

A TIME TO TEAR DOWN  
*and*  
A TIME TO BUILD UP

*A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*

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# Contents

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CIP

*Preface: On Rereading Qohelet*

ix

*Abbreviations*

xv

*Transliteration and Sigla*

xvii

## 1. On Reading Contradictions

1

1.1. Qohelet's Contradictions

1

1.2. Words and Ideas

4

1.3. Context

5

1.4. Parallels

6

1.5. Making the Rough Places Plain

14

## 2. *Hebel* and *R<sup>e</sup>ut Ruah*

27

2.1. *Hebel* in the Hebrew Bible

27

2.2. *Hebel* in Qohelet

30

2.3. The Absurd

30

2.4. The Incomprehensible

33

2.5. How Qohelet Uses *Hebel*

35

2.6. *R<sup>e</sup>ut/Ra<sup>y</sup>on Ruah*

42

2.7. How Everything Is Absurd

48

<b>3. Justice</b>	51
3.1. The Contradiction	51
3.2. <i>Mišpaṭ</i> and <i>Ṣedeq</i>	51
3.3. The Affirmation of Justice	53
3.4. The Recognition of Injustice	58
3.5. Justice and Injustice According to the Sages	59
3.6. How Injustices Were Explained	63
3.7. How the Explanations Fail	66
3.8. No Resting Place	68
<b>4. What Is Wisdom?</b>	71
4.1. Qohelet's Epistemology	71
4.2. Words for Wisdom	72
4.3. Qohelet's New Path	75
4.4. Methodology	77
4.5. Argumentation	79
4.6. The Ontology of Knowledge	82
4.7. Qohelet's Skepticism	85
<b>5. Is Wisdom Foolish?</b>	87
5.1. What's Wrong with Wisdom	87
5.2. Qohelet and the Wise	91
5.3. How Wisdom Succeeds	92
5.4. The Wisdom Imperative	93
5.5. Wisdom and Beyond	95
<b>6. Deed and Event</b>	97
6.1. <i>ʿAmal</i> "Toil" (Noun and Verb)	97
6.2. <i>ʿAsah</i> "Do," "Happen"; <i>Maʿāseh</i> "Deeds," "Events"	102
6.3. <i>ʿAnah</i> , <i>ʿinyan</i> "Be Busy," "Business," "Task"	106
6.4. <i>Hayah</i> "To Be," "Occur"	107

<b>7. The Best Things in Life</b>	109
7.1. <i>Heleq</i> "Portion"	109
7.2. <i>Yitron</i> ( <i>Motar</i> , <i>Yoter</i> ) "Advantage," "Profit"	112
7.3. <i>Šimḥah</i> , <i>Šamaḥ</i> "Pleasure"	113
7.4. <i>Ṭob</i> (Noun, Verb, and Adjective) "Good," "Pleasure"	116
7.5. <i>Šeḥoq</i> "Laughter," "Merriment"	117
7.6. <i>Šabaʿ</i> (Noun and Verb) "Satisfaction," "Get Satisfaction"	118
<b>8. Toil and Pleasure</b>	121
8.1. The Contradiction	121
8.2. Tearing Down	122
8.3. Some Harmonizations	123
8.4. Building Up	125
<b>9. The End of the Matter</b>	133
9.1. Meaning: Loss and Recovery	133
9.2. Qohelet's Soul	134
9.3. Qohelet's God	136
9.4. A Time to Tear Down: The Subversion of Meaning	138
9.5. A Time to Build Up: The Reconstruction of Meaning	140
9.6. The End of the Matter	144
<b>10. Commentary: Introduction</b>	147
10.1. Literary Structure	147
10.2. Genre	153
10.3. The Greek and Syriac Translations	156
10.4. Translation	157
<b>11. Commentary</b>	159
Excursus I: Time in Qohelet's "Catalogue of Times"	194
1. Time and Circumstance	194
2. Fate or Opportunity	197
3. <i>ʿEt</i> and <i>Zeman</i> in Biblical Hebrew	198

4. Times That Cannot Be Chosen	201
5. When the Timing <i>Can</i> Be Chosen	205
Excursus II: How Worlds End: Aging and Death in Qohelet 12	333
1. Approaching an Enigma	333
2. Facing the Surface	333
3. Seeing Through Symbols	338
4. Deciphering Allegory	343
Excursus III: The Voices in the Book of Qohelet	363
1. The Epilogist	363
2. The Hierarchy of Perspectives	366
3. Parallels	367
4. Qohelet Through the Epilogist's Eyes	371
5. Qohelet as Persona	372
6. The Postscript	373
7. Wisdom and Canon	375
<i>Bibliography</i>	379
<i>Subject Index</i>	407
<i>Author Index</i>	411
<i>Scripture Index</i>	413
<i>Index of Hellenistic and Rabbinic Texts</i>	419
<i>Index of Ancient Texts</i>	421
<i>Index of Hebrew Words</i>	422

## *Preface: On Rereading Qohelet*

This book began as a revision of my 1987 study *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (JSOT Supplement 71). But as I worked once again through the difficulties and conundrums that Qohelet thrusts upon us, the revision went deeper and deeper. At some point, I realized that this was no longer the "same" book.<sup>1</sup>

Reading Qohelet is not a once-for-all effort. For me, at least, the meanings and tones of the book have shifted and modulated over the years. The book is like a mountain that reveals new shape and colors as you approach it from different angles. In part, however, I have improved upon my earlier interpretations.

I have sought to clarify, strengthen, and synthesize my ideas and arguments. In some cases I take issue with "Fox 1987" and leave the alternative proposals to the reader's judgment. I have modified and expanded the exegesis in numerous details and have attempted to refine the definitions of Qohelet's key words, a task which is crucial to exegesis and cannot be left to listing glosses.

I have not, however, changed my basic theses about Qohelet's message, even though my understanding of it has evolved and deepened in numerous ways. In particular, I now give greater attention to the constructive phase of Qohelet's thought, the "building up." I also examine more carefully the un-

1. I am indebted to the Wisconsin Society for Jewish Learning for financial support in this research. I thank my student Rick Painter for his assistance in the preparation of the manuscript and the indexes.

## Commentary

### ◆ 1:1-2

- (1) *The words of Qohelet, son of David, king in Jerusalem:*  
 (2) *Utterly absurd, said Qohelet, utterly absurd. All is absurd.*

The authorial voice (also heard in the epilogue, 12:9-12) introduces Qohelet in the third person and summarizes his message. The motto in 1:2 and 12:8 brackets his words.

**1:1** The title associates Qohelet with Solomon. Since Qohelet takes on the role of king in 1:12–2:11, there is no reason to restrict the original title to the phrase “words of Qohelet” (thus Galling) and assign the rest of the identification to a later editor. The vast wealth and wisdom of Qohelet reflect traditions about Solomon, probably with direct dependence on 1 Kgs 3:12; 5:9-14; 1 Chr 29:25; 2 Chr 1:12; etc.

But it is also a fact that this verse does *not* call the speaker Solomon. The title does not say that Solomon is the author, as has always been assumed both by those who reject the accuracy of the ascription as well as those who accept it. Instead, the author creates for his persona a fictional king *based on* Solomon. Though he wants us to imagine the persona’s wisdom, power, and prosperity as Solomonic in quantity and quality, he is not trying to make us believe that the author truly is Solomon or to give the book full Solomonic authority. Though this fact evades most commentators, it seems to me clear that if the author wanted us to believe that the author was Solomon he would have called him by that name, as did the authors of Solomonic pseudepi-

graphic books in the Bible and Jewish Hellenistic writings, namely Proverbs, Psalm 72, the Odes of Solomon, the Psalms of Solomon, the Testament of Solomon, and the Wisdom of Solomon.

Qohelet speaks in this book, but he is not its author. In Excursus III, I point out several reasons to identify the author with the speaker of the epilogue (12:9-11a) and to regard Qohelet as his persona. But even if the author of the epilogue is not the author of the body of the book, we can be sure that Qohelet is a fictional character, hence not the author. Qohelet presents himself as a king called Qohelet, but, to state the obvious, there was no such king. If, as the naive view holds, Solomon wrote the book using an alias, was he trying to hide his identity? If so, why did he provide the other information identifying himself? In any case, a Solomonic dating is impossible. And even if there was an actual person (not Solomon) known as Qohelet, and he wrote the book, the fact that he makes himself a king shows he was *re-creating* himself as a fictional character, and we cannot simply identify the author with his fictional spokesman. The book belongs to the genre of fictional autobiography, like Onchsheshonqy and Aḥiqar and the Hellenistic apocryphal “testaments.”

The persona was created not for the proclamation of secure and timeless truths. That could be better achieved by impersonal statement, such as we have in most of Wisdom Literature, even in texts with an identified author. Qohelet states his observations and evaluations as such. His subjectivity is on display. The book is about *meaning*, and that, the author realizes, exists relationally, by means of perception.

