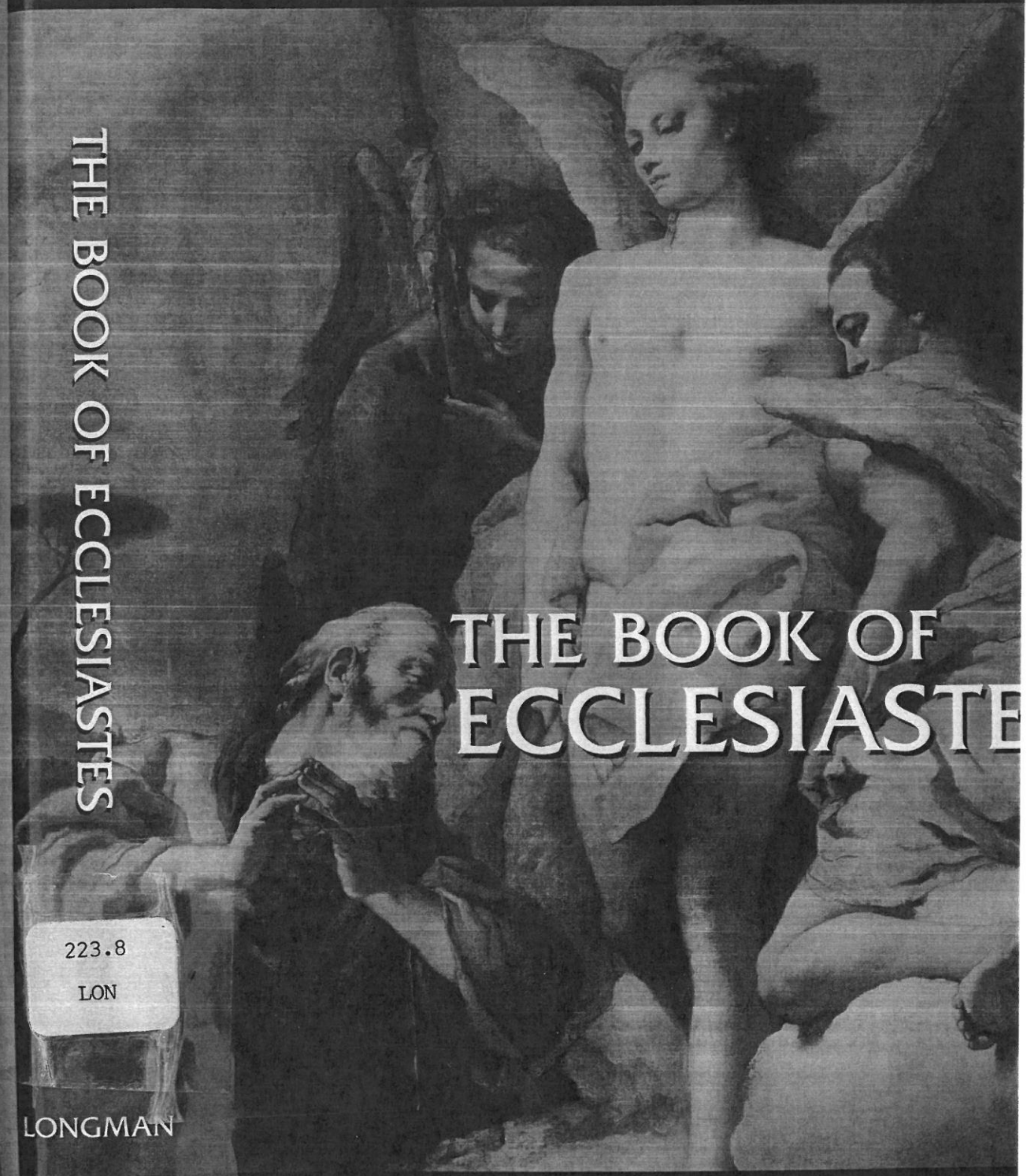
NICOT

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

Long ago St. Paul wrote: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6, NRSV). He was right: ministry indeed requires a team effort — the collective labors of many skilled hands and minds. Someone digs up the dirt and drops in seed, while others water the ground to nourish seedlings to growth. The same team effort over time has brought this commentary series to its position of prominence today. Professor E. J. Young "planted" it forty years ago, enlisting its first contributors and himself writing its first published volume. Professor R. K. Harrison "watered" it, signing on other scholars and wisely editing everyone's finished products. As General Editor, my hands now tend their planting, and, true to Paul's words, through four decades God has indeed graciously "[given] the growth."

Today the New International Commentary on the Old Testament enjoys a wide readership of scholars, priests, pastors, rabbis, and other serious Bible students. Thousands of readers across the religious spectrum and in countless countries consult its volumes in their ongoing preaching, teaching, and research. They warmly welcome the publication of each new volume and eagerly await its eventual transformation from an emerging "series" into a complete commentary "set." But as humanity experiences a new century of history, an era commonly called "postmodern," what kind of commentary series is NICOT? What distinguishes it from other similarly well-established series?

Its volumes aim to publish biblical scholarship of the highest quality. Each contributor writes as an expert, both in the biblical text itself and in the relevant scholarly literature, and each commentary conveys the results of wide reading and careful, mature reflection. Ultimately, its spirit is eclectic, each contributor gleaning interpretive insights from any useful source, whatever its religious or philosophical viewpoint, and integrating them into his or her interpretation of a biblical book. The series draws on recent methodological innovations in biblical scholarship, e.g., canon criticism, the so-called "new literary criticism," reader-response theories, and sensitivity to gender-based

and ethnic readings. NICOT volumes also aim to be irenic in tone, summarizing and critiquing influential views with fairness while defending their own. Its list of contributors includes male and female scholars from a number of Christian faith-groups. The diversity of contributors and their freedom to draw on all relevant methodologies give the entire series an exciting and enriching variety.

What truly distinguishes this series, however, is that it speaks from within that interpretive tradition known as evangelicalism. Evangelicalism is an informal movement within Protestantism that cuts across traditional denominational lines. Its heart and soul is the conviction that the Bible is God's inspired Word, written by gifted human writers, through which God calls humanity to enjoy a loving personal relationship with its Creator and Savior. True to that tradition, NICOT volumes do not treat the Old Testament as just an ancient literary artifact on a par with the *Iliad* or the Gilgamesh Epic. They are not literary autopsies of ancient parchment cadavers but rigorous, reverent wrestlings with wonderfully human writings through which the living God speaks his powerful Word. NICOT delicately balances "criticism" (i.e., the use of standard critical methodologies) with humble respect, admiration, and even affection for the biblical text. As an evangelical commentary, it pays particular attention to the text's literary features, theological themes, and implications for the life of faith today.

Ultimately, NICOT aims to serve women and men of faith who desire to hear God's voice afresh through the Old Testament. With gratitude to God for two marvelous gifts — the Scriptures themselves and keen-minded scholars to explain their message — I welcome readers of all kinds to savor the good fruit of this series.

ROBERT L. HUBBARD, JR.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The book of Ecclesiastes has captured my attention, or gotten under my skin, for the past fifteen years. I was first attracted to it for academic reasons. At that time my attention was riveted to a number of Mesopotamian literary texts that formed the substance of my doctoral dissertation at Yale University.[1] As I will argue in the introduction, these texts bear a formal, structural similarity to the body of the book of Ecclesiastes.

However, as I read the book of Ecclesiastes closely, its content fascinated me. The sentiments of the main speaker of the book, a person given the name Qohelet, sounded incredibly modern. He expressed the uncertainty and anxieties of our own age. He is driven by the question, "Where can we find meaning in the world?" This issue is the fundamental one that all sensitive human beings must address.

But while the questions that Qohelet raised attracted me, his answers shocked me, coming as they do out from the midst of the sacred canon. "Meaningless," says Qohelet, "everything is meaningless." How does this perspective fit into the rest of biblical revelation? My commentary addresses this question.

It has taken me far longer than I had hoped to finish this commentary. Other projects, a few false starts, a discerning editor, and life have slowed me down. But I first of all thank God for allowing me the energy and time to complete the commentary.

Second, I wish to thank the late Professor Roland K. Harrison for the invitation to join the series. Professor Harrison died just before I submitted my first draft, so I regret not having the advantage of his feedback on my material.

Third, I extend my deep appreciation to Professor Robert Hubbard,

1. Since published as *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1991).

who succeeded Dr. Harrison to the post of editor of the series. He has done a wonderful job working with a sometimes recalcitrant author, greatly improving the manuscript that the reader has before him or her. Dr. Hubbard was meticulous in his reading and guidance and has increased my respect and admiration for his scholarship and insight. For his benefit, however, I must admit that, while accepting the vast majority of his suggestions, I did not follow all his advice. Thus, he cannot be blamed for the remaining shortcomings of my analysis and presentation.

I wish to thank my colleagues in the Old Testament department at Westminster Theological Seminary for their support over the years it has taken to finish this work. Two of my colleagues are no longer here at the seminary. Ray Dillard died of a heart attack at the young age of forty-nine. He is greatly missed. Bruce Waltke, who has been an inspiration to many of us, left our faculty a few years ago and now teaches on the faculty at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando.

At the present time, my colleagues include Alan Groves, Doug Green, and Peter Enns. Thank you, my friends, for your friendship and support.

Over the past dozen years I have offered a doctoral course on the book of Ecclesiastes, allowing me to continue research during the semester. My students have never been afraid to disagree with their professor, and so this class has proved an excellent arena to try out my ideas and to refine or even discard them. The input of this class has been so important to me that I would like to thank the members of the seminar by name. Many of these former students are now professors in different parts of the world. Thanks go to Jack Brown, Lydia Brownback, Mark Bruffey, Mike Canham, Myung Sick Chung, Paul D'Angona, Martin Emmrich, David Freer, Ricardo Gouvea, Jin Kyu Kim, David Lee, John Makujina, Robert Mavis, Erika Moore, Phil Roberts, George Schwab, Adrian Smith, David Strabnow, Stephen Tan, Dean Ulrich, and Peter Yimbu.

