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Reading and Writing Qohelet: Reflections on the Heart, Pleasure, and Death

by

Ellen Sabo

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Abstract

The act of reading and writing on Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) is not only the process that created this thesis, but also its subject. The book's epilogue warns against excessive study and writing, but is itself an example of writing without end. As a supplement, it is undecidable whether the epilogue supports or supplants the body of the book. The second chapter focusses on Qohelet's uncanny heart, which has a double nature and reveals a split self. The heart contains the desire to understand everything that happens in the world, the impetus for Qohelet's quest. The last chapter deals with structure in 7:1–6 and 11:7–12:1. The passages are linked by the themes of pleasure and death. The first passage attempts to define what is good, but the seemingly solid advice ends in uncertainty. The second displays a paradoxical relationship in which death is present in life, and pleasure in death.

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Introduction

I have become Qohelet. The book of Qohelet has become my world under the sun. As Qohelet gave his heart to seek out everything that is done under the heavens, I gave mine to spy out the book of his creation. When Qohelet received no profit from his toil, my heart began to despair. When Qohelet ate and drank, I enjoyed the pleasure of his words. What you are about to read is the product of my toil, and you are the judges of whether it is good or evil.

As much as I studied and wrote on the book of Qohelet, Qohelet's quest has always reflected back onto my task. Thus, besides being the process which created this thesis, the act of reading and writing on Qohelet is also the connecting thread of this thesis. "Writing Qohelet" is the personal, individual voice heard in the words of the book, the implied author whom I imagine struggling over his text.

This thesis does deal with the same questions that many have already asked: What is the relationship between the body of the book and the epilogue? Who is Qohelet? What is Qohelet's relationship to his heart? What is the structure of the book? And of course, what is at the heart of the book? i.e. what is Qohelet's message?

These questions will continue to be asked after I deal with them, for far from answering them, I intend to show the difficulties and the resistance of the text in answering them. More relevant to my thesis than the question of "what" the book means, is the stranger-sounding question "*How* does the book mean?" This question takes language and all of its components seriously. While only certain parts of the book rise to poetic altitudes, the discussions in this thesis show the complexity of Qohelet's words and how they connect to one another in interesting ways. Even where his statements have historical parallels, the way in which he states an idea is interesting. He makes a common notion strange. This is why to simply relate the meaning of the book is uninteresting, but to analyze how the book is written has proven a richly rewarding task.

All of the chapters ultimately lead back to the same preoccupation with writing as a personal quest and a compulsion. It is about the difficulties and insufficiencies of writing, but also the pleasure of reading and writing on Qohelet. In the first chapter, I begin with the notion that much study is a weariness of the flesh. What we learn from Qohelet—that words are tired and tiring, that there is nothing new to say, but that there is always something left to be said—is in fact true of all writing. Qohelet is a superb test-case though, for it is written in spite of the full awareness of the insufficiency of words. The epilogue is a supplement to the body of the book, and as such it supports what has been written, but also undermines it. The second chapter deals with an uncanny heart, one that is strangely familiar, has a double nature, and is full of

contradictions. This mysterious heart can make its way into one's writing and unintentionally disclose its secrets. God has put in the human heart a desire to understand everything—and thus provided the impetus for Qohelet's quest. Finally, the last chapter begins with a discussion of structure, which continues to be a popular topic in Qohelet scholarship. In this chapter, structure is conceived of as connections. The proverbs in 7:1–6 begin with some of the most tightly structured, formulaic language of the book, but this tension and the connections of words are so tight that the section pulls apart to reveal gaps and weaknesses in the writing. Although Qohelet tries to offer solid advice, one is left still asking "what is good?" and it seems that the advice is retracted in an implicit הבל. Similarly in 11:7–12:1, there is a conspicuous structure which vacillates between pleasure and death. The two themes are more intertwined than this original contrasting structure would suggest, however, and in 12:1 they are brought together in paradoxical relationship. Death is present even in life, and there is pleasure in death.

My work on Qohelet was plagued by the warning that studying and putting forth such effort was bound to be condemned as הבל. This thesis is written with great reverence for the wisdom of its subject. The solution to the writing paralysis was to write about how Qohelet itself struggles with the inevitability of הבל, but is still compelled to write.

"Without End": Qohelet on the Nature of Writing,

and the Nature of Writing on Qohelet

Translation[1]

> Furthermore, Qohelet was wise, and he continually taught knowledge to the people; he listened to and examined and corrected many proverbs. Qohelet sought to find pleasing words, and wrote the most honest words of truth. The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like implanted nails are [the words of] the masters of collections; they are given by one shepherd. Furthermore, of these things, my son, beware: The making of many writings is without end, and much study is a weariness of flesh. The end of the matter; everything has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments. For this applies to everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, every secret thing, whether good or evil. (Qohelet 12:9–14)

The Epilogue as Commentary

I am writing on Qohelet, i.e. writing about what Qohelet wrote. I am also dealing with commentary, i.e. writing about what others have written on Qohelet. Furthermore, in this chapter I am writing about the act of writing on Qohelet. The book of Qohelet is especially suited for this kind of reflection, as the book itself is a superb example of the activity of researching and then recording one's findings. As well, it is suitable for reflection on reading and thinking about what one has read, because the received version of the book contains a kind of commentary on itself provided by the epilogue.[2] Finally, the

[1] All HB translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

[2] "Epilogue" for now refers to the entirety of 12:9–14, though vv. 13(or 13b)–14 are often considered to be a separate section.

epilogue speaks directly about writing and studying, and offers its opinion regarding such "scholarly" activities.

The epilogue states, in the context of a warning, "The making of many writings is without end, and excessive study is a weariness of flesh." With predictable frequency, writings on Qohelet will begin by quoting this verse,[3] and the author will jokingly apologize for adding yet another book, but of course he or she is not too sorry, for the new book or article or monograph is there. My thesis is also here, and I also begin by quoting the same verse, but I've taken the warning very seriously — to the extent that my starting point is the epilogue. This first chapter can be read in part as an apology for writing on Qohelet (again).[4]

To write on Qohelet, thus, is at once to disregard the warning of the epilogue, and simultaneously to prove the cynical claims of the book: there is nothing new to say, words are worn-out, nothing will be remembered, to increase knowledge is to increase pain, the wise person dies just like the fool, there is no end to writing, excessive toil does not produce anything of value, and all has been heard. It is a thoroughly ironic endeavor to study a book which says that much studying causes exhaustion, and then to write a lengthy paper on the same book that criticises more writing. The irony can only be surpassed by those

[3] E.g. Kyle R. Greenwood "Debating Wisdom: The Role of Voice in Ecclesiastes," *CBQ* (2012): 476–491. Greenwood notes that authors cite the verse for the publication of any book on a popular topic, but that of course it is relevant for books on the structure and content of the book from which the quotation is taken. Ironically, Greenwood's topic is a proposal of a "new interpretation" of the structure of Qohelet.

[4] My honors paper for my B.A. was a study of עמל in Qohelet.

in turn who read and hope to learn from what is written about this book. More words talking about the book of Qohelet are superfluous, but this is true of all writing.

The Secondary Nature of Additional Words

An epilogue by definition is the adding-on of more words. As a supplement, it is allegedly secondary, and serves as an aid to the "original" text.[5] In the case of Qohelet, the change to a third person voice suggests that these additional words are not Qohelet's words. Koosed stresses the universality of this assumption: "from the source critics of the late nineteenth century to the literary critics of the late twentieth century, no one can resist attributing these verses to another hand."[6] If the epilogue is not written by Qohelet, then it cannot be part of the original document, and thus will usually be considered secondary to the rest of the book.[7] In addition to the change in speaking voice,

[5] See Jack Reynolds's discussion of the supplement in "Derrida" in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [cited 13 June 2013]. Online: http://www.iep.utm.edu/derrida/.

[6] Jennifer L. Koosed, *(Per)Mutations Of Qohelet* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 103. During the heyday of source criticism, a typical view was that the book was made up of various sources and redactional layers (mostly due to the "disorderly structure"). This view is no longer dominant and most commentators accept the basic unity of the book, with the exception of the epilogue which maintains a secondary status (David Beldman, "Framed! Structure in Ecclesiastes" pp. 137–161 in *The Words of the Wise are Like Goads: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century* [ed. Mark J. Boda et al.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013], 139). Fox begins his influential article "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet" arguing that the characterization of the book as a product as editorship and not authorship has kept the third-person voice from being heard (*HUCA* 48 [1977]: 83–106), 83-84.

[7] Martin A. Shields expresses concern with the secondary nature of the epilogue in his *The End of Wisdom*: *A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 47.

Even though I have chosen to remain undecided about whether the body of the book and the epilogue come from the same hand, it is difficult to speak about the body and the epilogue in the same way. For the sake of convenience and clarity, I will variously call the writers "Qohelet" for the body of the book and "the epilogist" for the epilogue and postscript, but with

the epilogue is often seen to present different, even contradictory, views from the words in the body of the book. It is often characterized as a moderating addition, with the role of softening an unpalatable message or presenting a less heterodox view. A typical descriptor is "pious," attached without any justification given (and seemingly a euphemism for "boring"). Whereas the character of Qohelet is fascinating in every way—to the extent that Christianson introduces his survey on the reception history of the book to say that "readers have habitually engaged less with the complexities of Qoheleth's words and more with Qoheleth himself"[8]—the epilogist is void of such personality. One obvious reason for this is its brevity. Another is the aforementioned boring piety. All of these factors serve to reduce the importance of the epilogue. Commentary on the epilogue often neglects language, literary relationships, and its significance for understanding the message of the book as a whole. The epilogue receives attention primarily when it comes to topics such as authorship and canonicity.

In fact, Sneed argues that it was a lack of attention to literary subtleties and an over concern with religious edification that led to a mistaken belief in Solomonic authorship for the book of Qohelet.[9] We can be quite certain based on the Midrash that belief in Solomonic authorship during rabbinic times played

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the understanding that this could be the same person, or a collective of authors or any number of different editors.

[8] Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries* (BBC; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2007), 18.

[9] Mark R. Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social-Science Perspective* (Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 267–68. He cites Lawrence H. Schiffman "Understanding Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaisim" on the transition from scribes to Pharisees to rabbis.

some part in preserving the book's inclusion in the canon,[10] and that the epilogue (specifically the last two verses, the so-called "postscript"[11]) boosted the arguments of the sages who claimed that the book only seemed heterodox and it just needed to be properly interpreted.[12] The most famous example of the epilogue being used to defend the book is reported in the Talmud: "The sages sought to withdraw the book of Qohelet because its words are mutually contradictory. Why then did they not withdraw it? Because it begins with words of Torah and it ends with words of Torah" (b. Šabb. 30b).[13] Regardless of actual historical accuracy, this discussion shows that though the book was widely accepted, or indeed had been for a long time already,[14] it was still recognized as

[10] *Song Rab*. 1:1. Robert B. Salters ("Qoheleth and the Canon," *ExpTim* 86 [1975]: 339–4) explains the rise of the Solomonic authorship tradition as based on the superscription of 1:1, which came from an editor's interpretation of 1:12. Salters points out that Qohelet definitely would not have been included in the canon if it were known to be written as late as the third century BCE, when the period of inspiration was thought to be over. Thus, the attribution of Solomonic authorship also helped to give the book status by implying a much earlier dating for it (Salters, "Canon," 341). Choon-Leong Seow rightly points out, however, that the authority of the Solomonic name could not have been the primary reason, since the Wisdom of Solomon and the Odes of Solomon were not included despite their authorship claims (*Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 18C; New Haven: Yale University, 1997], 4).

[11] Thus Seow calls vv. 13b–14 in "The Epilogue of Qohelet Revisited." (pp. 125–142 in *Wisdom, You Are My Sister* [ed. Michael L. Barré; Washington: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1997]). Fox follows this designation, except that he includes v. 13a, a change which I agree with (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* [Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999], 359).

[12] Sneed, *Politics*, 270.

[13] Quoted from Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 1. Ironically, some would say the most obvious contradictory statements are between the body of the book and the words of the postscript, the "words of Torah" that ostensibly saved the book in spite of its contradictions. A second irony is that the Torah itself is also mutually contradictory!

Sneed claims that when these words were uttered (it appears he assumes it is a historically reliable account) the rabbis already assumed that Qohelet was included in the canon, but were debating whether Qohelet was sacred and fit for use in the synagogue. See Sneed, *Politics*, 268.

[14] By the end of the first century C.E., Qohelet appears on Josephus' list (it is most likely one of the books of "precepts for the conduct of human life") and it is present in many other Christian canonical lists in the early common era. Theodore of Mopsuestia (fifth century) appears

problematic, even up to Talmudic times.[15] It certainly does not explain why the book held some claim to canonicity, it only presents one argument used to defend the important place it already held.[16] Any interpretation of the book must acknowledge the heterodox nature of Qohelet, but also account for its early acceptance. One of the simplest yet most overlooked reasons for the book's popularity is that Qohelet's views were not unique to him, and apart from that, "there is a frankness and honesty in the way he expresses his opinions which make him attractive, and not necessarily just to those who share his point of view."[17] Thus we would do well to begin, as Salters does, by recognizing the attractiveness of Qohelet's words, "whatever their degree of orthodoxy,"[18] to historical audiences, and remains the case for readers of Qohelet today. But this still leaves the historical question of how the book and epilogue came to be together, and the literary question of how they relate to one another.

The only evidence to suggest the epilogue was once not part of the book is internal; all extent copies of the manuscript include the epilogue as we have it.[19] On one end of the authorship debate, alluded to above, is the position that many different voices and views in the text point to many different people who

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to have rejected the divine inspiration of Qohelet, and his disciple Nestorius did not include it in his canonical list (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 4).

[15] See *Mishnah Yadaim* 3.5 for a summary of debate over whether or not Qohelet was thought to "defile the hands."

[16] Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 2.

[17] Salters, *Canon*, 340.

[18] Salters, *Canon*, 340.

[19] Two partial copies of Qohelet have been found at Qumran, but neither is useful in determining the originality of the epilogue. 4QQoh^{a} (ca. 175–150 BCE) has portions of ch. 5–7 and 4QQoh^{b} (dated to the middle or later half of first century BCE) only preserves two fragments of ch. 1.

were responsible for the shaping of the book. On the other extreme is the position that a single person wrote both the body of the book and the epilogue. Other views vary as to the involvement of a later editor or editors; for example, were the third-person statements simply added on to a completed work, or was the editor responsible for selection and arrangement of the material?[20] My focus in this chapter is not on authorship or different speaking voices, however, but in asking about the "literary implications"[21] of the epilogue, to use Fox's phrase. As much as the change in voice is a possible sign of different authorship (an important question, to be sure), it is a literary device, and it means something more than just the answer to "Who is speaking thus?" [22] In this sense, a literary reading is always primary—not in terms of importance, but in terms of operation.[23] Barring the unlikely find of a truly exceptional manuscript, we must read the epilogue as an integral part of the book. What does the epilogue add to the words of Qohelet, besides more words?

[20] In the latter case, one may argue that, in a literary sense, the editor should then be considered the implied author. Fox's article "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet" carries a lot of weight in the debate. He thinks the real author is the third-person voice of the frame-narrative, and "Qohelet" is his invented persona. But Fox is also adamant that vv.13–14 are not said by the author of the epilogue (*A Time to Tear Down*, 360).

[21] Fox, "Frame-Narrative," 91. For a good summary of the different voices in Qohelet, see Fox's discussion on pp. 85–90 of "Frame-Narrative."

[22] See the beginning of Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author": "writing is the destruction of every voice, every point of origin...all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing." (*Image–Music–Text* [Trans. Stephen Heath; London: Fontana, 1977] 142).

[23] See Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 6.

The Weariness of Words

The book of Qohelet explicitly and implicitly shows a great obsession with the weariness of words, words, words. All the way through the book, the author turns and returns to the same words, the same phrases, the same topics, the same conclusions. Qohelet even begins and ends with the same phrase almost verbatim, the phrase itself being a repetition of the same word in different forms:

הבל הבלים אמר קהלת הבל הבלים הכל הבל

This same word, הבל, is used 33 more times in a relatively short book. Its literal meaning is "air, breath, vapour, mist, smoke"[24] and thus has a tendency to take on an abstract connotation of transience.[25] The word הבל as it is used in Qohelet has been assigned qualities of illusion,[26] ephemerality and unreliability,[27] bankruptcy,[28] emptiness,[29] meaninglessness,[30] and absurdity,[31] just to name a few. The metaphorical meanings of this illusory word are multiplied and piled

[24] Though not a typical gloss, John F. Hobbins argues that "air" stands at the semantic core of both הבל and רוח, and is the common denominator of the more usual glosses of "wind" "breath" and "vapour" (The Poetry of Qohelet" in *The Words of the Wise* (ed. Mark J. Boda et al.), 164.

[25] Klaus Seybold, "hebhel," TDOT 3:313–20.

Daniel C. Fredericks argues that הבל in Qohelet always means "transience." He reacts against translations which preclude a temporal meaning, and instead reflect the basic concept of "valuelessness." (*Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity of Life* [Biblical Seminar; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993], 15).

[26] Benjamin Berger, "Qohelet and the Exigencies of the Absurd," *Biblical Interpretatio*n 9 (2001): 141–79 (145).

[27] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 199–200

[28] Matthew Rindge, "Mortality and Enjoyment: The Interplay of Death and Possessions in Qoheleth," *CBQ* (2011): 265–80 (268, 270).

[29] Vulgate, *vanitas*; NEB translation.

[30] NIV translation.

[31] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 30–33. He prefers "absurd," but since in English the word has taken on a comical connotation, he suggests "senseless" for a more general audience.

one upon another in volumes of writings. There is no end to the making of many writings on הבל — in fact, in accordance with Qohelet's usage, the word itself could be used to describe all of those writings and the effort that went into producing them, for הבל in Qohelet is an evaluation, or as Seybold notes more accurately, a devaluation "directed against the norm of *yithron* thinking."[32]

For this thesis which focuses on words and writing, the הבל concept is relevant in that there may be many words, but they never produce anything substantial. A good example of this is Qoh 5:6 (Heb.), which Fox calls "a summary conclusion"[33](i.e. more words to explain the many words that have been given, except that the verse itself also needs explanation). The verse speaks of many dreams and הבל and many words, but it has perhaps too many words to make sense of how these are related, for it is nearly impossible to produce a translation that makes sense either grammatically or meaningfully of the text as it stands. Ironically, the best sense that commentators can make of it is that many words are like הבל. [34]

The spoken word is literally הבל, vaporous breath, and also figuratively in the sense of there for a moment and gone forever. This הבל of speech—impotent words, lifeless words, illusory words—is the opposite of the רוח, the lifebreath, which is powerful and life-giving, as well as eternal, for upon leaving the human it ultimately returns to God (12:7).

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[32] Seybold "hebhel," 319.

[33] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 233.

[34] Seow translates, "For vacuous dreams are in abundance, and there are words aplenty," with dreams here being a synonym of הבל *(Ecclesiastes*, 199–200), and Fox, "For like much dreams and absurdities are many words" (*A Time to Tear Down*, 233).

