in Qoheleth's speech (4:17–5:6[5:1–7]). It is phrased as an imperative, a direct command: "then fear God!" As such, it belongs to a whole series of imperatives and other volitives, most of which promote human strengths that foster the kinds of virtues that epitomize fear of God. (See above the discussion on volitives in Qoheleth's speech and the epilogue.) This extended string of ten instructions is the first time in the speech where Qoheleth addressed his audience directly. The religious theme and the high concentration of instructions indicate that Qoheleth has come to the theological center of his message, summarized in the instruction to fear God.

(4) The fourth occurrence in 7:18 supports Qoheleth's response to the disturbing circumstance that, under the corrupt foreign value system and its legal practices, people may be condemned to death not only in spite of their being righteous but in fact *because* of their being righteous, while others, who deserve capital punishment, escape not only in spite of their being wicked but *because* of their being wicked (7:15). As a remedy for this absurd state of affairs, Qoheleth recommends what at first sight looks like ethical and intellectual relativism, but which in reality constitutes behavior that promotes a mature kind of wisdom that leads to genuine righteousness, avoids ethical perfectionism, and fosters intellectually realistic expectations (7:16–18a). Someone who displays this mature kind of wisdom and genuine righteousness Qoheleth identifies as "one who fears God," and he promises that people like that will "come out of all these," that is, they will escape all of the negative circumstances mentioned in vv. 15–17: perishing in one's righteousness (15b), harming oneself (through excessively righteous or wise behavior, 16), and dying when it is not their time (through excessively wicked and foolish behavior, 17).

(5) The fifth occurrence in 8:12–13 is climactic among Qoheleth's references to the fear of God for three reasons: (a) it is the last mention of the fear of God in

Qoheleth's speech, (b) the idea is repeated no less than three times, (c) the scene described in 8:10–14 is particularly explosive and central to Qoheleth's overall purpose, to shore up religious and cultural resistance against the ideological and economic pull of the foreign regime. The allusion to a recent incident when foreigners had desecrated a religious site and offended indigenous religious sensibilities, leading to bloodshed on both sides, is particularly well suited for his subversive intent.

(6) The sixth occurrence appears in the form of a paraphrase, the climactic final instruction to "remember your *origin/creator/grave*" in 12:1a.

This survey of the distribution and function of the concept fear of God confirms that it is central to Qoheleth's message. It is now time to integrate the findings of our surveys of volitives and God-language in Ecclesiastes with the practical message that Qoheleth presents in his speech.

Conclusion Regarding Qoheleth's Theological and Practical Message

Qoheleth's message is presented on two levels of meaning. We need to pay attention to both in almost everything he says—on the surface level of theoretical debate over the "universality of human existence"[97] *and* the undercover level of meaning that aims to subvert the corrupting influence of foreign rule. The surface meaning is what Qoheleth wants the outsiders to hear. The undercover meaning is intended for his real audience. For those in the know, then, his message is not an abstract, disembodied philosophical tract, but a message that is deeply rooted in a community's painful experience under foreign rule. It is a missive of hope, a rallying cry to cultural resistance, an appeal to remain faithful to God.

As a conscious alternative, in direct competition with the prospect of happiness through success in the form of material possessions as a reward for complicity with the interests of the foreign occupiers, Qoheleth presents a viable alternative through a "theology of happiness." He offers the prospect of true happiness within the religious framework of traditional Jewish faith and cultural values. In the process, he exposes the futility of the foreign program, offers practical advice for finding true happiness, and presents equally practical advice on how to overcome the ethical and religious challenges and dangerous situations that regularly arise in a country occupied by a foreign power with soldiers' feet on the ground. And he does so in a humorous, covertly rebellious way that raises interest for his cause through entertaining his audience with unusual, provocative, and intellectually stimulating pronouncements that continually surprise, challenge, delight, and inspire—in his own time and into the present day.

Our survey of discourse-linguistic markers in the form of imperatives and

97. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 105.

volitives, of God-language and the fear of God, as well as the editor's hermeneutical summary in the epilogue and our reflections on the practical import of Qoheleth's speech leads to three conclusions. First, Qoheleth's editor accurately summarized the message of his speech in the double imperative, "God you shall fear, and his commands you shall keep" (12:13c–d). Second, in the process, however, the epilogist also simplified Qoheleth's message. Third, as we have seen, there is more nuance, more substance, more urgency, and more sense of fun to Qoheleth's message than the epilogist's summary suggests, despite the serious and even dangerous circumstances under which Qoheleth developed and presented his speech. This third conclusion deserves further exploration.

The *urgency* of Qoheleth's message arises from the sociopolitical and socioeconomic challenges to Jewish values and identity that the foreign occupation presented. The cultural and religious threat that confronted Qoheleth's community was acute and intense. A lot was at stake. As a consequence, Qoheleth's response was a restatement of traditional Jewish beliefs (i.e., fear God and obey his commands), but it was also more than that. The Christian church today in most parts of the world finds itself confronted with similar challenges, where modern ideologies of many kinds attempt to invade the Christian imagination and lure Christians into adapting their Christian values and faith commitments to the demands and interests of other ideologies.

The *substance* of Qoheleth's message develops and adapts traditional Jewish beliefs and applies them in fresh ways to the challenges that the novel Hellenistic culture posed. Specifically, Qoheleth's message goes beyond a simplistic application of the fear of God and obedience to the divine commands by showing how such faithful obedience can and will generate true happiness not only for individuals but for the whole community. The so-called carpe diem statements are therefore not just an isolated phenomenon detached from religious praxis; rather, they are integral to Qoheleth's religious program and combine with it to constitute a sophisticated and realistic theology of happiness that Qoheleth's audience—Jewish believers then and Jewish as well as Christian believers now—can apply successfully in their own lives even in the midst of challenging circumstances.

The challenging circumstances of foreign occupation with its attractive philosophical ideas and economic opportunities, combined with political coercion backed by a powerful military, stimulated Qoheleth to *nuance* his message in ways that enabled it to be effective even under conditions that were hostile to his community and unfavorable to the flourishing of those who remained faithful to their Jewish heritage. His resistance program had enough suppleness and elasticity to foster in his audience the kind of tenacity, resilience, and defiance that enabled them to stand firm against overwhelming odds. This can be most clearly seen in the various practical pieces of advice that Qoheleth presents for dealing with typical real-life scenarios of friction with the occupying forces. His coping strategies typically are overtly compliant but

covertly defiant. They respond in astonishingly nuanced ways to the realities of power and yet they foster determined resistance. Qoheleth's approach may serve as a paradigm for faithful resistance for modern Jews and Christians.

Finally, Qoheleth infuses his message with a *sense of fun* that is unusual in human history. It is rare for revolutionaries to see the funny side of things, to be able to laugh at themselves and their enemies. And, of course, Qoheleth is not a revolutionary in the strict sense of the word. He wages his war not with blades but with wit. He is not a resistance fighter but a resistance comedian, and his message is designed not only to ridicule the opposition but also to amuse his followers and help them respond to the challenges they face with a healthy dose of humor that will ultimately help them deal with the inevitable drawbacks, disappointments, and defeats that all truly worthwhile human endeavor will have to face from time to time.[98] His infatuating sense of humor can and should inspire modern Jews and Christians to adopt a more lighthearted and humorous approach to the defense of the faith today.

In conclusion, in the Canonical and Theological Significance sections that follow each Explanation of the Text in this commentary we will not only present the content of Qoheleth's message, but we will also trace the contours of his message's trajectory, offering our own reflections on the practical relevance of the substance of Qoheleth's message today with the same urgency, nuance, and sense of fun as the original.

Rhetorical and Discourse-Linguistic Method

Discourse-linguistic treatments of the book of Ecclesiastes are rare. To date, only two book-length studies of this kind have appeared in print, Walton's *Experimenting with Qohelet* from 2007[99] and Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall's *Qoheleth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* from 2017. What complicates the matter is that they arrive at strikingly different results even though they employ discourse-linguistic methods. And further cause for reflection arises because this commentary, the third discourse-linguistic treatment of the entire book, arrives at different results from either. What is going on?

After a brief review of the main differences between the three discourse-linguistic treatments, we will engage in an in-depth survey of Walton's work, which includes extensive reflections on his methods and results. This will demonstrate how my own approach and methods differ from Walton's on the one hand, and Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall's on the other, and why my interpretations are different.

98. Cf. Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*.

99. Timothy L. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*.

Differences between Three Different Discourse-Linguistic Treatments

The treatments of Walton on the one hand and of Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall on the other fundamentally disagree with each other on the most important and salient features of the book, including its structure at the macro-level, and not infrequently also at the micro-level of paragraphs and clauses.[100]

(1) While Walton has developed an intricate clause hierarchy for every single clause in the entire book,[101] Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall focus almost exclusively on clause hierarchy at the sentence level and deny the existence of a discernible structure even of smaller sections in the book. They note that "we have not found any structural analysis to be thoroughly convincing,"[102] and the smaller section headings they included in the commentary "are intended to be *a convenience for using the volume* and do not reflect any formal position on a structure within the book."[103]

(2) Walton identifies five major divisions in the book, 1:1–2:26; 3:1–7:24; 7:25–10:15; 10:16–12:7; and 12:8–14.[104] By contrast, Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall detect only two, 1:1–7:26 and 7:28–12:14, marked by 7:27.[105]

(3) The way these two approaches evaluate the structural function of 7:27 is strikingly different. Holmsted, Cook, and Marshall identify it as a base-level structural feature: "The only clear structural shift, in our opinion, is marked by the intrusion of the narrator at 7:27. The book is thus structured in two parts, marked at the beginning (1:2) and end (12:8) by Qoheleth's motto and in the middle by the narrator's intrusion."[106] Walton, by contrast, identifies 7:25 as marking the beginning of a new major division,[107] while 7:27 only functions at the micro-level of the immediate sequence of verses, and has no structural function at all.[108]

By contrast, my own discourse-linguistic analysis differs from both. I do not see a hierarchical structure for every single clause in the entire book (contra Walton), but I do identify hierarchical structures in smaller sections (contra Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall). Even so, my structural analyses of smaller text segments are often different from Walton's results.[109] How should we respond to these striking differences between three treatments that claim to employ the same methods? We begin with an in-depth review of Walton's study.

100. For examples of fundamental disagreement over the discourse position and function of prominent verses in Ecclesiastes, see my discussions of 7:27 and 12:8 in the commentary.

101. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 153–89.

102. Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Qoheleth Handbook*, 2.

103. Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Qoheleth Handbook*, 3; emphasis original.

104. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 36.

105. Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Qoheleth Handbook*, 2–3, 222.

106. Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Qoheleth Handbook*, 2.

107. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 57–59, 85–87.

108. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 91.

109. See, for example, the discussion of the Structure and Literary Form of 2:17–23 and 7:23–8:1 in the commentary below.

A Survey of Walton's Text-Linguistic Experiment

We begin with Walton's understanding of what constitutes a coherent discourse. We then turn to a description of his discourse-linguistic approach. Next, we consider his engagement with other exegetical methods. After that, we will conduct two case studies, exploring his clause hierarchy for Eccl 1:16–2:26 and his interpretation of discourse markers in 7:25–10:15.

Walton's Understanding of "Coherent Discourse"

Walton's understanding of what would make the book of Ecclesiastes a "coherent discourse" forms the basis for his study and shapes his method and approach. In his opinion, Ecclesiastes can only be read as a "coherent discourse" if it displays "sufficient linguistic structure, unity and connectedness for the reader to construct an *ordered* representation of the world described in the text."[110] And by "ordered" he means *hierarchically structured* rather than sequential: "Language (written or spoken) is not simply linear nor is it free from linguistic regulations found in the language system. Language, as a system, is hierarchical."[111] In the following paragraphs, I want to highlight two aspects of this understanding of coherent discourse that predetermined Walton's results.

First, and most prominently, for Walton a coherent discourse has to be *hierarchically structured in all of its parts* in order for it to be a coherent and meaningful communication.[112] Consequently, he includes every single clause in Ecclesiastes in this clause hierarchy, and his clause hierarchy identifies numerous structural levels. The fruit of Walton's labors resulted in "a textual schema for the whole book that graphically represents the position of each clause within the overall textual hierarchy and its specific relation to the clauses surrounding it,"[113] a schema that extends across thirty-seven pages in his manuscript.[114]

Second, for Walton a coherent discourse has to display sufficient unity and connectedness for the reader to construct a coherent representation of the world it describes. He explains: "our understanding of discourse does not require that the entire discourse develop only one theme or topic in order to display coherence. However, it does require that *when more than one theme or topic is being presented, there should be some type of identifiable relationship made between them*."[115] And again, for Walton this relationship can only be hierarchical, and not sequential. Previous "attempts to trace a unifying theme for Qohelet through linear, sequential, and non-hierarchical

110. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 71; emphasis added.
111. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 71.
112. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 71.
113. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 12.
114. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 153–189.
115. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 9.

analysis of successive text units" have proven inadequate to the task due to the nature of the book of Ecclesiastes itself:[116]

> Finding a consistent, comprehensive theme beyond small sections has proven especially elusive and slippery, due largely to apparent interruptions in its flow, the frequent reintroduction of participants (usually identified as *keywords*), and repetition of phrases and actions. Just when the reader thinks she/he has a hold on one line of thought, it changes, only to resurface later on.[117]

Stunningly, Walton's response to these characteristics of Ecclesiastes was to conduct a discourse-linguistic experiment with minimal consideration of thematic developments. Walton's insistence that a discourse has to be *hierarchically structured in all of its parts* for it to be coherent forced him to ignore one of the most important aspects of the language of Ecclesiastes, its thematic arrangement.