As usual, I must extend special appreciation and love to my family. My wife, Alice, and my three children, Tremper (IV), Timothy, and Andrew, have borne with my preoccupations with great patience. I love them all.

This book is dedicated to Dan Allender, with whom I have traveled much of the path of life. Starting as boyhood friends playing junior and senior high school football together (among other things), we then attended Ohio Wesleyan University together. While there, we were both attracted to the mystery and promise of the Christian faith and decided to attend seminary. Not to be separated, we decided to go to Westminster. After seminary, Dan pursued a doctorate in psychology, while I went on in Old Testament. Recently, we have combined our two interests in a series of writing projects, which keep us in close contact. Dan's insight into the human condition and the Bible has stimulated much of my thinking about the book of Ecclesiastes.

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ANET	J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament.* 3d ed. Princeton: Princeton University, 1969
AS	Assyriological Studies
ASTI	*Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute*
AUSS	*Andrews University Seminary Studies*
BASOR	*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Repr. Oxford: Clarendon, 1959
BHK	R. Kittel, ed., *Biblia Hebraica.* 3d ed. Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1937
BHS	K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, eds., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia.* Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1967-77
BibSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar: Altes Testament
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
BZAW	Beihefte zur *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
CAD	I. J. Gelb, et al., eds., *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.* Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1956-
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CTM	*Concordia Theological Monthly*
EI	*Eretz Israel*
EQ	*Evangelical Quarterly*
ETL	*Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses*
Evan. Theol.	*Evangelische Theologie*
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
GKC	E. Kautzsch, ed., A. E. Cowley, trans., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar.* 2d ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1910
GTJ	*Grace Theological Journal*
HAR	*Hebrew Annual Review*
HKAT	Handkommentar zum Alten Testament

HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
HUCA	*Hebrew Union College Annual*
ICC	International Critical Commentary
Interp	*Interpretation*
ITC	International Theological Commentary
JB	Jerusalem Bible
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JJS	*Journal of Jewish Studies*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JQR	*Jewish Quarterly Review*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* — Supplement Series
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
KAT	Kommentar zum Alten Testament
KB	L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*
KJV	King James Version
MT	Masoretic Text
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCB	New Century Bible
Neue EB	Die Neue Echter-Bibel
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NKJV	New King James Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTWSA	*Die Ou Testamentiese Werkgemeenskap in Suid-Afrika*
REB	Revised English Bible
SBLDS	Society for Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLSCS	SBL Septuagint and Cognate Studies
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
TSF Bulletin	*Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin*
TWOT	R. L. Harris, et al., eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament.* 2 vols. Chicago: Moody, 1980
UF	*Ugarit-Forschungen*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VTSup	*Vetus Testamentum,* Supplements
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZDMGSup	*Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft,* Supplements
ZThK	*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*

INTRODUCTION[1]

I. TITLE

The English title of Ecclesiastes has been handed down from the Septuagint *(ekklēsiastēs)* via the Vulgate *(Liber Ecclesiastes)*. The Greek title derives from the name of the main speaker of the book, who calls himself *ekklēsiastēs*. This Greek name is a translation of the Hebrew *qōhelet*. Qohelet is not a proper name, but rather a nickname of sorts, functioning as a type of pseudonym. The name literally means "one who assembles" or "assembler," since it is a qal feminine singular participle of the root *qhl*. The feminine participle here and elsewhere is used for occupational names (see also Ezra 2:55, 57; Neh. 3:57, 59). That Qohelet is an occupational name rather than a proper name is further indicated by its occurrence prefixed by the definite article (Eccles. 12:8).

The traditional English translations of the name/title are "the Preacher" and "the Teacher," both of which are misleading. Both translations assume that the speaker of the book is addressing a group that he has assembled. Those who believe the group is religious in orientation translate "Preacher," a rendition certainly encouraged by the Greek translation, which is related to the New Testament word for "church" *(ekklēsia)*. Others, however, rightly object that Qohelet is too untraditional to be located in a religious setting and thus believe the group he has assembled is a classroom of sorts; they thus translate "Teacher." This approach too has its fatal flaws (see the section on "Authorship").[2]

1. For further discussion, consult R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 247-55.

2. P. Joüon, "Sur le nom de Qoheleth," *Biblica* 2 (1921): 53-54, argues that *Qohelet* must mean "orator of the people," not of a small elite. E. Ullendorff, "The Meaning of *qhlt*," *VT* 2 (1962): 215, however, posits a meaning "the arguer."

The following commentary, for reasons to be described below, will observe a careful distinction in reference between Qohelet and Ecclesiastes. "Qohelet" is the main speaker of the book, while "Ecclesiastes" refers to the book as a whole.

II. AUTHORSHIP

A. THE TRADITION OF SOLOMON AS AUTHOR

Traditionally, Qohelet has been taken as a nickname for Solomon, who then is argued to be the author of the book. The predominant opinion of the past is that in Ecclesiastes an old and repentant Solomon looks back over his life, particularly the period after his apostasy from the Lord, which is recorded in 1 Kings 11:1-13.[3]

A surface reading of the text appears to support this identification. The first verse, often a place for a superscription that includes authorship information,[4] reads: "The words of Qohelet, son of David, king in Jerusalem." These words seem most naturally to point to Solomon, the biological son of King David, who ruled the kingdom after his father in the tenth century B.C. In addition, in 1:12 the first-person speaker in the body of the book of Ecclesiastes identifies himself as king of Israel who ruled in Jerusalem. Furthermore, the description of this king as one who enjoyed fantastic wealth (2:4-9) and as a possessor of great wisdom (1:16) also bears resemblance to the picture of Solomon that we get in the historical books (1 Kings 3:1–10:29).

Moreover, there is likely an intentional link between Solomon and the chosen acronym Qohelet. 1 Kings 8, the story of the dedication of the temple, uses the verbal root *qhl* quite often in reference to Solomon gathering people to hear his speech, which dedicates the newly constructed temple (cf. vv. 1, 2, 14, 22, 55). Thus, the "Assembler" may be an intertextual reference to 1 Kings 8 and a subtle hint that Solomon is the referent.

It is true that the earliest recorded interpretations of the book clearly identify Qohelet with Solomon. Gregory Thaumaturgos (A.D. 213-270), a disciple of Origen, wrote an early paraphrase of the book. He rendered Eccle-

3. M. Luther, "Notes on Ecclesiastes," in *Luther's Works,* vol. 15, ed. and trans. J. Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972 [1532]), p. 12, gets even more detailed and concrete by imagining Qohelet's monologue to be the reports of King Solomon's dinner conversations. Thus, Qohelet's monologue is analogous to his own Table Talk.

4. That is, Isa. 1:1; Jer. 1:1; Mic. 1:1; Nah. 1:1, but especially Prov. 1:1 and Song of Songs 1:1.

siastes 1:1, "Solomon (the son of the king and prophet David), a king more honoured and a prophet wiser than anyone else, speaks to the whole assembly of God."[5] The Jewish Targum on the book shows the same tendency. For instance, note its expansionistic tendencies in the rendering of 1:12:

> When King Solomon was sitting upon the throne of his kingdom, his heart became very proud of his riches, and he violated the word of God, by gathering many horses, chariots and riders, and amassing much gold and silver. And he married from foreign nations, whereupon the anger of the Lord was kindled against him, and he sent to him Ashmodai, king of the demons, who drove him from his kingdom's throne, and took away the ring from his hand, in order that he should roam and wander about in the world to reprove it. And he roamed about in the outlying towns and the cities of the land of Israel, weeping and lamenting, and saying, "I am Qohelet, whose name was formerly called Solomon, who was king over Israel in Jerusalem."[6]

The Targum illustrates the further tendency to use the book of Ecclesiastes to fill in gaps in the life of Solomon. The book of 1 Kings, which narrates Solomon's apostasy, never betrays a hint of any repentance before his death. However, the feeling was and, in certain quarters, still is strong that the person who wrote large parts of Proverbs and, according to 1 Kings 4:29-34, was renowned through the ancient world for his divinely given wisdom could not die in ignorance. Thus, Ecclesiastes became the witness to his return to orthodoxy at the end of his life, and his apostasy then becomes a foil to teach others of the dangers of wandering from the true God.

Even in the light of strong internal and external testimony to the contrary (see below), a small, but vocal, group of evangelical scholars still advocate this view.[7] Indeed, they argue that the text is most naturally read this way, and that to deviate from this traditional view of authorship can only be seen as a caving in to suspect views. Nonetheless, there are clear signs within the book itself that Ecclesiastes was not written by King Solomon in the tenth century B.C.

5. See the excellent translation and commentary on Gregory's work in J. Jarick, *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes,* SBLSCS 29 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).

6. From the helpful translation and commentary by E. Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Qohelet* (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1978), p. 28.

7. For example, and most notably, W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life,* Everyman's Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1979).

B. PROBLEMS WITH THE TRADITION

Attentive readers of the Bible have felt uneasy about the simple identification of Qohelet with Solomon for a long time. Even scholars with impeccably conservative credentials have argued against Solomonic authorship through the centuries. This list includes such luminaries as Moses Stuart,[8] Ernst W. Hengstenberg,[9] Charles H. H. Wright,[10] Edward J. Young,[11] and Derek Kidner.[12] We would certainly need to add the famous nineteenth-century Lutheran commentator, Franz Delitzsch, to this list. His comment concerning the language of Ecclesiastes has often been repeated, "if the book of Koheleth were of old Solomonic origin, then there is no history of the Hebrew language."[13]

What is the evidence that drove these and many others away from what seems the most natural reading of the text? I will consider the counterevidence to Solomonic authorship under two headings: internal and external considerations.

1. Internal Considerations

A number of subtle and even blatant hints within the book itself distance Solomon from Qohelet. The first is the use of the nickname (or more technically pseudonym) itself. One must ask what is gained or what possible reason could Solomon have had for adopting a name other than his own in this book? Is he hiding his identity from someone? If so, for what possible reason? Does the nickname add anything to the message of the book? After all, the connection to Solomon is tenuous, and no one has argued that the name contributes to the meaning of the book. It is much more likely that the nickname Qohelet was adopted by the actual writer to associate himself with Solomon, while retaining his distance from the actual person. It is a way of indicating that the

8. M. Stuart, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1851).

9. E. W. Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Evansville, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1960 [1869]).