*Qōhelet*: A feminine common noun appearing both with the article (7:27 <amar haqqohelet>; 12:8) and without it (1:1, 2, 12; 12:9, 10). Most commentators explain the word as a title of office, comparing the likewise mysterious *soperet* (Ezr 2:55; Neh 7:57) and *pokeret hašš<sup>e</sup>bayim* (Ezr 2:57; Neh 7:59). These seem to be titles that came to be epithets of individuals. Both appear in a list of names of men who, interestingly, are cultic functionaries called “the sons of Solomon’s servants.” Like *qohelet*, *soperet* can appear with the article (Ezr 2:55) or without it (Neh 7:57). The use of a feminine office-title to designate the male office holder has a parallel in *mmlkt* “kingdom” (fem.), equivalent to *melek* “king,” in Phoenician and Hebrew (*mamlakah* = “king” in 1 Sam 10:18 [in pl., with masc. pple.] and perhaps elsewhere; see HALAT 2.595b).

In Aramaic (Syriac), the G-stem verb *q<sup>e</sup>hal* is intransitive and means “to assemble,” “come into assembly,” that is, a group is assembled or assembles itself. This is the meaning that the G-stem would be expected to have in Hebrew, and it indicates an action that cannot be predicated of a single per-

son. Thus Qohelet cannot be “one who assembles himself” — apart from the problem of gender.

We should not assume that *qōhelet* is the participle of (an unattested) qal of QHL. It is best explained as a noun-from-noun denominative from *qāhāl* “assembly.” B. Kedar-Kopfstein has examined nouns in the *qōṭēl* pattern and shown that the qal active participle is only a subclass of them (1977; cf. IBHS §52d). A number of them are fixed designations of occupations or social roles, such as *bōqēr* “cowherd” from *bāqār* “cattle,” *hōbēl* “sailor” from *hebel* “rope,” *kōrēm* “vintner” from *kerem* “vineyard.” In some cases, the *qōṭēl* nouns lack a link to a verbal root in the qal, such as *nōqēd* “sheep-raiser,” *kōhēn* “priest,” *rōzēn* “prince,” and *šōlēm* “man of peace,” “ally” (*šol<sup>e</sup>mi* in Ps 7:5). Most nouns in this category are, loosely, doer nouns or occupation-nouns, but their meaning cannot be simply projected from the qal.

A *qohelet* would be someone who does something in the assembly, just as *korem* is one who does something in a vineyard, and *hobel* is one who does something with a rope. There is also a class of nouns supported by verbal roots that appear only in the derived stems (Kedar-Kopfstein, p. 163), e.g., *noqeš* from NQŠ, attested in niphāl, piel, and hitpael, and in *soken* “steward” from SKN, which appears in the hiphil. This opens the possibility that *qohelet* is (the office of) *maqhil*, “one who assembles.” But, as in the case of “sailor”-“rope,” the connection may be tangential or unpredictable, and the morphology allows no further precision.

The Greek rendering ἐκκλησιαστής, meaning “member of the ἐκκλησία, the assembly,” may be right. Alternatively, *qohelet* may mean “speaker in assembly” (thus Qoh. Rab. 1:1, §2). Sir 15:5 says that wisdom enables her devotees to speak in *qahal*. The *qahal* is not necessarily a formal assembly. It can be an informal, non-institutional gathering, such as a *qahal* of peoples (Gen 28:3) or of ghosts (Prov 21:16). We might imagine him speaking to any gathering of people. This recalls Lady Wisdom’s preachments in the busy parts of the city (Prov 1:20f.; 8:1-3). Lady Wisdom is, after all, a teacher, and so was Qohelet.

The traditional translation, “the Preacher,” is reasonable, but “preacher” tends to connote one who inculcates a given religious viewpoint of which he is confident. Thus “public teacher” might be better, and that is exactly what 12:9 says that Qohelet was.

1:2 *Häbel häbalim ʿamar qohelet häbel häbalim hakkol habel*: This is the book’s motto, phrased as someone else’s summary of Qohelet’s central, but not sole, message. It is not “an extremely misleading editorial summary of

Qohelet's statements" ("im allerhöchsten Grade misverständliche Summierung Qoheletscher Aussagen") (Ellermeier 1967:100). Even though this sentence in 1:2 and 12:8 is formulated as another person's quotation of Qohelet, it is an effective encapsulation (or "thematization") of Qohelet's thought. Of course it is an oversimplification, but that's what summaries are. There is no need to ascribe it to an editor who did not read Qohelet's message quite right.

In fact, the motto is best ascribed to the author, who is here paraphrasing Qohelet, who is his creation. Qohelet implies that *everything* is absurd by "going around" the world and attaching that word to the numerous things he observes. The same idea appears in 1:14, where Qohelet says that "all the events that occur under the heavens" are *hebel* — a statement equivalent to "all is *hebel*." 2:17 is a similar generalization.

Ellermeier (1967:98-100), who understands *hebel* to mean "Nichtigkeit" ("nothingness"), claims that the phrase *häbel häbalim* cannot convey the notion of "in the highest degree," for there are no degrees to nothingness. Furthermore, he says, if we take *häbel häbalim* to mean "*hebel* in the highest degree," then the end of the verse, "all is *hebel*," is a weakening of the opening statement, "(all) is utterly *hebel*." Ellermeier explains *häbel häbalim* as iterative: "immer wieder 'hebel'" ("again and again [Qohelet said] '*hebel*'"), but he gives no examples of similar phrases having an iterative sense, and it is doubtful that a superlative (as Ellermeier grants this phrase to be) can have an iterative meaning, unless iteration is part of the semantic content of words themselves.

Understanding *hebel* as meaning "absurd" answers the difficulties Ellermeier raises, for there *are* degrees of absurdity, depending on the intensity of the tensions in the contradictions judged absurd. The motto says that life, taken as a whole, is absurd to the highest degree. It is true that *hakkol hebel* is weaker than (*hakkol*) *häbel häbalim*, but this weakening serves a rhetorical purpose. The phrase *hakkol hebel* provides the subject of *häbel häbalim* and resumes the predicate in a de-emphasized form. In the final occurrence of the predicate (*hebel*), some weight is given to the subject ("all is absurd"), while in the first two occurrences (*häbel häbalim* . . . *häbel häbalim*), emphasis is placed on the predicate. In this way, the motto expresses first the intensity of the *hebel*-judgment and then its universality.

The quoting-phrase, *'amar qohelet*, controls the rhythm of the motto. It provides a slight caesura that makes us pause and absorb the notion of utter absurdity rather than jumbling the words together and gliding over the clause, as we would do if we read *häbel häbalim häbel häbalim hakkol*

*hebel*. It also interposes the frame-narrator (see Excursus III) between Qohelet and the reader. The frame-narrator is an interpreter, who, by abstracting this idea from Qohelet's teachings and bracketing the monologue with it, points out the central idea and determines the way we read the rest of Qohelet's words.

The book's motto is a thesis that the reader can expect to see validated in the following monologue, and this expectation channels the interpretation. After 1:2, 1:4-7 cannot be a celebration of the glorious stability of the natural order. Instead we immediately ask: what is it about these natural processes that is *hebel*? At the same time, we begin to redefine *hebel* in accordance with what we read, and we will continue to do so throughout the book. Likewise, the practical counsels Qohelet offers later will not be understood as guides to achieving a mastery of life and its meaning, since such control is precluded by the pervasiveness of the quality of *hebel*. The five-fold repetition of *hebel* sends reverberations throughout the book, so that all the subsequent *hebel*-judgments are subsumed to the opening declaration and wrapped up by the closing one. This strong interpretive guidance allows the monologue to wander about (*latur!*) without going astray.

#### ◆ 1:3-11

(3) *What profit does man have in all his toil at which he labors under the sun?*

(4) *A generation goes and a generation comes,  
but the world remains forever the same.*

(5) *The sun rises and the sun sets,  
then goes panting to its place,  
whence it rises.*

(6) *Going to the south,  
and rounding to the north,  
round and round goes the wind,  
and on its rounds the wind returns.*

(7) *All the rivers flow to the sea,  
but the sea is never filled.  
That place to which the rivers go,  
there they go again.*

(8) *Words are all weary;  
man is unable to speak.*

The eye is not sated with seeing,  
nor the ear filled by hearing.

- (9) That which happens is that which shall happen,  
and that which occurs is that which shall occur,  
and there is nothing whatsoever new under the sun.

(10) If there be something of which one could say, "Look, this is new!"  
— it has already happened in the aeons that preceded us. (11) There is no remembrance of things past, nor of the things yet to come will there be remembrance among those who come still later.

- A. 1:3. Thesis
- B. 1:4-7. Argument by analogy
- C. 1:8. Reaction to observations in B
- D. 1:9. Conclusion abstracted from B and justifying A
- E. 1:10-11. Prose addendum, reinforcing A

If the mighty efforts of nature can achieve nothing new, surely man's toil is futile. Since there is nothing new, man's toil can achieve nothing that would not have occurred anyway.