Walton's Engagement with Existing Exegetical Approaches

A second, less significant part of Walton's analysis was to dialogue with existing exegetical approaches.[118] His explanation of the process is brief but revealing:

> The nature of our experiment is to see how much we can say about the text world of Qohelet regarding its structure, cohesion, and internal hierarchy established *by the text-level linguistic parameters alone and then to explore the implications of these for exegetical decisions*. We readily admit that these are not the only factors that contribute to the continuity of the text and that we are not trying to describe the "whole world of the text" built up in the reading process. *As will be seen in our discussion, there are points in which our own analysis proves inadequate to accurately describe certain textual relationships or functions.* However, while this experiment does not say everything there is to say about the text, we believe it does provide *the essential framework* on which a complete picture of the text can be formed. In other words *it establishes the syntactic skeleton, which not only supports the whole text but indicates how specific text segments are related as well.* Additional exegetical methods can enhance the description of the text world by *"fleshing-out" this skeleton but should be directly connected to it and governed by it*. We are not claiming that our text-linguistic approach should replace any of the existing exegetical methods. However, we believe that in order for one to accurately understand the communication strategy of an ancient text, *it must be the initial step in all exegetical analysis*.[119]

116. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 71.

117. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 70–71; emphasis original.

118. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 13.

119. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 13; emphases added.

The following points are worthy of note:

1. The clause hierarchy that Walton has established via discourse-linguistic methods alone forms the basis for any exegetical decisions.
2. Walton admits that discourse-linguistic analysis is at times "inadequate" to describe certain textual features in Ecclesiastes.[120]
3. These limitations notwithstanding, Walton's discourse-linguistic clause hierarchy provides the "essential framework" and the "syntactic skeleton" for any subsequent exegetical work.[121]
4. The use of the "skeleton" metaphor reveals that Walton really sees it as the essential part of any interpretive work. Additional exegetical methods are secondary, they can only "flesh out" the skeleton, the clause hierarchy "must be" the initial step.[122]

What this demonstrates is that Walton's approach is a bottom-up approach only, where any subsequent exegetical considerations are not permitted to adjust what he considers the foundational work of establishing the text's clause hierarchy through discourse-linguistic methods alone.

Walton's Discourse-Linguistic Approach

The first, most important part of Walton's study is a discourse-linguistic analysis of the entire book of Ecclesiastes. He uses a "bottom-up procedure" based on "surface level linguistic parameters" to determine the text's linguistic structure.[123] He focuses exclusively on "explicitly marked text-level linguistic signals" in Ecclesiastes that "help the reader navigate through it."[124] He rejects rhetorical or literary methodologies because in his opinion "they emphasize a text's artistic design at the expense of its linguistic structure," when in reality a given textual feature may be present "simply because it is a convention of the linguistic system."[125] An extended quote illustrates this:

> This bottom-up procedure is an attempt to decode the reading process. First, it records all the surface level linguistic parameters that a reader recognizes and utilizes during the reading process. Then, by means of a graphic presentation of the entire text, it clearly displays the syntactic connections between clauses which these parameters signal. The end result of this stage of the analysis is a textual schema for the whole book that graphically represents the position of each clause within the overall textual hierarchy and its specific relation to the clauses surrounding it.[126]

120. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 13.
121. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 13.
122. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 13.
123. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 12.
124. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 5.
125. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 6.
126. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 12.

Walton's description highlights that the basis and essential part of his analysis is based on a "bottom-up procedure," based on "surface level parameters." It enables him to design "a textual schema for the whole book that graphically represents the position of each clause within the overall textual hierarchy and its specific relation to the clauses surrounding it."[127]

The schema is built upon tracking the following explicit markers in the text: (1) syntactic coordination or subordination; (2) grammatical features, including clause types, morpho-syntactic constituents, and forms of substitution and ellipsis; (3) text-syntactic features, including text types (based on linguistic features like participant communication, not literary features like genre), types of participant reference, and participant sets;[128] and (4) lexical features, including repetition of lexemes, phrases, use of key words, and use of synonyms or other word classes expressing semantic relations.[129]

The natural procedure for structuring discourse in *narrative* texts is tracking changes in the grammatical subject.[130] In Ecclesiastes, too, the most prominent surface-level indicators among the explicit markers identified by Walton are the distribution of syntactic coordination, syntactic subordination, and grammatical features.

Surprisingly, however, Walton assigns a crucial role to *secondary participants* because the distribution of syntactic coordination, syntactic subordination, and grammatical features in Ecclesiastes are insufficient for determining the hierarchical positions of clauses that Walton assigns them in his clause hierarchy. Since Qoheleth remains the grammatical subject and main participant throughout most of the text, this suggests a sequential rather than hierarchical reading of the different text segments in the book. Walton knows this:

> Even when one includes an analysis of clause types, due to the pervasive use of the Qatal with קהלת as subject (i.e., 1st person Qatal), the end result is *a rather flat reading of the text, since most segments appear to be at the same communication level.*

127. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 153–89.

128. In general linguistics, a participant is (1) someone "involved in an act, or series of acts, of speech: thus a speaker, a person or persons spoken to, and any others taking part in a conversation" or (2) an individual "involved in an event or process"; thus, in the sentence "John hugged Susan," "the participants are *John*, with the semantic role of agent, and *Susan*, with the semantic roe of patient" (Matthews, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Linguistics* 266–67). Walton departs somewhat from this. In his analysis, he identifies the primary participant in Ecclesiastes with Qoheleth, while "secondary participants" can be any topic, theme, or keyword that appears in a given clause, such as "wisdom," "folly," or "mankind" in 2:12 (cf. *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 29). In his own words, participants can be "any element of the clause that has a thematic role in (i.e., participates in) the actions or events of the discourse. Our usage applies not only to human actants . . . , but also to moral/ethical qualities (e.g., wisdom, folly) that fill important roles, especially in Wisdom literature" (*Experimenting with Qohelet*, 17n1).

129. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 11–12. The general procedures for the determination of a clause hierarchy are explained in Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 16–19. There appears to be significant overlap between Walton's "participants" and what he calls "lexical features." This conflation appears to facilitate the promotion of "secondary participants" in Walton's clause hierarchy.

130. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 71.

> In Qohelet, tracking the grammatical subject and clause type help to determine clause connections but are not sufficient by themselves to determine *a clause's position* in the hierarchy. *Additional text-linguistic features* must be analyzed before the reader can accurately determine to which level of communication *in the discourse* the clause belongs.[131]

Five observations are in order from this quotation: (1) The entire sequence from 1:2–12:8 is presented as a first-person account of Qoheleth's search for success. This circumstance does not just lead to "a rather flat *reading* of the text," as Walton calls it; rather, this textual reality demonstrates that the text itself is, in fact, hierarchically flat. It is arranged sequentially, not hierarchically. (2) Walton is correct when he notes that "tracking the grammatical subject and clause type help to determine clause connections." However, he then goes on to say that tracking grammatical subject and clause type "are insufficient by themselves to determine a clause's position in the hierarchy." Walton's concession seems counterintuitive at first. Why? Because tracking grammatical subject and clause type do in fact enable one to determine position in the hierarchy. Walton is forced to make this concession because he knows that grammatical subject and clause type can only indicate the position of clauses within the text segment in which they appear, and not in the entire discourse. This leads us to my next point. (3) Walton's goal of establishing "to which level of communication *in the discourse* the clause belongs" is aiming too high and asks of the text what it simply cannot yield and never was intended to yield. (4) It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Walton has to take recourse to "additional text-linguistic features" to construct clause relations at the level of the entire discourse, for if he had been unable to do so, he would have had to concede that Ecclesiastes is not a "coherent discourse" in the sense of his definition, as we have seen above. This reasoning appears to be somewhat circular. (5) Most prominent among the "additional text-linguistic features" in Walton's schema are what he calls "secondary participants," as we will see shortly in our discussion of the relations between 2:3a, 2:4a, 2:11a, and 2:12a. There we will discover that Walton's deployment of these secondary participants for the purpose of identifying clause hierarchies *relies heavily on interpretation*. Consequently, they are not nearly as reliable as Walton thought.

Evaluation of Walton's Discourse-Linguistic Approach

I will evaluate Walton's approach with two representative case studies, his analyses of Eccl 1:16–2:24 and Eccl 7:23–8:9. For the second case study, I will also include Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall's take on 7:27, which is strikingly different.

131. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 74; emphases added.

Walton's Clause Hierarchy for Ecclesiastes 1:16–2:24: A Case Study

An evaluation of Walton's clause hierarchy for Eccl 1:16–2:24 demonstrates why his use of "secondary participants" is not as reliable as he thought. After presenting the hierarchy in tabular form,[132] he goes on to explain the various surface-level observations and analytical decisions that led him to construe the textual hierarchies between the clauses. A good example is the relationship between the clauses in 2:3a, 2:4a, 2:11a, and 2:12a. He presents the hierarchical relations as follows (I have included the vocalization for clarity):[133]

[<Co> בְּלִבִּי] [<Pr> תַּרְתִּי] 2:3a
[<Ob> מַעֲשָׂי] [<Pr> הִגְדַּלְתִּי] 2:4a
[<Co> בְּכָל־מַעֲשַׂי] [<Su> אֲנִי] [<Pr> < פָּנִיתִי] [<Cj> ו] 2:11a
[<Su> אֲנִי] [<Pr> פָּנִיתִי] [<Cj> ו] 2:12a

Two surprising elements in Walton's clause hierarchy demonstrate how he determines various levels of subordination. The first element of surprise is the subordination of the clause in 2:11a to the clause in 2:4a, rather than the one in 2:3a. The second element of surprise is that he then connects the clause in 2:12a *not* to the formally equivalent clause in 2:11a, but to the clause in 2:3a. Here is his rationale for the first decision:

> Three clauses present themselves as possible mother clauses to clause 2,11a, namely 2,03a. 04a. 09a. Even though none of these are of the same type as 2,11a (W + Qatal + X), they do correspond in terms of other grammatical and text-syntactic features. To determine the *best* connection, *other formal markers of correspondence, like lexical features, must be considered*. The most significant linguistic signal, in our opinion, is the occurrence of the NPdet, מעשׂי, 'my works', in clauses 2,11a and 2,04a. This lexical feature seems to *force* a more immediate connection since it has been the focus of Qohelet's discussion in the preceding seven verses.[134]

The highlighted portions reveal three steps in Walton's line of argument. First, his attempt to find the "best" tacitly admits that the identification of clause hierarchies is not as exact a science as he elsewhere suggests. Second, he uses additional criteria beyond grammatical and text-syntactic features for determining clause hierarchies, namely, "lexical features," which elsewhere he calls "secondary participants." Third, in spite of his admission earlier that "other grammatical and text-syntactic features" create correspondences not only to 2:4a but also to 2:3a and 2:9a, Walton believes that

132. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 25; cf. also 153–59.
133. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 29.
134. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 29; emphases added.

the lexical repetition of the participant מעשׂי ("my works") "forces" a subordination of 2:11a under 2:4a.

In response, I make three observations. First, since the discourse-linguistic analysis of a non-narrative text like Ecclesiastes is not an exact science, frequently there are several possible hierarchical relations between textual elements. Consequently, identifying *the one correct relation* is often impossible. This leads to my next point. Second, it is indeed appropriate to employ a range of criteria beyond grammatical and text-syntactic features to determine clause hierarchies, including lexical ones. However, these criteria need to be employed *in a flexible fashion that takes the rhetorical purpose of the whole and of its parts into account*. Third, identifications of clause hierarchies *need to be held lightly and flexibly*, since the textual evidence can point in different directions and often supports several plausible clause hierarchies all at once.