10. According to Wright, "There are, however, passages to be found in the Book of Koheleth itself in which the author lifts up his visor in such a manner as to show the intelligent reader that the character and name of Solomon were simply assumed, not for any purpose of deception, nor as 'a pious fraud,' but by a perfectly allowable literary device" (C. H. H. Wright, *The Book of Koheleth* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1888], p. 83).

11. E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949).

12. D. Kidner, *A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976).

13. F. Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon,* trans. M. G. Easton (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975 [1872]), p. 190.

Solomonic persona is being adopted for literary and communicative purposes. In brief, the wise man who adopts the nickname Qohelet pretends to be Solomon while he explores avenues of meaning in the world. Solomon was known as the wisest and richest man to have ever lived. If he could not find meaning in the things of the world, who could (see 2:12)?

Second, two verses seem to be especially strong indications that Qohelet, while associated with Solomon, is not the historical personage.

Ecclesiastes 1:12:

> I, Qohelet, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

It is striking that the past tense is used here. Its use is an implicit claim that there was a time when Solomon was alive but was no longer king. Indeed, the Targum (see above) understands it that way and creates or uses an old legend that Solomon abdicated his throne in his old age. The historical books not only do not mention but also do not allow such a period in Solomon's life. According to 1 Kings 11, Solomon died while he ruled Israel.

Ecclesiastes 1:16a:

> I said to myself, "I have surpassed in wisdom everyone who ruled Jerusalem before me."

This verse sounds strange on Solomon's lips. He claims more wisdom than all the rulers in Jerusalem that preceded him, but only David was ruler in Jerusalem before him, unless of course he would include Jebusite city rulers, but that would be passing strange coming from an Israelite king. After all, these were pagan, alien kings, and hostile to Israel.

Besides these two verses that distance Solomon from Qohelet, careful readers notice that the association between Qohelet and the king/Solomon only lasts for the first three chapters, after which no more is made of it. As a matter of fact, when the kingship is mentioned later in the book of Ecclesiastes, there appears to be a large gap between the speaker and the institution.

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3:

> Then I turned and observed all the oppression that is done under the sun, and oh, the tears of the oppressed! There is no one to comfort them. Power is in the grasp of the oppressors. There is no one to comfort them. So I praised the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still alive. But better than both of these is the one who does not yet exist. That one has not seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.

How could Solomon write these verses? He was the mightiest ruler of the land. He could easily have done more than bemoan the plight of the oppressed; he could have taken steps to alleviate it. From what we know of the biblical Solomon, he did the opposite. He created a heavy burden for his people, something that continued until the end of his reign, as we know from the interesting dialogue between the people of Israel and Rehoboam, Solomon's son (1 Kings 12, especially v. 4).[14]

Ecclesiastes 5:7-8 (English 5:8-9):

> If you see oppression of the poor and deprivation of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be surprised concerning the situation. For one official watches out for another, and there are officials over them. The profit of the land is taken by all; even the king benefits from the field.

As before, these verses are awkward coming from the king. It is protest literature against the king, not by him. Solomon could have reversed the policy and is not likely to have written this about himself.

Ecclesiastes 10:20:

> Moreover, do not curse the king even in your thoughts;
> do not curse the rich even in your sleeping chamber,
> for a bird might carry the message
> or some winged creature may tell the matter.

Such advice concerning behavior in regard to the king hardly would come from the king himself. The verse assumes that the king is a suspicious bully. Such a statement might be made about Solomon, but not by Solomon.

The internal evidence, although not conclusive, certainly provides a strong argument against the simple identification of Solomon and Qohelet. Why would the speaker who identifies himself as Qohelet want to associate himself at all with Solomon? He gives us an indication in 2:12. In the process of changing from one topic to another, Qohelet says: "I turned my attention to observe wisdom and mad folly. For what can anyone who comes after the king do but that which has already been done?"

Let me restate my contention: Qohelet is not Solomon, but he does adopt a Solomonic persona to explore avenues of meaning in the world. It is only in

14. See J. Bright, *A History of Israel,* 3d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), pp. 211-28; J. Alberto Soggin, "The Davidic-Solomonic Kingdom," in *Israelite and Judaean History,* ed. J. Hayes and J. Miller, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), pp. 332-80.

the first three chapters of the book that we get even a hint of association with the great king of Israel. This section describes Qohelet's search for meaning. As my study of the relevant chapters will show, Qohelet tries to find meaning in a number of different areas, including wisdom (1:16-18; 2:12-16), wealth (2:7-11), women (2:8), and building projects (2:4-6). Who knew and experienced the height of these areas more than Solomon? Solomon was the richest (1 Kings 10:14-29) and wisest (1 Kings 4:29-34) king that Israel ever knew. He also constructed more buildings (most notably the temple) and married more women than anyone (1 Kings 11:3). Nonetheless, the historical books inform us that, though Solomon reached the pinnacle, he ended his life an apostate. The person who calls himself Qohelet pretends to be Solomon in order to argue that if Solomon cannot find satisfaction and meaning in life in these areas, no one can. Solomon was the perfect literary foil for his argument. Once the search for meaning is over, the Solomonic persona is dropped, and that is when we see the distance between Qohelet and Solomon widen.

I conclude the internal evidence against Solomonic authorship by pointing out that even if one grants that Qohelet was Solomon, that would not make Solomon the author of Ecclesiastes. We must take our cue from the literary structure of the book and take seriously the change in point of view between the body of the book, on the one hand (1:12–12:7), and the prologue (1:1-11) and epilogue (12:8-14), on the other. In my view, the body of the book contains the first-person speech of Qohelet; the prologue and epilogue contain the first-person speech of an unnamed speaker who refers to Qohelet in the third person, as another person whom he knows (e.g., 12:8-12).

The traditional view interprets the change as the shift between the old Solomon and the young Solomon, but this reading is unnatural. Why would the older Solomon refer to himself as a young man using the third person? In addition, as Michael V. Fox points out, there is one occurrence in the body of the book where the speaker refers to Qohelet in the third person: " 'Observe, this I have found:' Qohelet said, 'one thing to another to find the sum of things' " (7:27).

Such a use of a third-person reference to Qohelet is intrusive and is a strong argument against identifying the so-called frame narrator with Qohelet. In Fox's words in reference to 7:27, "While one *can* speak of himself in the third-person, it is unlikely he would do so in the middle of a first-person sentence, whereas a writer quoting someone else may put a *verbum dicendi* wherever he wishes within the quotation. *'āmar haqqōhelet* are not Qohelet's words in 7:27 and therefore probably not in 1:2 and 12:8 either."[15] The use

15. M. V. Fox, "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," *HUCA* 48 (1977): 84. This point may be confirmed by comparison with the third-person intrusions in first-person prophetic speech. The third-person references to the Lord hint at the presence of the prophetic narrator in verses like Isa. 1:11.

of the third person makes the body of the book (1:12–12:7) a virtual quotation. I will have more to say about this structural dynamic in the section "Structure" below.

2. External Evidence

As will be argued under "Genre," Qohelet's speech bears a close structural resemblance to a group of ancient Near Eastern literary texts that have been called fictional autobiographies.[16] Specifically, the body of the book (1:12–12:7) is similar in general structure to fifteen texts from Mesopotamia written in Akkadian that span a time from the Old Babylonian period (2017-1595 B.C.) down to the Seleucid period (312-ca. 150 B.C.).

As will be seen, this Akkadian genre can be divided into four subgenres, each characterized by its distinctive endings. The subgenre most like Ecclesiastes includes three texts that conclude with wisdom admonitions (the Cuthaean Legend of Naram-Sin, the Adad-guppi autobiography, and the so-called Sin of Sargon text). At this point, I will anticipate my later discussion of the genre and draw out the implications of this generic identification for the question of authorship.

First, there was a well-used genre of fictional autobiography in which a later author placed his words in the mouth of another, more famous individual. As an earlier study indicated, some of these were clearly fraudulent, with the intention of deceiving their audiences (Cruciform Monument of Maništušu), and others were not (Adad-guppi inscription).[17]

Second, it is striking that only Ecclesiastes 1:12–12:7 parallels these Mesopotamian texts. This observation highlights the fact that the prologue (1:1-11) and the epilogue (12:8-14) are a frame that is structurally distinct from the body of the book. Further, the evidence suggests that 1:12–12:7 is a separate literary unity distinct from the frame in 1:1-11 and 12:8-14. This observation combined with the change of perspective between the frame and the body of the book (see above) lends strong support to the view that a second voice is heard in the frame in addition to that of Qohelet.

3. Conclusion

In the final analysis, it is the voice in the frame, other than Qohelet, who seems most likely to be the author of the finished book. Ecclesiastes 1:12–12:7, then, is a virtual quotation.

16. See T. Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1991), for translations and a full discussion of these texts.

17. Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*.

If this is true, who is the frame narrator? Unfortunately, we can say little. He (or conceivably she) is probably a wisdom teacher, one who speaks as an insider when he critiques Qohelet (12:8-12). Furthermore, he addresses his son in a manner typical of other wise teachers (12:12). I will refer to this voice, the authorial voice, as the unnamed wisdom teacher or the frame narrator.

III. EXCURSUS: WHO WAS QOHELET?

If Qohelet is not Solomon, then who is he? Once again we have little to go on. The frame narrator calls him a wise teacher (12:8); beyond that we can say little about him except to characterize his teaching, a task that will occupy the remainder of this commentary.

Before leaving this topic, however, I must reckon with Michael Fox's suggestion that Qohelet might be a literary persona, not a real person. Fox draws an analogy with the Brer Rabbit stories, in which there is a similar relationship between the main character who speaks, Uncle Remus, and the frame narrative. Fox thus suggests that Qohelet may be a literary creation and not a real person.[18] In the final analysis, I cannot decide this for certain, though it seems an unnecessary hypothesis and one without ancient parallels. For the purposes of this commentary, I will assume that Qohelet is a real person, though there is no obvious theological significance to this decision.