The theme of הבל is developed in the opening poem about how all of nature is stuck in eternal repetition. It contains the famous lines “A generation goes, a generation comes, but the earth stands forever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and pants back to where it rises.” Not only humans, the sun, the wind, the streams, but as v. 1:8 says, “*All* things are wearisome / no one can state them.” Qohelet as he writes is struck by the impossibility of never being able to say enough, to say *all* that one wants. Like the streams running into the sea, there is no end to words as they continually replace one another—the sea or words, as it were, is never full; there is more to say. It is tiring for the writer or speaker who can communicate in an infinite number of ways, and tiring for the reader or listener who must hear indefinitely. In the attempt to communicate, the same words are used over and over again. The line could equally read “all *words* are wearisome,” since both “thing” and “word” are translations of the same Hebrew word דבר. Not only are the words overused, they are themselves worn out. The poem continues, “The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear enough of hearing. What will happen is what has already happened. And what will be done has already been done. There is nothing new under the sun.” Words are tiring and tired because the nature of language is to proliferate and signify endlessly. The words continue to grow and flow forever, even though there is never anything new to say.

Writings without End (Or Many Endings)

The opposite is also true, however, and the epilogue fulfills *the need to say something more*; even as it functions to end the book, it reflects the desire to continue. It begins with ויתר "furthermore" or "a supplement."[35] The same word יתר is used in 6:8, 11; and 7:11 where it means "the positive balance," "remainder" [36]—a notion which applies here. Despite grammatical difficulties, [37] most agree on a practical level that additional information is being provided. Seow thinks that the additional information is that Qohelet taught the people knowledge.[38] Fox thinks the "furthermore" is adverbial to the entire sentence, i.e. the remaining fact is that Qohelet was a sage *and* a diligent teacher of the public.[39] I would take Seow's parenthetical comment seriously that "postscript/addendum" is a fitting translation, and thus the additional information is not just a fact or two about Qohelet, but everything contained in the epilogue. These words are what remain when Qohelet finishes, both in a chronological sense that they appear at the very end of the book, and perhaps in

[35] According to Seow, the translation in LXX probably reflects the interpretation of yoter as a noun "an addition" "(or, as we may say, 'postscript/addendum')" over a substantive used adverbially meaning "additionally." (*Ecclesiastes*, 383)

[36] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 350

[37] The difficulties revolve around the meaning of יתר and the function of the relative pronoun -ש. See a good explanation in Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 383

[38] (*Ecclesiastes*, 383). This is because he accounts for the particle in a causal sense. His translation of v. 9 begins with "Additionally, because Qohelet was a sage, he constantly taught the people knowledge."

[39] *A Time to Tear Down*, 350. This interpretation is supported by the disjunctive accent.

the sense that Qohelet's wisdom can go no further, and the only thing left is Torah.[40]

The word יתר is related to one of Qohelet's key words, יתרון "profit, advantage." Fox distinguishes יתרון from חלק in that while humans can enjoy a "portion," there is never any real "profit"[41]; Qohelet's response to the question of 1:3 "What profit does a man have in all his toil at which he toils under the sun?" is that there is nothing that is truly meaningful or productive, and nothing which could be considered worth the effort invested. Here, finally, after all Qohelet has written, there is some excess. Is there perhaps also a sense in which whoever wrote the epilogue sees these words as "better" (another gloss for יתר), an improvement on what the body of the book taught?

In 12:12 there is another occurrence of ויתר[42]—a supplement to the supplement, even more "more"!—which either goes on to warn against the words of the wise from the previous verse, or against excessive writing and studying. (Presumably this statement is at least partially directed at the body of the book.) Some take the repetition of ויתר to mark the beginning of a second

[40] This is the sense of "end" meant by Shields in the title of his book "The End of Wisdom."

[41] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 113.

[42] In v. 12 ויתר is followed by the preposition מן, a combination which forms a well-attested idiom in Postbiblical Hebrew. Thus Seow interprets it as a formulaic warning to not go beyond what has been set down. He translates: "Beyond them [i.e. the words of Qohelet], my child, beware" (*Ecclesiastes*, 388). Fox argues that such a warning would require a clearer identification of the words or books to be avoided, and ויתר in v. 12 should instead be understood in the same way as in 12:9, where it is syntactically separate from the rest of the sentence (against MT, where the pause is set after מהמה). He offers a literal translation, "and an additional thing (is)," and a good paraphrase, "there's something else to be said" (*A Time to Tear Down*, 356).

epilogue.[43] It is also possible, however, that this is still the same author, who, like Qohelet, has his favourite terms, and is expressing that there is more left to say.

The next verse, v. 13, also begins with what is clearly some form of concluding remark, possibly an idiomatic expression: סוף דבר.[44] The Masoretes marked the beginning of the phrase with a large Samekh (and did not mark v. 9 with a large letter), the purpose of which, writes Fox, "is to mark the start of the book's conclusion."[45] This phrase apparently was more of a closure for these scribes than repetition of the book's "motto" at 12:8 or the change in voice in 12:9. The phrase may be understood to be looking backwards in reference to the body of the book, or forward to the conclusion of the postscript. Some suggest that it was the original ending of the book. [46] Fox also understands the phrase to be an ending for what has been written so far, but not that it originally marked the end of the book. He argues that it was probably added by a scribe who considered 12:9–12 as belonging to the book of Qohelet, and sealed the book

[43] E.g. James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 189. Besides the linguistic marker, arguments for the division include: 1) vv. 9–11 endorse Qohelet, while starting in v. 12 the epilogue is more critical, and differs sharply from Qohelet's thought (Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 190), 2) vv. 9–11 are in third-person while vv. 12–14 use imperatives, and 3) Odgen argues that דבר is used differently in v. 13 from the construct in vv. 10 and 11 (Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987]. 208). None of these arguments are convincing enough to say that v. 12 is from a different hand than vv. 9–11, and especially not if the antecedent of המה is in v. 11. Verse 12 builds on v. 11. The new voice enters at v.13 with סוף דבר.

[44] George Aaron Barton (*Ecclesiastes: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* [T & T Clark, 1908, repr. 1980], 200) argues that the absence of the article suggests that a technical expression or idiom is being used. According to Shields, this may be the best explanation for the absence of the article on either word, although there is no real evidence for it and the expression does not appear elsewhere. (*End of Wisdom*, 93)

[45] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 359.

[46] Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 199, and Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 394.

before adding an admonition of his own.[47] Thus, a practical reason for the multiple endings could be that there are different voices which need to end their discourse before another begins to speak.[48] The number of closing statements, however, exceed even the greatest number of speaking voices proposed.

According to Seow,סוף דבר "the final word" and the phrase following it הכל נשמע "all has been heard" (v. 13) are in apposition to one another, and both are variations of closing formulae;[49] thus, a single verse begins to end, and then begins again to end.

Finally, in a liturgical setting after the last verse (12:12) is read, v. 13 is repeated so as not to end on a negative note. In such a case, "the last word," or "words" as it were, is given twice.

The epilogue and postscript together therefore contains at least four different, final, closing statements, and six when the penultimate verse is repeated. The book appears to have a hard time coming to an end. The significance of the epilogue in general, and of the so-called closing statements in particular, is that once everything has been said, there is still more left to say.

The body of the book bears this out as well. Qohelet is the skeptic *par excellence*, so much so that he questions his own questions. For every argument,

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[47] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 359–60. As Fox reasons, "If we imagine the epilogist writing vv. 9–12 and continuing into v. 13, he would have had no reason to say 'end quote'…for he would not yet have finished speaking" (Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 361).

[48] Certainly in the parallels Fox gives for the use of סוף דבר this is the picture he creates, but one can easily imagine the same person continuing to write: "To sum up, when all's said and done…." It is not necessary to claim there is a new speaking voice for every ending phrase. If anything, a major point of this chapter is to show that a single writer always has more to add to his or her own writing.

[49] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 390.

he has a counter-argument; he even presents counter-arguments for his own counter-arguments. For example, a little while after claiming that "as wisdom grows, vexation grows" (1:18), he decides that wisdom is superior to folly: "A wise man has eyes in his head whereas a fool walks around in darkness" (2:14). But immediately following this, he considers that both a wise person and a fool have the same destiny and he says growing wise is הבל, "because the wise man just like the fool is not remembered forever" (2:16). Qohelet is constantly refining his views; there is no way to summarize all of the statements about wisdom. This characteristic makes it difficult to write on Qohelet, because one cannot easily describe exactly what Qohelet's views on a certain subject are; as soon as one claims that Qohelet says such and such, there is the necessity of making an addendum.

According to at least one commentator, however, the epilogue works to affirm the *completeness* and *sufficiency* of the text.[50] As mentioned, Seow interprets יותר + מן at the beginning of 12:12 to mean "beyond," i.e. there is no need to go beyond the writings of the sages, because of the adequacy of their instructions.[51] Again, in the commentary on לַהַג, Seow points to the words of the wise in general and Qohelet in particular, which he describes as "authoritative," and says "there is no need to go beyond them in writing or talking, for

[50] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 388. He also references the "canonical-formula" cf. Deut 4:2 and 13:1 as well as Rev 22:18–19.

[51] This idea is found in the epilogue of the Egyptian text Instruction to Kagemni, which ends with the words "Do not go beyond what has been set down" (Quoted in Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 388).

'everything has been heard.'"[52] Although he himself does not use this argument, Seow's impression that the book is complete and sufficient may be bolstered by the affirmations in v. 10.[53]

Seow's emphasis is exactly opposite to my analysis of the epilogue thus far. Whereas I imagine Qohelet struggling over every word, never being perfectly satisfied, Seow thinks the epilogist sees a kind of perfection: "The point is that everything intended by the author has been laid out; there are no accidental omissions and no superfluous materials. So there is no need to go beyond the text (or to hold back its teachings) – either in writing or speaking."[54]

The Epilogue as "Father"

Qohelet is full of representations of speech: the word דבר is repeated myriads of times (22 to be exact); constantly we hear that Qohelet speaks, and often he speaks to his heart. The book is an address to someone, focalized in the imperative, for instance, in the manifold ראה, "See!" And yet it is written. Writing is seen as replacement for speech, and secondary to it, according to the authoritative text on the topic, Plato's *Phaedrus* (indeed the very existence of the *Phaedrus* demonstrates the dependence of writing on the spoken word: one might say that every "Plato" requires a "Socrates"). Writing is a kind of dead speech (or in keeping with an image from Qohelet, an undeserving son) that, according to Socrates, requires a "father."

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[52] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 390.
[53] See following section, "The Epilogue as Father."
[54] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 393–394.

The word for writing (כתב) only appears once in the book of Qohelet; it is in the epilogue, and the epilogue, in a way, is a father to the rest of Qohelet's words. Unlike the rest of the book, which is very personal but whose audience could be anyone, worthy or not, the epilogue identifies an addressee: "my son." The epilogue is evidence of the afterlife of Qohelet's work, as the text continued to be read and commented upon; even if both the body and epilogue came from the same hand, the epilogue offers an interpretive lens. The epilogue is, of course, also written, but as commentary it is somehow one step closer to spoken, guiding words; the epilogue is the message of the father who supports and explains what has been written.[55]

Indeed, the epilogist seems to have had greater confidence in Qohelet's proficiency with words than Qohelet himself did. Verses 9 and 10 are seen by many as a kind of biographical comment[56] that endorses the person of Qohelet and the work he did. This portion of the epilogue introduces Qohelet as a wise man,[57] gives insight into the kind of intense research he did and his attempt to find pleasing words, and describes the final product as correct and true.

[55] This is true even if the epilogue is seen as overturning what has been written in the book.

[56] Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 54.

[57] It is unclear whether חכם in v. 9 is a technical term referring to a wisdom teacher or a certain class of court officials (usually translated as "sage"; a view held by Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 58 and Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 384), or if the epilogist is simply saying that Qohelet was wise. For Shields, this seemingly insignificant choice has ramifications for the interpretation of the entire work. See discussion in Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 57–58. Some argue that the description is meant to communicate that he was an exceptional wise man, and the sentence explains that he took on the additional role of teaching the people. As Fox points out, not every חכם is a teacher of the public or an author of proverbs (*A Time to Tear Down*, 350–51).

The word תקן "be straight" appears only in Qohelet among all the books of the HB. Qohelet utilizes it as a standard for unattainable perfection in a bent world: מעות לא־יוכל לתקן "The crooked cannot become straight" (1:15) and also ראה את־מעשה האלהים כי מי יוכל לתקן את אשר עותו "See the work of God: Who can make straight what he has made crooked?" (7:13). Surprisingly then, the same verb, once declared an impossible feat, appears in the epilogue to describe what Qohelet was able to accomplish with words: תקן משלים הרבה (12:9), "he composed" (or "arranged") "many proverbs." Based on the usage found in the body of the book, the latter option that Qohelet borrowed material from others is more likely; as Shields explains it, the epilogist is describing Qohelet's task as to "straighten" pre-existing wisdom sayings which were considered "bent."[58] Commentators are eager to point out that even if Qohelet was using pre-existing material, his work was not merely mechanical but involved creativity: Seow calls it renovation and innovation.[59] Perry translates "righting" but also wants to preserve "writing."[60] In addition to the experiential research Qohelet describes in ch.2, the two previous verbs in 12:9b make clear that Qohelet thoroughly researched the wisdom of his day.[61]

[58] Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 62–63.

[59] *Ecclesiastes*, 385.

[60] Theodore A. Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University, 1993), 172.

[61] The root אָזַן is a *hapax legomenon*. It can be understood as derived from the noun מאזנים "balances, scales" with the apparent meaning to weigh a proverb (although the idiom "to weigh words" is not attested in BH or for that matter anywhere in the ANE. See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 384) , or more likely, related to אזן "ear" with the sense of listening or analyzing. The verb חקר means not only to search out, but then to examine and see if it is true (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 385). Taken together with the act of "straightening" "bent" proverbs, this sentence

Verse 10 contains another synonym for "straight," but it may be that ישר does not really have anything to do with straightness here, but rather goes with "words of truth" to form a superlative, "the most honest words of truth." Alternatively, it may modify כתב[62] and thus refer to a particular kind of writing: clear and unambiguous. As well, the word ישר is often used metaphorically to mean appropriate, or even morally upright. The straightly-written description is couched on either side by "words of pleasure" and "words of truth,"[63] creating a full picture of the book's pleasing, correct, morally upright, and true dimensions; this is the only time the reassuring word אמת "truth" is used in the book, conveniently situated in the same phrase as the only occurrence of כתב.

The complete integration of truth and pleasure in v. 10, however, may be called into question depending on how one interprets the phrase בקש קהלת למצא, and the word חפץ "pleasing words." Although both of the verbs בקש and מצא are common in Qohelet, the combination is unique in the HB. According to Mazzinghi in his article on Qohelet's use of precisely these two verbs, usually when Qohelet uses בקש, "he does so to underline the negative result of the research: 'searching,' but without 'finding.'"[64] Apart from 7:26–27, Qohelet only

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may imply that Qohelet only studied old proverbs and did not invent new ones. See also Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 277.

[62] The passive participle is very awkward, so it is frequently translated as a finite verb "and wrote."Aq, Sym, Syr, and Vul all use a finite verb, but they may have had the same consonants as MT and were translating an infinitive absolute as a finite verb. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 352.

[64] Luca Mazzinghi, "The Verbs מצא 'to find' and בקש 'to search' in the Language of Qohelet: An Exegetical Study," pp. 91–120 in *The Language of Qohelet in its Context* (Angelika Berlejung and Pierre Van Hecke, eds; Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 114

tells what he has not found. Mazzinghi is sure that the purpose of the unusual combination of the words is to show once again that Qohelet found neither wisdom nor the meaning of work which takes place in the world, but that his research has produced at least one result: דברי־חפץ."[65]

Are Qohelet's words indeed pleasing? In reference to language, חפץ may describe that which is aesthetically pleasing, or that which has a pleasant meaning. Even a cursory reading would suggest to most readers that the book does not have a "pleasant" meaning. Thus most scholars consider the phrase to be an aesthetic assessment.[66] In favour of this view, the activity of the sages was generally considered to be of a "noteworthy literary nature"[67] and Qohelet is no exception. At the same time, it is clear that Qohelet does not explicitly reveal a desire to produce a literary work, but rather strove to find answers to his questions.[68] Shields provides another option by arguing that the "pleasing" description does refer to meaning, but that Qohelet was unsuccessful in his quest. Indeed, Mazzinghi's conclusion that Qohelet was only successful in finding pleasing words seems to go against the evidence that he produces. In Mazzinghi's own understanding of how Qohelet uses בקש (to underline the negative result of research), he probably should have concluded that the

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[65] Mazzinghi, "מצא and בקש," 115.

[66] Shields (*End of Wisdom*, 65) provides the following list: Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and his World*, 352; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 191. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (NCB), 171. He also notes that Brevard Childs (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [London: SCM, 1979], 585) is an exception, quoting that "pleasing words" here means "fitting" and "appropriate."

[67] Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 64.

[68] This does not mean that Qohelet's words are not aesthetically pleasing, only that the epilogist did not here make that point.

epilogist is indicating that Qohelet searched for a way to make sense of life and find out what was good to do, but like so many other times, failed to find that things operated in the way he expected them to,[69] and his "solution" of enjoying when one is able is little more than a concession.

In summary, 12:9–10 present Qohelet as wise and honest—wise enough to undertake a thorough examination of the world, and honest enough to admit that there is nothing of real value in life. Any theory to explain the significance of the epilogue must take into account the epilogist's respect for Qohelet and what he taught. It would be very difficult to explain the transmission of a book if those who were responsible for its transmission did not in some way see value in what had been written—one task of the scholar is to ponder this relationship, and to explain why the book continued to be copied and read.

The End of Wisdom

The epilogist also appreciates Qohelet's words because they are critical of wisdom, as can be seen with vv. 11–12. Verse 11 uses shepherding imagery to reveal some aspect of "the words of the wise" and "[the words of] the masters of collections." Despite grammatical difficulties, there is general consensus that the instruments to which the wisdom teachings are being compared can be used to prick and herd an animal in a certain direction. Drawing on relationships to other ANE wisdom tropes, many assume that wisdom teachings, though painful, are

[69] It is unlikely, however, that the epilogist is critical of this. Contra Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 278.

there to achieve a good end. This is the point of view taken by Seow to explain v. 11: "The words of the wise may hurt; they are not what one may choose to hear. Yet, in the end, they are better for one's being." Shields reacts against this "end" i.e. "goal" of wisdom, for the saying is ambiguous, and there is certainly no conclusion that the wisdom of the sages is beneficial.[70] If anything, far from gentle instruction or leading, the metaphor is one of coercion. Shields writes, "The wisdom of the sages could, according to this saying, be used to manipulate and ultimately lead the student astray!"[71] "Wise words" may not only send one down the wrong path, but cause great pain; the words/nails are drilled into the head, or hammered into the flesh like a crucifixion. In such a reading, the "wisdom" (which now always requires scare quotes) of the body of the book is there precisely in order to be *deconstructed* by the epilogue. Everything preceding is turned on its head with the warnings against wisdom writings and the command to fear God and observe his commandments. In a subversion of Prov 1:7, the end of wisdom is the beginning of the fear of God.