This last point can be illustrated with Walton's rationale for the second surprising decision, to connect the clause in 2:12a not to the formally identical clause in 2:11a, but to 2:3a:

> So now what do we do when we arrive at clause 2,12a? Formally, it is *identical to clause 2,11a with exact lexical repetition* up to the complement element. While an initial decision might be to make this clause parallel to 2,11a, *as one reads on in the text* such a decision becomes unsatisfactory. In the following clause *participants* are reintroduced. . . . Also, this is not the first time in this chapter these items have been mentioned. . . . Therefore, *based on this high degree of lexical reintroduction* into the discourse *of these secondary participants*, we suggest that it is better to connect clause 2,12a to clause 2,03a instead of 2,11a.[135]

The highlighted portions reveal two important steps in Walton's argument. First, even though the degree of similarity between his 2:11a and 2:12a (see above) is a particularly strong linguistic signal to suggest that they operate on a parallel level in the clause hierarchy, Walton decides otherwise. Second, his justification for resisting the strong textual signal of formal identify and exact repetition is *reading on in the text*, where in his opinion the reintroduction of "secondary participants" supersedes the textual signal of similarity between the adjacent clauses in 2:11a and 2:12a.

In response, I raise the following objections. First, Walton's decision to favor *what follows in the text* via the introduction of secondary participants at the expense of a particularly strong textual signal of formal and lexical identity in adjacent verses appears inconsistent. After all, his earlier decision to subordinate 2:11a under 2:4a was based on the repetition of but one word, while here we have the repetition of

135. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 29; emphases added.

two. Second, even granted that מעשׂי, "my works," in 2:11a refers to the same word in 2:4a and the description of Qoheleth's deeds from verses 4b–10, the same could be said about the reintroduction of the same word later on in the text, in 2:17b (הַמַּעֲשֶׂה, "the work") and the coreferential terms אֶת־כָּל־עֲמָלִי, "all my achievements" in 2:18a and בְּכָל־עֲמָלִי, "(in) all my achievements" in 2:19b. This leads to my second objection. If Walton favors *reading on* in the text when deciding on the hierarchical level of 2:12a, why does he single out the reintroduction of secondary participants to signal connections of 2:12a with the following verses, but fails to do so in the case of 2:11a, where the immediately following 2:12a repeats the first two words of 2:11a, and the following word, מעשׂי, is repeated in 2:17a and taken up in two coreferential expressions in 2:18a and 2:19b?

In conclusion to our first case study, Walton considers discourse-linguistic analysis as the basis for a "scientific" and thus value-free, *objective observation* of the textual data alone, since the surface-level linguistic parameters are "easily recovered from the text" and "marked formally," thus making their identification "more consistent."[136] Other exegetical methods, by contrast, Walton considers as more prone to error, because they rely on below-surface-level, *subjective interpretations* of the textual data. However, our review of his treatment of the clause hierarchy of 2:3–12 has exposed the apparent consistency of focusing on surface-level linguistic parameters alone as הֶבֶל ("a mirage"). Even at the surface level of the analysis of discourse-linguistic phenomena, the need for interpretation of these data arises throughout. Similar observations emerge in our second case study.

Walton's Clause Hierarchy for Ecclesiastes 7:25–10:15: A Case Study with Focus on 7:27 and the Beginning of 8:2

Walton uses two criteria for identifying 7:25 (rather than 7:23) as the beginning of a major division on the discourse level.[137] The first is a surface-level criterion on the level of the paragraph itself. It is the clause-initial first person *qatal* verb form סַבּוֹתִי, "I turned," without subordinating וְ־, followed by infinitive construct clauses, as in 3:17a and 3:18a:[138] "the *text* at this point signals a shift at the discourse level."[139] The second criterion is a discourse-level criterion: "there is a noticeable shift in the flow of the content or communication strategy."[140] Again, more detailed arguments for this shift at the discourse level rely heavily on the significance that Walton assigns to "secondary participants":[141]

136. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 12.
137. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 43–44, 83–87.
138. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 43, 85.
139. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 84; emphasis added.
140. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 85.
141. For the complete argument, see Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 43–44.

> The decision to begin a new pericope with 7,25 is not dependent upon any one feature alone. *The use of a specific clause type by itself is not sufficient to signal such a break.* Additional grammatical, text-syntactic, and lexical features must be considered as well. In this case, *the grammatical features of clause type* (0 + Qatal + X, followed by infinitive construct clauses) *combine with the text-syntactic reintroduction of participant sets* (אני, לבי, חכמה, סכלות, and הוללות) *and with the lexical repetition of* ידע *and* תור to *indicate a recommencement of the quest* begun in 1,13ff.[142]

The words in italics demonstrate how Walton arrived at the decision to propose a major division at this point. First, he acknowledges that the specific clause type of the phrase סַבּוֹתִי אֲנִי וְלִבִּי is "insufficient" to signal a major break. Second, he again is compelled to bring in other textual features, such as the "reintroduction of participant sets" and "lexical repetition." Third, these signals combine to "indicate a *recommencement* of the quest begun in 1,13ff."

In response, I raise three objections. First, while it is true that the clause type of 7:25a is the same as 3:17a and 3:18a, the clauses in Eccl 3 do not begin a new section, either major or minor, but continue a small section begun at 3:16. What is more, they are far removed from Walton's major division in the text, which he posits at 3:1. Furthermore, Walton ignores that in 2:20 the verb סבב—admittedly with a subordinating וְ־—does not function to signal a shift at the discourse level. While the lack of a subordinating וְ־ in 7:25 at first sight may indicate that a more significant shift may take place there after all, however, a review of clause-initial first person *qatal* forms without subordinating וְ־ in Ecclesiastes reveals numerous examples where no major shift occurs, as for example in 1:14, 16; 2:1, 3, 4; 5, 6, 7, 8 (twice); 3:10, 12, 14, 17, 18; 4:15; 7:15 (fronted direct object), and even in 7:23 (also with fronted direct object). Second, we see again that Walton needs to draw on secondary participants ("participant sets") to make the case for a hierarchical structure. Third, Walton counterintuitively interprets these signals to "indicate a *recommencement* of the quest begun in 1,13ff." However, a simpler and more intuitive response to these textual stimuli results from considering their rhetorical function. It is more natural to interpret them to signal that 7:23–8:1 *continues* the quest begun in 1:12–2:24 by bringing it to an interim *conclusion*, as I have argued in the commentary below.

We now turn to focus on the phrase אָמְרָה קֹהֶלֶת, "says (Lady) Qoheleth," in 7:27. A full discussion of the phrase appears later in the commentary, in my Explanation of the Text for 7:23–8:1. For now, however, I want to draw attention to two prominent discourse-linguistic signals in this short phrase. The first signal is that this phrase, with a third-person singular *qatal* form of the verb אמר, only appears three times in the entire discourse, at the beginning (1:2), the end (12:8), and here

142. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 43–44.

(each time with minor variations). This circumstance on its own singles it out as one of the most prominent discourse-linguistic signals in the entire text, especially if discourse-linguistic considerations alone are taken into consideration. The second discourse-linguistic signal is the gender of the verb is unexpected, because it has a feminine ending. As a third-person feminine singular, it treats the speaker it introduces as a woman. This is so unusual that almost all interpreters assume an error in transmission and propose a conjectural emendation from אָמְרָה to אָמַר, an elegant solution that brings 7:27 in line with 1:2 and 12:8.

How do the two treatments that analyze Ecclesiastes from discourse-linguistic perspectives respond to this surface-level marker in the discourse? In strikingly different fashion!

First, Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall's analysis. Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall prioritize the linguistic system, in line with Walton. Since they believe that the phrase "reflects the intrusive voice of the book's narrator," they take it as an explicitly marked text-level linguistic signal that helps the reader to navigate through the book.[143] Consequently, they "take this to signal the midpoint of the book, dividing the first half from the second," an interpretation that has consequences for the macro-level of the entire discourse.[144]

Even though they acknowledge that the phrase is "the narrator's overt intrusion" into the text, then, they do not pause to consider the possibility that the extremely unusual phrase may not be a feature of the linguistic system à la Walton, but a deliberate departure from that system, in line with the rhetorical strategy of the text as the written record of a public oration, as I propose.

What is more, they then *change* the linguistic signal, even though it is explicitly marked at the text-level.[145] They bring the author's artistic departure from the linguistic system back in line with that system.[146] Their strict application of discourse-linguistic methodology rules out the possibility of artistically motivated departures from the linguistic system. In the process, it not only *misses* the masterful improvisation on that system in 7:27, it also forces them to *change* the textual signal itself. Ironically, the result is a prioritization of the linguistic system at the expense of the text itself.

The isolated אני at the beginning of 8:2 Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall interpret as an intrusion of Qoheleth's perspective, which seems rather odd considering that the entire speech is his. How would the first-person singular personal pronoun indicate an intrusion into a first-person account? At the discourse-linguistic level of the clause in 8:2a, they broadly follow Gordis, who "takes אני here as short for

143. Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Qoheleth Handbook*, 222.

144. Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Qoheleth Handbook*, 222.

145. Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Qoheleth Handbook*, 2, 222.

146. Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Qoheleth Handbook*, 222.

'I declare.'"[147] The only difference is that, rather than assuming an elliptic verb of speaking, they "take the syntax to be that of a fronted adjunct orienting the speaker [*sic*] to the perspective from which the following opinion proceeds."[148]

Second, Walton's analysis. Walton assigns no discourse-linguistic function to the phrase in 7:27. He ignores the feminine ending of the verb אָמְרָה and notes that "the fact that this discovery [i.e., that "more bitter than death is the woman . . ."] is introduced by an imperative form of ראה (7,27a), uses a Qatal (1st person singular) verb, and contains a direct reference by the narrator/editor to the main participant as קהלת (7,27c), marks 7,27–28 for connection back to 7,25a where a Qatal first person singular form was used with **אני**."[149]

With regard to the isolated **אני** at the beginning of 8:2, Walton appears to take an exclusively discourse-linguistic perspective, at first sight at least: "the occurrence of **אני** in 8,02a marks[s] a connection back to 7,25a," where **אני** was previously introduced.[150] Then, however, he remarks that "the MT's elliptic **אני** *seems to defy connection and requires some form of emendation or addition*."[151] Walton wants to have it both ways. On the one hand, he interprets the function of **אני** from a discourse-linguistic perspective. On the other hand, he concludes that the word should be emended.

Here, too, the limitations of an exclusive concentration on discourse linguistics come into view. Walton ignores the feminine ending on אָמְרָה in 7:27 and ignores the linguistic signal of the narrative reintroduction of Qoheleth, even though it is explicitly marked at the text-level. When it comes to the **אני** in 8:2, he proposes to *change* it.

Walton's strict application of discourse-linguistic methodology rules out the possibility of artistically motivated departures from the linguistic system. He *misses* the masterful improvisation on that system in 7:27 because his methodology forces him to ignore one text-linguistic signal (the feminine verb ending in 7:27) and to change another text-linguistic signal (the personal pronoun in 8:2).

Our comparison has exposed serious flaws in approaches that favor discourse linguistics at the expense of rhetorical analysis. We now turn to my own interpretation, which combines them.

Third, my own analysis. A full exposition of my rhetorically informed discourse-linguistic interpretation of 7:23–8:1, including the phrase אָמְרָה קֹהֶלֶת in 7:27 and the isolated אֲנִי in 8:2, can be found in the commentary below. A separate study with special attention to the humorous quality and performance-oriented character of

147. Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Qoheleth Handbook*, 228.

148. Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Qoheleth Handbook*, 228.

149. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 45.

150. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 45–46.

151. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 46, emphasis added.

7:23–8:1 is also available.[152] For this reason, the following is a brief summary of my argument with special attention to how my interpretation differs from the analyses of Walton and Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall.

I interpret both the phrase אָמְרָה קֹהֶלֶת in 7:27 and the isolated אֲנִי in 8:2 as stage instructions that signal that the speaker in 7:27–8:1 switches from a male-sounding voice to the higher pitch of a female sounding-voice and back again, to humorous effect.[153] The text segment ends with 8:1, and the isolated אֲנִי at the beginning of 8:2 signals Qoheleth's return to a male-sounding voice for the remainder of his speech: "Attention to the performance aspects of the passage thus explains the occurrence of this otherwise isolated and incomprehensible word."[154]

What emerges is that a rhetorically informed discourse-linguistic approach to the interpretation of 7:23–8:2 has explanatory power for the overt text-linguistic signals אָמְרָה קֹהֶלֶת in 7:27 and the personal pronoun אֲנִי in 8:2. Attention to the rhetorical quality of the passage has enabled me to make sense of surface-level signals of the text that have until now perplexed interpreters and forced them to either ignore or change them. The combination of rhetorical with discourse-linguistic analysis helps us to understand their function within the text segment as well as within the speech as a whole.

Earlier I mentioned that Walton rejected rhetorical or literary methodologies because in his opinion "they emphasize a text's artistic design at the expense of its linguistic structure," when in reality a given textual feature may be present "simply because it is a convention of the linguistic system."[155] My combination of rhetorical analysis with discourse analysis helps us uncover when Qoheleth the orator masterfully subverts the linguistic system to subvert the system of the political masters he so skillfully opposes.