The generalization in v. 2 leads into the description of eternal repetition just as the same generalization in 12:8 flows out of the description of human mortality. This unit is naturally read as evidence for the principle in v. 2 and the rhetorical question in v. 3. Even if one starts the unit with v. 4 (as many do, including Galling, Lohfink, and Crenshaw) the unhappy implications of vv. 2 and 3 inevitably reverberate into the verses that follow.

The description of nature in vv. 4-7 serves only to demonstrate the thesis about human toil in v. 3. Verse 8 returns to the human realm, and v. 9 points back to v. 3 by echoing the phrase "under the sun." What the patterns of nature model, we now learn, is the fact that nothing new ever happens, and this fact validates the opening statement that toil is never adequately compensated. Vv. 10-11 form a prose addendum to the preceding section, wrapping up the argument of vv. 4-9 in rather scholastic fashion by accounting for impressions one may have to the contrary.<sup>1</sup>

1. E. Good (1978) carefully reconstructs and analyzes the dynamic process of reading this unit as it unfolds.

### A. 1:3. Thesis

"What profit does man have in all his toil . . . ?": This is a rhetorical question whose negative answer is implicit in the choice of the word *amal* to designate human activities (see §6.1) as well as in the negativism of the preceding verse. No labors are properly rewarded. This may be learned from the analogy of the elements of nature, which, though mighty and incessant, seem to accomplish nothing in particular.

*Amal* here is not only labor that aims at gaining wealth, but all human efforts (§6.12).

*Taḥat haššameš* "under the sun" (alternatively "heavens"; 1:13; 2:3; 3:1) is used twenty-five times to designate the domain of human life, in short, "the world." It excludes the underworld (see 9:6) and the heavens, God's domain ("for God is in heaven and you are on the earth"; 5:1b). Certainly God is not *hebel*.

There are two ways in which "under the sun" might be intended: restrictively and inclusively. In the first, the purpose of the phrase would be to modestly restrict the application of Qohelet's observations to this world *alone*, excluding other domains that are beyond human ken. In this case, Qohelet would be holding out the possibility of a different situation elsewhere, namely in the heavens. This is the traditional understanding of the phrase. It makes Qohelet out to be pious and modest in his claims and even hints at hopes for a better life above and beyond this one. If the sense of "under the sun" is inclusive, Qohelet's purpose is to underscore the *breadth* of his observations, claiming that such-and-such is true in the *entire* world "under the sun," not just in part of it. The inclusive function is more likely, for if the phrase were restrictive, 1:9 would be saying that only under the sun is there nothing new, thereby conceding the possibility of something new occurring elsewhere than in the human domain, though in other domains "newness" does not seem relevant. Nor is Qohelet likely to concede that toil may have a profit elsewhere than in this life (1:3), as if man's work could pay off in heaven or in the underworld. Furthermore, since most of the facts that Qohelet observes "under the sun" can hardly be imagined to exist in any other domain but human life, there is no need for him to exclude other domains of reality. Rather, he focuses on life "under the sun" and insists on the broad applicability of his observations to that realm.

### B. 1:4-7. Argument by Analogy

The staticity of nature. Each of these verses makes the same point: "le plus ça change, le plus c'est le même chose." All this is meant to show that, by analogy and *a fortiori*, man's toil cannot be expected to affect the course of events.



1:4 This verse is commonly understood to contrast the permanence of the earth with the ephemerality of the generations. Yet the permanence of the physical earth has no relevance to the individual life. The key to understanding this verse lies in recognizing that *ha'areš* here does not mean the physical earth, but humanity as a whole — “le monde” rather than “la terre.” Good examples of this usage are Gen 11:1; 1 Kgs 2:2; and Ps 33:8.

The flow of generations is not intended to call to mind human transience. The other images in 1:4-8 do not show the disappearance of the entities in the cycle. The point of 1:4 is the fact that humanity “remains always the same.” *Amad* here means “remain as is,” as in Lev 13:5; Jer 32:14; and Ps 33:11. Qohelet observes that the procession of generations does not alter the face of humanity, just as the rivers’ incessant flow downstream does not change the sea. No sooner does one generation depart — note that “going” precedes “coming” — than another moves in to fill the gap. Thus the “world” never changes in spite of appearances to the contrary. The procession of generations is one of the natural phenomena that move in cycles without achieving anything new.

1:5 The sun’s great, laborious journey across the sky merely brings it back to its starting point. The strain of the trek is implied by *šo’ep*, “pant.” Even if the author intended *šo’ep* to be primarily understood as if from ŠWP, “to walk, proceed” (thus Rashi, Gordis, Ginsberg; similarly Tg, “crawls and goes”), the reader would naturally associate the writing *š’p* with *šo’ep* (Š’P), “pant.”

1:6 The wind, which might well be perceived as wandering aimlessly, in Qohelet’s vision follows a fixed circuit. *Sobeb sobeb* is adverbial to *holek*.

1:7 The rivers’ endless flowing does not fill up the sea conclusively. The sea can always take more water, always absorb the rivers’ labor and leave no trace of the water they sent forth.

Vul and Sym seem to imply the presence of *mšm* before *šm* and require the translation “To the place [from] which they flow . . .” (JPSV). By this emendation, the verse mentions the return of the waters to the rivers’ sources. Without emendation, the MT describes the endless flow toward the sea without mentioning the return. Ibn Ezra explains the process precisely: the sea waters evaporate and become clouds, whose rain supplies the sweet waters to the springs, which feed the rivers.

### C. 1:8. Reaction to Observations in B

The *d<sup>e</sup>barim* that are weary are not the “things” mentioned — the world, sun, wind, and rivers. *Dabar* is nowhere used of physical entities. Rather, it is *words* that are weary, too feeble to communicate. These are Qohelet’s words, of course, and he is weary. Repetition and routine wear one down:

But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. “Begins” — this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. (Camus, *Myth*, p. 10)

“The eye is not sated with seeing” (*lo’ tišba’ ayin lir’ot*): *šaba’* with the direct object means “be satisfied, get enough of” (see §7.6). Sir 42:25 uses this construction in stating the opposite: *<umi> yišba’ lir’ot to’ar* “and who can be sated with seeing the appearance (of God’s works)?” Sir 42:21-25 seems to be directly dependent on Qoh 1:3-9 and to be gently reinterpreting it by turning 1:8 into an exclamation of awe. For Sira, the natural world is so lovely and purposeful that no one can get enough of contemplating it. For Qohelet, the natural world is so dreary and aimless that no one can fully and satisfactorily contemplate it.

A possible, and even expected, reaction to the constancy of these phenomena would be exultation in the stability and reliability of God’s creation. How glorious that the sun always rises and generation always follows generation! (Lohfink [1981] reads it this way, and understands the absence of newness as something good.) Qohelet, however, reacts with frustration. The futility of all effort, as he sees it, is inherent in the nature of things. This fact is not *bad*, it’s just the way things are. But it *is* absurd, and absurdities escape the powers of sight and speech, which is to say, comprehension and expression. Sights and sounds may inundate the senses but they cannot provide understanding. Isa 6:9-10 also speaks of a kind of hearing and seeing that consists of superficial absorption of sense impressions devoid of understanding (LXX-Isa makes the distinction explicit).

“The eye is not sated with seeing, nor the ear filled by hearing,” recalls 5:9a, “He who loves silver will not be sated with silver,” and 6:7, “All a man’s toil is for his mouth, but the appetite [*hannepes*] is never filled [*lo’ timmale*].” Just as an appetite for wealth is never sated by amassing possessions, so is Qohelet’s appetite for understanding never appeased by amassing hearing and seeing. Someone else might experience this insatiable appetite as a lively intellectual curiosity, but Qohelet feels it as an inadequacy and a source of frustration.

**D. 1:9. Conclusion Abstracted from B and Justifying A**

As in the natural world, so too in human life there is no true change, only dreary repetition. As Augustine observed, Qohelet is speaking of recurrence of *types* of beings and events:

Even monstrous and irregular productions, though differing from one another, and though some are reported as solitary instances, yet resemble one another generally, insofar as they are miraculous and monstrous, and, in this sense, have been, and shall be, and are no new and recent things under the sun.<sup>2</sup>

Archetypal events (including deeds viewed as events) — birth, death, war, embracing, and so on — come to realization in specific manifestations: the birth of particular individuals, particular acts of embracing, the outbreak of particular wars, and so on. The concept of archetypes reduces the reality of specific, non-repetitive events. As Mircea Eliade says,

Hegel affirmed that in nature things repeat themselves for ever and that there is “nothing new under the sun.” All that we have so far demonstrated confirms the existence of a similar conception in the man of archaic societies: for him things repeat themselves for ever and nothing new happens under the sun. But this repetition has a meaning . . . it alone confers a reality upon events; events repeat themselves because they imitate an archetype — the exemplary event. Furthermore, through this repetition, time is suspended, or at least its virulence is diminished. (1954:90)

The last sentence does not apply to Qohelet, who felt the repetitiveness as a heavy burden. But the notion that repeated event-types alone are real, or are, we might say, more real than other events, does apply to Qohelet. The assertion that “there is nothing new under the sun” cannot apply to events as specific, unique occurrences. World War II, the book of Qohelet, the death of Lincoln — these had not happened before. But in some sense Qohelet would regard their reality as inhering in their realization of archetypes: war, book, assassination. Only in that way can he deny their newness. An analogy to this notion is a video game. The icons can do different things, but there is no real “newness” in their actions. They are simply instances of visual effects gener-

2. *City of God*, XII, 13 (trans. M. Dods). Augustine also considers it possible that 1:9 speaks of predestination.

ated by the software. Novelty is a delusion. And without novelty, what real achievement can there be?