Based on the multiple closing formulae, the repetition of יותר, and the wordiness of the book as a whole, I see a piece of writing which needs to keep going because it hasn't yet said exactly what it wants to. Everything in it could be debated, and it will never be complete. At the same time, the warning about too much writing and too much studying undermines the entire book, and the feeling is not that the book should keep going, but that it never should have

[70] Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 83.
[71] Ibid.

been written in the first place. Koosed uses v. 12 as a key verse for understanding how the epilogue undermines the rest of the book. For her it has nothing to do with an unorthodox book with a pious ending, but rather it is recognition of the lack of stable meaning in the writing (or one might say, a lack of any meaning at all): "Qohelet writes, but this one verse is a giant gesture of erasure. I imagine here the author crossing out each and every one of the twelve chapters that precede this verse."[72]

For some, from a historical perspective, it has everything to do with an unorthodox book with a pious ending. Shields sets forth a very convincing argument that Qohelet was a true adherent of a certain wisdom movement[73] and the book of Qohelet including the epilogue and postscript (all by the same hand) served to draw students into a critical stance regarding the wisdom revealed by Qohelet.[74] His study is thorough, but not completely novel. Taylor, for example, argues that Qohelet is a personification and the real author's point is supposedly that "Philosophy" self-deconstructs by arriving at contradictory conclusions, and the epilogue by the real author sets forth the real conclusion.[75] T. A. Perry identifies a pious sage "Presenter," P, who transmits the wisdom of Qohelet, whom he appreciates but ultimately disagrees with.[76] In favour of the

[72] Koosed, *(Per)mutations*, 111.

[73] It is not necessary for Shields's thesis that Qohelet was a real historical person, but Shields leans in this direction. It is possible still that both the body of the book and the epilogue come from the same hand, that the book was written to be deconstructed, and that the epilogue is the author's true view.

[74] *End of Wisdom*, 109.

[75] Preston A. Taylor, *Ecclesiastes: Life Beneath the Blazing Sun*.

[76] Perry, *Dialogues*.

view that the body of the book was either written or preserved to be rejected, it embraces the heterodoxy of Qohelet, while at the same time giving a reason for the transmission of the book. One criticism of this kind of view is that it makes no sense for the epilogist to give so much room to the other side to explain their view, and then add only a short note at the end to refute it. Why not just discard it and write a new book?[77] Perhaps the contrast between Qohelet's long-windedness and the epilogist's brevity is exactly the point though. In order to not just set up a straw man, the epilogist needed to give Qohelet space to explore the whole extent of what wisdom had to offer. The epilogist wanted to find the wisest man there was, and for him to follow every line of thinking and to run out of every possible argument...הכל נשמע. In this scenario, Qohelet's words were meant to be wearisome. The function of the epilogue is to provide a conclusion, after revealing that, though he was most competent, Qohelet never found the answer. Fox points out that the short phrases at the beginning of v. 13 show a kind of impatience with excessive study and rumination, similar to v. 12, and that the next phrase את־האלהים ירא "Fear God" is also very blunt[78] as though it were as simple as that. Yet his final imperative, ואת־מצותיו שמור "And keep his commandments," though very pointed, opens up a floodgate. In the process of trying to end with something ultimate, he points to the eternal Torah, thus demonstrating that there really is no end to the conversation.

[77] Sneed, *Politics*, 273. The book had already attained some degree of authority. Even more importantly, "the glossator perceived the fundamentally religious tenor of the book and its importance for Judaism."

[78] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 360

The possibility that the body of the book of Qohelet might have been written solely to be deconstructed should not be lost on the reader. One resonating feature is the feeling that at every turn the question arises, "Is this really true?" and the possibility that for someone or some group this was exactly how the book was supposed to work. Indeed, every act of writing is withdrawn in an implicit הבל. Certainly there could be no epilogue for a book that doesn't exist (only in Borges' universe), but in this case it is possible that the book survived because of the epilogue. Regardless of whatever theories of authorship are held, interpretation of the "core" must take the whole book into account.

Once again, the supplemental nature of writing displays itself also in the body of the book. Even where Qohelet does not explicitly make an addendum, there is always more left waiting to be said. Sometimes the supplement is a simple questioning of whether what was said is true. (e.g. Is truly *everything* הבל? Is there anything that is *not* הבל?[79]) And sometimes the supplement is (seemingly, or not) the exact opposite of what was said (e.g. Qohelet is always talking about how no one and nothing will be remembered, but this is hard to believe when reading a document that has survived a couple of thousand years). The "something more" is what is left unsaid—it is between the lines, or perhaps in the mind of the reader.

[79] According to Sneed (*Politics*, 271,) ancient rabbis were especially troubled by 1:3, because the הבל judgement might be thought to apply to the study of Torah. They got around this by focussing on the phrase "under the sun," because it was believed that the Torah was created before the sun, and thus at least the Torah is not הבל, indeed it yields a profit. The school of R. Jannai commented: "Under the sun he has none, but he has it [profit] before the sun" (b. Šabb. 30b). This explanation is what is meant by "the words of Torah" with which the book begins.

One problem with Shields's thesis, which he readily acknowledges, is that he has no historical evidence of such a wisdom movement to back up his claim. It is in fact typical to explain the contradictions and the postscript with the theory that Qohelet was seen as a heterodox book, but the scribes instead of erasing words because the book was considered inspired, tried to fix it instead. This misunderstands the nature of pious editing. First of all, if someone were trying to correct a heterodox book, that person did a terrible job and fooled no one.[80] The dominant text-critical explanation for "pious" glosses is that scriptural texts were not fixed in the ANE (or at least not the way we understand the idea of the fixed nature of scriptural texts today), and that editors were free to add words to make the book explicitly say what they *were already thought to mean in the existing interpretive tradition*.[81] Most likely, the epilogue and postscript were meant to be clarifying summaries of the book.[82] This has historical support on the basis that the rabbis believed that the book was orthodox, but just needed to be interpreted properly. Murphy supports this view when he writes that "Fear God and keep his commandments" is an early interpretation of Qohelet's teaching, and one that remains important on the basis that the epilogist was

[80] Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 48–49

[81] Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*. New York: Oxford, 1993. Ehrman's work primarily deals with the effects of interpretive conflict on the text of the Christian New Testament in the 1st century CE.

[82] There are also modern commentators who would argue that the epilogue represents an accurate summary of Qohelet's message, e.g. Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* (TOTC; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1983), 156; Andrew G. Shead, "Ecclesiastes from the Outside In," *RTR* 55 (1996): 24–37.

much closer in time to him than we are.[83] Sneed recognizes the "hermeneutical significance" of the conclusion of the book, and writes that the body of the book "presents no strong opposition to the gloss," and Fox goes so far as to describe the postscript as "a conclusion that reasonably builds on Qohelet's words."

The Supplement

Thus we are left with two opposing views of the supplement to Qohelet, one which says the epilogue was written to be a summary of the book and another which says it was written to undermine or replace the body of the book. Derrida explains in *Of Grammatology* that it is always ambiguous, or more accurately "undecidable," whether the supplement adds itself and is "a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence",[84] or whether "the supplement supplements… adds only to replace… represents and makes an image… its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness."[85]

The undecidable nature of the supplement applies to the ending of Qohelet: Does the supplement *affirm* everything that has just been said, or does it *supplant* everything that has just been said? Is the epilogue an accurate summary of Qohelet's teachings, or does it show the insufficiency of Qohelet's

[83] Roland E. Murphy, "The Sage in Ecclesiastes and Qoheleth the Sage," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 271. Shields has a problem with "relegating the epilogue to little more than a reflection of an early interpreter of the book" because it makes the epilogue secondary to and less significant than the words of Qohelet themselves, and because it fails to account for the fact that Qohelet's words are encapsulated by the summary statements of 1:2 and 12:8 (Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 3).

[84] *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1976), 144.

[85] Ibid.

teachings? Is the epilogue a plenitude enriching another plenitude or does it add only to replace"? Is there nothing left to be said, or is there always still more to be said? (From a historical perspective, was the epilogue written to give a proper interpretation of the book? "This is what the book is trying to say. Here are more words to help you understand it. I am not telling you anything new." Or was the epilogue written as an alternative to the rest of the book? "See how the book is lacking? You should listen to these words instead. I am telling you something totally different.")[86]

The ambiguous nature of the book allows for the opinions of scholars who think the book is as close to atheism as was possible in the ancient world, to Delitzsch's view that Qohelet can be called "The Song of the Fear of God."[87] In opposition to those whose see Qohelet as the most modern or "secular" book of the HB, Sneed himself claims that Qohelet represents a return to more ancient and primitive theology, and is the most quintessentially religious book![88] The ancient rabbis did not really need an orthodox ending to defend the book, for they were able to take even the most troublesome verses and interpret them as "words of Torah."[89] One review of Shields's work ends with the reviewer's own opinion that the book of Qohelet, far from displaying wisdom at its worst

[86] In the context of the epilogue confusing rather than revealing Qohelet's identity, Doug Ingram asks many similar questions and gives many references for different views of commentators. See his *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 88–89.

[87] *Politics*, 272.

[88] *Politics*, 264. Sneed sees that as Judaism developed, there was an increased perception of God as predictable and reasonable. Thus, Sneed bases Qohelet's "ancient" religiosity on his depiction of God as a genuine *deus absconditus* (281).

[89] See n. 79 above.

(Shields's thesis), in fact represents the best of Hebrew Wisdom literature.[90] The epilogue does not reveal a "true meaning" or purpose of the book; instead, it only further problematizes interpretation. As the next chapter will show, the biggest indicator of what a reader finds in the text is what is in himself or herself. The actual historical relationship of the body of the book and epilogue is not as strong as the reader's personal history. Washington's review concludes that even if Shields is right, "and the epilogist really did compose Ecclesiastes in an effort to neutralize Qoheleth's influence, the rich reception history of Ecclesiastes gives a clear verdict: that effort was in vain."[91]

The Wisdom Imperative

That is to say, even if the book was transmitted for the purpose of showing the bankruptcy of wisdom, the readership still sought the wisdom of Qohelet. There is at least one case in which the body of the book and the epilogue say very much the same thing: wisdom is painful, and the search for wisdom, exhausting.

Fox gives a very good discussion of Qohelet on wisdom in which he argues that the sages obviously recognized the relative value of wisdom, or as he further defines "relative," that wisdom cannot overcome all of life's contingencies.[92] Traditionally, חכמה includes practical knowledge about life, and

[90] Harold C. Washington, "Review of Martin A. Shields, *The End of Wisdom*," [cited 11 July 2013] Online: http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5240_5519.pdf.

[91] Washington, "Review," n.p.

[92] "Though this was rarely stressed in didactic wisdom (probably for pedagogic rather than ideological reasons)." Fox, *Contradictions*, 116.

certainly Qohelet points out many ways in which wisdom can help a person. Sometimes, though, it can be the opposite of useful, as when it causes pain. Qohelet certainly values wisdom, and, as Fox so aptly describes, "he does not treasure wisdom less for recognizing—and complaining about—its *vulnerability*."[93] Despite Qohelet's criticisms, this wisdom teacher does value wisdom and believes that it should be pursued for its own sake. Fox calls this "the wisdom imperative." He writes: "The valuation of wisdom is not so much a teaching … as an attitude, an unspoken ethic, manifest more in what Qohelet does than in what he says about wisdom."[94] And what does Qohelet do? He observes. He investigates. He seeks wisdom. And he writes. All the while he questions the purpose of what he is doing, but he has a compulsion toward it that he cannot deny.

Qohelet never gives a reason for why wisdom is better, except that it illuminates: "A wise man has eyes in his head whereas a fool walks around in darkness" (2:14). Fox too, turns to the metaphor of light to explain Qohelet's eagerness for wisdom, "Lucidity is not pleasant or pragmatically advantageous, but it is quintessentially human."[95] And so perhaps this is just what it means to be human: to accept our limitations and to search them out as Qohelet did. Even after observing that a wise man knows his way around, so to speak, Qohelet still

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[93] Fox, *Contradictions*, 117

[94] Fox, *Contradictions*, 117. Fox thinks Qohelet diverges from other wisdom writing by believing that knowledge could cause unhappiness (p. 116)

[95] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 95. On the other hand, the light in 11:7 is pleasurable, and far from having a deep intellectual connotation, it seems to be rather simple and thoughtless pleasure.

wonders, “Why then have I become so very (יותר) wise?” (2:15). While wisdom illuminates, it is just enough to impress on Qohelet that in fact he cannot see very far, and his sight ends in the darkness that is Sheol. Hence, he gives another reason for seeking wisdom in the present: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, where you are going” (9:10). Study, write, learn, become wise, because you are mortal and this is your lot in life. And the lot of reading and writing about reading Qohelet is mine.

The Heart of Qohelet: Writing as Self-Revelation

The "I" in Qohelet is emphatic in its individuality, in a class with Montaigne's or Thoreau's. The "I" is the basis for the autobiographical genre, and lends unity to the book. As Christianson notes, the arguments in Qohelet depend on this "I's" own self-portrait. Looking at the reception history of the book of Qohelet, Christianson's first observation is that "readers have habitually engaged less with the complexities of Qohelet's words and more with Qohelet himself."[96] The "I" is the most interesting part of the book. Even though we hear more from this singular, personal, voice, and get to know the speaker from the inside-out better than any other biblical personality, we still wonder "Who is Qohelet?"

Qohelet is first and foremost a book. But the words on the page form a personality. A superscription introduces the book as the words of one called Qohelet, the son of David and a king in Jerusalem. The first person voice in 1:12 also calls himself Qohelet and king over Israel in Jerusalem, and proceeds to create a persona which evokes King Solomon. No one knows if Qohelet is a name or a title, or what its significance is.[97] Though grammatically feminine, Qohelet is a male, speaking to a male audience.[98] Qohelet is not a king and definitely not

[96] Christianson, *Through the Centuries*, 18.

[97] See discussion of the word in Ingram, *Ambiguity*, pp. 82–85, and references therein.

[98] Crenshaw makes this point in the context of 9:9, and contrasts it to the broader audience envisioned in v. 9 of the epilogue, "the people" (*Ecclesiastes*, 163).

Solomon or other close offspring of David.[99] The historical details of the so-called royal experiment are highly questionable.[100] The only likely information he gives is that he is in Jerusalem. At first glance this so-called Qohelet character seems to be unreliable. Though these opening personal facts are obvious disguises, the following text reveals a real person writing honestly out of his most intimate concerns.

Qohelet's writing style is strange, and the ideas he gives are often thought to be contradictory, and perhaps in part due to these features of the text, there is a tendency to identify certain parts of the text as quoted material or editorial comments.[101] In terms of style, however, Qohelet is absolutely unmistakable—even when he is parodying proverbs. More importantly, the strangeness of Qohelet is one of his distinguishing marks; rather than pointing to multiple hands (or hearts) at work, it is a unifying feature of the text. Fox, borrowing Wittgenstein's metaphor to describe Qohelet's organization (or lack thereof) calls the book "a report of a journey of consciousness over the

[99] Rudman clarifies that Luther was the first to suggest the unlikelihood of Solomonic authorship. (Dominic Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiaste*s [JSOTSS; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001], 12). Delitzsch's comment on this matter is authoritative: "If the Book of Koheleth were of old Solomonic origin, then there is no history of the Hebrew language" (Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* [trans. M. G. Easton. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1891], 190).

[100] Hence the terminology of "guise" or "royal fiction." The real issue of the royal experiment is not its historicity but its demarcations, as discussed by Ingram in *Ambiguity*, 78, n. 14. It begins in 1:12, but different commentators extend it to 2:12 (e.g. Rudman, Fox, Seow), 2:16 (e.g. Crenshaw), or 2:26 (e.g. Salyer, Longman, Whybray). Odgen (*Qoheleth*, 34) refers to the "autobiographical material" in 2:12–3:21. Ingram sides with Fox (*A Time to Tear Down*, 153), who claims the "fiction" is never "dropped, but at some point the reader realizes it is no longer maintained."

[101] Gordis is credited as the one who first drew attention to Qohelet's use of quotations, but he also noted the difficulty of identifying quotations in Ecclesiastes. See discussion in Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 62, n. 257, and also Roger N. Whybray, "The Identification and Use of Quotations in Ecclesiastes," *VT Sup* 32 (1981): 435–51.

landscape of experience."[102] The sense of real flesh and blood experiencing and thinking through everything is what gives the work coherence. Then again, each reader always feels his or her own way into the text, and maybe that person we find in the end is ourselves.

In some ways, however, Qohelet does not need scholarly dissection, for "Qohelet" has many separate references. The convention of using Ecclesiastes to refer to the book and Qohelet to the character to whom the bulk of the book is attributed is an attempt to circumvent the issue,[103] but proves insufficient. This "character" after all, is accessible to us only as nothing more or nothing less than the words on the page, which essentially are what make up the book. The character himself has a shifting identity, as when the "Solomonic" or "kingly" persona essentially fades sometime around the middle or end of ch. 2.[104] What parts of the book are included in "the words of Qohelet"? What about when different scholars divide the book in different ways? "Qohelet" has both historical and literary dimensions. Even if one believes that the entire work came from a single hand, Qohelet is plural.

There is one more aspect to this list of who or what Qohelet is, and that is Qohelet himself, or more precisely, that which he calls לבי, "my heart." Despite all of these different elements, Qohelet is individual, unique, and utterly alone. In this chapter I want to emphasize Qohelet's loneliness, and explore his only

[102] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 150.
[103] E.g., Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 1.
[104] See n. 100 above. The text continues on to say things that go directly against the likelihood of kingly authorship, e.g. 5:8. See the anti-king progression in Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 20

companion. In this straightforward solitude, perhaps because of it, there are signs that Qohelet is not at home with his heart. Some scholarship does not seem to be comfortable with the heart in Qohelet either. Just as Qohelet is not able to understand the world, his own heart, too, remains a mystery.

The Uncanny Heart

The label I've chosen for Qohelet's heart is "uncanny." The German equivalent, and the title of Freud's paper on the subject, is *Das Unheimlich* (literally "unhomely"), to which the opposite is *heimlich*, "familiar" or "belonging to the home." Freud does not see unfamiliarity as the defining characteristic of the *unheimlich*, because not everything new and unfamiliar is frightening. "Something has to be added to the unfamiliar to make it uncanny," writes Freud. A secondary meaning of *heimlich* is "concealed" or "kept from sight," a meaning apparently unrelated to the first meaning of home or familiarity.[105] The antonym *unheimlich* is defined in one dictionary which Freud consults as "uneasy, eerie, blood-curdling" and "the name for everything that ought to have remained hidden and secret and has become visible." The same entry finishes with the explanation that "*Unheimlich* is not often used as opposite to meaning II."[106] After pages of quotation (one author remarks how defining the uncanny "has one of the boldest thinkers of the twentieth century turning (back) for shelter

[105] Contrary to Freud's opinion that "concealed" and "familiar" are unrelated, something that happens within the four walls of the house and belongs only to the persons therein is *unheimlich* in both of these senses.

[106] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (trans. David McLintock; New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 129.

into mounds of dictionaries"[107]), Freud discovers that among the many shades of meaning of *heimlich*, it exhibits one which is identical with its opposite: "on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other hand, that which is concealed and kept out of sight."[108] That "something" which is added to the unfamiliar to make it uncanny, is actually that it was once very familiar, but, Freud writes, it "has been estranged only by the process of repression."[109]

A Heart of Flesh

Just as Freud first turns to dictionaries in his essay, I too begin with the attempt to define terms. The Hebrew word לֵב is very familiar in the HB (over 800 times),[110] and especially to the book of Qohelet (37 times).[111] However, Qohelet not only uses this common word in uncommonly high proportions, the way in which he uses it seems to depart from the other hundreds of examples in the HB. As Koosed puts it, Qohelet not only has a distinctive vocabulary, but also uses common vocabulary in a distinctive way.[112] At its most basic, לֵב refers to an

[107] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 9.