IV. DATE

With few exceptions, most critical scholars date the book late in the history of Israel. As we will see below, there are good arguments in favor of a late dating for Ecclesiastes.

Aarre Lauha dates Ecclesiastes to the late postexilic, but pre-Maccabean, period.[19] James Crenshaw is more precise, averring that "a date for Qohelet between 225 and 250 remains most likely."[20]

18. Fox, "Frame-Narrative," pp. 94-96.

19. A. Lauha, *Kohelet,* BKAT (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), p. 3. E. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 141, represents a critical position that dates the book even later to the mid-second century, the period of "Ptolemaic Judaism."

20. J. L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), p. 50.

The main argument used by critics to promote a late date of the book is language and style (see below, "Language"). For instance, the vocabulary and syntax of Ecclesiastes are compared to late Hebrew and Aramaic, and this argument pushes scholars to date the book late. I have already quoted the conservative scholar Franz Delitzsch to this effect (see above). Daniel Fredericks,[21] however, has devoted a careful study of all the linguistic arguments used to date the book late and has concluded that they are unpersuasive.[22] Further, so little is known about the transmission of the biblical text during its earliest stages that we cannot rule out linguistic updating. The so-called late forms may not in fact have been original to the book but may reflect the updating of vocabulary and grammar by later scribes so their contemporaries could understand the book better (see further discussion under "Language").

Another approach to the question of dating demonstrates similarities between Qohelet's speech and, for instance, Hellenistic thought.[23] This method, too, is dubious since connections can be made between Qohelet and earlier thought and literary forms[24] and also with much later foreign thought.[25]

All of this is not to dispute the possibility that Ecclesiastes is non-Solomonic (see above) and late (see below), but it does question the typical arguments used to support the critical position. In the past it has also been typical for critical scholars to argue that the book contains contradictions, specifically orthodox and unorthodox statements.[26] They have reasoned that the original speaker in the book was a radically unorthodox skeptic whose

21. D. C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language: Re-evaluating Its Nature and Date* (Lewiston, NY, and Queenston, Ontario: Edwin Mellen, 1988). His position will be presented more fully in the next section on "Language."

22. However, see more recently A. Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth,* part 1 (Leuven: Departement Orientalistiek/Uitgeverij Peeters, 1992), who still argues that the book's language favors a late date.

23. G. Bertram, "Hebräischer und griechischer Qohelet," *ZAW* 64 (1952): 24-69; E. H. Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes; or, the Preacher* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1881); and H. Ranston, *Ecclesiastes and the Early Greek Wisdom Literature* (London: Epworth, 1925).

24. For instance, M. J. Dahood, "Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth," *Biblica* 33 (1952): 30-52, 191-221; "The Language of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 14 (1952): 227-32; "Qoheleth and Recent Discoveries," *Biblica* 39 (1958): 302-18; "Qoheleth and Northwest Semitic Philology," *Biblica* 43 (1962): 349-65; and "The Phoenician Background of Qoheleth," *Biblica* 47 (1966): 264-82.

25. P. K. H. Lee, "Re-reading Ecclesiastes in the Light of Su Tung-P'o's Poetry," *Ching Feng* 30 (1987): 214-36.

26. For instance, compare Eccles. 8:11 and 14, which express the view that the wicked and righteous do not get what they deserve, and 8:12 and 13, which appear between them and state the opposite, namely, that the wicked will be punished (see commentary).

thought was later mitigated by one or a series of redactors.[27] The orthodox redactor was responsible, for instance, for the epilogue. A reading of the book that takes into account the two different voices of the book (see "Authorship" above and "Structure" below), however, does not have to resort to this hypothesis, since it accounts for the different perspectives by recognizing two speakers, rather than one.

V. LANGUAGE

The Hebrew of Ecclesiastes is unusual in comparison to the other books of the Hebrew Bible. No one questions this assessment. Many examples of difficult words, grammatical peculiarities,[28] and syntactical issues will be given in the commentary itself. While every scholar recognizes the language problem,[29] there is vast disagreement over the cause of it. Debate, often quite heated and personal, has risen around this topic. For reasons to be given below, however, the actual benefit of a solution for the question of dating may be quite minimal.

For some time, it appears, scholars have recognized similarities between the Hebrew of our book and the Aramaic language, and especially similarities with Mishnaic Hebrew. One of the most notable instances of this approach is the work of Franz Delitzsch. He had great confidence that the book of Ecclesiastes was influenced by Aramaic and, partly on this basis, argued that the book was late.[30] What is particularly striking about Delitzsch's position is that he was an important member of the orthodox Lutheran church in the last half of the nineteenth century, a group that might be expected to defend Solomonic origins of the book rigorously. Delitzsch's view was driven more by his understanding of the textual data than by dogmatic considerations. A more recent example of this theory may be found in the work of Charles F. Whitley. In his book *Koheleth: His Language and*

27. C. Siegfried, *Prediger und Hoheslied,* HKAT (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1898), posited nine hands contributing to the composition of Ecclesiastes. Later, G. A. Barton, *The Book of Ecclesiastes,* ICC (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1908), argued that there were three people behind the book, while E. Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste* (Paris: Libraire Victor Lecoffre, 1912), argued that there were four.

28. For instance, A. Schoors ("The Pronouns in Qoheleth," *Hebrew Studies* 30 [1989]: 71) states: "these peculiarities, such as the exclusive use of *'ny,* the feminine demonstrative *zōh,* and the frequent occurrence of *w-*, have often been pointed out."

29. That is, ever since Grotius (*Annotationes ad Qohelet* [Paris, 1644]), who used the unusual language of the book to argue for a late date of the book.

30. See Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon,* pp. 190-97.

Thought,[31] Whitley maps the connection between the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes and both Aramaic and Mishnaic Hebrew. Thus, he argues that the book's composition must be situated in the second century B.C., specifically 152-145 B.C., a date that "satisfies both the historical and linguistic considerations for the composition of the book."[32]

The view that the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes demonstrates Aramaic influence is thus an old one. More radical is the view propounded most forcefully by Frank Zimmermann,[33] though anticipated by Francis C. Burkitt,[34] that our present book of Ecclesiastes is a translation of an Aramaic original. Zimmermann was followed by two impressive experts in Semitic linguistics, Charles C. Torrey[35] and H. L. Ginsberg,[36] both of whom confirmed his thesis. Daniel Fredericks describes the three pillars that supported such a theory as "a high density of alleged Aramaisms, unexpected absence or presence of the definite article, and supposed improvements in the text obtained by restoring 'obscure' passages to the 'original' Aramaic."[37]

This view evoked a vigorous reaction from Robert Gordis.[38] Besides treating the specific passages that Zimmermann used to establish his case, he also argued that the book's Hebrew was too difficult to be a translation. He rightly noted that translation tended to smooth out syntactical and grammatical difficulties, not enhance them.[39] Gordis did not deny Aramaic influence but argued that the language of Ecclesiastes was closer to Mishnaic Hebrew than to Aramaic.

31. C. F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought,* BZAW 148 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979).

32. Whitley, *Koheleth,* p. 148.

33. F. Zimmermann, "The Aramaic Provenance of Qohelet," *JQR* 36 (1945-46): 17-45; "The Question of Hebrew in Qohelet," *JQR* 40 (1949-50): 79-102; *The Inner World of Qohelet* (New York: KTAV, 1973); and *Biblical Books Translated from the Aramaic* (New York: KTAV, 1975).

34. F. C. Burkitt, "Is Ecclesiastes a Translation?" *JTS* 23 (1921-22): 22-26.

35. C. C. Torrey, "The Question of the Original Language of Qoheleth," *JQR* 39 (1948-49): 151-60.

36. H. L. Ginsberg, *Studies in Koheleth* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1952).

37. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language,* p. 15.

38. R. Gordis, "The Original Language of Qoheleth," *JQR* 37 (1946-47): 67-84; and "The Translation Theory of Qohelet Re-examined," *JQR* 40 (1949-50): 103-16.

39. The same opinion is held by Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words,* p. 8, who says, "This is a self-destructive theory, for why should somebody want to translate an Aramaic text into Hebrew when he neither properly understands the Aramaic original nor sufficiently masters the Hebrew language to offer a flawless translation. For a few mistranslations can betray the translational character of a text, but in the theory under consideration there are too many of them and they are too fundamental. It is also strange that a translation would have left so many downright Aramaisms."

This debate was a spirited one with occasional jabs at the opponent's competence.[40] Nonetheless, Zimmermann's view proved too radical and also fell short of demonstration; thus, none of the more recent commentaries supports his approach to the language of the book.

Attention was diverted from Zimmermann's proposal when an equally radical one was made by the noted and provocative Semitist, Mitchell J. Dahood. In 1952 Dahood argued that Ecclesiastes was written in a dialect heavily influenced by Phoenician. He asserted that the author was a Jew,[41] but a Jew who probably lived in a Phoenician city.[42] Subsequent articles sought to support his thesis.[43] While Cyrus Gordon[44] and Gary Rendsburg[45] use his evidence to argue in favor of a northern origin of Qohelet's dialect,[46] few people take Dahood's position on this matter seriously since his evidence is amenable to explanations that are in harmony with a Palestinian origin of the book without Phoenician influence.[47]

Before proceeding to a conclusion, I should briefly mention the purported presence of words that show Persian and Greek influence.[48] These words too will be discussed in context, but one may argue that the presence of Persian loanwords does not demand a late date for the book. As Fredericks rightly argues, no good reason exists to restrict the possibility of Persian's influence on Hebrew to the time when Persia was at its cultural height. Persia was in existence long before the sixth century, and there were preexilic

40. Illustrated by Zimmermann's comment ("The Question of Hebrew in Qohelet," p. 81) that Gordis, an accomplished Semitist, should "familiarize himself somewhat more with the Aramaic idiom."

41. Dahood, "The Language of Qoheleth," p. 227.

42. Dahood, "Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth," p. 34.

43. Compare nn. 39 and 40. Also Dahood, "Qoheleth and Recent Discoveries," pp. 302-18; and "The Phoenician Background of Qoheleth," pp. 264-82.