*Na'āśah* here probably means “happens.” The recapitulation of this idea in 3:15 omits *na'āśah*, suggesting that *na'āśah* + *hayah* in 1:9 can be rephrased by *hayah* (“be,” “happen”) alone. The MT always vocalizes *n'śh* as a qatal *na'āśāh* rather than the expected participle *na'āśeh*. A possible reason for this is suggested in the comment on 8:11.

**E. 1:10f. Prose Addendum**

When people think something is new, that is only due to the defectiveness of the collective memory. This same defect means that not only do events repeat themselves, but the *experience* of events is also always the same. *Ri'šonim* and *'ahāronim* refer not to earlier and later generations (as Crenshaw says), but to earlier and later events, since the issue in this passage is not whether people are remembered but whether events are.

Verse 11a could be translated as a question (“Is there something . . . ?”) and answer (“It has already occurred . . .”). Michel (1989:186) says that *yeš* is used in argumentation to introduce for discussion a case or opinion other than the usual one. He follows Lohfink’s translation, “Zwar gibt es bisweilen ein Ding, von dem es heisst: Sieh dir das an, das ist etwas Neues” (“To be sure, sometimes there is a thing of which it may be said: Take note, this is something new”). Crenshaw notes the effective juxtaposition of *yeš* and *'eyn*: the consideration introduced by the latter knocks down the supposition introduced by the former.

This passage has a peculiarly argumentative or forensic quality of a sort unusual in Biblical literature. It is manifest in the attempt to anticipate counter-arguments and forestall them by reference to psychology: The immense and startling assertion in v. 9 might well meet opposition, for people do think that this or that event is unprecedented. But they are mistaken, because the same thing happened in earlier times as well. Why would they think this? They are misled by a faulty collective memory. And it will always be thus. Not only do events repeat themselves, but the *experience* of events is also always the same.

◆ **1:12-18**

(12) *I am Qohelet. I have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.*

(13) *I set my heart to investigate and explore with wisdom all that occurs under the heavens. (It is an unfortunate business that God has given people to busy themselves with.) (14) When I observed all the events that occur under the sun, I realized that everything is absurd and senseless.*

- *The doors in the street are closed*: The apertures of sensory input (perhaps specifically the ears), previously open to the external world, cease functioning. Or: the mouth and/or eyes of the corpse are closed by attendants. (Both organs are “double-doors.”)<sup>62</sup>
- *The sound of the mill fades low*: Man’s voice is eternally silenced. Or, possibly, the gasps and rasps of the dying, which may recall the grinding sounds of a mill, fall silent.
- *The bird arises to voice*: The “bird” — perhaps a man who keens the lament — begins a threnody. Or perhaps it is an actual bird whose song resonates in the keening of the wailing women.
- *The daughters of song bow low*: Non-allegorically, the wailing women bow down.

The remaining images are to be taken literally, as discussed above.

If the poem draws on actual dirges, it may well have borrowed cryptic tropes from them. Some Biblical dirges are called *m<sup>e</sup>šalim* or speak of the dead figuratively. Isa 14, called a *mašal* in v. 4 (correctly glossed in the LXX as θρηνην “lament”), speaks allegorically and cryptically of Babylon as a god, Helel son of Dawn. Ezekiel’s dirge (*qinah*) over Tyre imagines the prince as the first man and as a precious seal (Ezek 28:12-19). Num 21:27-30 is a dirge over Moab spoken by *hammoš<sup>e</sup>lim*, “the mashal makers.” Some *m<sup>e</sup>šalim*, at least, require exegesis (Prov 1:6). Some of the dirges recorded in the Talmud use ciphers, some of these quite mysterious. For example: “Our brothers are merchants whose goods are examined at the customs house” (b. Mo’ed Q. 28b); “I have many coins but no money changer to accept them” (b. San. 68a); “Borrow a Milesian robe for a free man who left no provision” (b. Mo’ed Q. 28b).<sup>63</sup>

The accurate decoding of allegorical figures and the information conveyed by them, whether pertaining to aging or death, is of secondary importance in Qoh 12:1-7. First of all, the reader must *start* with the knowledge of what the presumed figures communicate or they can convey nothing at all. The reader can know that the strong men’s quaking represents the legs’ shaking (if this is indeed so) only if he knows that legs grow shaky with age — or tremble in disease. If the “daughters of song” indeed

represent mourning women, the reader can know this only if he is already familiar with funerary practices. It cannot be the poem’s goal merely to inform us of such things. How great would our gain be if we knew for certain that Qohelet intended the powerful men to signify legs or the almond blossoms white hair? Not even the young need a sage to tell them that aging weakens the legs and grays the hair, or that people die and all their bodily functions cease.

The poem’s purpose is not to convey information, but to instil an attitude toward aging and (more important) death. A reader, especially a young one like the youth ostensibly addressed in this unit, can have little notion of the fear, loneliness, and nostalgia for a past irretrievably lost, which are the lot of many, perhaps all, the aged, Qohelet among them. As we stare into the darkened glass of Qohelet’s enigmas we strain to see what lies beyond. We see and sense a troubling scene, even if we cannot make out the details. Indeed, however we decode the symbols, we will come to the same insights and the same uneasiness. We finally descry ourselves. We see our own death, and Qohelet will not let us turn away.

#### ◆ 12:9-14

(9) *Furthermore, Qohelet was wise, and he also taught the people knowledge, and having listened and investigated, he composed many sayings. (10) Qohelet sought to find pleasing words and wrote<sup>a</sup> the most honest words of truth.*

(11) *The words of the sages are like goads, and the [words of] masters of collections are like implanted nails set by a shepherd.*

(12) *Furthermore, my son, of these things be wary: Making many books is endless, and studying<sup>b</sup> too much wearies the flesh.*

(13a) *(Here is) the conclusion of the matter. Everything has been heard.*

(13b) *Fear God and keep his commandments. For this is (the substance) of every man. (14) For God will bring every deed into judgment, (even) every secret deed, whether good or evil.*

<sup>a</sup>*w<sup>e</sup>kātōb* (MT *w<sup>e</sup>kātūb*)

<sup>b</sup>*lahăgôt* (MT *lahag*)

The book’s motto, “Utterly absurd, said the Qohelet, All is absurd” (12:8), has a janus quality, as it both concludes the poem on death and introduces the epilogue.

62. In Greece, the deceased’s eyes and mouth were closed by the next-of-kin as part of the ritual preparation of the corpse (Garland 1985:23). This was probably a very widespread practice, if only for aesthetic reasons.

63. Talmudic laments are collected, translated, and analyzed by Feldman, 1977:109-37.

- A. 12:9-12. The epilogue  
 a. Qohelet the wise man (12:9-10)  
 b. The words of the wise (12:11)  
 c. The study of wisdom (12:12)  
 B. 12:13-14. Postscript: man's main duty

The epilogue looks back on Qohelet and reports that he was a sage and a writer of *m<sup>e</sup>šalim* who sought for and wrote pleasing and true words. Then it comments on the words of all the sages: they prod their readers to better things. Turning next to the instructional mode (a quick sign of which is the address to “my son”), the epilogist warns about excesses in intellectual endeavors. Finally a postscript — probably a later addition, but not alien to the spirit of the foregoing — reminds us that the main thing is to devote oneself to piety and righteous deeds, for God's judgment is sure. The perspective of the book's ending becomes progressively broader, moving from Qohelet's life-work to God's universal judgment.

#### A. 12:9-12. The Epilogue

12:9 The phrase *yoter še-* has (as shown by Lohfink 1996:131-39) no good parallels in BH or RH. There are basically two ways of reading it: as an additive conjunction (“Not only X but also Y”) or a sentence adverb (“Furthermore, X . . .”). Lohfink believes the issue cannot currently be resolved. In my view, only the second is possible. Its meaning cannot be derived from RH *yoter mišše-* meaning “beyond the fact that,” as is commonly done (Podechard, Barton, Gordis, and most), because the *m(in)* before the first member is indispensable to mark the lesser term of the comparison and is used consistently in this construction in RH. *Yoter* is a noun in Qoh 6:8, 11; and 7:11, where it means “the positive balance,” “remainder”; this notion can be applied here. The clause introduced by *še-* is predicated of the noun. Hence *w<sup>e</sup>yoter šehayah qohelet ḥakam*, translated mechanically, means: “and something remaining is (the fact) that Qohelet was a sage.” This can be rendered “furthermore” or “moreover” (cf. Hertzberg, Ginsberg). The disjunctive *zaqeph gadol* on *w<sup>e</sup>yoter* reflects this interpretation. (LXX περισσόν is probably to be taken adverbially, “exceedingly was Qohelet. . . .”)