[108] "Thus, *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich"* (Freud, *Uncanny*, 131).

[109] "This uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression" (Freud, *Uncanny*, 148).

[110] Douglas R. Edwards, "Heart," in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 407–8 (407), reports 814 times.

[111] Qohelet speaks to his heart 18 times, and of these 12 take place in the course of his investigations (1:13–2:26).

[112] Koosed, *(Per)Mutations*, 47.

actual physical organ, corresponding to the English "heart."[113] Just as in English, however, the לֵב has given birth to an abundance of figurative meanings, such as the inner self, the seat of feeling and emotions, or one's inclination or courage.[114] In fact, the figurative meanings proliferate to the point that the original corporeal understanding of the לֵב accounts for only a fraction of its uses.[115] At the same time, these many metaphors presumably arise from certain characteristics of the tangible לֵב: its physical location inside the body and near its centre; its vital importance; and its increased movement in certain emotional states.

In Qohelet there is a lot of evidence that the לֵב is associated with the body. For example, the ב-preposition, which appears in Qohelet's frequent phrase אמרתי אני בלבי (2:1, 15; 3:17, 18) is often translated as "to" or "with"[116] but surely means "I spoke *in* my heart," signifying its location inside Qohelet's body. The לֵב has physical characteristics, such as sight (1:16; 2:1) and the ability to enjoy sensual pleasures (2:1). Statistically speaking, the לֵב is most relevant in 1:16–2:23, which corresponds with Qohelet's pleasure experiment; the experiment is directed at his לֵב, and Qohelet says that he did not deny his לֵב any enjoyment, where שִׂמְחָה, "enjoyment," is certainly not referring to some kind of

[113] They correspond in terms of location, but not in terms of function. The definition of "pumping organ" in *THAT* 2:514 is anachronistic. It is much more difficult to distinguish between literal and metaphorical meanings in ANE conceptions, since the heart was thought responsible for psychological processes, i.e. the heart in some ways functioned like the modern conception of the "brain."

[114] BDB, 523.

[115] Koosed, *(Per)Mutations*, 48.

[116] E.g. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (cf. 1:16 דברתי אני עם־לבי)

disembodied pleasure. Qohelet even speaks of how a worker's לֵב cannot lie down and rest at night (2:23).

This personification of the לֵב, however, may serve to contrast it with the body; Longman, for example, points out how in the verse just mentioned, the לֵב toils in addition to the body, and so after a day of physical labour has ended the worker is still exerting mental effort.[117] Fox uses the example of 2:3, which says, "I turned in my heart to draw my flesh with wine, and my heart was guiding in wisdom." Fox interprets the parallelism as contrasting the flesh which is drawn by means of physical influence, namely wine, with the לֵב which Qohelet is leading by means of intellectual influence, namely wisdom.[118] The contrast Fox draws here is too great; the לֵב here is not purely intellectual—after all, the motivation for physical pleasure originates with the לֵב. The verse does not show distinction between physical and mental influences insofar as it shows the לֵב guiding Qohelet in a psychophysical experiment. In addition to being separate from the body in order to observe its responses, the לֵב is part of the body and itself responds. The לֵב is not merely a set of eyes (figuratively speaking!) observing Qohelet, rather it remains with him in all his sensual pursuits.

It is very significant that Qohelet's לֵב has this double nature in order to undertake the type of investigation which Qohelet sets himself—an investigation which Fox describes as "unparalleled: a sage choosing to seek out sensory

[117] Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 105.

[118] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 178–9. Fox believes that the verbs מָשַׁךְ "draw" "ply" and נָהַג "lead" or "drive" are nearly synonymous. They are more obviously opposites, but this does not negatively affect the argument for parallelism.

experience as a path to insight."[119] Freud discovers that the meaning of *heimlich* coincides with the meaning of *unheimlich*, that is, two seemingly opposite words come to have the same meaning. The inverse appears to happen in the case of Qohelet's לֵב, as a single word holds what are two seemingly opposite significances; at one and the same time the לֵב is a physical entity and it provides a contrast to the body. The לֵב is both in the body and separate from it, and in this sense, "mind" is a good translation.

Qohelet's Heart on his Sleeve

In returning to the לֵב in the HB in general, we find that the Hebrew לֵב is more comprehensive than its English counterpart: instead of being the opposite of the intellect, it includes this aspect. With this in view, "mind" is not an ideal translation. The problem with all English translations is that they draw a dichotomy between the "thinking" organ and the "feeling" organ which simply does not exist in the Hebrew. The לֵב is both the seat of the intellect, *and* the source of emotion; it is the very intersection of reason and passion.[120] There is no reason to believe that the לֵב in Qohelet departs from this conception. In fact, just as the unity of the somatic and symbolic aspects is essential to the success of Qohelet's investigation, so too is the unity of the thinking-feeling לֵב. When scholars are not careful to maintain this unity, however, it is usually the

[119] *A Time to Tear Down*, 77.

[120] The emotional/intellectual conception of the heart is strongly supported by an abundance of ancient Egyptian wisdom literature. See Shannon Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period* (SBLDS 170; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1997), 144.

emotional qualities that are neglected and the intellectual side of the לב that is emphasized, especially within the context of Qohelet's investigation. Seow is consistent in calling the לב the "heart" in his translation, but then in his commentary he calls it the "mind." He notes that "The heart is the decision making organ in near eastern anthropology," [121] which is not inaccurate, but he wrongly links decision making to purely mental activity. Longman is more explicit in his denial of an emotional heart:

> As is well known, lēb refers not to the emotions, as in English, but to the mind and will, or even the core of one's personality. Qohelet thus uses the idiom ["I gave my heart"] to indicate his focused, deeply personal, disciplined pursuit of the object of his study.[122]

It is strange that the "core of one's personality" and a "deeply personal" pursuit should exclude the emotions. Qohelet is indeed very focussed, and one evidence of this focus is the giving of his heart fully to experience a range of emotions: throughout his disciplined pursuit he feels vexation, sorrow, and joy.

Certain scholars' emphasis on the לב as a thinking-organ is most likely due to the לב's involvement with wisdom and its significant role in the investigation. Certainly Qohelet's heart knows wisdom,[123] but when he knows wisdom, and folly, it is to "know" in the biblical sense; that is, he is not just thinking about them, he is experiencing them. As for the second association, it is true that most

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[121] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 120.

[122] Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 78.

[123] One problem may be that the לב is closely connected with wisdom and then wisdom is connected to the intellect. In 1 Kgs 3:9, Solomon asks for a discerning לב; in 2 Chr 1:10, he asks for wisdom, and therefore the two are conflated. Krüger thinks that when Qohelet traces his undertaking back to his own decision, it is a parody of the tradition of Solomon who receives his לב and his wisdom from God (*Qoheleth*, 63).

occurrences of the לֵב take place in the context of Qohelet's search (1:12 to 2:26), but the search is the most sensual part of the book.[124] As Qohelet tells his לֵב in 2:1, "Come, I will test [you] with enjoyment, and you, see what is good." Longman, however, says the verse appropriately introduces a "reflection on life" and then translates 2:3 in a way that connotes intellectual reflection, but minimizes physicality and emotion: "I mentally explored by cheering myself with wine."[125]

The לֵב has emotions and passions and desires, but these attributes have often been repressed, leaving it only with the straightforward task of relaying information.[126] It is more comfortable to judge that Qohelet's search was a rational undertaking and that he was wholly guided by his intellect, than to ponder a mysterious heart with unpredictable actions and feelings; in the same way, it is easier to believe that scholarship is always rational and securely structured, than to entertain the possibility that we are led more by our passions than we believe, and that writing is, at heart, a sensual pursuit.

Doppelgänger

The heart is a dialogue partner, though it never responds, or its responses are not recorded. Thus it directly affects the composition of the book, and also contributes to the tone of the written words. Many commentators are content to see the לֵב as (merely) a rhetorical device, pointing out that the phrase "I said

[124] Koosed, *(Per)Mutations*, 49.
[125] Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 89.
[126] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 72.

in my heart" is a common idiom meaning to speak to oneself.[127] However, nowhere else in the HB does the phrase appear with a quotation marker (לאמר or כי) and never elsewhere is the לב addressed in the second person.[128] Furthermore, the frequency with which Qohelet addresses his לב is unparalleled. Qohelet's לב is a highly developed character, as complex as Qohelet himself.

Speaking with one's heart always implies a split self, and the extended conversation between the "I" and the לב produces what sometimes appears to be two distinguishable selves. Robert Holmstedt explains the abnormal use of the first person singular pronoun as a way to grammatically formulate separate experiences of the "I" and the לב. His argument is that this rhetorical tactic "allows Qohelet the character to experience the wilder, seedier, even debauched side of life and keep himself, by virtue of the counter experiences of his לב from becoming thoroughly distasteful to the audience."[129] But in keeping with the ever-paradoxical nature of the לב, it is also true that it is still a part of Qohelet or even identical to Qohelet. An extremely common theme of the uncanny is the "double." A *doppelgänger* is one that not only looks identical to another, but also has knowledge, feeling and experience in common with another. A person

[127] Christianson calls it "inner dialogue" (*A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998], 197); Gary D. Salyer refers to "Inner monologue" (*Vain Rhetoric: Private Insight and Public Debate in Ecclesiastes* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001], 175. Others overlook that there is any communication taking place at all, and simply translate, e.g. "I thought," (Krüger, Qoheleth, 56).

[128] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 123. There is only one reference in 2:1. Holmstedt: "The second-person address in the rest of the book is apparently aimed at Qohelet's audience."

[129] Robert Holmstedt, "אני ולבי The Syntactic Encoding of the Collaborative Nature of Qohelet's Experiment," *JHS* Online: http://www.jhsonline.org/cocoon/JHS/a121.html. This reminds me of Fox's assertion that the Epilogist was trying to distance himself from Qohelet, or rather the wisdom of which Qohelet's teaching is a part. He writes "The epilogist is somewhat chary of all the sages" (*A Time to Tear Down*, 372).

identifies himself or herself with the double so that the self becomes confounded or the foreign self is substituted for his or her own.[130] This is clearly the case with Qohelet and his לֵב. Holmstedt's "I and my לֵב strategy" which keeps the experiences of Qohelet and his לֵב separate is too easy, because it is impossible to determine which knowledge, feeling or experience belongs to which, if indeed any of these could even be said to belong to one and not the other.[131]

The self as "doubling, dividing and interchanging" itself is seen even at a semantic level; it is difficult to even discuss the relationship as though the two are separate entities, especially for those commentators who sometimes translate לֵב as "himself," and then in their commentary refer to the speaking "I" as Qohelet's "self"; the two selves are confused semantically. To quote von Meyenfeldt, the author of the only book-length study of the לֵב in the HB, "the לֵב represents the whole person. In the deepest sense it marks this characteristic: the genuine, the authentic, the essential."[132] Koosed points out that even within this definition, there is a contradiction: "How can the heart represent both the whole person and the most essential aspect of that person? Can a whole person be reduced to his or her essence? Or is the essence the only authentic part of the whole person?"[133] It is telling that arguably the most authoritative voice on the

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[130] Freud, *Uncanny*, 141.

[131] Qohelet can tell his לֵב to experience something, but then it is clear that the speaking "I" had the same experience, just as happens in 2:1.

[132] F. H. Von Meyenfeldt, *Het, Hart (LEB, LEBEB) in Het Oude Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1950), 218.

[133] Koosed, *(Per)Mutations*, 50

לֵב arrives at a definition that contradicts itself, for perhaps the לֵב can *only* generate contradictory responses.

As we shall see in the next section, the לֵב may be even bigger than the person, outside the body, and transcendent. The לֵב can be compared to Durkheim's description of the soul (Indeed, "soul" or "psyche" might be appropriate translations for understanding this aspect of Qohelet's heart): "in one sense it is ours. It expresses our personality. But at the same time it is outside of us... It is as if we really had two souls: one that is inside us, or rather is us; the other that is above us, whose function is to control and assist us."[134]

Heart of Darkness

According to the most literal definition of a physical organ, the לֵב is first and foremost something inside, something hidden. When one speaks to one's heart, it implies that this is something done in secret. In this it is like the double, because it is literally on the dark side. Though the לֵב is double, it is not duplicitous; the לֵב keeps secrets, for though Qohelet often speaks to it, there is no record of the לֵב speaking back. The last step of the heart's role, according to Fox, is that the heart is to "evaluate the sensations it perceives, in order to produce knowledge and report this knowledge to the person."[135] It is true that Qohelet sometimes finds things out or sees things after speaking to his לֵב, but there is no explicit connection that this knowledge was filtered through the לֵב.

[134] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (trans. Carol Cosman; New York: Oxford, 2001), 207–8.

[135] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 77.

On occasion, there is the sense that the לֵב can be controlled—as it is used to examine, and in 7:21 "To all the things that people say, do not give your heart, so that you do not hear your servant cursing you." At other times however, the לֵב determines whether a person is wise or foolish, and controls the way a person goes, as in 10:2–3 ("the heart of the wise to his right, and the heart of the fool to his left"). Usually, though, the לֵב is a silent stranger; 7:22 continues, "For many times your heart knows that you yourself have cursed others." Knowledge is repressed in the heart. In this example, the contents of the heart are revealed to the chagrin of the "I," or as Fox explains it, the heart functions as a conscience and tell a person what he or she does not want to hear.[136]

העלם *in Their Heart*

The most revealing but also the most mysterious characteristics of the לֵב are to be found in 3:11: גם את־העלם נתן בלבם "[God] gave eternity into their heart." The most obvious reading of העלם is some kind of reference to time,[137] supported by the use of the same word at least five other times in the book,[138] including just three verses later in 3:14. In addition, the contrast between עת ("time") and עלם is a strong argument in favour of reading "eternity,"[139] and as

[136] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 263.

[137] Or timelessness, or that which transcends time.

[138] Also found in 1:10, 2:16; 9:6 and 12:5. Certainly the meaning of a word cannot be determined by statistics alone, in which case the dominant meaning would always outweigh any contextual concerns. עלם in 3:11 is a special case because it is the only instance in the HB where it has an object preposition and one of very few where it is neither preceded by a preposition, nor is part of a construct chain.

[139] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 98. See also Seow, who explains the relationship in that "Eternity is that which transcends time."

Isaksson writes, "the whole context is pervaded by time."[140] Nevertheless, there are many who reject this meaning, to the point that Isaksson calls the meaning of העלם here the great *crux interpretum* of the book of Qohelet.[141]

Without the holem, the same root may mean "Concealed, dark." This is the word Rashi read.[142] Some have continued in this vein and offer nominal forms based on "darkness," hence "ignorance"[143] or "the unknown."[144] Interestingly, with different pointing, Hitzig comes up with the exact opposite possibility of "knowledge."[145] None of these readings, however, presents a more plausible solution, and even introduce new problems by postulating a *hapax legomenon*. In the recent past commentators are more likely to accept the text as it stands, with the notable exception of Fox who emends to read "toil." [146]

In postbiblical literature, עלם takes on the meaning of the present age and the world to come. Thus, it is still connected to the idea of eternity, but also

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[140] See discussion of עלם in 3:11 in Bo Isaksson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth With Special Emphasis on the Verbal System* (Stockholm: Uppsala, 1987), 176–89 (180).

[141] Ibid., 179

[142] As recorded in Whitley, 32. Rashi thought it signified what is hidden, so he took the word to apply to the wisdom of the world.

[143] Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 105.

[144] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 91, citing Qoh. 12:14 as "hidden" (97) Seow refutes this idea

[145] It would be *hapax legomenon* in Hebrew, related to the Arabic for "knowledge." Ferdinand Hitzig, *Der Prediger Salomo's* (Leipzig: Hirzel), 1883. Referenced in Seow, 163.

[146] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 211. He bases his emendation on metathesis and in comparison with 8:17. There is no textual evidence for emendation; it is purely conjectural (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 163). It seems that Fox is not so much convinced that "toil" is a good emendation, as he is that "eternity" doesn't make sense and requires too much amplification (*A Time to Tear Down*, 210). He constructs a straw man argument out of a rather pious quotation from Delitzsch "…{God] has established in man an impulse leading him beyond that which is temporal to that which is eternal," and points out "the big jump from perpetuity to consciousness of memory" in Barr's explanation: "The reference to perpetuity would mean the consciousness of memory, the awareness of past events" (*Biblical Words for Time* [Chicago: A. R. Allenson, 1962], 124).

means "the world."[147] Issakson combines both spatial and temporal meanings of עלם with his suggestion of "creation in its widest sense" to be translated "the eternal work of God."[148] Many of the problems with the translation of "eternity" are caused by the tendency to extend the meaning to "a longing for eternal life" or "a yearning for God"[149]; in comparison to this kind of amplification that does not conform with the text, Isaksson's proposal finds much evidence elsewhere in the book and does not produce any of the problems associated with emendation.

Regardless of one's preferred gloss, a necessary characteristic of העלם in 3:11 is that humans have a hard time fully understanding it. This is in keeping with the context of Qohelet's next observation that a person is not able to find out the work that God has done from beginning to end. Surely this observation is related to Qohelet's quest, as described in 1:13: "I gave my heart to seek and to spy out with wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven."[150] Qohelet gives his heart to spy out all that is done, but 3:11 reveals that God has provided the imagination and the impetus required for such an undertaking in Qohelet's heart.

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[147] Vulgate *mundum*. This explains why some commentators translate LXX αιων as "world" (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 164, Gordis, *Koheleth*, 231) and others as "eternity" (Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 97). Gordis translates "the world, love of the world" (*Koheleth*, 231. Cf. Ben Sira 3:18).

[148] Isaksson, *Language*, 183–4. Isaksson argues for time and space, i.e. involving aspects of both αιων and κοσμος.

[149] Ibid., 180.

[150] The passages are even more tightly connected in their concern with the "business" of living. The second part of 1:13 "It is a bad business God gave to the sons of man to be busy with," is certainly in view in 3:10, which says "I have seen the business that God gave to the sons of man to be busy with."

"העלם in their heart" is a torturous secret, because it is put in the most tempting, the closest possible place, but it is at the same time inaccessible. Koosed writes, "God has placed something so infinite or mysterious or troubling into finite flesh that no one can quite decide what it is, and every translation leaves something lacking."[151] And indeed we see that there is something lacking. Regardless of how one translates העלם, there is always a discrepancy between what God does and what humans are able to comprehend. Every suggestion of what עלם means turns out ironic: Humans are stuck in time, but have a consciousness of that which transcends the present[152]; humans have the desire to understand their world, but the universe does not provide the ultimate meaning that humans so urgently desire.[153]

The עלם in Qohelet's לב could be substituted for the uncanny when it is defined as something "that ought to have remained hidden and secret and has become visible."[154] It is telling that עלם is read variously as both knowledge and ignorance, for it is in fact a knowledge of ignorance. This עלם in the לב ought to have remained secret, because it only frustrates humans by showing the incommensurability between what the לב has an inkling of and a person's inability to comprehend it. In essence, the knowledge that is in the לב is just enough for us to know that we cannot know. Unlike the double, the לב is not truly frightening, but this is perhaps as close as it gets.