In conclusion to our second case study, Walton's and Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall's method, drawing on discourse-linguistic methodologies alone, is not able to explain prominent surface-level textual phenomena that do not comply with the normal conventions of the linguistic system. As I have explained earlier in this introduction, however, the book of Ecclesiastes is full of textual material that defies convention, and the narrative introduction אָמְרָה קֹהֶלֶת in 7:27 and the personal pronoun אֲנִי in 8:2 we have discussed in our case study are representative. In sum, discourse-linguistic methodologies need to be complemented with a range of exegetical methods. Below I will explain my integrated interpretive approach.

152. Knut M. Heim, "Humor and Performance in Ecclesiastes 7:23–8:1," in *Biblical Humor and Performance*, ed. Peter Perry, BPC 20 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2023), 30–58.

153. Cf. the detailed discussion below and in Heim, "Humor and Performance in Ecclesiastes 7:23–8:1," 50.

154. Heim, "Humor and Performance in Ecclesiastes 7:23–8:1," 55.

155. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 6.

The Need for and the Suitability of a Hybrid Approach to Ecclesiastes

As we have seen, exclusive bottom-up approaches based on discourse-linguistic methods alone are insufficient for addressing the discourse features of Ecclesiastes. Therefore, this commentary employs discourse-linguistic procedures flexibly—with a good dose of humility—and in combination with other exegetical methods.

The book of Ecclesiastes is unusual, even unique, when compared to other parts of Scripture. Walton correctly identifies it as a "non-narrative" discourse,[156] but it is not poetry, either. It is neither classical narrative nor classical poetry, but something else. There is no other text like it; it is a genre all by itself, in the Bible at least. It has unique characteristics that purposefully depart from the linguistic features that discourse linguists have come to expect on the basis of their familiarity with *narrative* texts, which to date have been studied more frequently from discourse-linguistic perspectives. Our methods therefore need to explore surface-level textual elements as well as elements that operate *below* or *above* the surface of the text.

Consequently, this commentary employs a hermeneutical approach and interpretive methodology that matches its subject, with a combination of rhetorical and discourse-linguistic procedures that are both top-down and bottom-up, where genre and literary form play an equally important part as clause connections and transitional features.[157] It employs discourse-linguistic *and* rhetorical methods, including performance criticism.[158]

Discourse Linguistics and Rhetorical Analysis

Discourse-linguistic methods are complemented with rhetorical methods. The editor's comments in the prospectus of the series introduction to this commentary explain why the rhetorically informed discourse-linguistic methods I employ in this commentary are especially suited for the book of Ecclesiastes:

> The commentators in this series recognize that *too little attention has been paid to biblical authors as rhetoricians, to their larger rhetorical and theological agendas*, and especially to the means by which they tried to achieve their goals. . . . So we must inquire not only what that message was but also what strategies they used to impress their message on their hearer's ears. This reference to "hearers" rather than readers is intentional, since *the biblical texts were written to be heard*.[159]

156. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 9–10.

157. Cf. the general editor's comments on p. xii in the prospectus of the series introduction in this volume.

158. On performance criticism, see esp. the essays in Perry, *Biblical Humor and Performance*.

159. The quotation is from p. xi of the general editor's comments in the prospectus of the series introduction in this volume; emphases added.

The words in italics highlight what is especially true of Ecclesiastes. Since the book is the written record of a speech originally composed to be performed before a live audience, it was indeed "written to be heard." And as a consequence, the rhetorical dimension and the performative quality of the book are especially prominent, and so attention to the "larger rhetorical and biblical agendas" of Qoheleth's speech need to inform and guide the discourse-linguistic analysis of the book in top-down fashion.

The impact of rhetorical analysis on the analysis of the discourse structure of the book of Ecclesiastes leads to the conclusion that the book is hierarchically structured at the medium level of smaller- to medium-sized text segments that tend to be arranged *sequentially* rather than hierarchically. Therefore, this commentary pays special attention to the identification of small- to medium-sized text segments. It then explores how each is hierarchically structured internally. Only then will I explore how each of the text segments combines with other text units to achieve Qoheleth's larger rhetorical and theological agenda, and how the performance of each part of his speech contributes to the overall message of the book, in bottom-up fashion.

Another paragraph from the editor's comments in the series introduction illustrates why the hybrid approach adopted in this commentary is particularly suitable for the interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes:

> To most readers syntax operates primarily *at the sentence level*. But recent developments in biblical study, particularly *advances in rhetorical and discourse analysis*, have alerted us to the fact that syntax operates also *at the levels of the paragraph*, the literary unit being analyzed, *and the composition as a whole*. Discourse analysis . . . studies the text beyond the level of the sentence (sentence syntax), where *the paragraph serves as the basic unit of thought*.[160]

The words in italics highlight the benefits of my hybrid approach. The editor notes that syntax operates not only at the sentence level but also at the levels of paragraphs and of textual compositions as a whole. This tends to be correct with regard to narrative texts. However, it is not necessarily the case for poetic texts, and it also does not tend to be true for other kinds of non-narrative texts, and especially not for the book of Ecclesiastes. Here, syntax only operates at the sentence and paragraph levels, and not at the level of the entire composition.

160. The quotation is from p. xii of the general editor's comments in the prospectus of the series introduction in this volume; emphases added.

As a consequence, therefore, it is indeed true that "the paragraph serves as the basic unit of thought" in Ecclesiastes, and for this reason my hybrid approach is really a bottom-halfway-up approach from the discourse-linguistic part of the interpretive process, and a top-halfway-down approach from the rhetorical part of my interpretive process. And the two meet in the middle, at the level of the paragraph (= text segment in my terminology).

In sum, my explanation of Ecclesiastes as the *sequentially ordered*, written record of a speech sequence originally composed for oral performance before live audiences is able to construct a holistic interpretation of the book that makes sense of the whole and all of its parts. While each text segment is hierarchically structured within itself, the arrangement of text segments from one to another generally is not; rather, they are strung together sequentially, and for the most part they operate on the same structural level. The various sequential text segments operate more like a string of pearls on a necklace than a textual hierarchy. Even so, however, it is possible to discern how they relate to one another. We can identify what they contribute to the overall argument of the speech. We can determine the function of each text segment in the larger composition. A rhetorically informed discourse analysis allows the unique composition of Ecclesiastes to set the agenda for its explanation and application, even where it departs from the conventions of the linguistic system. The following paragraphs will review what caused Qoheleth to depart from the linguistic system so regularly.

Discourse Linguistics, Sociopolitical Analysis, Theological Rhetoric, and the Subversive Nature of Qoheleth's Language

A review of the sociopolitical situation of the book's composition explains the challenges it sought to address. Qoheleth's theological and practical rhetoric reveal his intentions and explain the subversive character of his language. Some repetition of earlier material brings the different parts of this introduction together into an integrated approach.

The Sociopolitical Situation That Prompted the Composition of Ecclesiastes

The book of Ecclesiastes was composed during the explosive sociopolitical circumstances under foreign rule exercised by the Greek Ptolemaic kings in Egypt. Historical data reveal that the apparent invincibility, cultural sophistication, and economic prowess of the Greeks exerted a strong pull toward assimilation on the various populations under Greek rule, resulting also in the Hellenization of the Judean population. Qoheleth's aim was to counteract the popularity of Hellenistic

culture and religion, whose allure was all the stronger for the coercion of Greek military might and the promise of fortune for those who collaborated with the foreign regime.

In the process, his oration presented a sustained critique of the many negative aspects of occupation, which included economic, legal, and political systems of exploitation established by Ptolemaic rule. He covertly calls out the foreign oppressors and their manipulative-coercive practices, and he presents a barely concealed rallying cry for his compatriots to resist the allure of foreign values in matters religious, social, and economic.

Consequently, the linguistic features of Qoheleth's speech need to be interpreted not only as conventional features of the Hebrew language system but also as *distinctive expressions that Qoheleth the rhetorician employed creatively to serve his unique, subversive purposes*. The combination of rhetorical analysis with discourse analysis helps us uncover the sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and socioreligious reasons that inspired Qoheleth the orator to subvert the linguistic system so masterfully to subvert the system of the political masters he so skillfully opposes.

Qoheleth's Theological and Practical Rhetoric

The sociopolitical situation of the Jewish struggle for the survival of their socioreligious identify under foreign rule leads to a rhetorical strategy that fully affirms the illusory nature of life "under the sun," that is, under foreign rule, *while at the same time* promoting a positive, hopeful outlook on life conducted within the trajectory of Jewish religion and tradition.

Qoheleth's instructions, in the form of volitives (imperatives, jussives), are the surface-level discourse-linguistic markers that reveal his intention against the sociopolitical background under foreign occupation that Qoheleth seeks to address. His instructions are the most important discourse-linguistic markers for identifying Qoheleth's intentions, for here he tells his audience explicitly what he wants them to do upon hearing his speech.

The thorough review of Qoheleth's instructions earlier in the introduction has revealed his most important intentions: (1) to promote religious beliefs and behavior; (2) to commend coping strategies to help his community respond well to the challenges of foreign occupation, enabling them to cope with the dire sociopolitical circumstances under foreign occupation; and (3) to entertain his audience with humor to win them for his cause and its important practical message.

Qoheleth's message can be extrapolated from what he asks his audience to do upon hearing his presentation. First, he urges them to buy into a program of attitudes and behaviors that promote true happiness. Second, he commends to them the essence of the Jewish faith and its traditional value system, epitomized in the concept of the

fear of God. Third, he wants his audience to enjoy life within the religious framework of traditional Jewish faith. The combination of these goals, the promotion of happiness within the framework of traditional Jewish faith, is designed to offer a viable alternative to the hedonistic kind of happiness through the accumulation of wealth that the foreign overlords dangled before the eyes of would-be Jewish collaborators. Fourth, Qoheleth commends a series of coping mechanisms and practical coping strategies to help the local population respond constructively to the challenges that the foreign occupation presented, especially where foreign demands clashed with Jewish sensibilities. Fifth, Qoheleth's use of humor in his instructions reveals that he aimed to recruit members of the audience for his cause through entertaining them in thought-provoking fashion.

In sum, by presenting the prospect for a deeper kind of happiness built on Jewish cultural and religious virtues (Eudaimonia), Qoheleth offers his audience a viable alternative to the superficial instant gratification promised by the foreign occupiers through the accumulation of material goods (Hedonia).

The Subversive Character of Qoheleth's Language

The book of Ecclesiastes is political satire. It is resistance literature. The interpretation of Ecclesiastes as resistance literature in the form of political satire enables us to see the tensions and apparent contradictions in Ecclesiastes not as interpretive obstacles but as rhetorical means to a theological end.

The book is the written record of a poetic prophet, an accomplished public orator who employed his formidable skills in an explosive amalgam of rhetorical schemes and devices borrowed from the traditional arsenals of Hebrew eloquence and Greek rhetoric in a new way to fight a guerrilla war of the mind.

Against the background of foreign occupation, Qoheleth takes a stand against wholesale Hellenization, an indiscriminate adoption of the foreign Greek culture into all aspects of Judean life, such as economy, religion, and the pursuits of leisure and social life. To keep his actual, seditious intentions hidden from the watching eyes and the listening ears of the foreign regime and its informers, he employs strategies of indirection that in more recent times have been most prominent among stand-up comedians with their veiled yet pointed allusions to current affairs. These allusions are specific enough for the insider audience to recognize the reference to real-life events while carefully concealing to outsiders what the talk is really about behind underdetermined language (cf., e.g., the commentary on Eccl 8:10–14 below).

The spoken words of Qoheleth consist of shorter speech segments that flow into each other. Fluid transitions from one part to the next, combined with frequent repetitions, create continuity. This kind of language and style is similar to the routines of modern stand-up comedians. Each segment in the speech has its own meaning

and message. Together, they combine into a powerful overall message to which each part makes an important contribution. This fluid character of arrangement mitigates against attempts like Walton's to find a hierarchical structure for all text segments in Ecclesiastes. Standard features of the language system, the peculiarities of Qoheleth's language and style that subvert them, and issues of genre and intention are inseparably intertwined.

Qoheleth was a public orator who skillfully used language—characterized by underdetermination, ciphers, ambiguous allusions, and other kinds of double meanings—to conceal his real message so effectively that almost everything in his speech could be understood in two or more different ways. He employed a wide repertoire of rhetorical strategies, using many of the tools and strategies of Greek rhetoric, including humor. The skillful deployment of underdetermined language served to create plausible deniability, and he used humor to entertain and inspire his audience by ridiculing the perspectives of those whom he targeted in his routine.

Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes is not an end in itself but rather the consequence of a strategy of indirection. Qoheleth uses "hidden transcripts" to mislead at least part of his audience into thinking that he says one thing, when in reality he means something else—a hidden second meaning only available to those in the know. Ambiguous words, phrases, and paragraphs have "official" meanings, but they also have altogether different, hidden meanings. Interpretations that only pay attention to surface meanings will miss the hidden references to current events under political pressure. Interpretations that take Qoheleth's language at face value will miss the humorous dimensions of the work. The sociocritical and seditious elements of Qoheleth's language are lost.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the book of Ecclesiastes is "rhetorical discourse," employing language creatively not only to inform but also to entertain and persuade.[161] In this regard it is like some of the prophetic literature. It is a *non-narrative rhetorical discourse*, and so rhetorical analysis and discourse-linguistic method are not mutually exclusive opposites, they are natural allies in its interpretation.