The additional or remaining information (the “*yoter*”) is not the fact that Qohelet was wise — that was asserted clearly enough in 1:16 — but the fact that he was a sage *and* a diligent teacher of the public. Hence the “furthermore” is adverbial to the entire sentence.

*’Od* means either “constantly” (Ibn Ezra, Galling, Hertzberg; cf. Qoh

7:28; Gen 46:29; Ruth 1:14; Ps 84:5; etc.) or “additionally,” “also.” If the latter is its sense here, it may mean: in addition to the wisdom quoted thus far (Ginsberg), or, in addition to being a wise man. In either case, the sentence implies that Qohelet's teaching was extensive and that the “many sayings” he constantly examined and composed went beyond those quoted in this book.

Gordis maintains that this verse draws a distinction between a professional wisdom-teacher for the rich (a *ḥakam*) and a teacher of knowledge to the common people, both of which Qohelet was. But the authors of Wisdom Literature would not have distinguished teachers of the upper class from teachers of the general populace. The Wisdom writers never saw their instruction as directed to certain social classes (though they do reveal an unconscious class orientation). The knowledge and virtues of wisdom are accessible to all (Prov 8). Personified Wisdom calls from the city walls and at the thoroughfares (Prov 1:20f.; 8:1-3) and summons all men (8:4). Nor does *ḥakam* ever designate a professional educator of the well-to-do as opposed to a teacher of the general populace. Indeed, Seow draws a causal connection: “Because Qohelet was a sage, he constantly taught people knowledge” (1997b:129; emphasis added).

Although I do not think that *yoter še-* is contrastive and to be translated “Not only was Qohelet a sage himself, but he also taught the people knowledge . . .” (Gordis) or the like, I do think that the sentence mentions two areas of activity. These correspond to the distinction between just being wise, which can be confined to the private sphere, and the *additional* role of teaching and writing. Not every wise man is a teacher of the public or an author of proverbs, though, of course, authors of proverbs and other wisdom could be called *ḥākamim* (Prov 22:17; 24:23; and Qoh 12:11). The latter is an additional role, for a *ḥakam* may be, as Ben Sira puts it, merely “wise for himself”:

He who is wise for himself [*ḥakam l<sup>e</sup>napšo*] will be sated with delights, and all who see him will call him blessed.

But he who is wise for the people [*ḥākam ’am*] will inherit honor, and his name will remain everlastingly in life.

(Sir 37:24, 26 [contiguous in Hebrew, MS D])

Ben Sira calls both types *ḥakamim*. The latter type is a *ḥākam ’am*, which could be translated “a teacher of the people” and which is the nominal equivalent of the clause *’od limmad da’at ’et ha’am*.

*W<sup>e</sup>’izzen w<sup>e</sup>ḥiqqer tiqqen m<sup>e</sup>šalim harbeh*: Ginsburg says that the asyn-

deton in the series of verbs shows that the first two are adverbial modifiers of the third. Syr, 10 MSS K-R, and, more significantly, Aquila have a conjunction before *tiqqen*. *W<sup>e</sup>tiqqen* may have been an actual Hebrew variant, but it is not preferable to MT (otherwise in Fox 1987). In the MT, the first two verbs are circumstantial to the third, and this makes sense, because listening and examining would precede and be the background of *composing m<sup>e</sup>šalim*. Moreover, listening would precede investigating.

*ʾIzzen* probably does not mean “weigh” (Delitzsch, Hertzberg, Podechard, and most); that would be *šaqal*. It is also unlikely that a prefixed noun-form would be the source for a denominative, which would require the extraction of ʾZN as the root of *moʾznayim*, though the ʾaleph is quiescent (the root is etymologically \*WZN [as in Arabic]). *ʾIzzen* might be a direct verbal derivation from \*WZN, though that root is not attested in NW Semitic except in *moʾznayim* and cognates. ʾZN-piel is probably a denominative from ʾozen, “ear,” equivalent to ʾZN-hiphil. *ʾIzzen* was understood as “listen” by Syr, Aq, and Tg, as well as Rashbam and Ginsberg.

A sage listens to others’ wisdom (see Prov 1:5-6; Sir 3:29; 6:33-35) so that he can compose proverbs of his own. As Ben Sira remarks, “When a man of understanding hears a wise word, he praises it and adds to it” (21:15).

M. Fishbane (1985:30-32) compares the description of Qohelet’s activities to Assyrian and Babylonian colophons. But while both mention writing and (sometimes) composing, they do not show the “striking similarity” Fishbane sees (ibid., p. 30). Colophons are always reflexive, referring to the act of copying the tablet (its source, the name of the scribe, date of completion, the owner of the tablet, etc.) (see Leichty 1964). Typically the scribe refers in the first person to his activity in writing, composing, or collating the text. The epilogue to Qohelet speaks in praise of teaching, not scribal work. The activity of the sages praised here is not the inscription, editing, or preservation of documents, but the formulation of their own wise teachings.

**12:10** *W<sup>e</sup>kātūb*: MT’s consonants and pointing are supported by LXX’s γεγραμμένον, but the passive participle is very awkward here. Aq, Sym, Syr, and Vul use a finite verb (“and wrote”), but they may have had the same consonants as MT and could be interpreting an infinitive absolute as a finite verb. An infinitive absolute would be in agreement with Qohelet’s usage (4:2 and 8:9) and should probably be read here. In a Hebrew fragment of Tobit (13:1) (4QTob<sup>e</sup>), *wktwb thlh bšbwht* is translated (in recension G<sup>1</sup>) as “and (Tobit) wrote a prayer for rejoicing (ἔγραψεν προσευχὴν εἰς ἀγαλλίασιν) (= 4Q200, fig. 6, l. 4; see C. A. Moore 1996:277). The structure (though not

word order) is similar: infinitive absolute *kātōb* + direct object (of words) written + adverb (of manner).

*Yošer dibrey ʾemet*: An Aramaizing equivalent of this phrase appears in Prov 22:21, *qošt ʾimrey ʾemet*. *Qošt*, which corresponds to *yošer*, is the bound form (of *qošet*; see Ps 60:6), suggesting that in Qoh 12:10 *yošer* is a bound form. In that case, *yošer dibrey ʾemet* is a superlative: “the most honest words of truth.” Compare *qomat ʾarazayw* “his tallest cedars” (*ʾlmibḥar b<sup>e</sup>rošayw* “his choicest cypresses”; Isa 37:24) and *ḥakmot šaroteyha* “her wisest princesses” (Judg 5:29).

**12:11** “The words of the sages”: In Proverbs (outside the headers), mention of the speech of the wise refers either to the content and manner of their speech in daily life (12:18; 14:3; 15:2, 7), or to the message of their teachings (13:14; 16:23), rather than to specific proverbial utterances. Here the words of the wise are the teachings of learned men. Since their teachings are meant to be inclusive of the words Qohelet wrote, the former too are to be understood as written teachings.

With rare exceptions, a *ḥakam* in the Bible is any person possessing special expertise or the virtue of wisdom, not to a member of a professional class or one who subscribes to a particular school of thought. Whybray (1974, *passim*) has argued this at length and his view is now widely accepted.

In a few verses from the latest stages of Biblical Wisdom, *ḥākamim* refers to a specific group, the sages or the learned, who are experts in Wisdom Literature and other written lore. This is the meaning of *ḥākamim* in Prov 22:17 (reading *dibrey ḥākamim* “words of the wise”), 24:23a, *gam ʾelleh laḥākamim* “these too are by the wise,” and 1:6b, *dibrey ḥākamim w<sup>e</sup>ḥidotam* “the words of the wise and their enigmas.” *Ḥākamim* seems to designate the scripturally learned in Sira 3:29; 8:8; and 44:4b. In the latter verse, Sira speaks of men who are *ḥkmy šyh bšprtm* “wise of speech in their writings.” The scholar [*soper*] of God’s law is *ḥakam* (Sir 38:24; 39:1-14). “How can one grow wise who guides the plow?” (38:25) does not mean that the plowman cannot fear God, act judiciously, and the like, but that he cannot become learned in scripture. This is the meaning of *ḥakam* in Qoh 12:11. It is not used in exactly that way in the body of the book, but this does not show that the author did not know that meaning, since the *ḥokmah* that Qohelet amasses (1:16), is certainly to be understood as erudition, not life-skills.