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[151] Koosed, *(Per)Mutations*, 73.
[152] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 173.
[153] Izak Spangenberg, "Irony in the Book of Qohelet," *JSOT* 72 (1996): 57–69.
[154] Freud, *Uncanny*, 129.

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I conclude that the לֵב in Qohelet is uncanny. It is a familiar word, which branches off into meanings which are opposite from one another. Qohelet's לֵב is physical and it also contrasts with the body—a reflection of the human's position as a conscious mortal; it is fully thinking and feeling—acting not just as a source of information but also leading the self; it is and is not the self and it is also part of the self. The uncanny has to do with this sense of being double, split, at odds with oneself. I introduced Qohelet's use of the לֵב by saying it departs from the rest of the HB, or that he makes it foreign. I still agree that the לֵב in Qohelet is distinctive, but this is not because it is new and unfamiliar; rather, Qohelet develops and reveals a לֵב that is in fact very familiar to every human being. While the לֵב is at heart a dark and mysterious thing, Qohelet's לֵב is special because it reveals so much of itself. Qohelet brings to light so many of the things that we would rather not think about, and maybe are not able to fully comprehend, for example, thinking about one's own death ("The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning"). And yet, the search can never be fulfilled because the very organ with which Qohelet searches can never be entirely known. At which point I end this chapter, since I realize that my search will never be complete either. Qohelet has an uncanny way of reflecting back onto the reader, and it has made me think and feel my way through my motivations for writing, and what I am truly investigating, and what could be hidden inside me, and what is waiting to be revealed.

Enjoy Life, Remember Death:
Death and Pleasure in the Structure of Qohelet

Over a century ago, E. H. Plumptre opened his commentary on Ecclesiastes with a litany of scholarly disputes about the book of Qohelet. All readers of Qohelet see all previous interpreters as wrong, he believed, and from this belief he originated a popular metaphor: "It comes before us as the sphinx of Hebrew literature, with its unsolved riddles of history and life."[155] A few years later, another scholar adopted the language for the title of his article "Ecclesiastes or the Sphinx of Hebrew Literature."[156] Finally, Addison G. Wright referred specifically to the structure of the book of Qohelet as "The Riddle of the Sphinx" in the title of his article.[157]

Since Plumptre wrote, there has been a growing consensus on many of the issues he mentions. For example, as opposed to earlier labels of "optimistic" or "pessimistic," there is a trend toward a more balanced view and a recognition that no single label completely expresses the complexity of Qohelet's views. In Wright's opinion, the most difficult remaining problem of the book of Qohelet is "its seeming lack of order and of progression of thought, as well as its alternation

[155] Edward Hayes Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes; Or, The Preacher* (London: C. J. Clay), 1898.

[156] B. Pick, "Ecclesiastes or the Sphinx of Hebrew Literature," *Open Court* 17 (1903) 361–71.

[157] Addison G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qohelet," *CBQ* 30 (1968): 313–34.

of orthodox and of heterodox statements sometimes to the point of apparent contradiction."[158]

C.-L. Seow summarizes the history of the study of structure in Qohelet in the following way: "Scholarly opinion regarding the structure of the book falls between two poles. There are those who find no order whatsoever, and those who discern a carefully constructed structure."[159] But among those who do discern a structure, the lack of agreement has been taken by many as the final and conclusive evidence that there is indeed no plan in the book.[160] Wright's problem with previous attempts at finding a structure was that they were too subjective. He proposes a third way, based on New[161] Criticism with its emphasis on structural analysis. It puts attention first not on the thought but the form, and looks for repetitions of vocabulary and grammatical structures. What Wright finds is eight units from 1:12–6:9, all of which each contain a major observation from Qohelet's investigation of life and end with an evaluation that it is הבל and a chasing after wind. He also notices an "interlocking arrangement whereby once the series begins, each section picks up an idea mentioned two units earlier."[162] The second half, 6:10–11:6, is concerned with the human inability to understand the work of God, revolving around the phrases "do not know," "no knowledge," and "cannot find out." The opening poem reinforces the first theme of "there is

[158] Ibid.
[159] Seow, *Ecclesiastes* 43.
[160] Wright, "Riddle of the Sphinx," 316.
[161] Now considered "ancient." It should be noted that New Criticism developed in the 1920s–30s and peaked in the 1940s–50s, and Wright's article was published in 1968.
[162] Wright, "Riddle of the Sphinx," 321–22.

no profit/everything is הבל" and the closing poem reinforces Qohelet's advice on enjoyment (the only good Qohelet can find for people to do).[163]

Wright's final conclusion is as follows: "If the above analysis is correct, the book speaks more clearly, but at the same time says much less than we previously thought." I appreciate aspects of Wright's analysis, but he may have been too confident in his choice of title, which implies that the mystery is solved: whereas Plumptre calls Ecclesiastes a Sphinx because of its tendency to confound readers and a penchant for fascinating him with its "zymotic power," Wright intends to discern a clear structure in order to move on to "solving" the other "essential riddles" of message, genre, and unity.[164] The problem is that to study Qohelet does not leave one with the feeling that one can completely understand—instead, deep reading only reveals the complexity of the book.[165] Plumptre's position instead is fitting for a book filled with statements like "I do not know" and "I could not find out." If Qohelet himself acknowledged uncertainty and contradiction and concluded "it was far from me" (7:23–24), his writing will certainly be much farther for the modern critical reader.

The attempt to discern a structure is essentially to summarize. A rigid and imposed structure can contribute to circular reading, in which any further reading merely reinforces the previous shape imposed on it. Naturally, such pronouncements usually say more about the reader than the book itself. Most

[163] Ibid., 333.
[164] Koosed, *(Per)mutations*, 91.
[165] As any reasonably complex artistic work is liable to exhibit several structures.

of the time, descriptions are not wholly wrong so much as they are not very useful or helpful for anyone but that particular reader. Wright tried to overcome this problem with an "objective method," but in this way he ignored the content and the relational element between text and reader.[166] As Fox points out, "a literary or rhetorical structure should not merely 'be there' [like 'a ghost in the attic,' as he calls Wright's proposal]; it must do something. It should guide readers in recognizing and remembering the author's train of thought…"[167] So it follows that it may be helpful to have a more fluid structure, one that is allowed to shift with further reading. Wright is concerned about the subjectivity expressed in a multitude of different structures, but isn't that precisely what an outline of a structure is—the way a person understands the book?

A literary work does not so much *have* a structure, as it *is* a structure: the structure is the way a literary work holds together, and it is, as it were, our way into the text. All of the components are connected. The message, genre, and unity are part of the structure; one cannot "solve" one aspect at a time any more than it would be possible to "solve", for example, a painting. Thus, to speak of literary structure is to speak of connections, or sometimes, of disconnections and disjunctures. Certainly when it comes to the book of Qohelet there is great agreement on the general train of thought, and on the borders of larger literary

[166] One criticism of the New Criticism is that it is based on the assumption that "the reader and the text...are stable and independent forms." (Terence Hawkes, Quoted by Mark Jancovich, in *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993]).

[167] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 149

units[168]; as well, key words are easily recognizable and memorable. This is precisely the problem, however: there are so many key words and so much overlap, contradiction, and repetition, that the quantity of connections and their complexities perhaps explain why some see great disarray and others an intricate arrangement.[169]

Like Wright, I take the lack of agreement as evidence of perceived complex structures among many readers. But unlike Wright, I do not claim to provide a solid structure that will somehow unlock the mystery of the book. Rather, my analysis of two passages in Qohelet will show the complexity of words in relationship leading to uncertain meanings, and the way in which the difficult subject matter breaks down any appeal to an orderly structure. Perhaps scholars are so divided on the structure of Qohelet and have such different answers to the riddle because the text is difficult, shifting, and unstable, and is about a world that is difficult, shifting, and unstable.

To write on structure involves recognising personal taste and awareness and observation. To describe the structure of the book is like creating a blueprint

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[168] *A Time to Tear Down*, 148

[169] An extreme example of the first is G. Bickell (*Prediger*, 1–45), who claims that Qohelet cannot be understood as it stands. Galling thinks the book is a loose collection of 27 units (*Prediger*, 76–77), and Lauha claims the same, but with 36 units (*Koheleth* 4–7). Loader on the other hand, reveals an extremely complex structure in his book *Polar Structures*, to the point that Seow questions why any author would construct a work that is so structurally complex (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 43). The same goes for Wright, whose detailed work eventually leads to manipulation of the text so that it can keep up to his theory. The most successful structures are ones that break the book into topical blocks, taking formal and grammatical features into concern, but not allowing them to fully dictate divisions. Seow (who generally follows F. J. Backhaus "*Denn Zeit und Zufall trifft sie alle*," 1–332) divides the book roughly into half, and further divides each half into a section of Reflection and then one on Ethics (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 46–47).

after walking around inside of a building and experiencing it – different readers will notice different aspects of the text and organise their memories differently. According to Fox, Qohelet's radical innovation was that a person could use his independent intellect to discover new knowledge and interpret the data of individual experience.[170] He explains that previously, wisdom was a static entity: it was gained by absorbing and applying existing knowledge.[171] If you ask Qohelet how he knew, however, he would answer "Because I saw it"[172] or "I experienced it." In the same way, although I have learned about Qohelet from other readers, my knowledge of Qohelet comes from experiencing the book. Can one say "I know there is an author, Qohelet, because I experience him as I read his words?" Certainly one can say, and Fox essentially does, that it is possible to know the book is not a random string of thoughts because it is cogent to a reading individual. In the writing of this thesis, I have also imitated some of the ways I've experienced the structure of the book: I write in sentences and paragraphs, observing and reflecting as I go, and not always knowing where the words will take me.

Song of Songs Rabbah attributes Solomonic authorship to Qohelet, explaining that Solomon wrote Song of Songs in his youth, Proverbs as a mature adult, and Qohelet as an old man (*Song R.* 1:11). Although it is certainly not a product of Solomon, there is truth in the saying in that Qohelet is commonly

[170] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 76.

[171] Ibid., 84. This is an overgeneralization; many texts in the HB pit personal experience against traditional wisdom (Job is an obvious example, and perhaps Lamentations, too).

[172] Ibid., 85.

seen to be written by an old man with one foot already in the grave, i.e. in the twilight of his life. This construction of Solomon is reminiscent of the Riddle of the Sphinx: "What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?" The solution to the impenetrable riddle involves a human in the different stages of life (a baby crawling, a middle-aged person walking, and an elderly person using a cane). In the mythical telling of the Riddle of the Sphinx, someone is always destroyed – either the traveller who cannot answer the question, or eventually the Sphinx when Oedipus answers correctly. Perhaps Wright sees himself as a type of Oedipus, and in a way, he destroys the book beyond recognition as he forces it into his rigid sections. But it is far more likely is that his work is but an incomplete and imperfect response to the Sphinx's haunting questions. As opposed to the Sphinx who knows a unique and completely coherent answer to his riddle, Qohelet instead appears to revel in contradictions, tensions, angst, and unknowability. Qohelet is not asking rhetorical questions to lead the reader to an answer that he understands and accepts – instead, by doing what he does he brings the reader to his state of incomplete understanding and dissatisfaction. Koosed discusses Wright's theory in a chapter entitled "Decomposing Qohelet," which states "death is enacted in the overall structure of the book, a structure that decays and disintegrates like the dying body." Her criticisms of Wright's attempts to "embalm Qohelet in his theory" are so insightful that I quote them in full:

> Verses encroach, while others are lacking where they are wanted. Wright ignores whole phrases and they clamor for attention, repeating themselves

> throughout the text. And finally, an extra hebel intrudes to fracture his numbers theory. It is telling that one of the words that Wright needs to delete in order to make his theory perfectly fit is hebel. This should be a warning to us. The word hebel means nothing; it is a word that signals absence and ephemerality like vapor, like death itself. It is the very principle by which all desire for stable meaning must unravel.[173]

Qohelet is that unstable creature hobbling along on three uneven legs, in the penumbra of the dying day. This chapter follows and builds on Koosed's thesis that death is manifest not only in the content of the book but its very form: "the structure of the book…is in a state of decay." The structure of the book is indeed related to הבל, but not in the objective, comprehensible sense that Wright sought out. It is הבל which makes trying to master the book a lost cause, which complicates meaning, which undoes structure, and which ends in death.

Death and Pleasure in Qohelet 7:1–6

Translation

A name is better than good oil,
And the day of death than the day of birth.
Better to go to a house of mourning than a house of feasting,
Because that is the end of every person and the living should take it to heart.
Better vexation than laughter,
For an anguished face will go well with the heart.
The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,
And the heart of fools in the house of pleasure.
Better to hear the rebuke of the wise,
Than a man listening to the song of fools.
As the sound of the thorns under the pot, so the laughter of the fool.

[173] Koosed, *(Per)Mutations*, 94.

And this too is mere breath.[174]

The beginning of ch. 7 is like a breath of fresh air—after much philosophical musing, largely critiquing wisdom and its advantages, here we have solid advice offered in the form of aphorisms. Thus, 7:1 clearly announces the beginning of a new section. It takes us, we imagine, into the world of Proverbs, where the verses conform to well-established parallel structure, and vv. 1–14 are organized according to a "prose heptad" [175] of so-called טוב-sayings. Verses 1–5 are the most rigidly structured, with four out of the first five verses beginning with טוב, and all consisting of contrasting pairs. This section is tightly structured in the sense that the verses (generally) follow a formula, there is a lot of repetition, and there are a lot of linguistic connections.[176] In contrast to Qohelet's usual prolixity (e.g. עמלו שיעמל, "his toil at which he toils"; הענין אשר נתן אלהים לבני האדם לענות בו, "the business which God gives to the sons of man to be busy with it), the speech suddenly turns concise.

The first line of the first proverb is especially promising; not only does it sound very much like traditional wisdom in terms of content, but it is beautifully

[174] This is the translation chosen by Robert Alter (*The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary*; New York: W.W. Norton, 2010). While the phrase retains a literal meaning, the adjective adds a "devaluation" factor, as well as the proper poetic touch.

[175] See the discussion on pages 20–22 of Gordis, "The Heptad as an Element of Biblical and Rabbinic Style," *JBL* 62 (1943): 17–26. He in fact does not see unity of thought in the section, and instead claims that "The nexus of these verses is to be sought not in the realm of ideas, but in their purely formal similarity" (21).

[176] The proverbs are a key target for those seeking "unoriginal" material in Qohelet. But as Gordis notes, "the spirit and style are characteristic of Koheleth…reflecting both the original and the traditional elements in Koheleth's thought, the whole refracted through his unique personality" ("The Heptad," 21). Another scholar here compares Qohelet to another original thinker using formulaic language: "The rhythm and the dissonance of these words strangely foreshadow the melody of the Beatitudes" (Susan R. Andrews, "Ecclesiastes 7:1–19," *Interpretation* 55 [2001]: 299–301).

crafted in form: טוב שם משמן טוב "A name is better than good oil." The saying is similar in meaning to Prov. 22:1: נבחר שם מעשר רב מכסף ומזהב חן טוב "A name is preferable to great wealth, and good favour to silver and gold." The version of the proverb found in Qohelet, however, is more economical and artistic; of the four words, two are identical (טוב) and the other two differ by only one letter (שׁם and שמן). It holds together both visually and audibly due to its palindromic structure. The saying contains a pleasant repetition of sounds which makes it all the more quotable. After all, a nice sounding proverb is more likely to be considered true as a result of its many repetitions. In the words of the epilogue, this verse is a perfect example of pleasing words which are also correct, words of truth. Both pleasure and uprightness are encompassed by the structurally key word טוב.

What is Good?

Pleasure is not only found in the construction and repetition of the verse, it is referred to directly; Good oil represents wealth and pleasure. It was among the luxuries offered at banquets, and thus is echoed by "house of feasting" (v. 2) and "house of pleasure" (v. 4). The laughter and the glad heart of v. 3, as well as the singing in v. 5, make a strong statement that pleasure is in view here. More to the point, according to Wright's structure (and according to others who make a chiasm out of the body of the book, and particularly those who wish to make the book optimistic), 7:1 is the beginning of the second half of the book, the focus of which is enjoyment.

In a book which is so often accused of being negative, there is a lot of positive vocabulary, and much of it has to do with pleasure. The most common of these positive words is טוב "good" (59 occurrences), and it is particularly concentrated in the sayings of 7:1–17 (nine times in total). In his study of טוב in Qohelet, Fox showed it to have the sense of what we would normally think of as good—beneficial, efficacious, virtuous, fortunate, etc.[177] He writes that the word טוב also has the sense of moral goodness in other places in the HB, and sometimes in Qohelet as well (7:20; 9:2).[178] In Qohelet's special vocabulary, to "see good" is an idiom for experiencing pleasure (2:1; 3:13; 5:17; etc.). According to Fox, this serves a rhetorical function in Qohelet: "It makes the commendation of pleasure seem self-evident: experiencing טוב is טוב." [179] For example, in 5:17 (5:18 Eng.) Qohelet claims to have found something good (טוב) and beautiful: to eat and drink and see good (ולראות טובה) in all his toil. The connection is particularly explicit in 3:12–13, where Qohelet says there is no good (טוב) for humans, except to enjoy (שמח) and do good (עשה טוב).

In the last verse of Ch. 6, Qohelet asks, "Who knows what is good for a person to do during life, during the number of days of his futile life?"(v. 12), and so the following verses are often read as an answer to the question, since they explicitly name some things that are good. The reader at this point could rightfully expect Qohelet to speak more about pleasure, and he does, but not in

[177] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 116.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Fox, *Contradictions*, 74.

the way one expects. In the beginning of ch. 7, the relationship between (טוב) and pleasure is forced apart. The טוב-sayings consist of contrasting pairs, and surprisingly it is the contrast to what is טוב—that is, the un-טוב component of the verse—which has to do with pleasure: oil, the house of feasting, laughter, the house of pleasure, and singing. Good, as Qohelet earlier defines it, is not good, or at least not good in the same way as the less pleasurable options. This can be seen on a small scale where oil obviously represents pleasure and is directly modified by טֹוב, and yet it is not good in comparison with a name (for which good is merely implied).[180] Even though the advice in 7:1–4 may at first seem straightforward, it is complicated by the strangeness and mysteriousness of a very common word, טוב, used in a traditional literary form.

On the other side of the passage at hand, there is a pious sounding verse in which טוב seems to be used in a most traditional moral sense; indeed, it is an *exempli gratia* of Fox's "moral" goods: "For there is no one righteous on the earth who does good and does not sin" (7:20). The moral sense of doing good seems especially evident in contrast to the verb חטא (lit. "miss," or the more theologically charged "sin").[181] For this verse, though, the JPS notes refer the reader back to 6:12. This is an interesting connection to make, because ch. 6 is focused on the satisfaction of enjoyment, and usually there is an assumption in

[180] The LXX explicates "name" in the parallel verse in Prov 22:1 by adding "good."