44. C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1947), p. 143; compare comments by R. Gordis, "Was Koheleth a Phoenician?" *JBL* 74 (1955): 103-14.

45. Rendsburg ("The Galilean Background of Mishnaic Hebrew," in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity,* ed. L. I. Levine [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992], p. 238) argued that the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes is similar to both Phoenician and Mishnaic Hebrew and that this indicates its northern origin because "all three comprise what we may tentatively label the Israelian-Phoenician dialect bundle."

46. See also A. F. Rainey, "A Study of Ecclesiastes," *CTM* 35 (1964): 148-57; and more recently J. R. Davila, "Qohelet and Northern Hebrew," *MAARAV* 5-6 (1990): 69-87.

47. See critiques by R. Gordis, "Qoheleth and Qumran — A Study of Style," *Biblica* 41 (1960): 395-410; Whitley, *Koheleth,* whose book is a running critique of Dahood; and Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language,* pp. 18-24.

48. See comments and bibliography in Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language,* pp. 242-54.

connections between "Palestine and the East."[49] In addition, there is reason to dispute the allegation that there is a Greek influence on Qohelet's language. As Fredericks concludes, "alleged instances have adequate Biblical precedent, or natural Hebrew meanings and have no need for explanations based on Greek."[50]

Fredericks offers the most comprehensive examination of this issue.[51] He describes and evaluates all the arguments and sifts through the evidence presented by scholars who theorize that the book's language indicates a late and/or foreign origin. The present commentary will draw on the details of his work in the expository section (especially in footnotes). Through a carefully developed methodology (described in his chapter "General Methodological Concerns"), Fredericks counters the grammatical and lexical arguments used by many scholars to insist on a postexilic date for the book. He argues that his scholarly opponents have not allowed for legitimate alternative explanations (for instance, the possibility that Qohelet's language reflects the vernacular of his day). He also believes that previous studies overlooked evidence that indicates that Qohelet's language has precedents in biblical Hebrew, rendering parallels in later Hebrew irrelevant. His own conclusion is that "Qohelet's language should not be dated any later than the exilic period, and no accumulation of linguistic evidence speaks against a pre-exilic date."[52]

Fredericks's study should give rise to a healthy skepticism concerning the linguistic arguments used to date the book late. Unfortunately, some reviews[53] have accused Fredericks of allowing his evangelical theological presuppositions to unduly influence his conclusions. Antoon Schoors has recently argued that the cumulative evidence, particularly such linguistic features as "the exclusive use of *'ny,* the feminine demonstrative *zōh,* and the frequent occurrence of *w-*," override Fredericks's individual treatments of these and other phenomena.[54]

This reaction to his work undermines Fredericks's own belief that "the

49. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language,* p. 244. Furthermore, there are only two apparent Persian loans in the book: *pardēs* (2:5) and *pitgām* (8:11).

50. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language,* p. 249.

51. Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words,* arrived too late for me to make full use of it throughout the commentary; when the study is completed, it will supersede Fredericks in its coverage. He differs from Fredericks in that he concludes that the language of the book indicates a late date of the book; it "belongs to what scholars have recently called Late Biblical Hebrew" (p. 221). He allows for the possibility but not the probability that the peculiarities of the book's language are a result of dialect or vernacular (pp. 223-24).

52. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language,* p. 262.

53. Most fully by Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words,* especially the general comments on pp. 14-16.

54. Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words,* p. 14.

language [of the book] is the most important criterion for dating the book because it is less subjective than the other methods."[55] We do not know the history of the Hebrew language or the foreign languages that influenced it well enough to use Qohelet's language as a barometer of the book's origin. Are certain features late, or do they reflect vernacular or dialectical peculiarities in Hebrew? We can never be certain. My conclusion is that the language of the book is not a certain barometer of date.

VI. GENRE

A. OF THE WHOLE

The following exploration of the genre of the book of Ecclesiastes bears similarity to the modern method of form criticism, but it should not be confused with it. While the practice of form criticism has changed somewhat since Hermann Gunkel, it remains an essentially diachronic analysis of the text. Elsewhere[56] I have made the case that Gunkel formulated a form-critical method based on a neoclassical view of genre, already obsolete in his own day. The following presupposes a synchronic, descriptive approach to genre, informed by more recent literary theory.

Traditional form-critical studies of Ecclesiastes conclude that the book's genre cannot be precisely defined. Typical is Roland Murphy's conclusion that the book's overarching genre "still escapes us"[57] and James Crenshaw's comment that the book does not have one single genre.[58] In these studies, description of the book's various parts replaces a discussion of the whole.[59] While such a survey is extremely helpful (and may be found below), a more flexible approach to genre allows us to suggest literary associations for the body of the book (1:12–12:7) and invites a genre identification for the whole. Since my approach to genre differs from the typical approach found in most commentaries, I will begin with a short outline of theory and method.

55. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language,* p. 255.

56. T. Longman III, "Form Criticism, Recent Developments in Genre Theory, and the Evangelical," *WTJ* 44 (1985): 46-65; *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), pp. 76-83; and *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography,* pp. 3-21.

57. R. E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther,* FOTL (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 129.

58. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* p. 28.

59. See, for instance, O. Kaiser, "Die Botschaft des Buches Kohelet," *ETL* 71 (1995): 49-50.

Genre identification significantly affects a reader's interpretation and application of a text. Proper identification may lead to correct interpretation, but a mistaken genre identification will certainly distort the reader's understanding.[60] For instance, to take Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings,* as compelling as it is as historical fiction, and treat it as a serious contribution to Egyptian historiography would be a travesty to both his novel and the pursuit of ancient history.

The Song of Songs provides a well-known biblical example of misinterpretation through faulty genre identification. For centuries the book was brutally misread by "desexing" its meaning and labelling it an "allegory." It has only been within the past century that its original message has been heard through the reestablishment of its proper genre label "love poetry."[61]

Of course, proper genre identification arises from reading the text itself and is not imposed from outside the text. Thus, genre identification derives from the give-and-take of the reading process. The text is embedded with signals of both an implicit and explicit nature to guide the reader along.

We may see this most clearly in contemporary literature with which we are familiar. Title pages customarily signal that a literary work, for instance, is "A Novel," so that no confusion will arise.

The process of genre identification becomes more difficult when the reader is separated from the literary work by culture and time. In the case of the Bible, we are separated in both regards from the text. Robert Alter makes the following statement, which has important ramifications for genre as a major literary convention:

> Every culture, even every era in a particular culture, develops distinctive and sometimes intricate codes for telling its stories, involving everything from narrative point of view, procedures of description and characterization, the management of dialogue, to the ordering of time and the organization of plot.[62]

Thus, we must proceed more gingerly and consciously to seek out those "codes" as we deal with the genre of biblical books.

The other important characteristic of genre to bear in mind is the fluidity of the very concept itself. Any single piece of literature may be described with more than one generic label. A genre is defined by similarities

60. See the insightful work done on genre in E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); and *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

61. J. B. White, *A Study of the Language of Love in the Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Poetry,* SBLDS 38 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978).

62. R. Alter, "A Response to Critics," *JSOT* 27 (1983): 113-17.

that exist between a group of texts.[63] To group texts into genres, it is necessary to concentrate on those similarities while bracketing their differences. Thus, it is a matter of abstracting characteristics from particular texts. A piece of literature may exist in a broad genre with many members on the basis of a few shared traits as well as a narrow genre with few members on the basis of many traits. The literary critic Tsvetan Todorov pointed out that it is correct to speak of genres on a scale that ranges from one to the maximum. According to Todorov, "jedes Werk gehören zu einer 'Gattung'; alle Texte gehören zu einer 'Gattung.' "[64] This notion of genre suggests that genres are not rigid categories.

More than one genre label may apply even on the same level of abstraction. For example, Psalm 98 may be classified as literature, poem, hymn, divine warrior hymn, and then in a small genre with two members that includes Psalm 96,[65] as we move from the broadest to the narrowest classification. Genre distinctions do not fall from heaven. They are approximate ways by which we may speak of similar texts.

Thus, while there are a number of possible genre labels for the book of Ecclesiastes (wisdom literature, reflection, etc.), the present interpretation describes it as "framed wisdom autobiography." This identification draws on a genre study of the group of Mesopotamian autobiographical texts briefly introduced earlier.[66] After describing the Akkadian genre here, I will then show the analogy with the central section of the book of Ecclesiastes, the words of Qohelet (1:12–12:7).

Before I proceed, however, perhaps it will be helpful to define the central term of my proposed genre label. I define the term "autobiography" broadly as "an account of the life (or part thereof) of an individual himself or herself." Such a composition must be written in the first person and include reminiscences of the past life of the first-person narrator.[67]

It is true that a few students of the genre define autobiography in terms of modern post-Enlightenment attitudes toward the self and individuality.

63. Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation,* pp. 76-78.

64. That is, "each [literary] work belongs to a 'genre'; the entirety of texts belong to one 'genre'." The quote comes from K. Hempfer, *Gattungstheorie* (Munich: W. Funk, 1973), p. 137. See also G. S. Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 5.

65. See the argument in T. Longman III, "Psalm 98: A Divine Warrior Victory Song," *JETS* 27 (1984): 267-74.

66. A. Poebel, *Das appositionell bestimmte Pronomen der 1. Per. Sing. in den westsemitischen Inschriften und im Alten Testament,* AS 3 (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1931); and Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography.*

67. Such a definition is given and defended within the history of the discussion of autobiography in Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography,* pp. 40-43.

However, such an approach seems myopic and prejudicial, since it highly prizes modern conceptions of the individual and excludes such masterpieces of autobiography as Augustine's *Confessions,* not to speak of other ancient Near Eastern texts such as Sinuhe, Wen-Amon, the Utnapishtim speech in the eleventh tablet of the Gilgamesh Epic, and the Sargon Birth Legend.[68]

In my study of Akkadian literary autobiography I analyzed fifteen texts written in Akkadian that shared traits in common and that I descriptively labeled "fictional autobiography."[69] The fifteen texts were united by a similar three-part structure. Not all preserved the introduction, but those that did began with a first-person identification, such as the one in the autobiography of Kurigalzu: "I am Kurigalzu, the great king, the mighty king, the king of the universe, favored of Anu and Enlil, called by the chief of the gods, a king who has no rival among all kings." For all fifteen texts, it is demonstrable that they were written years, even centuries, after the death of the first-person speaker. For this reason, they are fictional and pseudonymous. The second part of these Akkadian texts contains a personal narration, where the first-person speaker recounts his or her exceptional acts. The length of this section varies greatly among texts that make up the genre.