*Baʾāley ʾāsuppot*: *ʾāsuppot* probably refers to collections of sapiential sayings; thus LXX συναγμάτων “collections.” *Baʾāley-* has been taken to mean “members of”; thus Delitzsch, Barton, Gordis, and Hertzberg, who

compare *ba'al* "participant" (in a covenant or vow) in Gen 14:13 and Neh 6:18. But the meaning of *ba'al* in those verses is not quite the same, because participants in a covenant may be said to be *b<sup>e</sup>alim* in the sense that they "possess" it. The basic sense of *ba'al* is "possessor," "master," and that is appropriate in the present verse as well. *Ba'aley 'asuppot* are the "masters of (proverb) collections," parallel to *ḥakamim*. The force of *dibrey* "words of" carries over from v. 11a (thus C. D. Ginsburg, who notes the very same ellipsis in 10:12 and 13). RH uses *b<sup>e</sup>alim* of men *expert* in different types of literature: *ba'aley miqra'* = experts in Scripture; *ba'aley 'aggadah* = experts in Aggadah, and so on (see, e.g., the listings in Gen. Rab. 41.1, Lev. Rab. 36.2, and the Alpha Beta d'Ben Sira §24). These *b<sup>e</sup>alim* are not the authors of the texts in question but rather learned specialists in them. By this parallel we should translate *ba'aley 'asuppot* as "experts in collections." But these experts are themselves the wise, and their words in writing are Wisdom Literature.

This sentence assumes that Qohelet belongs to this category. He was a *ba'al 'asuppah*. His words, then, constitute an *'asuppah*. This does not necessarily mean that they were collected from different sources or authors, but rather that in terms of its form it is a collection of sayings — *d<sup>e</sup>barim*, *m<sup>e</sup>šalim*, and *'amarot*. All could have been "collected," brought together, by the author. A *mašal* can be quite lengthy, e.g., Num 24:3-9; Hab 2:6-12; Ezek 17:1-10; and apparently the entirety of Ps 49:6-21 and 78:5-72. Thus not only could Qohelet's proverbs and short units be considered *m<sup>e</sup>šalim*, but the longer units too, such as 1:3-11, 3:1-15, and 11:7-12:8, could each be called a *mašal* in Biblical usage.

*Dār<sup>e</sup>bōnōt* (sic) are the nails on the end of ox goads, parallel to *mašm<sup>e</sup>rot* "nails" in v. 11aβ. (Sira 44:4b apparently uses *mšmrwt* in reference to proverbs, parallel to *sprt* "writings"; see Di Lella ad loc.) Commentators have invariably considered the tenor of the comparison between goads and words of sages to be the fact that both spur people to better behavior. The similarity between *ba'aley 'asuppot* (however that may be construed) and implanted nails is thought to be that the latter are difficult to move or remove. If that were so, however, the parallel comparisons would refer to completely different qualities: an extrinsic quality in v. 11a (they induce better behavior in others) and an intrinsic one in v. 11b (they are in themselves unchanging and stable). I suggest that the "nails" share a referential function with the "goads," which are called "implanted" either by virtue of being stuck in the flesh or by virtue of being fixed in the end of the staff. In either case the *tertium comparationis* of the words of the sages and goads/nails is not that they are immovable but that they both sting. A goad prods one on to thought

and better behavior, but it also hurts. As Ibn Ezra recognized, goads "afflict and open the mind (*m<sup>e</sup>yass<sup>e</sup>rim umēpaqq<sup>e</sup>ḥim hannepeš*)." The words of the sages, in other words, can be uncomfortable, even dangerous.

*Nitt<sup>e</sup>nu mero'eh 'ehad*, lit. "given from a/one shepherd": All commentators have assumed that what is given by the shepherd is "the words of the wise." The shepherd is almost always thought to be God. But in the Bible, God is called "shepherd" in his capacity as keeper and protector, which is not relevant here, and the epithet "shepherd" is never used by itself to refer to God (see Galling). Nor are the words of the wise ever said to be given by God. Wisdom as a personified entity and as a personal intellectual and moral power is given by God, and perhaps the essential, abstract message of Wisdom is also a divine gift. But the specific teachings of the sages do not come from him directly. Similar reasons militate against identifying the shepherd as Solomon (contrary to Delitzsch and McNeile). Qohelet is not identified with Solomon in the epilogue, nor could it be said that Solomon "gave" the words of the sages.

Another difficulty in the identification of the shepherd as God (or Solomon) is the modifier *'ehad*. If the point were that there is only one divine shepherd who gives the words of the wise, rather than several, the "one" would be very emphatic. The weight of the verse would rest there rather than in the similes of v. 11a, and the verse would become an avowal of monotheism divorced from context.

Whatever "shepherd" may represent metaphorically, the sentence must first make sense literally. The fact that the images of "shepherd" and "goads" belong to one domain shows that the vehicle of the simile is continuing and the clause *nitt<sup>e</sup>nu mero'eh 'ehad* is something that could be done by an actual shepherd. In the usual interpretation, an irrelevant comparison is sandwiched between subject and verb. A more natural reading of the sentence locates the subject of *nitt<sup>e</sup>nu* not in the distant "words of the sages," but the immediately preceding nouns, the goads and nails that a shepherd "gives" or "puts" in the sense that he prods his herd with them. Within the simile, it is not the words but the goads that are "given," and they are "given" — set or stuck — not by God or Solomon but by a *shepherd*, any shepherd. NTN means "to stick" (an awl) in Deut 15:17. *'Ehad* can function as an indefinite article.<sup>64</sup>

Within the vehicle of the simile, "shepherd" is an actual shepherd, just

64. As in 1 Sam 24:15; 26:20; 1 Kgs 19:4, 5; Ezek 8:8; 17:7 (see *GBH* §137u, *GKC* §125b, *BDB* *'ehad*); similarly Aramaic *ḥādah/hāda'*: Ezr 4:8; Dan 2:31; 6:18. In all these cases enumeration is not the point, since there is no need to mark unity in opposition to plurality. The modifier could be removed with little effect on the sentence.

as goads are real goads.<sup>65</sup> When applied to the tenor, “shepherd” does have a metaphoric function, which is created and controlled by the ratio implied in the simile: words are to the sage as goads are to the shepherd. Goads and shepherds are not independently figures for words and sages. Rather, the *relation* between the two elements of the image, shepherd and goads, is an analogy to the relation between the sage and his words. Words and goads are tools to guide people on the right path, but their effect is not always pleasant. Any reader of Qohelet knows this.

12:12 *W<sup>e</sup>yoter mehemmah b<sup>e</sup>ni hizzaher*: *Yoter* presents the same problem as in 12:9. In my view, it does not mean “And besides these . . .,” as if the listener were to beware of words other than those of the wise, for the exclusion “than these” would require *miyyoter*. Moreover, by this translation the sentence would be warning against words and collections other than those of the wise. What could those be, since the authors of all of Jewish literature were wise, that is, learned? (It is only modern scholarship that enrolls “the wise” in a “school” of their own.) The warning against books other than those of the wise would at least require a clearer identification of the words or books of the non-wise. Otherwise how could we know what to avoid? Simply to say “other than these” would not identify the proscribed category, when “these” is not well-defined.

We must set the pause at *w<sup>e</sup>yoter* (against MT, which takes *yoter mehemmah* as a prosodic unit) and translate *w<sup>e</sup>yoter* (literally) as “and an additional thing (is),” hence “there’s something else to be said,” or “furthermore,” or the like. It is not problematic (contrary to Lohfink 1996:138) that *nizhar* does not govern a *min* elsewhere in the Bible. It often does so in RH when it means “be wary of” (e.g., Qoh. Rab. 4.9; Lev. Rab. 16.1; Num. Rab. 10.4). (When *nizhar* means “be careful” [to obey or to do something], it governs *b-* or *šello’*.) The antecedent of *mehemmah* “of these” must be the subject of the preceding sentence, the words of the sages/proverb collections. Lohfink (p. 139) says that, on the face of it, “these” could refer either to the object of the warning (“of these be wary”) or to the *source* of the warning (“from these take this warning”). *Nizhar min* is not used in the latter sense in RH. The latter, moreover, would imply that the admonition in v. 12b came

65. The words “literal” and “metaphorical” intersect in discussion of the functioning of metaphor. In “he was a lion in battle,” it is the “literal” feline creature that is a “metaphor for” human bravery. We commonly apply “literal” in this context to the metaphor prior to transposition to another domain, but we also apply the term to the tenor of the metaphor, its sense *after* transposition. Both uses are correct, for a metaphor takes us from one “literal” domain (e.g., animals) to another (humans).

from the words of the sages, but I do not think that one could find such a warning in Jewish literature.

The caution about the words of the sages is reinforced by the next sentence (12b), which reveals a certain hesitancy about the effects of much writing and study. Those are the very activities attributed to Qohelet in v. 9.