The main hypothesis of this commentary is that Qoheleth's speech aims to present a programmatic alternative to the program of Hellenization imposed by a foreign regime. It promotes happiness within a framework of faith, and the pursuit of happiness forms an integral part of his practical message.

161. Cf. Joel Barker, *Joel*, ZECOT 25 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 36.

Qoheleth's message is presented on two levels of meaning. We need to pay attention to both discourse levels of meaning in almost everything he says—on the surface level of theoretical debate over the "universality of human existence"[162] *and* on the undercover level of meaning that aims to subvert the corrupting influence of foreign rule. The surface meaning is what Qoheleth wants the outsiders to hear. The undercover meaning is intended for his real audience. For those in the know, then, his message is not an abstract, disembodied philosophical tract, but a message that is deeply rooted in his community's painful experience under foreign rule. It is a missive of hope, a rallying cry to cultural resistance, an appeal to remain faithful to their God.

As a conscious alternative, in direct competition with the prospect of happiness through success in the form of material possessions as a reward for complicity with the interests of the foreign occupiers, Qoheleth presents a viable alternative through a "theology of happiness." He offers the prospect of true happiness within the religious framework of traditional Jewish faith and cultural values. In the process, he exposes the futility of the foreign program, offers practical advice for finding true happiness, presents equally practical advice on how to overcome the ethical and religious challenges and dangerous situations that regularly arise in a country occupied by a foreign power with soldiers' feet on the ground, and he does so in a humorous, covertly rebellious way that raises interest for his cause through entertaining his audience with unusual, provocative, and intellectually stimulating pronouncements that continually surprise, challenge, delight, and inspire.

Qoheleth also presents his message with nuance, substance, urgency, and even a sense of fun, despite the serious and even dangerous circumstances. The *urgency* of Qoheleth's message arises from the acute and intense sociopolitical and socioeconomic challenges to Jewish values and identity that foreign occupation presented. Qoheleth's response included a restatement of traditional Jewish beliefs (i.e., "God you shall fear, and his commands you shall keep," 12:13c–d), but it was also more than that.

The *substance* of Qoheleth's message develops and adapts traditional Jewish beliefs and applies them in fresh ways to the challenges that the novel Hellenistic culture posed. It goes beyond a simplistic application of the fear of God and obedience to the divine commandments by showing how such faithful obedience can and will generate true happiness not only for individuals, but for the whole community. The so-called carpe diem statements are therefore not just an isolated phenomenon detached from religious praxis; rather, they are integral to Qoheleth's religious program and combine with it to constitute a sophisticated and realistic theology of

162. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 105.

happiness that Qoheleth's audience could apply successfully even in the midst of challenging circumstances.

The foreign occupation with its attractive philosophical ideas and economic opportunities, combined with political coercion backed by a powerful military, stimulated Qoheleth to *nuance* his message to make it effective even under conditions that were hostile to his community and unfavorable to the flourishing of those who remained faithful to their Jewish heritage. His resistance program had enough suppleness and elasticity to foster in his audience the kind of tenacity, resilience, and defiance that enabled them to stand firm. This can be most clearly seen in the various practical pieces of advice that Qoheleth presents for dealing with typical real-life scenarios of friction with the occupying forces. His coping strategies typically are overtly compliant but covertly defiant. They respond in astonishingly nuanced ways to the realities of power, and yet, they foster determined resistance.

Finally, Qoheleth infuses his message with a *sense of fun* that is atypical in human history. It is rare for revolutionaries to see the funny side of things, to be able to laugh at themselves and their enemies. He wages his war not with blades but with wit. He is a resistance comedian who ridicules the opposition to amuse his audience, who inspires those whom he seeks to recruit for his cause with a healthy dose of humor.

We are now in a position to appreciate the rhetorically motivated structure of the book of Ecclesiastes and how each of its parts contributes to Qoheleth's persuasive goals, even though most of its text segments are arranged sequentially.

Brief Outline of Ecclesiastes

A rhetorically informed discourse-linguistic analysis suggests two outlines. The book has a surface-level outline that can also be understood at a deeper, rhetorical level.

Surface-Level Outline

The brief narrative announcements "says Qoheleth" (1:2), "says Lady Qoheleth" (7:27), and "says the qoheleth" (12:8) near the beginning, middle, and end of the book indicate that the main part of the book (1:2–12:8) is the written record of a speech sequence that was originally performed as a single session before live audiences. The beginning of the book (1:1) assigns it to an anonymous speaker called Qoheleth, clearly a pseudonym to conceal his real identity. The end of the book (12:9–14) is an epilogue written several decades later by an editor, who reissued the original to commend it to a new readership in his own time.

The Fear of God and Obedience to His Commands as a Roadmap to Happiness

Themes

- A Philosophical Treatise on Human Limitations and Happiness (Surface Meaning)
- Object Lessons to Promote Judean Values under Foreign Rule (Actual Meaning)

I. Introduction (1:1–11)

A. A Quasi-Philosophical Treatise on Human Limitations and Happiness (1:1–3)

B. Poetic Prelude: Complexity of Search for Happiness Demonstrated Through Poetic Meditation on Human Transience and Earth's Constancy (1:4–11)

II. The Quest (1:12–12:7)

II.1 First Cycle of Case Studies: Human Happiness and Limitations (1:12–4:12)

A. Case Study 1: Apparent Success thro ugh Unlimited Satisfaction of Human Desires (1:12–2:26)

A.1 The Preamble to the Experiment (1:12–18)

A.2 The Methodology of the Experiment (2:1–3)

A.3 The Report on the Experiment (2:4–10)

A.4 The Analysis of the Experiment (2:11–16)

A.5 The Emotional Response to the Experiment (2:17–23)

A.6 The Conclusions from the Experiment (2:24–26)

B. Case Study 2: Sequence and Duration of Desirable and Undesirable Time Periods Beyond Human Control (3:1–15)

C. Case Study 3: The Public Perversion of Justice (3:16–22)

D. Case Study 4: An Inquiry into Pervasive Exploitation and Social Injustice (4:1–6)

E. Case Study 5: On Loneliness Despite "Success" (4:7–12)

II.2 First Cycle of Practical Interludes: On Wisdom, Worship, and Injustice (4:13–5:11)

A. Practical Interlude 1: Reflections on the Illusory Nature of Youthful Wisdom (4:13–16)

B. Practical Interlude 2: Proper Worship and Keeping Vows (4:17–5:6[5:1–7])

C. Practical Interlude 3: Instruction on the Proper Response to Social, Economic, and Legal Injustice (5:7–11[8–12])

II.3 Second Cycle of Case Studies: On Wealth and Misery (5:12[13]–6:12)

A. Case Studies 6–7 (5:12–19[13–20])

A.1 Case Study 6: Self-Induced Misery Through the Hoarding of Wealth (5:12–14[13–15])

A.2 Case Study 7: Self-Induced Misery through Persistent Poverty Despite Hard Work (5:15–16[16–17])

A.3 Conclusions from Case Studies 6 and 7 (5:17–19[18–20])

B. Case Studies 8–9 (6:1–12)

B.1 Case Study 8: A Common Cause for Misery Despite Abundant Wealth (6:1–2)

B.2 Case Study 9: A Specific Cause for Misery Despite Abundant Wealth (6:3–9)

B.3 Reflections on the Human Condition in Light of Case Studies 6–9 (6:10–12)

a. Introduction: Mournful Interjection (10:16a)
b. An Immature King (10:16b)
c. Hedonistic Leaders (10:16c)
2. Delight over Competent Government (10:17–19)
a. Delight over Competent Government Described (10:17)
b. Delight over Competent Government Defended (10:18–19)
3. Concluding Instructions on Coping with Bad Governance (10:20)
a. Concluding Instructions Offered (10:20a–d)
b. Concluding Instructions Supported (10:20e–f)

II.6 Instructions on Risk-Taking and Enjoying Life (11:1–12:7)

A. Instructions on Risk-Taking (11:1–6)
1. Two Instructions with Motivational Explanations (11:1–2)
a. First Instruction (11:1)
b. Second Instruction (11:2)
2. Two Quasi-Proverbial Pronouncements (11:3–4)
a. First Pronouncement (11:3)
b. Second Pronouncement (11:4)
3. Concluding Instruction (11:5–6)
a. Motivation to Trust God's Sovereignty (11:5)
b. Challenge to Action (11:6)

B. How to Enjoy Life from Beginning to End (11:7–12:7)
1. Introduction (Motivational): Life is Beautiful (11:7)
2. Nine Instructions on Happiness (11:8–12:1a)
a. First Instruction (11:8a–b)
b. Second Instruction (11:8c–e)
c. Third Instruction (11:9a)
d. Fourth Instruction (11:9b)
e. Fifth Instruction (11:9c)
f. Sixth Instruction (11:9d)
g. Seventh and Eighth Instructions (11:10)
h. Ninth Instruction (12:1a)
3. Six Impending Obstacles to Enjoyment (12:1b–7)
a. First Impending Obstacle (12:1b–e)
b. Second Impending Obstacle (12:2)
c. Third Impending Obstacle (12:3–4a)
d. Fourth Impending Obstacle (12:4b–d)
e. Fifth Impending Obstacle (12:5)
f. Sixth Impending Obstacle to Happiness (12:6–7)

III. Conclusion to Qoheleth's Quasi-Philosophical Treatise (12:8)

A. Executive Summary Confirmed: Everything a Mirage (12:8)

IV. Epilogue (12:9–14)

A. Final Reflections (12:9–14)
1. An Evaluation of Qoheleth's Philosophical Treatise (12:9–11)
a. A Commendation of Qoheleth (12:9–10a)
b. A Commendation of Qoheleth's Work (12:10b–11c)
2. Concluding Instructions (12:12–14)
a. Initial Instruction (12:12)
b. Final Instruction (12:13–14)

PART I

Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

Introduction

Main Idea of the Macro Unit

The opening sections combine to introduce the speaker, the main hypothesis, and the research question guiding the entire discourse (1:1–3), as well as the intellectual disposition that Qoheleth wants his audience to adopt (1:4–11).

Literary Context of the Macro Unit

The unit from 1:1–3 serves as an introduction to the entire discourse while 1:4–11 functions like the overture to a larger musical piece, shaping audience expectations.

Structure and Outline

Ecclesiastes is a speech sequence composed to be performed in spoken form, in one sitting, before live audiences. As a spoken routine, it is meant to be heard and understood as a single, complete discourse from 1:2–12:8, the main body of the book marked as the spoken words of Qoheleth through the phrases "says Qoheleth" (1:2), "says Lady Qoheleth" (7:27) and "says the qoheleth" (12:8). Upon first hearing, it appears to be a philosophical treatise that demonstrates the unsatisfactory nature of human endeavor and provides coping strategies for overcoming life's challenges to find happiness, nonetheless. For later readers, this has been the only meaning of the text. At another level of meaning, however, it was and still is also a string of humorous reflections and addresses in which the speaker urges his audience to resist the cultural and religious pull of a foreign power that occupied Judah in his time and to remain faithful to God by remaining loyal to their faith, including its religious Jewish traditions. This second level of meaning becomes increasingly prominent from 3:16 onwards.

CHAPTER 1

Ecclesiastes 1:1–3

A. A Quasi-Philosophical Treatise on Human Limitations and Happiness

Main Idea of the Passage

These three verses briefly introduce the speaker, the main hypothesis that the speech promotes, and the main research question that the entire routine seeks to answer to substantiate its hypothesis.

Literary Context

The opening three verses provide a carefully crafted introduction, at the face of it presenting the following discourse as a philosophical treatise on human limitations and happiness.

Translation and Exegetical Outline

(See page 93.)

Structure and Literary Form

The three verses follow one upon the other as independent statements. Verse 1 is the title of the written record (i.e., book) of the speech and introduces all that follows, the entire discourse from 1:2–12:8, as the "words" of Qoheleth. This is immediately followed in v. 2 by a direct quotation of words spoken by him. His signature statement, that everything is הֶבֶל, a "mirage," functions as a hypothesis, which is followed directly by the main research question that everything that follows seeks to answer.