[181] Likewise, the meaning of the verb חָטָא "sin" is also shifting. In 7:20, in opposition to צַדִּיק, it seems to keep its traditional meaning of any kind of sinfulness. Similarly, in 5:5 it seems to refer primarily to the failure to keep vows. There is a strong exegetical trend to recognize "the sinner" as one who has missed the mark, is unfortunate, in contrast to the one who pleases God. (See Schoor's discussion of חטא in *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*, 225–8).

interpretation that the good which has to do with pleasure is not associated with the good related to moral concern; Qohelet criticizes "the act-consequence process" of traditional wisdom, that is, the connection between a person's ability or opportunity to enjoy and his or her "good" actions.[182]

In a discussion of Qohelet's religious vocabulary, Robert Gordis specifically names "good (before God)" in a list of conventional religious and ethical terms which Qohelet could not dispense with, as they were part of his world-view.[183] He goes on to say, though, that Qohelet flips traditional morality on its head; "Traditional morality declared that he who fulfilled God's will would be happy. Koheleth declares that he who is happy is fulfilling God's will." [184] To further support the view that seeking pleasure is good in a moral sense, Gordis compares Qohelet in 12:1 to a prophet who calls upon the people to remember God and his purpose for people—to seek pleasure. Gordis also notes some parallels in Proverbs, Ben Sira, and the Talmud, which attributes the saying "Seize hold and eat, seize hold and drink, for this world whence we depart is like a wedding feast" (B. Erub. 54a) to the Babylonian sage Samuel.[185] Thus, according to Gordis, טוֹב carries a kind of moral implication in Qohelet, even (or especially) when it points to seeking pleasure.

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[182] Schoors, *Pleasing Words*, 227.

[183] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 91.

[184] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 91. Gordis cites parts of 5:18–30 (Eng.) "Indeed every man to whom God has given wealth and possessions and granted the power to enjoy them, taking his share and rejoicing in his labor, that is the gift of God…for it is God who provides the joy in a man's heart." Gordis then applies the same idea to the sinner, "A sinner is he who fails to work for the advancement of his own happiness," but Qohelet himself never advances this idea of sin.

[185] Ibid., 92.

Some of Gordis's examples (particularly the image of Qohelet as a prophet calling the people to seek pleasure) are strange, but he raises the important point that Qohelet's moral system and language should not be taken for granted. If טוב does point to divine favour, who knows if this favour has ethical connotations, or if is completely random? The text of Qohelet does not support the idea that God favours certain "good" people, whether "to do good" means to follow commands or to seek pleasure. It seems rather that "one who is good before God" is a description after the fact of someone who is able to enjoy life, but we never know why some people are able to enjoy and others not. In Qohelet's estimation of God, one cannot be sure of what the deity desires from humans.[186]

The world may be a wedding feast for the Babylonian Samuel, but Qohelet prefers it to be a funeral. According to Seow the most likely explanation for the illogical statement of 7:2 is that "it is better to face the reality of death than to be caught up in the euphoria of a wedding celebration."[187] The paradoxical solution being offered for vv. 1–5 in general is that a rebuke or a funeral, or the day of one's death are good because they are reminders of death and the end, which in turn can help a person enjoy more fully. Thus, it is

[186] According to Sneed, this kind of humility makes Qohelet's theology more religious and pious than that of Proverbs. He writes: "Human hubris becomes the primary sin in Qohelet, not the violation of a command" (*Politics*, 264).

[187] According to Seow, the house of mourning of which Qohelet speaks was not void of feasting, and in fact was often more debaucherous than a wedding. Seow imagines a situation where someone makes a joke that the party was better at a wake than at a wedding; i.e. funerals are good because they can be extremely pleasurable (*Ecclesiastes*, 245).

concluded, Qohelet's intentions are not anti-pleasure, but pro-contemplative.[188] Perhaps this explanation makes logical sense, but it is deserving of suspicion. For example, the idea that Qohelet remains consistent in not condemning pleasure is too optimistic, for at least one of the voices of Qohelet is very anti-pleasure (as is true of the wisdom tradition generally); even in the immediate context, Qohelet despises the song and laughter of fools.

Furthermore, Qohelet gives a reason for why a wise person should think about death, and it is not because it makes him happier. Within the context, Qohelet explains that it is better to be in the house of mourning "for that is the end of every person." This is a comment important enough to break with the aphoristic rhythm, and seems to lead out from the rest of the book; these proverbs, too, are part of Qohelet's quest to understand everything that happens under the sun. If we want to understand life, the first thing to work out is death, or as Cicero put it, "to philosophize is nothing else than to prepare for death."[189]

Rather than accepting the paradoxical solution, it may be better to treat 7:1–6 as an exercise in trying to come up with something solid, and failing. טוב is supposed to be the foundation on which these verses are laid, but neither the reader, nor Qohelet himself, knows what the word means. After giving a couple of interpretive options for 7:2, Seow's final comment is that, in either case, not

[188] Fox's interpretation is common: "the aim of 7:1–4 is not to condemn feasting but to advocate an open-eyed awareness of morality" (*A Time to Tear Down*, 250).

[189] A saying made even more familiar by Montaigne's essay, "To Philosophize is to Learn to Die."

only is the meaning of טוב uncertain, but one is not even sure that the meaning can ever be known. It is possible that the uncertainty is precisely the point of the proverb; Seow points out the possibility of knowing what is good in a given situation, but clichés like the טוב-sayings are just so many words that dissipate with the vicissitudes of life. "Even the cleverly constructed and memorable sayings that humans are wont to repeat are, like human beings themselves, all 'vanity.' They usually come up empty. They are unreliable."[190] What is really good is unknown, for what appears to be good at the moment can be הבל the next.

Connecting שם, שמן, *and* שמש

The structure of this passage grows out of word association, beginning with the clever שם/שמן wordplay and ending with the pairing of סירים and סִיר. Fox points out that the double meanings of words allow 7:1a to have a double sense: שם means "name," but it can also stand for the memory of a person. שמן can be the oil which signifies pleasure, or that used for preparing dead bodies; Fox provides two translations reflecting the dual meanings of the words: "A good reputation is better than a pleasant rub-down with fine oils; and a remembrance is better than a proper burial."[191] שמן is a perfect word to connote both death and pleasure. Qohelet recommends in 9:8, "At all times let your clothes be white, and let not oil be lacking from your head." This counsel comes in the

[190] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 246.
[191] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 251.

context of taking pleasure in eating and drinking and going through life with a woman whom one loves; it is clearly meant for enjoyment, but someone clothed in white and anointed with oil is also a body prepared for a funeral! Furthermore, these things are to be done "all the days of your הבל" and the enjoyment is advised in light of the fact that one will not be able to do these things in Sheol, every person's ultimate destination. The last time Qohelet uses the word שמן, it again occurs in a proverb and is parallel to wisdom and honor: "A fly that dies causes the perfumer's oil to stink; a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor" (10:1).[192] Like the proverb in 7:1, this saying is concerned with a person's reputation; in particular, both proverbs show the fragility of wisdom, honor, and reputation. In the proverb of 7:1, however, death is a friend which protects the dead person's name from becoming tarnished, while in 10:1, the bad smell of the dead fly is "weightier" (יקר) and more precious than the good scent of the oil. The imagery is perfect: oil is used to represent honor (כבוד), the literal meaning of which is "heavy," and oil itself is a heavy substance. Wisdom and honor should be able to prevail over a flimsy fly, but ironically, even a slight trifling foolishness is what weighs most heavily in the estimation of a person.

In 7:1, שמן and שם are brought together because of their similarity in look and sound. שם occurs only one other time in the book, and there it is linked to

[192] Though the first part of this verse is difficult, the meaning seems to be making the same point as the preceding and following verses: a little bit of a bad thing can outweigh much good. For a good discussion of the textual issues, see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 311–12. There is good evidence to suggest there was a misdivision of consonants. The singular זבוב 1) is attested in Targ, 2) provides an appropriate parallel for the singular סכלות "foolishness," and 3) is in agreement with the m. s. verb.

another similar word, שמש "sun": In 6:4–5, the stillborn's שם is covered in darkness, and it never sees the שמש. The sun is a key character in the book of Qohelet. The word itself makes many appearances, and is (omni)present in the frequent phrase "under the sun." The sun has a personality; it is introduced as one who is constantly (and needlessly) hurrying to return to its spot. In some ways it is like Qohelet's deity: distant, judgmental, observing the world but not interfering in it.

The sun in general points to the הבל of human existence, because like humanity it toils (lit. "pants") but does not accomplish anything. The portrayal of the sun in 1:5 betrays a view of the flat earth in which the sun has to hurry back to its starting place for the start of a new day.[193] Humans are also part of this monotonous cycle, both in the sense of generations that come and go (1:4), and in the individual being who returns to dust and whose lifebreath returns to God (3:20; 12:7). An essential part of the cycle then is the death of individuals, and the mini-death of the sun every day as the sky turns dark. In 11:7, however, the light of the sun points to life, and a positive view of life at that. It is described as "sweet" and once again טוב is employed in a way that connotes pleasure "it is good for the eyes to see the sun." The reason for this enjoyment, however, is the realization that though the sun continues in endless repetition, the individual life

[193] It has been suggested that the wind in v. 6 is not a separate entity but is a continuation of a description of the sun going around on its circuits. This view is defended by Sara Japhet, "'Goes to the South and Turns to the North' (Ecclesiastes 1:6): The Sources and History of the Exegetical Traditions," *JSQ* 1 (1993/4): 289–322.

is limited. Immediately following the friendly description of the sun, the days of darkness start to encroach (11:8), and in 12:2, the sun grows dark.

As demonstrated by the parallelism in Prov. 22:1, שם by itself implies a good reputation. In traditional teaching, a good reputation was more important than material possessions because it would outlast them. According to Isa 56:5, it could also be a better way of achieving immortality than having progeny; Yahweh promises the eunuchs who keep their covenant with Yahweh "a name better than sons and daughters…an everlasting name." One's name and children are closely linked in that these are the two main ways that one could in some sense continue on after death. In addition, they are almost the same thing, because the descendants carry on the name. So according to the traditional sounding proverb, if a name can be remembered forever, then a good name is better even than life itself, or as Seow writes, "Here is one way, it seems, to have an advantage over others, even over death!"[194]

Thus the parallel to שם in the second line is the day of death, which is better than the day of birth. The name and the day of death are related in that it takes a lifetime to build up one's reputation. The name is also connected to the day of birth, because the שם seems to be something one is born with (even though no one knows the name; maybe it is pre-existent). Even the stillborn of ch. 6 has a name, though it is covered in darkness. The name is both perpetual and evanescent.

[194] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 243.

All three words are symbols. All three change in meaning, being used to represent one thing and then used to represent the opposite. All three are sometimes strongly connected to life and at other time strongly connected to death. These three similar sounding and looking words are a prime example of the connections between words and how Qohelet plays with them. Their meanings and uses cannot be distilled down or sorted out into neat lines. Rather, they have a surplus of meaning which grows as they continue to be used and connected to other circumstances.

A Time to Build Up and a Time to Tear Down

The two parts of the 7:1 fit together most obviously by the fact that when a person dies he is no longer able to make a bad name for himself. While alive, there is always the chance that he will tarnish his reputation. Seow claims this saying is without parallel in ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature.[195] But a similar idea is certainly there in the saying, "Call no man happy until he is dead."[196]

Seow is correct in adding "it seems" to the idea that a good reputation leads to a kind of immortality, because there are many reasons to suppose Qohelet is quoting ironically. First of all, the idea that there could be some ultimate advantage is not only absent from the rest of the book, the opposite is ubiquitously argued. Qohelet doesn't believe in any kind of advantage, and

[195] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 244

[196] The best known version of this saying is attributed to the Greek sage Solon. There are also versions found in Aeschylus' play "Agamemnon" (I. 928) and Sophocles' "Oedipus the King." But the closest cultural analogue is in Sir 11:28a.

especially not after death. Instead, Qohelet emphasizes that no one is remembered; for him, a person's reputation is of little importance. Rather than using שם, usually Qohelet speaks of the memory of a person to refer to the person's reputation.[197] Everyone is forgotten after death. It does not help to be wise, for the wise man like the fool is not remembered (2:16; this verse has a similar construction to the end of 1:11, where there is no memory of later ones just as there is none of those who came before them.) In 4:16, even if someone is a successful ruler, "There is no end to the ones before him" and hence have never heard of him, and "The ones who come after will not praise him." Additionally, 9:5 reiterates once more that the memory of the dead is forgotten. Thus, the idea that a name is good is undermined because elsewhere in the book a person is always forgotten. "No memory" is a theme throughout the book. Death destroys memory, and it gives impermanence to everything that might make a human life meaningful.

The very strange declaration that "the day of death is better than the day of birth" is an extreme example of the preference of a good name over the enjoyment of life, and it showcases Qohelet's struggle with what is "good" and what he ought to be pursuing. The second line is probably Qohelet's rejoinder to the popular adage which glorifies a good reputation. It is the traditional saying being carried out to its logical conclusion…perhaps in order to show its absurdity.

[197] 1:11, 2:16, 4:16, 8:10, 9:5

Verses 2–6 continue the trend of words building on one another and bringing in new concepts, while producing aphorisms that are counterintuitive. The most evident structure is that the verses are interconnected in an alternating fashion: v. 5 builds on v. 3, and v. 4 clearly builds on v. 2. Both vv. 2 and 4 privilege the house of mourning over the house of pleasure, and both mention the heart. In v. 2 it is merely an expression, "the living will take it to heart," but in v. 4, the heart, as representative of the core of a person, demonstrates the symbolic meaning of the houses of mourning and of pleasure—they are a reflection of the person's thoughts and desires.

But there are other ways that the different proverbs are linked together and help to define each other. Proverbs do not necessarily need to be connected to one another, but these move so gently from the day of death to mourning and sorrow to wisdom. There is a strong connection in Qohelet between wisdom and sadness (e.g. 1:18), and therefore the "wry" face or faces in v. 3 naturally introduces the wise person in v. 4.[198] As Fox points out, all merriment is bad, not just the fool's,[199] but the fools serve as an antonym for the wise man in v. 4. Verse 3 simply says that sorrow is better than laughter, with no mention of the fool, but foolish people are so connected to merriment, singing, and laughter in this passage, that the fool is retrospectively alluded to in the laughter.

[198] The face may be sad due to the grief in the house of mourning. Fox explains the paradox of "A bad face can make a good heart" by claiming that the face and the heart do not belong to the same person. One showing a bad face—i.e. giving a rebuke—and most likely a wise person giving a rebuke, can make someone else's heart good.

[199] Fox, *Contradictions*, 228.

The mention of the fool's song allows for v. 6. This saying is silly, and perhaps appears superfluous, but is very telling of Qohelet's nature. Qohelet tops the שם/שמן wordplay by using homographs to describe the fool's laughter: like the sound of סירים ("thorns") under a סיר ("pot"). The fool's laughter is excessively repetitive. Seow points out that in the repetition of sibilants one can hear the hissing of the fire, and the crackling of wood in the abundant palatals. The components of the simile alliterate with כסיל "fool," and are also very close sounding to שיר, the "song" of the fool from the previous verse. Why does Qohelet make a game of the fool's song and the sound of laughter while condemning them?

The referent for v. 6b, "And this too is הבל," is uncertain. The most obvious is the fool's laughter. Fox doesn't like this solution because it is redundant (although redundancy should hardly be surprising by this point). Another possibility is that the entire passage is being called הבל. Verse 6b may be a revelation of self-doubt as some of the proverbs go directly against advice strongly argued in many other parts of the book, and can be read ironically. The טוב-sayings can be interpreted as illustrative of the "many words" that increase הבל, in 6:11 (and 5:6).[200] Qohelet can still offer advice seriously; it's just that part of his advice is that even the wisest advice has limits and can't be taken completely at face value. It is also a sign of closure; the section needs to restart

[200] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 242.

because Qohelet started with the serious topic of death and has somehow wound up singing a fool's song.

For this reason, I wonder if וגם־זה הבל was an outburst on the part of Qohelet, and refers not to the proverbs themselves, but his effort in producing such proverbs.[201] It is typical of Qohelet to build up to something and then declare it to be הבל. After much toil, he calls toil הבל. After experiencing much pleasure he calls pleasure הבל. After composing proverbs, he calls composing proverbs הבל too! Does this remark show disappointment and disgust for having such fun with the words? Qohelet is generating his own hollow song and (foolish) laughter. He is laughing—as well as expressing frustration—at the advice he has given, for he knows that he could have said everything exactly the opposite too.

Alternatively, there is evidence to suggest that the original antecedent of "this" in v. 6b is missing. 4QQoh[a] has space for fifteen to twenty letters after 7:6, and the arrangement of the lines indicates that something once stood before 7:7. Even before this lacuna in the manuscript was discovered, Delitzsch conjectured that a couplet was missing before 7:7 on the basis that the text didn't make sense.[202] Fox agrees that there may have been a sentence that was later deleted, but he also allows that the lacuna is perhaps only a result of a "meaningless error."[203] On one extreme Delitzsch, unaware of the extra space, suggests adding a proverb that he thinks would make the text make sense. On

[201] The very typical of Qohelet.

[202] Fox reports that Delitzsch speculated it was a saying like Prov 16:8 "Better a little in righteousness than great produce without justice"; although it would fit in terms of length, Fox doesn't think that particular saying is quite apropos (Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 254).

[203] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 254.

the other end, Fox is aware of the lacuna, and chooses a common gloss for הבל to describe its presence. Delitzsch wants to add extra meaning where there is no evidence for it except a difficult text, while Fox allows for meaninglessness and a text that doesn't make sense. "This" is הבל: a meaningless error, a text that refuses to convey any meaningful message, or the search for meaning where perhaps there is none to be found, whether it is lost or was never there to begin with.

The structure of Qohelet's writing beginning at 7:1 takes a dramatic turn. Especially in the first verse, the words follow a close adherence to a traditional parallel form. Words are joined together artfully, the verses alternate building upon each other and interlocking, and the topoi of pleasure, death, sadness, wisdom are brought up one by one, but like everything else it ends in הבל. Unlike the smooth order of events in 3:3, (and Fox's title), tearing down then building up, here the proverbs build on one another, until they collapse in on themselves, almost as though what has been said before has been forgotten. Qohelet starts to give wisdom in a traditional form, but in the end the structure cannot hold together. He has a myriad of connections, criss-crossed all over the place. The dissociative מן cannot clearly differentiate the שם and the שמן. Qohelet has constructed a most beautiful proverb. But even the firmest, most symmetrical structure cannot hold under the weight of the rest of what is discussed in the book. The proverb is so tight, it creates tension. Words are being stretched to include many different meanings, including contradictory meanings. Like the

traditional wisdom Qohelet criticizes, there will always be limits, holes, and weaknesses in what one writes.

Death and Pleasure in Qohelet 11:7–12:1

Translation

Sweet is the light, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun.
If a person should live many years, let him rejoice in them all,
and let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many.
All that comes is mere breath.
Rejoice, young man, during your youth,
and let your heart gladden you in the days of your prime.
And walk in the ways of your heart and the sights of your eyes,
and know that according to all these things God will bring you to judgment.
Remove sorrow from your heart put away evil from your flesh,
for youth and black hair are mere breath.

Crenshaw writes that the main message of Qohelet is easily summed up: "Since death's shadow threatens all supposed profit, one had best seize what enjoyment opportunity afford."[204] 1:2 and 12:8 are referred to as summary statements, but the final section before the epilogue (11:7–12:7) is actually a much better summation of this "main message." Crenshaw hits the nail on the head, however, with the following innocent observation, "Opinions differ as to whether emphasis belongs on the circumstantial clause or on the conclusion."[205] The text constantly vacillates between the despair of הבל and the joy of the pleasures of life, and the majority of scholars and readers of Qohelet feel compelled to choose one option as the more emphatic.