In all the texts there is a third section, and it is on the basis of this third part that it is possible to divide the genre of fictional autobiography into four subgenres. Some of the texts ended like nonfictional first-person royal inscriptions, with blessings and curses (Sargon Legend, Idrimi); others, like Kurigalzu, finished with a list of donations to the cult of some deity (see also the Cruciform Monument of Maništušu and Agumkakrime). Still others, of interest to biblical studies, had long sections with prophetic, near apocalyptic, endings (Uruk Prophecy; Marduk Prophecy; Šulgi Prophecy; Dynastic Prophecy, Text A). But the texts that bore the most similarity to the book of Ecclesiastes were three texts that ended with wisdom admonitions, instructions on how to behave.

68. And, further, first-person royal inscriptions. For a work that includes all these in its survey, see the magisterial volume by G. Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951); and U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, "Die Autobiographie im Altertum," *Internationale Monatschrift für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Technik* 1 (1907): 1105-14. For modern debate on autobiography, consult R. Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); J. Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); W. C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); S. K. Padover, *Confessions and Self-Portraits: 4600 Years of Autobiography* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries, 1957); K. J. Weintraub, *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); and the especially helpful G. May, *L'autobiographie* (Paris: Universitaires de France, 1979).

69. Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography.*

The three texts are the Cuthaean Legend of Naram-Sin (most probably written just before the Old Babylonian period), the Sin of Sargon text (neo-Assyrian), and an Adad-guppi autobiography (neo-Babylonian). The concluding section of each of these compositions gives advice to the reader in a manner similar to other wisdom texts.[70]

The most complete of the three texts is the Cuthaean Legend.[71] At the beginning (ll. 1-4), Naram-Sin of Akkad introduces himself as the subject. The long first-person narrative (ll. 4-146) focuses on Naram-Sin's political and personal struggles with a people known as the Anubanini. These experiences lead to a series of first-person instructions that characterize this subgenre (ll. 147-75).

The parallel with Qohelet's speech in Ecclesiastes is formal and not material. That is, it shares the same three-part structure as the Cuthaean Legend, but the content of the narrative and the wisdom advice are quite different. Qohelet's speech (1:12–12:7) may be analyzed as follows:

1. Qohelet begins with a first-person introduction: "I, Qohelet, was king over Israel in Jerusalem" (1:12).
2. The second section is an extended first-person narrative (1:13–6:9), where Qohelet describes his own quest for meaning in life.[72]
3. The third section contains first-person instruction delivered by Qohelet for the benefit of those who follow after him. It is true that Qohelet offers advice in the second section of the book (e.g., 4:12; 5:2 [English 5:3]), but the final secton (7:1–12:7) contains large blocks of instructional material.

Thus, Qohelet offers the same threefold structure found in the Cuthaean Legend, and with the same effect. That is, the advice offered by Qohelet is firmly rooted in his own personal experience. His experience is the soil out of which his wisdom grows.

Qohelet's speech in the body of the book of Ecclesiastes thus employs

70. For instance, the Cuthaean Legend concludes its long narration of events in Naram-Sin's life with his advice: "Do not be bewildered! Do not be confused! Do not be afraid! Do not tremble! May your position be firm. Do your task in your wife's embrace. Have confidence in your walls. Fill your moats with water. Bring your chests, your grain, your silver, your goods, and your possessions into your strong city. Bind your weapons; hide them in corners. Protect your heroship and take care of yourself" (ll. 154-73). See Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, p. 231.

71. This composition dates from the early 2d millennium B.C. For a translation, see Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, pp. 228-31.

72. O. Loretz, "Zur Darbietungsform der 'Ich-Erzählung' im Buche Qohelet," *CBQ* 25 (1963): 46-59; and *Qohelet und der Alte Orient* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964).

the same pattern of autobiography as that which appears in Mesopotamian literary tradition. Such an analysis suggests a basic tripartite structure to the book as a whole, as the following outline indicates:

1:1-11	Framework — Prologue
1:12–12:7	Qohelet's Autobiographical Speech
1:12	Autobiographical Introduction
1:13–6:9	Autobiographical Narrative
6:10–12:7	Wisdom Admonitions
12:8-14	Framework — Epilogue

The division between Qohelet's speech and the frame has long been recognized on the basis of the shift in pronominal reference. The frame refers to Qohelet in the third person ("he"), while the speech is clearly autobiographical ("I"). The significance of this shift will be explored later.

B. OF THE PARTS

The genre (or form) of the various subunits may be identified as well. By far the four most commonly utilized types of writing in the book are the reflection, the proverb, the anecdote, and the wisdom instruction.[73]

In a reflection, the author states an observation or a truth, which he then ponders and evaluates. Examples include 1:5; 1:13-15; 1:16-18; 2:1-11; 2:12-17. A proverb is a pithy, highly stylized statement of a truth about life. For examples in Ecclesiastes, see 1:15; 1:18; 4:5; 7:1-12. Occasionally, it is possible to subdivide the proverbs into different types. The most studied type of proverb in the book is the so-called better than proverb, which compares and contrasts two states of affairs.[74] An anecdote is a short story told in order to illustrate a principle or truth of interest to the author (see 2:21; 4:7-8; 4:13-16; 9:13-16; 10:5-7). Lastly, an instruction is a teaching in which the author seeks to persuade his reader toward or away from a certain course of behavior or thought (4:17–5:2 [English 5:1-3]).

73. See the introductions to the subunits in the commentary proper as well as in Murphy, *Wisdom Literature,* pp. 125-49.

74. G. S. Ogden, "The 'Better'-Proverb (Ṭôb-Spruch), Rhetorical Criticism, and Qoheleth," *JBL* 96 (1977): 489-505.

VII. STRUCTURE

The book of Ecclesiastes is divided into three parts. It begins with a short prologue, introducing some of the themes of Qohelet's thought (1:1-11), continues with a long monologue by Qohelet (1:12–12:7), and concludes with a brief epilogue (12:8-14). The prologue and epilogue are differentiated from the body of the book by their third-person references to Qohelet. Together they frame Qohelet's speech. The bulk of the book is Qohelet's speech that is made up primarily of autobiographical reflections on the meaning of life.

Qohelet's "autobiography" (1:12–12:7), I have just argued, is a separate and complete literary unit. The frame (1:1-11 and 12:8-14), therefore, was composed secondarily, introducing and then guiding the reader's interpretation of the autobiography in ways to be specified in the commentary itself. In a sense, it is appropriate to say that the frame was secondary, that it was written later than the body of the book, which it is treating as a long quotation.[75] Nonetheless, the framed autobiography itself has a unity, though it is admittedly a composite unity. In this regard, I see the superscription (1:1) as an introduction to the whole book, though written as part of the frame by the unnamed wise teacher whom I consider the author of the whole book.

While the general structure of the book is clear, scholars have experienced frustration as they seek a minute analysis of the whole. Attempts to discover an underlying structure to Qohelet's musing (most notably that of Addison D. G. Wright)[76] have not been followed by many other scholars.

75. Unless, of course, the frame narrator created Qohelet out of whole cloth, which is an open possibility. If that is the case, then he could have composed the whole book at one time.

76. A. D. G. Wright ("The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 30 [1968]: 313-34) took his key from certain repetitive formulae. He assumes that the versification goes back to the autographs and divides the book into two halves of 111 verses apiece (see also S. G. Brown, "The Structure of Ecclesiastes," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 14 [1990]: 195-208). Wright argued that the first half of Qohelet's speech (1:12–6:9) was composed of eight units, each of which ended with the "meaningless" formula. This half he entitles "Qoheleth's Investigation of Life." The second half of the book (6:10–11:6) is divided into two parts, "Qohelet's Conclusions." The first runs (after an introduction [6:10-12]) from 7:1 to 8:17 and contains four sections, each of which ends with "not find out/who can find out." The second has six sections, all of which conclude with "do not know/no knowledge." In two later articles he added various numerical patterns to support his view ("The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisted: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 42 [1980]: 35-52; and "Additional Numerical Patterns in Qoheleth," *CBQ* 45 [1983]: 32-43). Wright's views are rather idiosyncratic, however. His numerical patterns depend in part on the number of verses in the book, concerning which it is at least debatable whether they go back to the original composition. It also compares the number of verses with the numerical value of the word *hebel*. Further, as others have pointed out (e.g., Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* pp. 40-42), the formulae do not always end a section (cf. 11:2) and not all the many repeated refrains are considered in his analysis.

Close study shows that Qohelet's thought rambles, repeats (1:12-18 and 2:11-16; 4:1-3 and 5:7-8 [English 5:8-9]; 4:4-12 and 5:9–6:9 [English 5:10–6:9]), and occasionally contradicts itself. Such a lack of order, though, far from detracting from the message of the book, actually contributes to it. As Morris Jastrow, Jr., states: "Koheleth is not afraid of the charge of inconsistency, but he would have his answer ready, 'Why not — life itself is full of inconsistencies.' "[77]

While Qohelet's thought does not follow a detailed outline, some features may be observed in its progress. His speech begins (1:12) with a formula (I, PN, king . . .) that is well known in the autobiographical tradition of the ancient Near East.[78] From 1:13 to 2:26 Qohelet recounts his search for meaning in life "under the sun," adopting the literary persona of Solomon. From 3:1–6:9 the persona is dropped but the quest for meaning continues. Ecclesiastes 6:10-12 is a transitional summary statement to the second part of Qohelet's speech. This second part is dominated by advice and instruction. The conclusion of the speech in 12:1-7 is a meditation on death, an appropriate conclusion for an autobiography.