Explanation of the Text

1. The Author: Qoheleth, an Alias for an Anonymous Figure from the Royal Line of David (1:1)

While the words of "Qoheleth" make up most of the book, his spoken words are introduced by another person at its beginning (1:1), with v. 2 reporting his thesis statement that everything is a mirage, with a brief quotation formula, "says Qoheleth," spoken audibly by himself. In the middle (7:27), a short section from 7:27–8:1 is marked as the words of "Lady Qoheleth," also by means of a quotation formula, "says Qoheleth," also spoken audibly by himself, but this time with a feminine form of the verb, indicating that in this brief sequence he is speaking in the high-pitched voice of a woman.[1] At the end, he repeats his thesis statement that everything is a mirage, again including a quotation formula, "says the qoheleth" (12:8), spoken audibly by himself. The book, as a written record of Qoheleth's speech, concludes with an editorial epilogue that evaluates and recommends the work in its written form to a later generation of readers (12:9–14). This creates a narrative frame (1:1 and 12: 9–14) around the speech that provides background information to guide the book's readers in their interpretation of Qoheleth's spoken words.[2]

The book's title, originally a stage introduction to his performance, identifies the orator as קֹהֶלֶת ("Qoheleth"). The words of 1:1 that now open the book were originally the formal introduction that announced his performance.

The designation is an overtly fictitious name, a pseudonym. It only appears in this book, and its particular form, a feminine singular participle, identifies the professional role that the book's main

1. Cf. the comment on 7:27–8:1 + 8:2 and the extended analysis in Heim, "Humor and Performance in Ecclesiastes 7:23–8:1," 30–59, which presents a comprehensive argument for the passage's humorous quality as part of a live performance.

2. Cf. the discussion of the "frame narrator" in the introduction and the commentary on 12:9–14.

			I. Introduction (1:1–11)
			A. A Quasi-Philosophical Treatise on Human Limitations and Happiness (1:1–3)
1	דִּבְרֵי קֹהֶלֶת בֶּן־דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ בִּירוּשָׁלָם:	The words of Qoheleth, son of David, king in Jerusalem.	1. The Author: Qoheleth, an Alias for an Anonymous Davidic Royal Figure (1:1)
2a	↓ הֲבֶל הֲבָלִים	↓ "A mirage, nothing but a mirage,"	2. Hypothesis: Everything Is a Mirage (1:2)
2b	אָמַר קֹהֶלֶת	says Qoheleth,	
2c	↑ הֲבֶל הֲבָלִים הַכֹּל הָבֶל:	↑ "a mirage, nothing but a mirage. It's all a mirage."	
3	מַה־יִּתְרוֹן לָאָדָם בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ שֶׁיַּעֲמֹל תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ:	What profit is there for humans in all their hard work with which they work so hard under the sun?	3. Research Question: What May Count as Success from Human Effort? (1:3)

speaker exercises: he is "the Speaker," someone who regularly addresses groups of listeners who gather to hear his reflections on topics of interest.[3] His description as "son of David" and "king in Jerusalem" suggests Solomon, but the alias "Qoheleth" suggests an *anonymous* figure. The pseudonym designates an anonymous royal figure from the line of David whose name and actual identity is deliberately obscured.

This would have been obvious to the live audiences who attended Qoheleth's spoken word performances, in a time much later than the lifetime of Solomon, who would have only known him as a prominent figure from a distant past in their country's history. For later readers of the book, however, awareness of this soon faded, and the royal aspects of his description captured the imagination.[4] From the outset, then, readers are informed that the Speaker, whose words they are about to read, was a person of significant means, influence, and intellectual capacity, comparable to the legendarily wise Solomon.

This at once allusive and elusive scheme achieved two purposes. First, it laid claim to the fact that the speaker, a descendant of David, may be a "messiah" who had the capacity to save his people from foreign rule. Second, it ensured the speaker's anonymity, in case the written record of his speech fell into the wrong hands.

Consequently, the word *Qoheleth* functions as a pseudonym and a title all at once.[5] As such, this commentary will use that designation in transliterated form throughout.

2. Hypothesis: Everything Is a Mirage (1:2)

As in the executive summary of an academic research project, Qoheleth summarizes in v. 2 the essence of his teaching in the form of his main hypothesis, stated in the most emphatic terms: all is

3. The word "Qoheleth" is a transliteration of how the word would have been pronounced in Hebrew. It is a *qal* feminine participle of the verb קהל. The *qal* conjugation of the verb does not appear in any form apart from here, and so we can only infer its meaning in the *qal* from its use in the *niphal* and *hiphil* conjugations where it means "to assemble." Most of the traditional renderings of the term in translations therefore are variations on the theme "leader of the assembly," "speaker in the assembly." Hence, it is transliterated *Ecclesiastes* in Latin and translated "Preacher" in English, "Prediger" in German, and "Predicador" in Spanish. The French has "L'écclesiaste," a transliteration from the Latin term, and the Italian CEI translation has "Qoélet," a transliteration of the Hebrew. The term effectively and intentionally hides the specific identity of the person addressed by this name or title. Because the designation only occurs in the book of Ecclesiastes, it remains somewhat enigmatic. It is most likely a newly coined designation to describe the speaker who presents the long discourse in the book as a public oration, similar to the famous rhetoricians of contemporary Greek culture. He has performed this speech (and many others) in a professional capacity. The designation is thus used both as his nickname and as his professional title, much like a professional smith in English is sometimes called "Smithy," as if that were his name, and sometimes referred to as "the smith," using the title for his profession.

4. The debate over the identity of the author of the book of Ecclesiastes is a recent one. From antiquity until the eighteenth century, virtually all readers, interpreters, preachers, and commentators were unanimous that the author was Solomon, the son of David, who was king over all Israel in Jerusalem from 971 to 931 BCE. On the one hand, this identification seems natural, for the one son of David who was king in Jerusalem over all Israel was indeed Solomon. He is the only one who fits this description, as the Kingdom of Israel was split into North and South at the beginning of the reign of David's grandson Rehoboam. On the other hand, this virtual unanimity is surprising because the author is not named as Solomon, in contrast to the Book of Proverbs and the Song of Songs. There, the name of Solomon is mentioned explicitly. If the person who wrote the note that identifies the author of the book wanted his readers to think that its author was indeed Solomon, then why did he not say so? One word would have been enough: דִּבְרֵי שְׁלֹמֹה בֶּן־דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ בִּירוּשָׁלָם.

5. A translation of the word as "Teacher," with capitalization, has been chosen by some modern Bible versions, most notably NIV. However, the title is nowhere else used for teachers, and Hebrew has several other words for "teacher."

הֶבֶל, "a mirage."[6] The word "all" in this claim is an exaggeration for rhetorical effect; it "strictly refers to everything that was within Qoheleth's purview during his investigation."[7]

Fox assigns this summary to the frame narrator, whom he also identifies as the author of Qoheleth's words: "the motto is best ascribed to the author, who is here paraphrasing Qohelet, who is his creation."[8] However, the following question in v. 3, to which so much of the remainder of the speech recorded in the book responds, is already posed in response to the motto here, and so it is the opening statement of the speech, signaled by the phrase "says Qoheleth." Qoheleth was a real person operating under a pseudonym who performed *all* of the materials from 1:2–12:8 viva voce, including the narrative introduction formulae "says Qoheleth," "says [Lady] Qoheleth," and "says the qoheleth" in 1:2, 7:27, and 12:8.

The word הֶבֶל first appears in the Hebrew Bible in Gen 4:2, as the name of Adam and Eve's second son הֶבֶל, "Abel," the younger brother of Cain. Abel's life was exceedingly short, he dies seven verses later (Gen 4:8), murdered by his jealous older brother. As such, Abel's name, הֶבֶל, quintessentially expresses the ephemerality and transience of human life and the futility of human endeavor in the face of sin (Gen 4:7), the root cause of human jealousy (Gen 4:4–7).[9]

Beyond the personal name Abel, the word most frequently refers to a body of warm, moist air that is briefly visible as the water vapor contained in it condenses when it cools. For example, human breath is briefly visible on a cool morning, and mist can remain visible for a long time when the cooler ground below it slowly reduces the temperature of larger bodies of warm, humid air.

Qoheleth uses the word as a novel visual metaphor. It extends the properties of mist, namely that it appears to be more substantial than it is (ephemerality), eventually disappears (transience), and hides other objects in the line of sight, thus obscuring reality from view (illusoriness). He wants us to see that the various aspects of life explored in the book are a mirage, an illusion. Mirages are optical illusions caused by the refraction of light from the sky by heated air. In metaphoric usage, mirages designate things that appear real or possible but are in fact not so. Just like a mirage in the desert creates the illusion of life-saving water, so the scenarios, goals, and circumstances that Qoheleth explores as possible sources for an intellectually and emotionally satisfying goal and purpose in life are illusory.

3. Research Question: What May Count as Success from Human Effort? (1:3)

The research question in v. 3 asks what may count as an emotionally and intellectually satisfying goal in life worthy of sustained human effort. The question gains its intellectual allure from the three special formulations of which it is composed: (1) יִתְרוֹן, "profit, benefit, return, gain, compensation, satisfaction, success"; (2) the lengthy expression בְּכָל-עֲמָלוֹ שֶׁיַּעֲמֹל, "in all their hard work with which they work so hard"; and (3) תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ, "under the sun." All three expressions are keywords or key phrases that appear again and again in important parts of the speech. Without a clear understanding of their meaning and the emotions that Qoheleth associates with them, it is impossible to understand his speech.

Qoheleth uses the phrase תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ, "under

6. The word הֶבֶל is repeated five times in v. 2: . . . הבלים הבל הבלים הבל . . . הבל

7. Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Qoheleth Handbook*, 51.

8. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 162.

9. Cf. Hess, *The Old Testament: A Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction*, 484.

the sun," in two distinctive ways. First, it is used in a technical sense. It designates the world as is, the stark realities of human lives that are, while not without God, nonetheless lived in a fallen world under the consequences of divine judgment on sin (Gen 3), which has permanent consequences for human beings and the rest of creation, both animate and inanimate. The realities of hard work, disappointment, injustice, and failure are ever-present for all human beings, no matter how competent or religious they are.

Second, it is used as a cipher for the sociopolitical realities under which Qoheleth and his audience live. Specifically, Judea in Qoheleth's time is under foreign rule, dominated by the Ptolemaic empire that rules from Egypt. The word שֶׁמֶשׁ, "sun" is a metonymy for Egypt. The sun as Egypt's most prominent deity, adopted by the Ptolemies upon their accession to the throne, thus represents the country as a whole. It also serves metonymically for the Ptolemaic king, whose throne names includes the epithet "son of the Sun." The preposition תַּחַת, "under," in conjunction with הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ (the definite article signals that sun which stands for the foreign regime) thus describes the sociopolitical realities of the Judean population *under* which they seek to carve out a meaningful existence.

This second meaning, however, is dormant in the first part of Qoheleth's speech. Nothing, or at least very little in 1:1–3:15, hints directly at this second meaning. Qoheleth's original audience may have picked up on the possible second meaning straightaway. One reason is that the expression "under the sun" may already have had that connotation in the conversations about their foreign overlords that Judeans were having with each other. Furthermore, Qoheleth may have signaled the phrase's hidden meaning through his intonation of the word, perhaps accompanied by suggestive body language and a pregnant pause. For later readers, however, the second meaning will not come into play until much later, when further details about conditions under the sun are revealed (3:16–22). From then on, however, the two meanings remain equally prominent in Qoheleth's speech sequences, even though from time to time one or the other of the two is slightly more in the foreground than the other.

The verb עמל, "to work hard," refers to human exertion and effort in a more or less neutral way. The corresponding noun עָמָל, by contrast, usually has negative connotations, leading to renderings like "trouble, care, anxiety, need, harm." In Ecclesiastes, however, the word refers to all human endeavor. Qoheleth uses it not to describe particularly demanding, tiring, or gruesome labor, but "hard work" in general. Neutral in meaning, it sometimes, but not always, takes on negative connotations from the contexts in which it is used.

The word יִתְרוֹן is a buzzword trending among Qoheleth's audience, which explains why there was no need for him to explain it. A neologism coined among the avant-garde of his culture to express their aspirations in the new sociopolitical environment under foreign rule, it meant to express economic and social success in the pursuit of personal happiness, something that—under the new economic and political circumstances driven by foreign religious values—seemed obtainable without adherence to traditional Judean beliefs. Among Qoheleth's target audience, the word designated economic and social success in the pursuit of personal happiness as a natural reward for intense human effort, *apart* from divine blessings rewarded for one's adherence to the Jewish faith and its traditional ethical and religious requirements.

As we shall see, Qoheleth sometimes uses the term this way, but more often than not he *subverts* its original meaning to designate human achievements that are *intellectually and emotionally*

satisfying. His creative theological and philosophical achievement is that he subverted the common understanding of this new, trendy buzzword to create a nuance of meaning serving his religiously and ethically motivated didactic purposes. In his new usage, the word emphasizes emotional satisfaction on the one hand and intellectual consistency on the other. In short, Qoheleth uses the word יִתְרוֹן in two different ways. First, he uses it in the way his audience employs it—economic and social success. Second, he appropriates the word with a new connotation—emotional satisfaction and intellectual consistency—to undermine his audience's usage of the word. Failure to identify this *dual* meaning of the word has prevented readers through the ages from interpreting the word in ways that satisfy its meanings in all its occurrences in the book.