[204] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, 35.
[205] Ibid.

The book begins and ends with the very negative assessment הכל הבל and this theme is obviously stronger in terms of space given to it. Thus, the burden of proof lies on those who see a more positive overall message. Anderson has provided a critique of some of the ways scholars have tried to explain the place of the so-called joy statements. He writes that the joy statements appear to be the most blatant example of editorial influence in the book, due to the internal contradictions with the "overall dour mood" of the book.[206] Others view the joy statements as *carpe diem* statements, the only thing one can do in light of the rest of Qohelet's negative discourse.[207] In other words, the negative message still prevails, but the joy statements are the next best thing.[208] As Crenshaw states, "not 'This is good,' but 'There is nothing better.'"[209] Finally, Whybray with his famous article "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," heads up the "essential message of joy" camp.[210] This appears to be a counter reading which diverges from the historically skeptical or pessimistic reading.[211] In sum, the scholarly discussion shows that almost every reader at some point asks themselves whether the book is *primarily* about death, or pleasure in life. It is no coincidence that, very broadly speaking, among those who do discern a strict structure, their models tend to

[206] William H. U. Anderson, "A Critique of the Standard Interpretations of the Joy Statements in Qohelet," JNSL 27 (2001): 57–75 (57).

[207] E.g. Barton, Crenshaw, Eaton, Ginsburg, Gordis. See Anderson, "A Critique," 59, and references therein.

[208] Anderson questions why, when the interpreters are so prone to hold to the skepticism throughout the book of Qohelet, they are not skeptical of the joy statements themselves, i.e. "why does scepticism in the book lead to a carpe diem interpretation of the joy statements instead of an ironic or sceptical interpretation of them?" ("A Critique," 71).

[209] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 89.

[210] Roger N. Whybray "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *JSOT* 23 (1982): 87–98.

[211] Anderson, "A Critique," 72.

focus either on הבל, death, and related concepts, or on the commendations of enjoyment.

At first glance, Qoh 11:7–10, with its many injunctions to enjoy one's youth, seems to promote *carpe diem*. Interspersed among the enjoyment statements, however, are clear reminders of death and judgment. In the passage at hand, the enjoy life/remember death debate reaches an intensity as the text quivers between the two extremes. It swings wildly until the two imperatives are finally and mysteriously brought together in the command, וזכר את־בוראיך "Remember your creator" (12:1). Against the long history of arguing about which theme is more prevalent in the book, this section focuses on 11:7–12:1 to show the difficulty of separating the two themes, and I propose that there is a paradoxical relationship between death and the enjoyment of life. Pleasure is הבל, but (the knowledge of and path towards) death is also pleasurable.

The Death Drive

A Freudian reading of the passage places the enjoyment theme in the realm of the pleasure principle or Eros, and the reminder of death in relation to the death drive. The theory of the death drive, as proposed in Freud's 1920 book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is tenuous to be sure, as Freud himself freely confesses when he proposes the idea in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.[212] In the end, Freud was never able to produce a consistent coherent theory of the death

[212] Perhaps this is one reason that Ernest Jones wrote in his biography of Freud that *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is "noteworthy in being the only one of Freud's which has received little acceptance on the part of his followers" (1957, Vol.3, p. 287).

drive. For the majority of his career, Freud assumed that "In the theory of psycho-analysis we have no hesitation in assuming that the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle."[213] (One might say then, up to this point, Freud's writings were more or less in agreement with the first few lines of the passage at hand: "Sweet is the light, and good for the eyes to see the sun. If a man lives many years, let him rejoice in them all.") Freud's theory was interrupted late in his career as he observed actions which seemed to violate this principle; foremost among these confusing behaviours was the repetition or re-enactment of unpleasant events. The most famous example is that of his grandson, who would play a game in which he would stage the disappearance of his toy and cry out at its absence "o-o-o" which Freud interpreted as the word "fort" ("gone"). Then the child would pull the toy out again and hail its reappearance with a joyful "da" ("there"). Freud theorized that the game in which the child was able to control the reappearance of the toy was a way of mastering the sensation of loss which he felt in his mother's absence. The so-called "repetition compulsion" was also seen in war veterans who would repeat traumatic experiences. One explanation for such strange desires was that re-enactment would help the "victim" to regain a sense of control by experiencing the same situation without the original fright. Freud therefore concludes, "there really does exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat which

[213] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Rev. ed; trans. James Strachey. New York: Liveright, 1961 [1950]), 7.

overrides the pleasure principle."[214] Thus he introduces the concept of the death drive.

The conclusion that the compulsion to repeat overrides the pleasure principle allowed Freud to move to the argument that drives have a *conservative repetitive nature*.[215] The development of living beings is not direct; it leads along "circuitous paths." Along these paths, it is impossible to distinguish between eros and the death drive, and the death drive never exists in its pure form, only within eros. Freud always presents the two drives as opposites, which sometimes serve each other's aims. But ultimately, the death drive seems to be more powerful and fundamental.[216] The conservative nature of the drives means that the organism wishes (unconsciously) to return to an inanimate state. Thus "development" is actually leading along "circuitous paths to death." Freud is compelled to proclaim that "the aim of all life is death."[217] (And perhaps we may add that this is also the aim of all writing.)

Choosing "Displeasure"

There is much to say about the book of Qohelet in relation to the death-drive concept. Freud's shift in thought which took him beyond the pleasure principle was caused by the observation that patients seemed to choose displeasure. The displeasure caused by the text of Qohelet is first of all due to its subject matter. Perhaps the most unintuitive comments are in ch. 7, as discussed

[214] Freud, *Pleasure Principle*, 16.
[215] Havi Carel, *Life and Death in Freud and Heidegger* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 17.
[216] Cavel, *Life and Death*, 40.
[217] Freud, *Pleasure Principle*, 32.

above. Here Qohelet claims that "it is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting" (7:2) and similarly, that "sorrow is better than laughter" (7:3). Qohelet dismisses as הבל every way someone might try to seek pleasure or meaning in life, whether through wealth, work, wisdom, acquiring goods, or ensuring for the future. Like Freud, Qohelet challenges the ways and things that people consciously believe could truly and unfailingly make them happy or make their lives meaningful. Second, the unpleasant subject matter is reflected in the difficult grammar and syntax. Frequently it seems that Qohelet expresses himself in a deliberately incomprehensible manner. These two are brought together in a third displeasure for the Qohelet scholar, which is the frustration in reading and writing on a book that explicitly states that wisdom will not be found, and such activities are without end (both in the sense of never-ending and having no purpose) and painful to boot, as described in my first chapter. Clearly, according to the advice within the book itself, Qohelet had some better ideas of how to have a pleasurable life than by embarking on the search for wisdom (or by wisdom), and then by reliving the stress through recording it in words. The pleasure principle is not sufficient to explain the existence of a book such as this.

Like the grandson who hides his own toy, or the soldiers who daydream about war, people in general and Qohelet scholars in particular, continuously place themselves in undesirable situations, they "go to the house of mourning,"

acts which an outside observer would interpret as a drive toward displeasure, and Qohelet approves.

Repetition as a Clue to the Book's Structure

Among those scholars who do discern a structure, "most think repetition offers a decisive clue to the book's plan."[218] The repetition may be in the form of a palindrome,[219] or of splitting the book into two equal parts where the second is a re-view of the first.[220] There are also theories based on repetition of key words or phrases. Since the 1960s at least, scholars have taken a more formal approach and have begun to base analysis on recurring words and motifs.[221]

While this is not an unusual literary approach, it brings distinctive results when practised on the book of Qohelet due to the book's extremely repetitive nature. Qohelet's writing is repetitive, superfluous, frustrating; as described in the first chapter of this thesis, Qohelet uses the same words and phrases over and over, turns and returns to the same topics, asks the same questions and gives the same advice. Qohelet's final words (before the epilogue) are essentially the same as those with which he began and then repeated throughout the book. Like the child compensating for being unable to control his mother's departure, it is possible Qohelet is trying to gain control over the הבל of life through

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[218] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 38.

[219] Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 8.

[220] See H. L. Ginsberg, "The Structure and Contents in the Book of Qoheleth" in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (ed. M. Noth and D Winton Thomas; VTSup 3; Leiden: Brill, 1955), 138–48. Crenshaw notes that Daniel Lys also essentially follows this structure (*Ecclesiastes*, 39).

[221] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 147

repetition. It could also be that despite his attempts, Qohelet is never able to master the sensation of loss, and the repetition signifies a failure to satisfy the terms of his quest to understand the world.

Life and Death are Mutually Defining

In her article "Death in Qohelet," Alison Lo describes a structural pattern which shows Qohelet's contemplations of death intertwined with seven exhortations to enjoy, and in each cycle the reflection on death comes directly before the joy statement.[222] In her mind, this organization is not accidental: "Obviously the brevity of life is the key factor prompting him to utter such exhortations." The more Qohelet reflects on death, the stronger his exhortations towards joy become.[223] For example, Lo demonstrates that in the sixth passage (9:7–10), the urgency begins to be expressed in the use of imperatives (go, eat, drink, enjoy, do) and this continues in the seventh and final joy passage (11:9–12:1) with rejoice, let your heart gladden, go, and remember. Lo also points out that just before the heightened call to enjoyment in ch. 9, there is a turning point where Qohelet most clearly expresses a positive view of life "Whoever is among the living has hope." She takes this as evidence that "the death theme and joy

[222] Alison Lo, "Death in Qohelet," *JANES* 31(2008): 85–98 (88).

[223] Whybray, too, notices the "steadily increasing emphasis" on enjoyment ("Preacher of Joy," 87), and Perdue has produced a sevenfold literary structure organized around carpe diem (*Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* [Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009], 237), but neither balance them with the statements about death as Lo does.

statements develop in the same crescendo. Life and death are mutually defining."[224]

Lo's statement that death and life are mutually defining is also a way of understanding the relationship between Eros and the death drive. While Freud wanted to support a view in which the drives were equal but opposed forces, the opposition is refuted time and again with the overlap and collapse of one drive into another.[225] On the one hand the death drive is mute and traceless and never appears in its pure form—it can exist only within Eros.[226] On the other hand, Eros is also incomplete without death, and ultimately the death drive *seems* more powerful and fundamental. It appears that Lo, too, wants to keep an equal relationship between life and death by intertwining them in a structural pattern and claiming mutual definition. She balances two equal but opposed conclusions: 1) Death is better than life and 2) Life is better than death. She is betrayed, however, by the fact that in the end she privileges (or is compelled to privilege) death: her conclusions come under the heading of "Qohelet's view of death," rather than "Qohelet's view of life," and the title of the article is "Death in Qohelet" not "Life in Qohelet" or "Enjoyment in Qohelet." Furthermore, in regard to mutual definition, she can observe how death defines life, but it is impossible to argue the reverse.

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[224] Lo, "Death in Qohelet," 96.

[225] Cavel, *Life and Death*, 41. The drives often serve one another's purposes; for example, in the case of externalised aggression which protects the organism.

[226] Ibid., 40.

Proposed Structures

The general structure given in most commentaries is that 11:7 begins a passage on youth and enjoyment which is followed by a poem on old age and death. Dulin delimits the sections as follows: youth (11:7–10), old age (12:1–5) and death (12:6–8).[227] Fox's divisions are more nuanced:

A. 11:7–10. The light: carpe diem
    a. Enjoy all of life (7–8)
    b. Especially the time of youth (9–10)
B. 12:1–7. The darkness: *memento mori*
    a. And remember your creator when young (1a)
    b. Before the miseries of old age (1b)
    c. Before your death and funeral (2–5)
    d. Before your burial (6–7)
C. 12:8. All is absurd

He communicates that the theme is carpe diem, but that far greater attention is given to the negative –"the somber limits on this opportunity—than to the positive enjoyment itself." In the final verses of ch. 11, every positive commendation to enjoyment has some kind of warning or negative statement attached to it. Furthermore, it can be observed that the positive statements are about the present, while the negative statements look to the future:

11:7–11:8a Enjoy all the days of one's life
11:8b (because) All that comes is nothingness
11:9a Enjoy your youth
11:9b (because) God will judge you
11:10a Don't suffer in your youth
11:10b (because) Youth is fleeting

[227] Rachel Zohar Dulin, "How Sweet is the Light": Qoheleth's Age-Centered Teachings," *Interpretation* 55 (2001): 260–270 (264–5).

The purpose of the alternating structure, following the most common lines of interpretation, is that the passage promotes both positive and negative arguments for life.[228] On the positive side, Qohelet reminds the reader of the desirability of living in order to motivate him to enjoy himself during the time allotted him. The negative argument is that people should think of death—specifically its inevitability and immanence—so as to appreciate life more. (Hence my purpose in pointing out that all of the positive statements focus on the present.) Of course, the idea that people should think about death is in opposition to 5:19 where Qohelet praises pleasure for diverting the mind from the brevity of life.[229] The two ideas create a paradoxical message (which I emphasized by making the negative statements causal): "we are reminded of death in order to persuade us to lay hold of the pleasures that will divert our thoughts from death. People often contemplate most what they most wish to avoid."[230]

All of these structures, especially my own, assume that passages or phrases or words can easily be distributed into the categories of positive/-negative, death/life, pleasure/displeasure, הבל /not הבל, youth/old age, etc. Yet at some point all of these "opposites" collide into one another, and the timing of past/present/future, or the different stages of life (and death) are difficult to untangle. It is not just that positive and negative sentences somehow even each

[228] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 317.
[229] Ibid.
[230] Ibid.

other out, as my summary seems to suggest, rather, even as pleasure is mentioned, it recalls death, and vice versa. As I previously concluded in regard to the טוֹב-sayings in ch. 7, Qohelet has a hard time keeping track of his words, and they take on a surplus of meaning. The following paragraphs demonstrate the ambiguity in Qohelet's symbolic language, and the thin line between stages of life and death.

The Ambiguity of the Sun

It is fitting to begin a section on death and pleasure with the sun, for as noted above, the sun is a powerful symbol of both.[231] The sun also fully represents both permanence and transience, and Qohelet utilizes these features at his convenience. In 1:5, he emphasizes the sun's faithful but monotonous movement. The whole section of 11:7–12:2 is infused with "light" terminology, but the sense of solar repetition is gone, for it has been replaced by the imminent days of darkness and the eventual dimming of the sun in 12:2. To see the sun is a feature of being alive; the opposite is seen in 6:4–5 where the absence of the sun is a sign of non-existence. All of a sudden in view of this transiency of light and life, both are deemed good.

The Ambiguity of Youth

Qohelet often enjoins his readers to enjoy themselves, but for no other verses is there such emphasis to enjoy oneself in one's youth. Qohelet utilizes vocabulary for youth to excess; there are at least five and perhaps six direct

[231] See also the discussion of שמש on pp. 68–69.

references or synonyms for youth in this section.[232] The topic of youth is mentioned twice earlier: in 4:13–14 a poor wise youth supplants an old and foolish king. It may be that youth shows vigor, or that the youth was able to overcome because of his wisdom, and despite his young age and poverty. Young people are in need of instruction while someone with the experience of time is supposed to have gained wisdom, but Qohelet knows and shows that this is not always so. In the second reference, it is a disadvantage to have a king who is young: "Woe to you, O land whose king is a young man and whose princes eat in the morning" (10:16). The most permeating presence of youth comes indirectly through "the man who comes after me" (e.g. 2:18) who may or may not be "the son." This vaguely identified son or heir is characterized as a wastrel, a potential fool, and is generally unworthy. The one positive mention of the son comes in the epilogue, where for the first time there is a sense of a productive relationship, a transmission of knowledge (even if it is non-knowledge). Thus, like many other topics, youth is ambivalent. It is associated with strength, success, and enjoyment, but also with foolishness, lack of will, and irresponsibility.

[232] בחור "young man," ילדות "childhood," בחרים "prime of life"(11:9); ילדות "childhood," שחרות "black hair" or "dawn"(11:10) בחרים "prime of life," and perhaps בוראיך which can be repointed to mean "your vigor"(12:1). See a good discussion of שחרות in Seow 350–1. Clearly the translators of ancient versions did not think blackness was an appropriate meaning, but most modern commentators do interpret it as a contrast to the grey hair of old age. He concludes, however, that "whatever the etymology it is difficult to believe that the audience would not have connected the word with dawn." The connection with dawn is also likely because of the motifs of light and darkness in the passage. Here is another strange case where unlikely words connect: darkness, which is a symbol of death, actually refers to a youth with dark hair, or one in the dawn of life.

Although the focus of vv. 9–10 is on enjoyment of youth and youth here carries (or is supposed to carry) very positive connotations, Qohelet also calls youth and black hair הבל (11:10). This is one instance in which almost everyone agrees that הבל has to denote transience, but this is not to say that other connotations of הבל do not apply. Ogden, for example, writes that the choice to call youth הבל here shows that far from being vacuous, "it depicts something not fully comprehensible, something enigmatic, and this even for the sage." [233] Like pleasure or wisdom, youth cannot bring ultimate satisfaction. Like toil, it cannot accomplish anything lasting. Youth is foolish, and its pleasures short-lived. Fox links youth with physical beauty: it is deceitful because it is ephemeral.[234] Like death, youth is indiscriminate in who experiences it. Youth promises much, but does not necessarily deliver.

Verse 8 shows that even the longest life is fleeting, however. Both the years of a long life and the days of darkness are modified by "many," but in comparison to the days of darkness which stretch out forever, even the longest life is just a blip. Traditionally speaking, when it comes to life, quantity is related to quality. Thus, simply to live many years is traditionally evidence of a good life (and a sign of God's blessing, or in Qohelet's terms, good fortune). For example, Qohelet goes against the grain when he imagines one who lives many years and is wealthy and has many children, but still is not satisfied (6:3). Qohelet

[233] "Qoheleth XI 7-XII8: Qoheleth's Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection," *VT* 34 (1984): 27-37), 32. Ogden is followed by Bartholomew, who translates הבל in both 11:8 and 11:10 as "an enigma" and "enigmatic" (*Ecclesiastes*, 339–40).

[234] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 40.

minimizes the difference between a long and short lifespan as he emphasizes the brevity of all life and the urgency of enjoying it to the bitter end—because even though life may feel long, it is not. Youth and old age are also not so far apart as we would like to think.

The Ambiguity of Old Age, Misery, and Death

"The days of darkness" in 11:8 provide a contrast to the light of the sun. While light and darkness are fundamental opposites, this may not be true of the tenors, which are not clearly identified. The uncertainty of the subjects is apparent in the commentaries; some think the phrase "the days of darkness" refers to any kind of problem in life. Seow states that the expression is clarified in 12:1 as the days of unpleasantness: "Qohelet probably has old age in mind, but not only that, he is thinking of all the difficult times that may come in the future."[235] The phrase is also interpreted as a reference to failing eyesight or loss of pleasure in old age, in keeping with various allegorical interpretations of the so-called poem on old age in ch. 12.[236] Others interpret the days of darkness as Sheol[237] or death.[238] Still others see a combination of these.[239]

[235] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 348. He also cross references Qoh 5:16.