Such an analysis yields the following general outline of Qohelet's autobiographical speech:

I. Autobiographical Introduction (1:12)
II. "Solomon's" Quest for the Meaning of Life (1:13–2:26)
III. The Quest Continues (3:1–6:9)
IV. Qohelet's Wise Advice (6:10–12:7)

The outline found in the table of contents gives the structure that I follow in the commentary. Within the broad tripartite structure of the book and the fivefold outline of Qohelet's autobiographical speech, I do not find a clear and obvious structure. In the body of the commentary (particularly in the introductions to the individual units) indications will be given of the connections (or lack thereof) between preceding and following units.

77. M. Jastrow, Jr., *A Gentle Cynic, Being a Translation of the Book of Koheleth* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1919), p. 189.

78. For instance, note the first line of the Sargon Birth Legend, "I am Sargon, the king of Agade." See Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, p. 215. See also Poebel, *Das appositionell bestimmte Pronomen*.

VIII. LITERARY STYLE

It is difficult to describe the literary style of the book of Ecclesiastes. After all, in the words of Geoffrey N. Leech and Michael H. Short, the particular style of a writing arises from the fact that "every writer necessarily makes choices of expression, and it is in these choices, in his 'way of putting things,' that style resides. . . . Every analysis of style . . . is an attempt to find the artistic principles underlying a writer's choice of language."[79] The implication of this definition of style is that it is necessary to distinguish which features of language, grammar, and syntax are the result of the writer's conscious choice and which are the result of the language itself.

Thus, the main obstacle to describing the style of Ecclesiastes is uncertainty concerning the language of the book (see "Language"). It is hard to differentiate a product of the book's unique use of language from that of self-conscious literary artistry. A further problem of analysis arises because of the book's genre; it is otherwise unexampled in the Bible.

I may make a few comments, however. Ecclesiastes contains both poetry and prose, although recent work on the nature of poetry and prose has blurred the distinction between the two. In the past, meter and parallelism have been taken as indicative of poetry, but since the 1980s scholars have come to doubt the presence of meter in Hebrew poetry[80] and have shown that parallelism is a characteristic even in prose.[81] In Ecclesiastes there is also uncertainty. A study of different English translations shows that translators are confused over the matter. For instance, a comparison between the NRSV and the NIV shows that the translation team for the latter believed that the book contains a great deal of poetry, and thus they formatted much of the book in parallel lines.

After having completed a detailed study of the NIV text, I have come to the conclusion that the original translation team overpoeticized the text. In a number of cases they have broken prose sentences into poetic cola that show none of the classic indications of poetry (parallelism in particular). An instance of this is the NIV translation of 1:3:

> What does man gain from all his labor
> at which he toils under the sun?

79. G. N. Leech and M. H. Short, *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose* (London: Longman, 1981), pp. 19, 74.

80. See T. Longman III, "A Critique of Two Recent Metrical Approaches," *Biblica* 63 (1982): 230-54.

81. J. Kugel (*The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981], pp. 76-84) discards the notion of prose and poetry and prefers the language of "high style" for heavily ornamented language.

This sentence, while rhythmical (but not metrical) like all discourse, has no parallelism between the cola.[82] It is a simple prose sentence, arbitrarily divided in half to create the semblance of parallelism.

Such an overpoetization of the book may be attributed in part to the fact that the work on the NIV preceded the recent paradigm shift in our understanding of poetical conventions.[83] While it is true that James Kugel and others define parallelism less in terms of synonymity, there still needs to be some echo of the first colon[84] in the second in order for the second line to "sharpen" the first. Also, Kugel allows for the presence of prosaic insertions in poetic contexts.

Nonetheless, there is poetry in the book of Ecclesiastes, most often in proverbial material (e.g., 1:15, 18). These issues will be treated in the commentary on individual verses.[85]

The book of Ecclesiastes presents the reader with some very sophisticated and interesting imagery as well. Perhaps the twin heights of the author's literary imagination are encountered in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 and 12:1-7. In the first passage, he presents a highly structured poem on the different seasons of life "under the sun." In the second, he creates three metaphor clusters in order to paint a picture of senility and death.[86]

Leland Ryken[87] reminds us of the comprehensive nature of Qohelet's imagery: "There are references to the city, cultivated fields, gardens, the temple, a house, a bedchamber, courts of justice, seats of power, and battle. The preacher is concerned with all of the main areas of life — wealth, power, religion, social relationships, work and pleasure."[88]

82. Contra the analysis of J. G. Williams, "Proverbs and Ecclesiastes," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible,* ed. R. Alter and F. Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 278.

83. As presented in Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry;* and R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

84. Or, as Kugel (*The Idea of Biblical Poetry,* p. 2) puts it, "a feeling of correspondence between the two parts."

85. On the use of proverbs in Ecclesiastes, see L. Ryken, "Ecclesiastes," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible,* ed. L. Ryken and T. Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), pp. 276-77.

86. R. G. Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible,* rev. ed. (Boston: Heath, 1899), pp. 221-24.

87. L. Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), p. 252.

88. For a negative assessment of Ecclesiastes' aesthetic quality, note Lowth's comment that "the language is generally low, I might almost call it mean or vulgar; it is frequently loose, unconnected, approaching to the incorrectness of conversation; and possesses very little of the poetical character, even in the composition and structure of the periods" (*De sacra poesi Hebraeorum* [London, 1753, Lecture 24], quoted from the English edition of 1835, p. 271, by Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words,* p. 1.

IX. TEXT

The Hebrew text of Ecclesiastes is without major problems and is the basis of the following translation and commentary. The difficulties encountered in the text have to do with the unusual language, genre, and message of the book, rather than any problems with the text's transmission.

Other ancient witnesses to the text of Ecclesiastes include Greek, Syriac, Latin, and Aramaic versions. There are also fragments from Qumran, which attest to 5:14-17 (English 15-18), 6:3-6, and 7:7-9.[89] They add little to our understanding of the text, since, except for orthography, they essentially agree with the Masoretic Text. They do have some importance, however, as the earliest witness of the text's existence.

Scholars debate the nature of the Greek tradition. The Septuagint contains a translation of Ecclesiastes that is surprisingly literal, including representing the direct object marker *('et)* with the Greek preposition *syn* ("with"). It resembles the method of translation adopted by Aquila, and a number of scholars[90] thus argue that what passes for the Septuagintal Ecclesiastes is in actuality translated by Aquila, or else Aquila has edited the Septuagint of this book. Others[91] believe that the Septuagint version of Ecclesiastes differs from other books of the Greek version because it was translated later.

In the body of the commentary I will chart the course of the Septuagint's departures from the Masoretic Text. In the majority of these cases I conclude that the Septuagint mistranslates the Hebrew text (see 1:6, 17, 18; 2:12, 20, 21, 25, 26; 5:16 [English 5:17]; 7:14, 18, 19, 22, 25; 8:1, 7). Occasionally, however, it provides support for a variant, which yields a better reading in context (see 2:25; 3:18, 19, 21; 4:8, 14; 5:16 [English 5:17]; 5:19 [English 5:20]).

Jerome has translated the book into Latin twice, once in his commentary on it[92] and the other time for the Vulgate. The Peshitta follows the Masoretic Text in the main, with occasional departures that show Septuagintal influence.[93]

89. J. Muilenburg, "A Qohelet Scroll from Qumran," *BASOR* 135 (1954): 20-28.

90. For instance, D. Barthelémy, *Les devanciers d'Aquila,* VTSup 10 (Leiden: Brill, 1963), pp. 21-33.

91. For instance, K. Hyvarinen, *Die Übersetzung von Aquila* (Lund: Gleerup, 1977), pp. 88-99.

92. Jerome, "Commentarius in Ecclesiasten," in *Patrologiae Latine,* vol. 23, edited by J.-P. Migne (Paris: Migne, 1863), pp. 1063-1173.

93. See M. V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions,* JSOTSup 71 (Sheffield, England: Almond, 1989), p. 165; A. Schoors, "The Peshitta of Koheleth and Its Relation to the Septuagint," in *After Chalcedon: Studies in Theology and Church History,* ed. C. Laga, et al., Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 18 (Leuven: Peeters, 1985), pp. 347-57.

The Targum[94] is not a translation, but a paraphrase, which greatly expands the book and interprets it in keeping with a particular theological perspective. In its approach it is similar to the paraphrase of Gregory Thaumaturgos.[95] The Targum and Gregory both treat Qohelet as a consistently orthodox thinker. All of these versions and paraphrases have been consulted in preparing the following commentary.

Antoon Schoors[96] has helpfully examined all of the Ketib-Qeres in the book and has concluded that the Qere is to be preferred in all instances except 5:10 (English 5:11) and 10:20, and that these readings do not have a major impact on our understanding of the text. I follow Schoors's conclusions in the commentary.

X. CANON

The status and function of canon is much in discussion these days. Is "canonical" an achieved status or does the term describe an inherent authority that is later recognized by the people of God?[97] In other words, does the church make the canon or does the canon make the church? Herman Ridderbos provides the best defense of the latter, while disputing the former. He argues that the canonical books are self-attesting and accepted by faith, rather than provable by an external criterion such as authorship.

While I agree with Ridderbos on this issue, I will now address the issue of the external attestation to Ecclesiastes' canonical status. Interestingly, there were ancient doubts about its divine authority among the rabbis and others.

These doubts lay along three lines. The book was accused of contradictions, secularity, and even outright heresy. Indeed, all three accusations were interrelated in that Ecclesiastes was said not only to contradict itself, but also to contradict other Scriptures, which meant that its author was a heretic.

For example, Ecclesiastes was considered to be in conflict with the teaching of the Torah, which warns readers to follow the commands of God

94. Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Qohelet,* pp. 5-26.

95. Jarick, *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase.*

96. A. Schoors, "*Kethibh-Qere* in Ecclesiastes," in *Studia Paulo Naster oblata II: Orientalia Antiqua,* ed. J. Quagebeur, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 13 (Leuven: Peeters, 1982), pp. 215-22.