Qoheleth would have been able to express these distinct meanings *audibly* through intonation in the oral delivery of his presentation. For example, in contemporary English usage, if a speaker wants to draw attention to the fact that he or she may be using the word in an unusual way, they will pronounce the word *emphatically*, which in writing is usually expressed in *italics* or "scare quotes." If the speaker wants to draw attention to two distinct usages of the same word, they will express this through two equally distinct, contrasting pronunciations of that word through intonation. An approving oral rendering of the word *success*, where the speaker associates him- or herself with its usage, will be expressed through emphatically pronouncing the second syllable in a slightly higher pitch, intoning the word as "success." By contrast, disapproval or distancing usage will emphasize and pronounce the second syllable in a slightly lower pitch, intoning it as "success." This example demonstrates one way in which such a distinction can be encoded in writing or speaking in modern English. Similar strategies for marking different usages of otherwise identical words *audibly* exist in most and perhaps all languages, and presumably also existed in the spoken Hebrew language of Qoheleth's time. The same cannot be said for ancient writing, and this explains why the two distinct usages of the word were not marked in the text of Ecclesiastes, and it also illuminates why awareness of the distinction between Qoheleth's two usages was lost over time.

To reflect the word's dual usage in writing in this commentary, we will translate יִתְרוֹן as "success" (without quotation marks) whenever Qoheleth's usage reflects the meaning that his audience assigns to it but always include it in scare quotes ("success") to indicate that this is not how he understands it. By contrast, whenever Qoheleth uses the term יִתְרוֹן to designate his own preferred meaning, we will translate it with the phrase "*true* success," and always print the qualifier in italics to distinguish the term's usages *visually* in Qoheleth's writing. When Qoheleth uses the word in a way that does not distinguish between these two meanings, as in the opening hypothesis, we will also leave it unmarked in our English translation (i.e., "success," without the quotation marks).

So, what is the object of Qoheleth's inquiry? In a world tainted by sin and in a situation where his country is under foreign rule as a consequence of his people's sins through time, he ostentatiously undertakes a search for "success" through human effort. In the process, his inquiry demonstrates that the "success" that his target audience seeks is unobtainable (see comments on 2:11, 13; 3:9; 5:8[9], 16[17]; 7:12; 10:10–11). Like all the achievements that Qoheleth investigates as possible sources for success, it is itself a mirage. This is why, after the highly ironical research impact report in 7:23–8:1, the term only appears once more, in an equally ironical context (10:10). It does not appear in the final chapters of the book (Eccl 11–12), because by

then Qoheleth considered his refutation of such aspirations to be complete.

Given the thesis statement in the previous verse, that everything is הֶבֶל, "a mirage," many readers of the book assume that Qoheleth's question in v. 3 is a rhetorical one.[10] They assume that its answer is implied in the question itself, and that it is negative: There is no true satisfaction. To a degree, this is correct. However, if this were absolutely so, why did Qoheleth write twelve entire chapters peppered with case studies that explore serious attempts to find true satisfaction? Admittedly, most of these case studies lead to one and the same conclusion, namely, that all human effort to find success, in both of its usages, is doomed to fail. All the goals that humans pursue to find it are mirages, optical illusions of the mind. Nonetheless, the special achievement of Qoheleth is that he did not just make a claim based on generalizations, anecdotes, and gut feelings, but that he undertook a range of serious experiments and carefully interpreted a range of observations of typical scenarios of universal human experience to demonstrate that it is indeed so.

While these comments are true in general, readers will encounter several occasions later in the book where Qoheleth also reaches surprisingly positive conclusions. He will propose that certain human qualities, attitudes, and behaviors do indeed yield some kind of profit, perhaps even *true* success. On numerous occasions, he recommends coping strategies to overcome the painful realities of human experience. What is more, from 3:16 onwards, these observations are often interwoven with highly provocative and politically explosive observations, reflections, and quasi-revolutionary instructions that challenge the foreign regime's claims on the political, cultural, and religious loyalties of Qoheleth's contemporaries. Finally, he regularly encourages his readers to enjoy life and urges them to foster positive mental states that lead to happiness and enjoyment.

Canonical and Theological Significance

Qoheleth's search for success unfolds "under the sun," within the confines of a fallen, sinful world. As discussed in the introduction, numerous allusions in Ecclesiastes point to the central role of Gen 3 as a framework for Qoheleth's experience and thought. Practically, the opening of the book marks its contents as a surprisingly relevant, almost scientific and philosophical inquiry based on empirical evidence. This makes it naturally relevant for the modern world.

Just below the surface, however, Qoheleth also raises questions about freedom, political and cultural independence, and in particular the question of religious freedom and social justice, other important topics that continue to play crucial roles in Jewish consciousness both in Qoheleth's own time and into the time of the NT, as the Gospels testify.

The message of Qoheleth's introduction naturally falls into three parts that foster

10. See, for example, Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 47–55.

the fear of God and the keeping of his commandments, in line with the epilogue's summary of Qoheleth's message (12:13).

The first part introduces "Qoheleth," the investigator who conducts the experiment. Who is Qoheleth? The opening of the book (1:1) and especially the next verse after the poetic reflection (1:4–11) in 1:12 suggest that its main speaker is an anonymous royal figure from the line of Israel's model leader, King David. The pseudonym "Qoheleth" suggests that this speaker is not Solomon, David's most famous son, who was extraordinarily wise, powerful, and rich. Nonetheless, the deliberately vague introduction of Qoheleth commends him as someone who is to be trusted and as someone with considerable resources at his disposal. In this way, his main hypothesis, his quest, and the findings he will describe in the remainder of the speech are presented as reliable and persuasive.

He emerges as an anonymous figure, as an intellectual of significant social standing, a leader in the community. He is prepared to ask serious questions about real life and is determined (as the rest of his discourse demonstrates) to reject simple answers. Instead, he regularly acknowledges important questions about human life in a fallen world that cannot be answered, and he also arrives at realistic, often provocative answers that challenge traditional solutions.

Qoheleth thus serves as a role model for modern believers in three respects:

1. He encourages them to engage in serious intellectual interaction with the question of how their faith relates to the challenges human beings face in the modern world.
2. He encourages them to ask the really difficult questions (for example, about unjust suffering and social injustice) and, if necessary, to continue faithfully in the face of open, unanswered questions where no simple solutions can be found.
3. He encourages them through practical recommendations on how to cope with the challenges of life.

The second part constitutes both the introductory hypothesis of the entire discourse and its ultimate conclusion (12:8): "It's all a mirage." The material world promises more than it can deliver. Through this provocative, totalizing, and radical hypothesis, he confronts his audience, then and now, with one of the fundamental questions of life: What then should we live for? He deflects our attention from the material sources for human flourishing that most people consider the most promising, and directs our attention to ultimate things, including the divine. This part of Qoheleth's message chimes well with Jesus's own response to temptation through material goods. When tempted to miraculously turn stones into bread, he responded: "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from

the mouth of God,'" quoting from Deut 8:3. A fulfilled life, true happiness, can only be found through faith in God and through living in accordance with the divine will.

The third part constitutes not only the fundamental research question that guides Qoheleth's quest but invites his audience to become co-investigators with Qoheleth in their own search for success. It invites us to consider the things we hold most dear in the clear light of day to discover whether or not they deliver the *true* reward we expect from our investment into obtaining them.

In sum, Qoheleth's introduction sets the scene for his teaching of the fear of God and the keeping of his commandments, and it asks a question about the purpose of life and what we should invest our lives in, a question that has profound repercussions for practical living (cf. 12:13).

CHAPTER 2

Ecclesiastes 1:4–11

B. Poetic Prelude: Complexity of Search for Happiness Demonstrated Through Poetic Meditation on Human Transience and Earth's Constancy

A poetic meditation on the cyclical nature of natural phenomena and the limits of human experience set the scene against which human endeavor will be shown as unsatisfactory in the remainder of the discourse, highlighting the limited lifespan of humans as a major challenge.

Main Idea of the Passage

This beautiful poetic meditation contrasts the transience of human life with the permanence of nature. As humans marvel at the beauty and permanence of nature, they come face to face with their intellectual limitations and their mortality. Just below the surface drifts a second, hidden message that will not fully emerge until later in Qoheleth's routine—that the novelty of the apparently invincible conquerors' Greek culture is nothing new at all.

Literary Context

High esteem for poetry is a universal cultural phenomenon. Following directly upon the quasi-philosophical introduction, this poetic reflection sets the scene for the entire speech. It at once elevates the beauty and stability of creation and draws its readers into acknowledging that their grasp of the world and the human condition in it is limited.

It not only introduces the first case study in 1:12–2:26, in which a fabulously rich and powerful figure undertakes a failed attempt to find true satisfaction. It also serves as the imaginative backdrop for everything else that follows. It functions like

an overture in a large and complex piece of music, introducing major themes and providing an interpretive key for understanding the speech's various parts against the work as a whole.

The reintroduction of Qoheleth as first-person speaker in 1:12 embeds vv. 4–11 between 1:2–3, the third-person account of the narrator's quotation of Qoheleth's words, and 1:12–2:26, the first-person account where Qoheleth himself reports his experience in conducting his first case study.[1] Even so, they are the words of Qoheleth himself. The poem consists of an introductory claim (4a + 4b), and the following poetic lines are dependent upon it and substantiate it in paratactic form, with each poetic line on the same level in the discourse structure.

Translation and Exegetical Outline

(See pages 103–4.)

Structure and Literary Form

The poetic reflection has two parts.[2] It opens with a thematic statement that contrasts human transience and earth's constancy (v. 4). The first part then explores earth's constancy (vv. 5–8), in particular the constancy of the sun (v. 5), the constancy of the wind (v. 6), and the constancy of water (v. 7). This culminates in a climactic exclamation on the overwhelming impact of nature on human consciousness (v. 8), a sentiment that found more recent expression in the great Romantic poets, in Britain and elsewhere.[3]

1. Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 36–37.

2. On the continuum between poetry on the one hand and prose on the other, these verses are clearly poetic. However, they read more like a meditative sequence of observations than a poem. Cf. Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Qoheleth Handbook*, 54.

3. Among others, William Blake (1757–1827), William Wordsworth (1770–1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834),

Ecclesiastes 1:4–11

I. Introduction (1:1–11)

B. Poetic Prelude: Complexity of Search for Happiness Demonstrated Through Poetic Meditation on Human Transience and Earth's Constancy (1:4–11)

1. Contrast Between Earth's Constancy and Human Transience Declared (1:4)

4a	דּוֹר הֹלֵךְ וְדוֹר בָּא	A generation goes and a generation comes;
4b	וְהָאָרֶץ לְעוֹלָם עֹמָדֶת׃	but the earth remains ever the same.

2. Contrast Between Earth's Constancy and Human Transience Described (1:5–11)

a. Earth's Constancy (1:5–8)

(1) Constancy of the Sun (1:5)

5a	וְזָרַח הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וּבָא הַשָּׁמֶשׁ	The sun rises and the sun goes down,
5b	וְאֶל־מְקוֹמוֹ שׁוֹאֵף	and hurries back to its origin,
5c	זוֹרֵחַ הוּא שָׁם׃	from where it keeps rising.

(2) Constancy of the Wind (1:6)

6a	הוֹלֵךְ אֶל־דָּרוֹם וְסוֹבֵב אֶל־צָפוֹן	Going south and turning north,
6b	סוֹבֵב סֹבֵב הוֹלֵךְ הָרוּחַ	turning, turnin', going, the wind;
6c	וְעַל־סְבִיבֹתָיו שָׁב הָרוּחַ׃	and to its surroundings returns the wind.

(3) Constancy of the Water (1:7)

7a	כָּל־הַנְּחָלִים הֹלְכִים אֶל־הַיָּם	All streams go into the sea,
7b	וְהַיָּם אֵינֶנּוּ מָלֵא	but the sea never fills up;
7c	אֶל־מְקוֹם שֶׁהַנְּחָלִים הֹלְכִים	to the place where the streams go,
7d	שָׁם הֵם שָׁבִים לָלָכֶת׃	there they return, to go again.

(4) Summary: Wonder & Curiosity over Earth's Constancy (1:8)

8a	כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים יְגֵעִים	All these breathtaking things
8b	לֹא־יוּכַל אִישׁ לְדַבֵּר	humans cannot capture with words,
8c	לֹא־תִשְׂבַּע עַיִן לִרְאוֹת	[…] the eye cannot be satisfied with seeing,
8d	וְלֹא־תִמָּלֵא אֹזֶן מִשְּׁמֹעַ׃	and […] the ear cannot be filled with hearing.