*’Āšot s<sup>e</sup>parim harbeh ’eyn qeš*: This clause, like the next one (v. 12bβ), is structurally an affirmative sentence of classification with two nominal members; the predication places the subject-clause in the category of *’eyn qeš*. Literally: “making many books is a thing-of-no-end”; in other words, endless. *’Eyn qeš* is a noun phrase, literally, “a nothingness of end” or “an absence of end,” hence “a thing of no end.” The negative particle *’ayin* is a noun, and the nominal use of the bound form *’eyn* (+ noun) is clear in prepositional phrases such as *b<sup>e</sup>’eyn musar*, “because of lack of instruction” (Prov 5:23); *me’eyn mayim*, “because of lack of water” (*Ilbaššama’*; Isa 50:2); *l<sup>e</sup>’eyn ’onim*, “to the one-of-no-strength” (*Illyya’ep*; Isa 40:29); and often. Note also the strict parallelism in Prov 26:20 between *’eyn* and *’epes* “nothing,” whose nominal character is clear.

Contrary to my comment in *Contradictions*, I do not now follow Tur-Sinai in construing *qeš* as “purpose, profit” and *’eyn-qeš* as “profitless.” This usage is inadequately attested elsewhere. However, the traditional translation, “without end,” comes down to the same thing. The sentence is not just an observation on the unremitting enterprise of authorship; it is an evaluation of the activity. Making many books is endless in the sense of leading nowhere, like the interminable movements of natural phenomena in 1:3-8, which Qohelet considers profitless. In Qoh 12:12b, the epilogist shares Qohelet’s assumptions about the preconditions of profit and their lack.

In 12:12ba, *harbeh* “many” is not superfluous. It is not that writing books itself is endless, hence pointless. It is the *excessive* production of books whose value the epilogist doubts. Qoh 12:12ba is thus an application of one of Qohelet’s own lessons: Do what you will, but don’t *overdo* it (9:10).

A different understanding of the phrase is suggested by the translation in R. B. Y. Scott’s commentary: “book learning is an endless occupation”; but Scott offers no further comment. P. de Boer (1977) argues that *’āšot s<sup>e</sup>parim* means “working at books” (p. 88) and notes that the Targum first translates the phrase as *lm’bd spry ḥwknt’* “to make books of wisdom” then paraphrases *wlm’sq bptgmy ’wryt’* “to busy oneself in words of Torah.” Tg, however, may be extending the application of the idea paraphrastically rather than explicating it. N. Bronzik (1980) interprets the phrase to mean “book-learning” and compares *’ašah torah* in RH, meaning “to study Torah.” Mid. Ps. 119:42 shows that this was one ancient interpretation of Qoh 12:12bβ:

“What is the meaning of ‘It [the Torah] belongs to me forever’ [Ps 119:98]? It means that I did not busy myself with other books besides it, as Solomon says, *’āšot s’parim harbeh ’eyn qeš.*” In the Midrash the line must be rendered, “there is no end in studying many books.” By this interpretation, the phrase is in synonymous parallelism with the end of the verse, “and studying too much wearies the flesh.” The problem with this intriguing interpretation is that even though *’āšah torah* means “to study Torah,” there is no evidence that *’āšah s’parim* ever meant “to study books.” In Aramaic, *’abad sipra*’ (see below) means “write a document,” and this supports the interpretation of *’āšot s’parim* as “writing books.”

M. Fishbane (1985) translates *’āšot* as “compose” or “compile,” comparing Akkadian *uppušu* (D-stem of *epēšu*, the equivalent of Hebrew *’āšah*), used in scribal colophons. But whether *’āšot s’parim* means to compile or to write books (or, most likely, both), the epilogist does not ascribe the original composition of Qohelet’s sayings to someone other than Qohelet. The equivalent Aramaic phrase, *’bd spr*’, occurs in a fifth century B.C.E. papyrus (*spr*’ *znh zy ’nh ’bdt*; Kraeling 1953:9, 22), where *’bd* means “write,” not “collect.” *’SH* is used of scribal activity in Jer 8:8, but we cannot know just what these scribes were doing — composing, compiling, or copying.

*Lahag* is a crux, usually explained by reference to Arabic *lahija*, “apply oneself assiduously.” But that root is not otherwise productive in Hebrew. Qoh. Rab. on this verse rephrases *lhg* as *lahāgot*: “They [the words of the wise] were given (to us) to study (*lahāgot*); they were not given for weariness of flesh.” This seems to grasp the gist of the verse. We should, however, emend to *lhgt* (Perles 1895:29), a haplography with the similar *heh* of *hrbh*; see LSF §205. *Hagah* means “meditate, study” (see especially Josh 1:8 and Ps 1:2). It also (and originally) means “utter, speak” and is used of teaching wisdom in Ps 37:30a: “The mouth of the righteous utters (*yehgeh*) wisdom.” The “uttering” probably refers to studying (by reading aloud, perhaps in a singsong) rather than to teaching. By this interpretation, the verse warns against excess in the two aspects of the sage’s activity attributed to Qohelet: studying others’ sayings (*lahāg<ot>* = *’izzen* and *hiqqr*) and writing one’s own wisdom (*’āšot s’parim* = *tiqqen* and *katob*). The clause “and studying too much wearies the flesh” means that excessive study is tantamount to, or produces, this discomfort. (For this type of predication compare 2:23.)

## B. 12:13-14. Postscript: Man’s Main Duty

**12:13a** *Sop dabar hakkol nišma*’, “(Here is) the conclusion of the matter. Everything has been heard”: The Masoretes make the *samekh* of *sop dabar* a

*samekh rabbati*, a “large *samekh*.”<sup>66</sup> The *rabbati* letters call attention to something special, such as a beginning of a new section. Here the function is to mark the start of the book’s conclusion. It is significant that the Masoretes marked v. 13a rather than v. 9 by the large letter. Regardless of the authorship of vv. 13-14 (Hertzberg, Lauha, Zimmerli, et al. identify them as later than vv. 9-12), they constitute a “postscript” (as Seow [1997b:138] aptly calls the passage, with reference, however, only to vv. 13b-14).

The epilogue has thus far appraised Qohelet and his intellectual setting: the production and study of wisdom, probably meaning book-learning generally. The postscript has a different perspective: man’s religious duty prior to, and apart from, wisdom. This is supplementary, not contradictory, to Qohelet’s (and Wisdom’s) perspective, even though it may well be a later addition (thus too Seow 1997b:139). But it is not of a piece with the rest of the epilogue. A new voice enters, one which probably belongs to a later scribe.<sup>67</sup>

An examination of *sop dabar hakkol nišma*’ (v. 13a) shows how the postscript stands apart. It marks the end of the epilogue proper (12:9-12) but stands outside it.

Qohelet’s *sop dabar* has a precise Aramaic equivalent in *sopa’ di-mill<sup>e</sup>ta*’, in Dan 7:28a. The full phrase in Daniel is *’ad kah sopa’ di-mill<sup>e</sup>ta*’, lit. “up to here is the conclusion of the matter.” This phrase concludes Daniel’s report of an angelic interpretation of a symbolic vision. The commentary of Hartman and Di Lella (1978:207) explains Dan 7:28a as a conflation of two expressions, *’ad kah mill<sup>e</sup>ta*’ “thus far the matter” and *kah sopa’ di-mill<sup>e</sup>ta*’ “here is the conclusion of the matter,” but neither expression is attested independently. More likely, the clause is a fusion of *’ad kah* and *sopa’ di-mill<sup>e</sup>ta*’, each of which is a meaningful phrase and attested elsewhere. The latter is found in Qoh 12:13a, the former has precise Hebrew equivalents: *’ad hennah* and *’ad ka’n*. Jeremiah’s words end with *’ad hennah dibrey yirm<sup>e</sup>yahu* “until here the words of Jeremiah” (Jer 51:64), after which follows the historical appendix from 2 Kgs 24:18–25:30. The RH equivalent *’ad ka’n* is often used to close quotations (e.g., Sifra *Behar Sinai* §5; b. Bek. 20a).

Daniel’s fusion of two synonymous phrases resembles the present verse, in which *sop dabar* is reinforced by *hakkol nišma*’. In Daniel the phrase marks the end of a long quotation of the angel’s explanation, draws a

66. Not written in the Leningrad codex proper, but listed in its Masorah Finalis and noted in *Diqduqey Haṭṭēamim* (ed. Baer-Strack, §61).

67. In *Contradictions* (pp. 310-23; 328f.), I read these verses as integral to the epilogue and construed v. 13a as prospective.



ler it, as it were. If we apply this to Qohelet, the “matter” (*dabar*) is it is about to be said in vv. 13b-14 but what has been said so far.

These considerations support the perception of Seow (1997b:138f.) 3a marks the end of the book proper. Seow calls v. 13a a colophon, linking the colophons at the end of Egyptian Wisdom books. (The usage is common to many genres.) Vv. 13b-14, Seow says, are a “postscript” or editor. To be precise, a colophon is the addition of a scribe to a text copied, assuring the reader of the accuracy of the inscription and adding relating to the copy itself, such as its date (see Leichty 1964 on Babylonian colophons).<sup>68</sup> However, Qoh 12:13a can (somewhat) be called a colophon along the lines of Jer 51:64 and Ps 72:19 and Amen. The prayers of Jesse son of David are finished”), which typically mark what was originally the end of a scroll.