[236] Failing eyesight is a possible interpretation for 12:2 "the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark" and 12:3 "those looking through the window darken." Loss of pleasure is reflected in the suffering of old age in general, but "the sun grows dark" may also mean the joy of life fades. In regard to sexual pleasure, "the grasshopper becomes laden" has been interpreted as sex becoming onerous and "the caperberry is annulled" may represent that "desire is dulled. Or aphrodisiacs fail" (Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 344–5) (Fox's translations).

[237] Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 185.

[238] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 334.

[239] Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 148.

Despite all the literary relationships, however, the days of darkness will be "many," and logically speaking there is no guarantee that old age or suffering will last a long time, whereas death certainly will.[240] But even after Crenshaw makes this exact point to assert that the days of darkness in 11:8 must refer to death, he still wants to liken the symbol of darkness to "the dreaded failing years" because they "already participate in the essential feature of Sheol, an absence of the warmth of the sun." In this way, he shows that the days of darkness may focus on death, but still include old age.[241]

The discussions resume with the following phrase "all that comes is הבל," whether this is pointing to future life or death or both, and then again a similar disagreement occurs in 12:1 with the phrase "before the bad days come," as to whether it means before one grows old or before one dies.[242] Again, one can logically argue for 12:1 that it means before old age, because the parallel to bad days is the years of which one says "I find no pleasure in them." As Fox writes, "This would be a feeble way to complain about eternity in the underworld."[243] But unpleasant days are not just during old age, it is any time of life when one may no longer be able to enjoy life. If one goes with the most common symbolic interpretation of ch. 12 as the decay of the body, it demonstrates that the physical suffering of growing old was an obstruction to the enjoyment of life. But this can happen in youth too. Clearly pain and sorrow, normally associate with

[240] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 183.
[241] Ibid.
[242] Graham S. Ogden, "Qoheleth 11:7–12:8: Qoheleth's Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection," *VT* 34 (1984): 27–37 (34).
[243] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 322.

old age, can also be found in youth. Qohelet is certainly addressing the youth when he says to remove vexation from the heart and badness from the flesh. To take pleasure any time one is able fits with the theme of the rest of the book and in the context especially with v. 8 to rejoice in all of one's years.

Surely the phrase "the days of darkness" contrasts with the time that one is alive and able to rejoice, and the fact that "they will be many" speaks of the eternity of death. And surely the contrast with youth would imply that "the bad days" are a reference to old age. And yet, old age, misery, and death keep getting confused. Like the beginning of ch. 7, these verses seem to consist of dialectical pairs—enjoyment/unpleasantness, light/darkness, youth/old age, death/life—but different readers see different lines between life and death. The reason for the discrepancies is that the act of living is also dying. One may be dying while alive – contradicting Qohelet's advice that one should rejoice for as many days as one lives. Death encroaches on life, and not just in old age or during troublesome times, to the point that life and death take place simultaneously and thus can be described in similar ways.

It is no coincidence that Qohelet employs הבל in 11:8 and 10, with the verses' strong focus on death. Death may be that which makes everything in life הבל. Death itself is never directly labelled as הבל, unless the time after death is the reference in 11:8 "all that comes is הבל,"[244] or if one wants to count it in the

[244] So Whybray (*Ecclesiastes*, 161); Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 40. Fox claims that none of the usual meanings of הבל apply here, for death is not futile, trivial, or transient, and הבל never means literal nothingness. (How would Fox fit this claim with 9:5–6, where there is no reward,

phrase "everything is הבל." And yet the majority of the occurrences of הבל are used to describe situations in relation to death.[245] Death is completely beyond human understanding, and it makes everything else in life uncertain.

Everything, that is, except for the certainty of death itself. In his article "Death as the Beginning of Life," Mark K. George claims that "death has a positive value for Qohelet" and because of this certainty death becomes the foundation upon which he builds his epistemology. Whereas traditional wisdom gives advice that will supposedly help one to postpone or avoid death, death for

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memory, love, hatred, envy, etc…in other words, nothingness?) "Qohelet is warning us not to expect greater meaning or rationality after death than we face before it." In other words, there is nothing after life that will ultimately bring meaning or make sense of everything. Seow disagrees, and saysit makes no sense to say that "all that comes" refers to death, because Qohelet claims not to know anything about what happens after death (Even if one doesn't know, one could still say it is pointless or irrelevant, however.) Rather, Seow takes "all that comes" to mean all the experiences of life. He makes the interesting point that this is not the phrase that Qohelet uses to talk generally about the future. Rather, the term שבא occurs twice in the book and both times refers to people coming into existence (5:14–15); see also 6:4, 2:12, 1:4 and 12:6. Coming and going speak of coming into and out of existence, and thus 11:8 makes the point that humans like everything else are impermanent, and הבל (*Ecclesiastes*, 348–9) Interestingly, in the verse immediately following one of Seow's examples of humans coming and going, the same word is used for the sun, which in 1:5 is a symbol of permanency.

[245] Injustice is a great complaint, but it is not the primary complaint. The unfairness which occurs under the sun is a by-product of the effects of death, and a great many of the things that make Qohelet the most upset have to do with death as the great equalizer: the wise man dies just like the fool (2:15); humans die just like animals (3:19).. A person cannot thoroughly enjoy what he or she has worked for because death steals it away and gives to whomever it pleases. Hard work is due to trying to keep death at bay—all of a person's toil is to satisfy his gullet—and physical suffering is a precursor to the ultimate annihilation of the body. Even worse, death not only makes things equal but sometimes actually gives an advantage to those most deserving of death, as when a righteous person perishes in his righteousness, but a wicked person lives on in his wickedness (7:15). The recurring complaint about working hard is exacerbated by the fear that one will die and never be able to enjoy what he has worked so hard for. It might be okay to leave it to a family member who is responsible, but the thought that often it will be a fool or a stranger who inherits is intolerable (2:19). The complaints reach a climax in the opening of ch. 4, where life is not only pointless, it is oppressive, and leads Qohelet to say that death is preferred, but the best option of all is to have never been born.

Qohelet is something to be "recognized, acknowledged and accepted,"[246] freeing one to live without delusion, and making one responsible for his or her "portion" in life.[247]

Fear and Desire

In his explanation of the paradox that people should think about death in order to enjoy life more in order to not think about death (in a sentence which seems to come out of nowhere) Fox claims that people contemplate most what they most wish to avoid.[248] People also think much about what they most desire. And according to Freud, death may be both feared and desired—in fact our greatest fear and our greatest desire. One of the most uncomfortable parts of this passage, at least according to the evidence of the versions, is that which speaks of desire: והלך בדרכי לבך ובמראי עיניך "Follow the ways of your heart and the sights of your eyes." While this command fits clearly within the "positive" category of any proposed structures, it was read apprehensively by many early readers,[249] mainly because it is a direct contradiction to the command in Num 15:39 not to walk in the ways of one's own heart and eyes. Some modern commentary tries to tame the text in its own way; Seow, for example, explains

[246] Mark K. George, "Death as the beginning of life in the Book of Ecclesiastes," pp. 280–293 in Strange Fire: Reading the Bible after the Holucaust (ed. Tod Linafelt. New York: New York University Press, 2000), 288.

[247] Ibid., 289.

[248] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 317.

[249] Fox gives a summary of some of the changes that are evidence of this discomfort. He mentions LXX, which translates שחרות as "ignorance" and adding "innocently" after "your heart" in v. 9a. Several Greek witnesses add a negative to the phrase, reading "and (go) not in the sight of your eyes." Ben Sira reverses Qohelet's advice "Do not follow your heart and your eyes, to go in evil delights" (5:2) (Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 318.)

that the Egyptian parallels show that the point is enjoyment and "the idiom has nothing to do with how one makes ethical decisions."[250] Readers both ancient and modern are afraid of where the desires of heart and eyes make lead.

Others may have a problem with the following sentence, "Yet know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment," and want to remove it as a gloss.[251] Salters, for example, feels that the supposed gloss creates "a kind of irony" (by which he means a contradiction), because elsewhere Qohelet doubts whether God punishes sin.[252] As in every other case in Qohelet where people think there are additions, there is no textual warrant for the removal, and furthermore, Qohelet does allude to God's judgement (3:17),[253] and the fear of God in 5:1–7. To conclude his discussion on הבל, Fox claims that הכל הבל "is ultimately a protest against God." Qohelet sincerely believes in the rule of divine justice, which is why he is continually shocked by the injustice of the world.[254] Isn't justice or judgment what Qohelet most desires from God? This is what would make the world make sense.

To follow the heart's desire will lead to pleasure and to judgement, while judgment is both desired and feared.

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[250] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 350.
[251] E.g. Salters, Zimmerli, Galling, and Ginsberg.
[252] Salters, "Qoheleth and the Canon," 341.
[253] See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 166.
[254] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 49.

Remember Your Creator

After the three mini-cycles between life and death in 11:7–10, comes the strange command in 12:1: וזכר את־בוראיך "Remember your creator." בוראיך is a rich, provocative word, used in the book of Qohelet only this one time, and because of its uniqueness and its difficulty, there are a multitude of interpretations with many looking to variant readings. That being said, I agree with Fox that the only two meaningful counsels here are to enjoy life or to remember death, in the sense that all possible interpretations could be placed under one of these two headings. Corresponding with the first of these counsels, by repointing the vowels one could read "your health" or "your vigor." Others interpret it as "remember your well" which refers to enjoying one's wife, the greatest pleasure of life.[255] Leaving it as "your creator" can also have a very positive meaning; it points to the origin of life, and parallels the theme of youth and enjoyment of life earlier in the section.

On the other hand, בוראיך is paired with the verb זכר, which harkens back to v. 8 "remember the days of darkness." Creation is linked to death and destruction. Verse 8 is a very poetic description of the moment of death, "the lifebreath goes back to God who gave it," but at the same time it recalls the moment of coming to life.[256] The title of "Creator" also introduces the cosmic

[255] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 185. Crenshaw, like many others, thinks it likely that a thinker of Qohelet's complexity chose a word that suggests one's greatest pleasure and one's ultimate destiny. His interpretation is that Qohelet "urges young people to reflect on the joys of female companionship before old age and death render one incapable of sensual pleasure."

[256] Dust works in much the same way as the lifebreath, eg. 3:20, pointing back to the creation of humans and forward to death—these two things are seldom far removed. Delbert R.

theme, and it looks forward to the description in vv. 2–8 in which creation is undone.

Dropping the aleph from בוראיך makes an almost imperceptible difference in sound, but yields the meaning "your pit." Koosed remarks that "since the aleph is nothing more than a hard breath of air, nothing stands between 'your creator' and 'your grave,' birth and death, but a gasp."[257] Krüger notes perceptively that "The reader of 12:1 expects death, hears crater, and then realizes that creator was said."[258] The text resists choosing only one of these meanings. In this short phrase is summed up perfectly the paradox of life in death and death in life.

Circuitous Paths

Aside from the subject matter, another common explanation for the structure of Qohelet is a fragmented psyche. Beldman claims that in order to discern the structure, one needs to take seriously the psychological dimension of Qohelet's struggle.[259] Taking Qohelet's psyche seriously is exactly what leads Bartholomew to a description of the book's "spiral" structure: "The journey into and through despair is anything but linear, and as is typical in such experiences, moments of great insight are often followed by lapses back into the old struggles

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Hillers, "Dust: Some Aspects of Old Testament Imagery," pp. 105-109 in *Love & Death in the Ancient Near East* (ed. John Henry Marks and Robert McClive Good; Guilford, Conn.: Four Quarters, 1987), 107.

[257] Koosed, *(Per)Mutations,* 98.

[258] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 195

[259] Beldman, "Framed!" 146.

so that the journey is far more of a spiral than a straight line."[260] Alison Lo's interpretation would fit with the image of an upward spiral. She uses words like "crescendo," "heightening," and "develop." Koosed's description of structure fits with more of a downward spiral, with words like "decay" and "unstable."[261] Some scholars argue 11:7–12:1 as a high point for Qohelet. Bartholomew points out that for the first time, the *carpe diem* passage comes first, rather than having to fit into the context of life's enigmas.[262] Beldman says that the reference to God as creator in 12:1, followed by closing with a reference to God as the source and goal of the lifebreath, "represents a significant restoration for Qohelet."[263] And yet this new starting point, this pinnacle of joy and the acceptance that life is a gift of God, quickly ends in death. It is unclear whether life or death is the goal, only that the journey is indirect.

Despite his complaints about life, Qohelet never looks forward to death (although he is jealous of the one who has never existed, and he thinks a stillborn is better off than someone who can't enjoy life). This does not negate the death drive, for it is unconscious, and indirect. As discussed above, the death drive is not revealed by Qohelet's explicit obsession with death, but by his compulsive repetitiveness and his movement along circuitous paths.

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[260] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 83.

[261] I refer to the reader back to ch. 1 of this thesis, to the discussion on the multiple endings, and the desire to keep on writing. Koosed interprets this sudden burst of energy in the context of a violently decaying structure: "Qohelet spews forth excess as if in the very throes of death."[*(Per) Mutations*, 100].

[262] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 353–54.

[263] See also Odgen "Qoheleth 11:7–12:8," 33.

This thesis began by analysing Qohelet's writing as a manifestation of the need to say more, but of feeling that there is nothing new to say, and of the irony of writing when faced with this superfluity and endlessness ("without end" also means "without purpose"[264]). This chapter has added the unconscious wish to die. It would be very difficult to explain why one would engage in the seemingly masochistic behaviour of writing and repetition, reminding oneself of toil, the meaningless of life, and ultimately death, if there were nothing beyond the pleasure principle.

There is great irony in a work that speaks of the weariness of words, and their ultimate meaninglessness in view of forgetfulness and death, and yet continues on in such a long drawn out fashion. There is a double irony then, in the person who ignores Qohelet's advice about overwork by toiling and vexing herself with a book which refuses to be comprehended. The paradox is complete in the fact that one desires to write and to remember, for there is pleasure in the process. "Remember your creator in the days of your youth, Before the days of unpleasantness come and the years draw near of which you will say 'There is no pleasure in them for me.'"

Freud had a similar problem in asking why, if living things are driven toward death, do they take so many actions to prolong life? His solution was to relate them to the conservative nature of drives:

[264] Fox, *Contradictions*, 327. Fox takes this back in *A Time to Tear Down*, 357. He says "making many books is endless in the sense of leading nowhere."

> "What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die *only in its own fashion*. Thus these guardians of life, too were originally the myrmidons of death. Hence arises the paradoxical situation that the living organism struggles most energetically against that which might help it to attain its life's aim most rapidly."[265]

Seen in this light, the injunction to enjoy life actually serves the purposes of remembering death. Rather than the common interpretation that remembering death helps one to enjoy life, we might say that in some way enjoyment is a reminder of the desire to die on one's own terms. The pleasure of writing prolongs the endeavour.

[265] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 33

Conclusion

To write on Qohelet is ironic. All writing is superfluous, and ends in death.

The epilogue receives much attention in discussions of authorship or canonicity, but more attention should be paid to its language and how it relates to the rest of the book in a literary sense. The book of Qohelet demonstrates that there is nothing new to say, and at the same time there is always more to say. With this in mind, one view of the epilogue is that it is a summary of what the book says. Words always give way to more words. Or in Derrida's theory of the supplement, it is a plenitude enriching another plenitude. Another explanation is that the epilogue undermines the body of the book. Words are written to replace. Both views can be argued from a historical perspective, but regardless of the epilogist's intention, the fact remains that how the epilogue functions is fundamentally undecidable. Not just the epilogue, but all writing is supplemental—writing is in fact Derrida's choice example of the supplement.

I was only able to touch on the topic of written versus spoken words in relation to the book of Qohelet, but there is more that could be said in this regard. Connected to this would also be the theme of memory (or no-memory): Qohelet insists that nothing will be remembered, but of course, we are "remembering" his written words at present, while the spoken words with which

he taught the people are gone forever[266] as well as the authentic sound of Qohelet's voice.

Though we can consult dictionaries and define the word לב, there is no definition that will not contradict, and no translation that will convey the contradictoriness and the double nature of the heart. It is in the body and outside of it; it is the seat of the intellect and the emotions; it is the whole person and the most essential part. The irony is that this central part of the human seems to be almost a separate being in Qohelet, and is so mysterious. This heart has an infinite capacity for the totality of the world, yet a person cannot even guess at it. It is significant that the heart plays such a large role in Qohelet's quest—not just from a perspective of dialogue or making observations, but because the heart is where the desire to find out comes from.

The most regrettable lack in the chapter on the uncanny לב is a discussion of the unconscious feminine, such as that raised by Koosed.[267] The mother, after all, is the original home, and *the* example of the uncanny. I would also do a lot more thinking about Qohelet's home as well as his home life (family, the "son," and "the one who will come after me"), and finally, the eternal home.

I would also take the discussion on knowledge and wisdom further. Qohelet's primary goal is knowledge of how the world works; though he claims to fail in his quest, and though he recognizes that knowledge causes pain and

[266] Even though in Plato's Phaedrus the criticism of the Egyptian king, Thamus, was that writing does not improve memory, but in fact does the opposite (274e).

[267] See her ch. 5 "In Love and (Gender) Trouble," pp. 74–87 in (Per)Mutations, esp. pp. 82–86.

sorrow, still the epilogue tells that he taught the people knowledge. On the one hand he warns strongly against knowledge, and on the other he has a compulsion to know and even wants to share what he has learned with others.[268] This ambivalence about wisdom is present from the story of the Garden of Eden on, and it would be interesting to look at how Qohelet fits into this theme.

The last chapter tries to work out the structure of 7:1–8 and 11:7–12:1, by which I mean understanding how the words and phrases interconnect and build on one another. In the first passage I see an attempt to build a solid structure, but one which ultimately folds under the pressure, or perhaps springs apart because of tension. Qohelet himself seems to question whether he has given any real advice, as the limits, holes and weaknesses of the text are exposed. Starting with 11:7, there also appears to be a neat organization of alternating statements of enjoyment and judgment. Upon closer scrutiny, however, the words cannot be controlled, and the ambiguity between pleasure and death seeps in. What is it that humans truly desire?

There is much more to say about the structure of the book as a whole. I am very interested in the idea of a "spiral" structure, and whether it would be possible to trace the development of thought in this way (for though

[268] This also raises the question of Qohelet's objectives and perhaps his trustworthiness. As Willi Braun pointed out (in the context of a question and answer period after I presented a paper on the first chapter of this thesis), what shall we think of someone who complains about wisdom and shows it weaknesses, but then asks the reader to listen to his wisdom?

Bartholomew uses the terms to describe Qohelet's journey, it does not play a part in his structural analysis).[269]

I've spent some time in each chapter criticising "scholarship." I've pointed out the authorship presuppositions that keep the epilogue in a secondary position. I've postulated that the portrayal of the heart which guides Qohelet in his pursuit as rational and intellectual is a reflection of scholarship's desire to perceive itself in this way—as opposed to seeing the act of writing connected to one's emotional and physical self. I've also shown scholarship trying to define the limits of life and death, and coming away confused. Like the wisdom teacher who teaches that the words of the wise are like goads and warns against excessive study, I push up against others working in the same "tradition" or field of study.

Then again, the entire academic pursuit rests on the fact that no matter how extensive the research and how many volumes are filled, there is always more to be written; indeed, there is much more to be written in response to the new words, which in the end are not really new at all. And so it is with this thesis —the end leaves me no further ahead than at the beginning, with too much said but much more left to say.

[269] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 83–84.

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