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			b. Human Transience (1:9–11)
9a	מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה הוּא שֶׁיִּהְיֶה	Whatever that is, that's what will be,	(1) Introductory Summary: Human Inability to Innovate (1:9)
9b	וּמַה־שֶּׁנַּעֲשָׂה הוּא שֶׁיֵּעָשֶׂה	and whatever has been done, that's what will be done,	
9c	וְאֵין כָּל־חָדָשׁ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ׃	and there is nothing that's entirely new under the sun.	
10a	יֵשׁ דָּבָר שֶׁיֹּאמַר	Is there anything of which one can say:	(2) Counterclaim: An Apparently New Event (1:10a–b)
10b	רְאֵה־זֶה חָדָשׁ הוּא	"Look at this, *that* is new?"	
10c	כְּבָר הָיָה לְעֹלָמִים	It's already been there, a long time ago;	(3) Refutation: Its Existence before Human Memory (1:10c–d)
10d	אֲשֶׁר הָיָה מִלְּפָנֵנוּ׃	it's something that was there before our time.	
11a	אֵין זִכְרוֹן לָרִאשֹׁנִים	There is no memory of former events;	(4) Conclusion: Limited Purview of Human Memory (1:11)
11b	וְגַם לָאַחֲרֹנִים שֶׁיִּהְיוּ	and even for the events that will happen,	
11c	לֹא־יִהְיֶה לָהֶם זִכָּרוֹן עִם שֶׁיִּהְיוּ לָאַחֲרֹנָה׃	there will be no remembrance with those who will be hereafter.	

The second part then surveys human transience (vv. 9–11) by means of an introductory summary statement about human inability to innovate (v. 9), a counterclaim about an apparently new event (v. 10a–b) in reported speech, and its refutation through the adoption of a transgenerational perspective based on traditional knowledge (v. 10c–d). This leads to the conclusion that the limitation of human memory inhibits cognitive progress. Humans must concede their cognitive limitations.

This poetic meditation is programmatic for Qoheleth's entire discourse and aims to foster epistemological realism and cognitive humility as a prerequisite for what he aims to instill for the remainder of his discourse.

Explanation of the Text

The proto-scientific introduction to a philosophical treatise in verses 1–3 is followed by poetry. It is an elevated form of human language that raises not only the register of the spoken text, but also the level of intellectual, emotional, and motivational engagement of its original audience and later readers. What follows is important and, as the original audience of Qoheleth's words and the implied readers of their written record will soon appreciate, programmatic. As already mentioned, these verses are not a poem in the strict sense but rather a poetic reflection or meditation. Krüger captures this well in calling it a "poetically stylized prelude."[4] Verses 4–7 mention the four elements—earth, fire, air, and water—which, according to Greek philosophy (esp. Empedocles, Plato),[5] made up the rudimentary elements of the cosmos.[6]

Combining vv. 4–11 directly with v. 3, Krüger sums up his interpretation of vv. 4–7: "through their various behaviors, the earth, the sun, the wind, and the rivers produce no gain (and do not even seem to be trying to do so). Precisely this—along with the constant repetition of the same things in the world (cf. vv. 9–10)—seems to be the point of vv. 4–7."[7] By contrast, I take more seriously Krüger's insight that the elements do indeed not try to produce gain. Consequently, I will argue that vv. 4–7 do not answer the question in v. 3 directly but set up the constancy of the earth as a contrast to human transience to foster the intellectual stance that the speaker wants his audience to adopt and that the written record of the speech wants its readers to embrace for the remainder of Qoheleth's discourse.

1. Contrast Between Human Transience and Earth's Constancy Declared (1:4)

Verse 4 introduces the contrast between human transience and earth's constancy. The pronouncement on humans comes first and this shows that

Lord Byron (1778–1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), John Keats (1795–1821), William Morris (1834–1896), as well as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), and many others in Germany and elsewhere throughout Europe.

4. Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 48.

5. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004), 62, 75. Plato, *Timaeus*, 48B.

6. Longman, notes that this was already recognized by Ibn Ezra (Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 70). Cf. also Hans Bardtke and Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *Der Prediger. Das Buch Esther* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1963), 71.

7. Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 50.

the contemplation of nature is not undertaken for its own sake but to illumine the human condition. The order of the human generations first going and then coming challenges ancient and modern readers' expectations, as we tend to define human existence from our own perspective. The purpose for this inversion is to go beyond individual concerns and to highlight the meditation's transgenerational perspective and concern with the human condition at large.

The word עוֹלָם, commonly translated into English with words like "forever, eternal, everlasting," is one of the most important keywords in the book. As here, it mostly serves in contrast with the limited timespan of human life. It is also regularly associated with God (for example in 3:14), and in those contexts these renderings are entirely appropriate. Nonetheless, the word does not always refer to an unlimited expanse of time. Here, too, the nuance is slightly different. The natural cycles explored are considered permanent and continuous, but also ever changing and dynamic. Variations, progression, and change are part of the predictability of the natural phenomena that the poet contemplates. Thus, the translation "ever the same" aims to reflect the dynamic beauty of nature's regularity—the fascinating predictability of the "laws of nature," in modern terms.

2. Contrast Between Human Transience and Earth's Constancy Described (1:5–11)

a. Earth's Constancy (1:5–8)

Verses 5–7 describe various aspects of the earth's constancy.

(1) Constancy of the Sun (1:5)

Verse 5 describes the movements of the sun to demonstrate the earth's constancy. It follows the expected sequence, with the sun rising first, then setting. The verb that describes the sun's motion is שׁוֹאֵף, usually rendered "hurries" (NRSVue, NIV) in English translations.[8] The verb שׁאף is rare in the Hebrew Bible (thirteen clear attestations), consistently associated with heavy breathing, that is, gasping or panting, due to sustained physical effort (running, childbirth, etc.).[9] The translations offer a (correct) interpretation of the figure of speech. It is a so-called metonymy, with the effect (gasping for air) standing for its cause (running). Longman helpfully illustrates the interpretive options:

> Depending on which nuance is adopted in Ecclesiastes, either the sun joyously rushes back to its starting point so that it can once again begin its glorious march across the sky, or the sun toils across the sky, only to reach its destination and achieve no rest, no closure, but needing to rush back and do the whole meaningless task over again. Context and overall message of the book will determine one's understanding.[10]

While Longman provides good and concise summaries of the two alternative meanings, the last sentence in this quotation highlights that both interpretations usually rely on circular arguments. In what follows, I want to provide three arguments that I consider not to be circular. One points in one direction, the other two in the other.

The first argument—and this suggests an interpretation of the sun's motion as toilsome—comes from a comparison with the description of its

8. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 5, Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 47, Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 60.

9. "שׁאף," *HALOT* 1375.

10. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 69.

motion in Ps 19:6[5]: "and it strides out [יֹצֵא] like a bridegroom from his chamber, rejoices [יָשִׂישׂ] like a warrior to run [לָרוּץ] its course." In line with the wider context, the sun's motion here is portrayed as stately and joyful. The portrayal in Ecclesiastes lacks these positive notations, and this contrast with Ps 19:6[5] furnishes external evidence for the interpretation of the sun's course in Ecclesiastes as toilsome. Even so, however, this amounts to an argument from silence, which weakens its persuasive force. The next two arguments favor an interpretation of the solar motion as purposeful.

Second, the emphasis on the sun's subterranean motion being swift may simply reflect the physical reality that on most days of the year the period between sunrise and sunset is longer than twelve hours.[11] This would have suggested to the ancients that the sun moves more quickly during the period when it is invisible. Observation of the actual motion of the sun also suggests that, while the circularity of its motion is perpetual, its trajectory and speed, when visible and invisible, changes through the year. Here, the evidence from an observation of solar motion furnishes external evidence for the interpretation of the sun's motion as purposeful, without negative connotation.

The third and most important argument arises from a thought experiment by following the implications of the negative interpretation to their logical conclusions: (a) It would mean that Qoheleth personifies the sun (similar to Ps 19:6[5]) and then envisages it being physically exhausted and emotionally demoralized by its motion. (b) It would also mean that in v. 8, Qoheleth sympathizes with and adopts the sun's presumably negative emotions.[12] This seems implausible. Is it really conceivable that Qoheleth would have lamented the predictability of solar motion? Even if we accept that he and his audience might not have known what we now know about solar motion's crucial role for the survival of life on earth, he would have known that its stability was a good thing and that, conversely, the sun changing its course and speed or remaining stationary would have been catastrophic. This is the reason why solar eclipses were almost universally seen as foreboding harbingers of catastrophe in the ancient world. Here, too, external evidence suggests a more positive or at least neutral interpretation, while the traditional negative interpretations rely on circular reasoning because they already presume that Qoheleth's stance is one of frustration with life in general. In sum, it is more likely that v. 5 describes the sun's predictable circular motion as a life-sustaining illustration for the world's constancy.

(2) Constancy of the Wind (1:6)

Verse 6 continues with a description of wind movements to further illustrate the world's constancy. Four powerful poetic strategies are employed in this astonishingly rich portrayal. First is the strategic inversion of word order:

verb + indirect object (location)
verb + indirect object (location)
verb + verb + verb + subject
indirect object + verb + subject

11. For example, in 2017 the sun is visible in Jerusalem for more than twelve hours on 194 days, as opposed to 171 when it is invisible for more than twelve hours. The shortest day (10:04:27) is 21 December. The longest day (14:13:33) is 21 June. If twilight is added to this, then the number of longer days in the year and the length of daylight increase drastically. This information is from "Jerusalem, Israel — Sunrise, Sunset, and Daylength," https://www .timeanddate .com /sun /israel /jerusalem.

12. In this interpretation, v. 8 reads "All things are *wearisome*; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing" (NRSVue, emphasis added).

The expression "the wind" (הָרוּחַ), whose movements, locations, and destinations are described in extraordinarily rich fashion, appears twice but comes late and last in the verse, creating a sense of "pull" through the syntactic vacuum that in itself mimics the movement of air.

Second, there is a flowing succession of similar sounds through assonance (repeated vowel sounds: o–e–a–o // o–e–a–o; o–e–o–e–o–e), alliteration (repeated consonants: הולך–הולך / ועל–אל–אל / הרוח–הרוח / סביבתיו–סבב–סובב–סובב), anaphora (repetition of sounds at the beginning: the vowel pattern o–e in 6a + 6b [3x!]), and rhyme (repetition of sounds at the end: הָרוּחַ in 6b + 6c). These are recurring and predictable sound patterns that mimic recurring and predictable wind patterns.

Third, the verse mentions three geographic locations, north, south, and "its surroundings." The first two are cardinal directions (which may stand for east and west also) and refer to the main directions against which the wind's direction is determined. The third, by contrast, appears puzzling at first sight. The term elsewhere describes the location that surrounds a particular entity. Where such an entity is stationary, the physical vicinity is in view. How should we envisage the "local vicinity" of winds, which are by definition not local, stationary, or physically stable? I propose that the term is used metaphorically, and that the local vicinity of moving masses of air refers to the locality-through-time into which they move as air masses proceed through a region along predictable corridors or wind channels. The "surroundings" of winds are the imaginary channels along or through which they flow.

Fourth, there is a sequence of six verbs of motion, all participles, in swift, staccato succession, all with the same subject. The verb שׁוב, "to return," appears once and describes semicircular motion. The verb הלך, "to go," occurs twice and describes linear motion, but that motion goes into opposite directions (north and south) and thus expresses alternating or rotating motion. The verb סבב, "to turn," expresses circular motion and appears three times, plus the root appears once more in nominal form (סְבִיבֹתָיו).[13]

This wind is extraordinarily active, proceeding in opposite, circular, and recurring patterns at predictable locations. As the poetic artistry of the verse aims to display, it is also beautiful.[14] What is described here as "the" wind is really a series of different regional wind patterns. These prevailing and recurring winds (many of whom have names) have associated weather patterns. While they are different from one another, they nonetheless appear at regular and thus predictable intervals, year after year. They are constant in their variety.

Therefore, they enable agricultural management, planning for safe and comfortable travel, and enable precautions against discomfort or danger. In particular, many of these bring life-sustaining

13. The third participle is written defectively, i.e., without ו. I have indicated this variant repetition through apostrophe. It is likely that its variant spelling would have been pronounced through intonation or another form of variant pronunciation. Its purpose would have been to mimic minor variations even in recurring and prevailing wind patterns.

14. Krüger discussed the traditional interpretations of this verse. With Delitzsch, he proposes that there is "nothing permanent but the fluctuation" Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 50; Franz Delitzsch, "The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes," trans. M. G. Easton, in *Commentary on the Old Testament* (1864–1892; repr. in 10 vols., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 6:659–60 (221–22; note that the pages of the original twenty-five-volume set are given in parentheses). He notes that the wind described here appears to be in "(constant?) *irregular* motion," in contrast with a motion around a circular orbit, cf. R. N. Whybray, "Ecclesiastes 1.5–7 and the Wonders of Nature," *JSOT* 41 (1988): 108. Krüger refutes this interpretation with recourse to 11:5, where "the wind is unpredictable and incalculable" (Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 50 with n10). However, this argument presumes that the wind in 11:5 is the same wind as here.