Verse 13a is *not* said by the author of the epilogue, just as Dan 7:28a is by the preceding speaker, the angel. Likewise, Jer 51:64 is certainly the words of the scribe who added the historical appendix, not Jeremiah himself. Verse 12:13a, then, is a colophon, and vv. 13b-14 an extension of it. The speaker (whom we need not dub an “editor”) has, fairly enough, sealed the book with v. 13a before adding an admonition of his own.

The blunt “everything has been heard” suggests a certain impatience with excessive study and rumination, just like v. 12. In context, the “everything that has been heard” is the words of the wise (the *hemmah* of v. 12), not the words among them. The author puts wisdom in perspective: wisdom (wisdom gained through booklearning, not good sense or sagacity) is all very fine, but don’t get too proud.

The next sentence begins with “fear God,” which is also blunt but theologically significant. Ben Sira rephrases Qoh 12:13a by the sentence *‘wd k’lh l’ q’s dbr hw’ hkl* (43:27), a difficult line that is probably to be translated “(things) such as these we shall not add, and the end of the matter: He [God] is everything.” It must be granted that Sira seems to understand *dabar* as prospective. Sira’s sentence, however, does support the traditional reading in part, because *k’lh*, like *hakkol* in Qohelet, is retrospective. The verse as a whole concludes a passage. The structure of Sirach and the first-plural verbs in 27f. suggest that Ben Sira is construing the sentence *‘wd k’lh l’ q’s dbr hw’ hkl* as an independent sentence in apposition to *sop q’at*: I have done here.

<sup>68</sup> A typical Egyptian colophon says “Finished successfully [lit. “It has come well, (made) by the (soul of the) scribe PN son of PN [sometimes with titles and self-praise] (such-and-such a date).”

“The conclusion of the matter” means that the book of Qohelet, together with its epilogue, is finished. The author of Qoh 12:13a considered vv. 12:9-12 as belonging to the *dabar*, the “matter” or “word” that is the book of Qohelet. In v. 13b, he contributes something beyond that book.

As Excursus III will argue, the speaker of the epilogue (and 1:1 and 7:27) presents himself as a teacher transmitting the words of Qohelet, a literary persona, whom he comments on in 12:9-12. The speaker of the postscript, however, has a different relation to the preceding: He is not looking in retrospect on the most recent speaker, the epilogist. If we imagine the epilogist writing vv. 9-12 and continuing into v. 13, he would have had no reason to say “end quote,” so to speak, marking v. 12 as the end of the book proper, for he would not yet have finished speaking. Hence it is probable that a later scribe added vv. 13f. in order to bring the discussion to an end, respectfully but definitively.

A difference in ideological nuance too, discussed below, supports this ascription of the postscript to a different author, though not conclusively. It is not that the postscript contradicts the rest of the book, but it does take a different tack and adds a new dimension.

**12:13b** The postscript reminds us that what really counts is fear of God and obedience to his commands. Basic knowledge of this principle is accessible to everyone — *kol ha’adam* — from the start, even without “much study.” Prov 1:7 and 9:10 teach the same.

The theme of fear of God belongs to traditional (pre-Sira) Wisdom, but keeping his commandments diverges from it insofar as it speaks of a revelation of the divine will. The postscript goes beyond earlier Wisdom Literature and, like Ben Sira, explicitly subordinates wisdom to the Law. That does not make vv. 13-14 “alien to everything Qohelet has said thus far” (Crenshaw, p. 192). Vv. 13b-14 do stand outside of Wisdom epistemology, but Wisdom Literature, including the book of Qohelet, does not repudiate divine revelation of commandments; that is simply not its province. Wisdom Literature, including Qohelet, seeks to show the way to a righteous and successful life through the exercise of human intellect. There is much that the Law does not regulate, and that vast area is largely Wisdom’s realm. With rare exceptions, most notably with regard to adultery, the behavior Wisdom deals with is not in categories covered by law. The same is true of Pirqey Avot, which is, of course, thoroughly aware of God’s law and committed to its fulfillment. While Avot counsels study of Torah and obedience to it, it does not itself reiterate the law or tell people to do what the law already commands.

*Ki zeh kol ha'adam*, lit. “for this is every man” or “this is the entirety of man.” The Aramaic translation hypothesis explains this difficult phrase as reflecting, approximately: *ky dyn* [i.e., *dāyēn*] *kl nš*, “For he [sc., God] judges every man.” *Dyn* “judge” was supposedly misread as *deyn* = “this” (Zimmermann 1973:163; followed by Ginsberg). An Aramaic writer, however, would probably have supplied *hu'* as a copula, which would have eliminated the ambiguity that supposedly faced the Hebrew translator.

*Kol ha'adam* means “every man” throughout the Bible (see, e.g., Qoh 3:13; 5:18; 7:2), not “all of man.” In this verse, the phrase is elliptical, but it is not clear how the ellipsis is to be filled out. AV, Gordis, Murphy, and many supply “duty”: “For this is the entire duty of man.” But the notion of “duty” is not really provided by context and supplying it seems rather *ad hoc*.

The predicate in such nominal predications can have a variety of functions. It can designate the material from which something is made, the thing contained, the measure, the thing numbered (for *mispar*), the abstract quality, and a concrete particularity (GBH §154e). These can be boiled down to the notion of content — the substance that constitutes, or fills up, the entity in the predicate. For example, *šabbeyhem kesep w'zahab* (Ps 115:4) means “their idols are made of silver and gold”; *m'lo' kol ha'areš k'ebodo* (Isa 6:3) means that God's glory fills up the earth, is its very substance and material; *šani šalom* (Ps 120:7) means that I am peace and nothing but peace, I have no hostile thoughts; *šani t'pillah* (Ps 109:4) means that “I am all prayer” (in the way we might say, “I am all ears”); *amm'ka n'dabot* (Ps 110:3) (lit. “your people are voluntariness” [abstract]) means that the entire nation is composed of volunteers; *kullo mašmadim* (Cant 5:16aβ) means that “he is entirely delights,” with nothing bland or base mixed in. This explanation fits most of the examples GBH (§154e) gives.<sup>69</sup> The effect of this construction seems to be an intensification of the equation: Not only am I prayerful, I am prayer itself; or, we might say, I am the very soul of prayer, and similarly for the other examples. By this measure, *zeh kol ha'adam* in Qoh 12:13 means that *this* — the fear of God and obedience to his commandments — is the substance, the “material” of every person. There should be no alloy.

“Every man” implies a distinction between the statements and admonitions in 12:9-12, which have to do with the sages and their pupils, and *this*, the demand stated in 12:13bβ, which applies to everyone. *Zeh* is thus emphatic, italicized so to speak. Verse 14 provides a logical motivation for v.

69. “The seven good ears are seven years” (Gen 41:26), which GBH classes as “explanation,” is different. It is an equation formula typical of glossing.

13bβ: this rule applies to everyone, whatever his learning and wisdom, because God will bring every single deed into judgment.

12:14 “For God will bring every deed into judgment, (even) every secret deed, whether good or evil”: This recalls 3:17, “God will judge the righteous and the wicked,” which also emphasizes the globality of the judgment. In *al kol ne'lam*, the preposition *al* is governed by the verbal notion implicit in *mišpaṭ*. As in 11:9, *al* indicates the deeds with respect to which one is judged. Compare Jer 1:16, “And I will pronounce my judgments (on) them [*otam*] upon [*al*] all their evil,” in which the deed being judged is introduced by *al*. The final warning is that God will judge every deed, even hidden ones.

On the theology of the postscript see §9.6.

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### EXCURSUS III

## The Voices in the Book of Qohelet

After being introduced in 1:1 and epitomized in 1:2, Qohelet speaks. In 12:8, Qohelet's message is again epitomized, with a third-person quoting-verb. An external speaker, the epilogist, steps forward in 12:9-12. In 12:13f., a postscript, probably by a later hand, sums up with an exhortation to fear God and obey him, since his judgment is certain. This excursus examines the interrelations and functions of these three voices.

### 1. The Epilogist

The epilogist speaks in a pronouncedly didactic tone. He marks off the points to be learned: “Furthermore, . . . Furthermore.” He commends the wise Qohelet, generalizes about the words of sages, and cautions the listener against excess in writing and study. He addresses the ostensive audience of his remarks as *b'ni*, “my son,” in the customary Wisdom fashion, thus implying the discourse-setting almost universal in didactic Wisdom Literature: a father giving instruction to his son. The epilogist thus represents himself as a sage, a teacher of Wisdom, as he describes the work of an earlier wise man, Qohelet. Who, then, is the epilogist, and what did he do?