97. See H. Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures,* trans. H. De Jongste (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1963), for a definition and insightful discussion of the concept of self-attestation. Though his book deals specifically with the NT canon, the principle applies to the OT as well.

and "not prostitute yourselves by going after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes" (Num. 15:39). Specifically, Ecclesiastes 11:9 states, "Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see."

In the first tractate of the Mishnah (*Shabbat,* ch. 3), Rabbi Tanhum of Nave is quoted as saying, "O Solomon, where is your wisdom, where is your intelligence? Not only do your words contradict the words of your father, David, they even contradict themselves."[98] The Talmud specifically cites Ecclesiastes 2:2 ("I thought, 'Laughter is madness and pleasure — what can it do?' ") and 7:3 ("Anger is better than laughter, for in a troubled face the heart is made well") as contradicting 8:15 ("Then I commended pleasure, for there is nothing better").[99]

Also note Tosephta *Yadayim* 2.14, where Rabbi Simeon ben Menasia is quoted as saying, "The Song of Songs makes the hands unclean because it was spoken in the Holy Spirit.[100] Ecclesiastes does not make the hands unclean because it is [merely] Solomon's wisdom."[101] In early Jewish thought, a book makes the hands "unclean" if it is divinely inspired. In other words, it is so holy that special rituals accompany its being physically handled while it is read or carried. The important point is that a book that makes someone unclean if it is touched is a holy book, an authoritative book.[102]

I further observe that the *Pesiqta of Rab Kahana* (*Leviticus Rabbah* 28.1) states: "The sages sought to store away the Book of Ecclesiastes, because they found words in it which tended to heresy." Jerome picked up and affirmed this sentiment when he noted in the introduction to his commentary, "The Jews say that . . . this book seemed fit to be consigned to oblivion, because it asserted the creatures of God to be vain, and preferred eating, drinking, and transitory pleasures to all things; on account of this one section [i.e., Eccles. 12:13-14] [it seemed] to have deserved its authority, that it was included among the divine books."[103]

Indeed Jerome was correct that most Jewish scholars accepted the book in spite of its apparent conflicts with other Scriptures. According to *Shabbat* 30b: "The sages sought to store away the Book of Ecclesiastes. . . . And why

98. Translated from the citation given by Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste,* p. 11.

99. R. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (London: SPCK, 1985), p. 284.

100. The Tosephta, dated perhaps to the fifth century A.D., is a collection of earlier rabbinic writings. Rabbi Simeon ben Menasia may be dated to the late second century A.D.

101. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon,* p. 284.

102. For more on this idea of uncleanness as it relates to canonicity, see Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon,* pp. 278-87.

103. Both quotes are from Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon,* p. 287.

did they not store it away? Because its beginning is words of the Law and its end is words of the Law."[104]

Once again, the rabbinic terminology needs some commentary. In this case, to "store away" a book means to get rid of it, consign it to oblivion. Certain sages made the argument to so treat the book, but apparently saner heads prevailed and treated it as one of the authoritative books. Specifically, according to *Shabbat* 30b, the beginning and end of the book show its orthodoxy, probably especially the last two verses, which encourage the fear of God and obedience to the commandments as well as warn of the coming judgment (12:13-14).

Thus, it appears that, while Ecclesiastes was questioned, its canonicity was never rejected by the mainstream Jewish community. The question, in other words, was not, "Is Ecclesiastes canonical?" but, since the book was considered authoritative, "Why is this book canonical?"

The answers, however, are not always satisfying to us in the twentieth century. Solomon's purported authorship, for instance, lent a measure of authority to the book, and thus Ecclesiastes' canonical recognition (to be distinguished from its inherent canonicity) is analogous to that of the book of Hebrews, where a common early opinion was that it was authored by Paul.

The connection with Solomon gave rise to or fed the extrabiblical legend that Solomon repented of his apostasy before the end of his life.[105] This story was embedded in the Targum to the book, as we noted earlier (see "Authorship" above). More about this Targum may be found below in "Theological Message," but we may assume that the connection with Solomon, the author of Proverbs and Song of Songs, encouraged the recognition of this book as authoritative.

Thus, we are not surprised that early Jewish and Christian sources attest its canonicity. That Ecclesiastes was among the texts found at Qumran (see "Text" above) implies that it achieved an authoritative status before the time of Christ.

Further, Roger Beckwith[106] lists and briefly comments upon a number of early Jewish witnesses to the high authority of the book of Eccesiastes: the Greek Testament of Naphtali (8:7-8), Josephus, Aquila, and the Mishnah.

Emmanuel Podechard[107] recounts a number of early rabbinic stories (4th to 6th centuries A.D.) that reflect early Jewish opinion concerning Eccle-

104. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon,* p. 287.

105. The Jewish legends about Solomon's departure from the throne, its occupation by the demon Ashmodai, and Solomon's eventual return have been described by in L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews,* vol. 4 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), pp. 168-76, with sources cited in vol. 6, pp. 299-303.

106. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon,* pp. 319-21.

107. Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste,* p. 7.

siastes. The first is the Talmudic tractate *Berakot.* Here the Pharisee Simon ben Chetah cites (ca. 90-70 B.C.) Ecclesiastes 7:2 as he addresses King Janneus, introducing it with the formula "it is written." This formula is similar to that used in the NT before quotations from the OT (e.g., Matt. 4:6, 10) and indicates the absolute authority of the source that is quoted.[108]

The second story is from *Baba Batra* (4a) and comes from the period of Herod the Great (37-34 B.C.). The story recounts Herod's slaughter of the Sanhedrin. He allowed only one member, Bab ben Bouta, to survive, and Herod blinded him. Later, Herod approached ben Bouta to see whether he would curse him, but the wise sage quoted Ecclesiastes 10:20, "Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom," once again introduced by "it is written."

Third, the tractate *Shabbat* narrates an encounter between Gamaliel (first century A.D.) and one of his students. When the teacher lectured on the wonders of the messianic age, his incredulous student replied, "There is nothing new under the sun." Taking this as a serious challenge, Gamaliel then countered by showing analogies to those marvels so as not to contradict the teachings of an authoritative book.

Though there is a likely allusion to Ecclesiastes in the NT (see "From a New Testament Perspective" below) as well as in the *Shepherd of Hermas,* the first clear Christian witness to Ecclesiastes as canonical is from Melito (last half of the second century A.D.),[109] showing that the early church considered the book as authoritative. Furthermore, Clement of Alexandria also cited it in his *Stromateis* and introduced it by "it is written." No evidence exists that Ecclesiastes was ever doubted by the early church, and even Theodore of Mopsuestia, cited by many as an exception to this widespread belief, also recognized that the book was Holy Scripture.[110] Thus, the early Christian witnesses regard the book of Ecclesiastes as part of the canon with no question.

XI. THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE

So much debate surrounds the interpretation of Ecclesiastes that early Jewish scholars, as we have seen, even questioned the canonicity of the book on the grounds that it gives contradictory advice and teaches heterodox doctrine.[111] For example, the book's author, who went by the name Qohelet (see "Author-

108. See Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon,* pp. 69-70.
109. Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste,* pp. 13-14.
110. R. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes,* WBC (Dallas: Word, 1992), p. xxiii.
111. Jarick, *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase,* pp. 1-2.

ship" above), could, on the one hand, say that he "hated life" (2:17), but, on the other hand, assert that a "live dog is better off than a dead lion" (9:4). Not infrequently, Ecclesiastes clashes with the teaching of other biblical books. For instance, while the book of Proverbs advocates a total commitment to the way of wisdom, Qohelet says, "Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise" (7:16), and concludes that in the long run wisdom can get one no further than folly (2:12-16).

While for these reasons some Jewish interpreters rejected the canonicity of Ecclesiastes, others justified its inclusion in the canon by straining its interpretation. The Targum to the book is an instructive example.[112] It made explicit what the author skillfully and intentionally never stated, most notably the identification of Qohelet and Solomon. As all critical and many evangelical interpreters have remarked,[113] the two are not the same. Too many passages in the book could only be written by a nonroyal person (4:1-3; 5:7-8 [English 5:8-9]; 8:2-6). Nevertheless, the Targum makes the identification, and this identification in part helped the religious communities accept the book as canonical. The same Targum stretched the interpretation of individual passages beyond all reason in order to turn Qohelet = Solomon into a teacher of pure orthodoxy. Thus, when Qohelet warns about the weariness of books (12:12), the Targum turns it into an exaltation of Torah study: "And more than these, my son, take care, to make many books of wisdom without end; to study much the words of the Law, and to consider the weariness of the body."[114]

Early Christian intepretation took the same basic approach. It is noteworthy that the NT never directly quotes Ecclesiastes (but see below for a significant allusion in the book of Romans). The only mention of the book in the first couple of centuries of the church is in the *Shepherd of Hermas,* and that book alluded to only the last two verses.[115] It is in the third century that commentaries on Ecclesiastes are first attested. We have only fragments from Hippolytus of Rome and Origen, but a full text by Origen's student Gregory Thaumaturgos is available.[116] After Gregory, we have a number of early commentaries, most notably ones by Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome, the last of which became a standard resource during the Middle Ages.

These early Christian interpreters found theological meaning in the text through allegory. For instance, Qohelet's frequent refrain advocating that his listeners seek pleasure in eating and drinking (e.g., 2:24-26; 3:12-13) is turned into an admonition to partake of the Lord's body and blood in com-

112. Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Qohelet,* p. 47.
113. See nn. 8-13 above.
114. Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Qohelet,* p. 47.
115. Jarick, *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase,* p. 3.
116. Jarick, *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase.*

munion.[117] Ambrose finds a reference to the Trinity in the three-strand cord of 4:12.[118]

The issue of the interpretation of Ecclesiastes continues to the present, with some commentators arguing for an orthodox teacher in the book who has a positive view of life.[119] The theological contribution of the book, according to this approach, is its affirmation of the wisdom traditions of Proverbs and its encouragement to enjoy the little pleasures of the present life in the midst of a fallen world.[120]

Such a view,[121] however, does not take into account the book's literary structure and either treats certain, more negative aspects of the book as secondary or strains at the interpretation of words and passages to make them fit a preconceived idea of the function of the book.[122]

On the contrary, the most natural reading of the book, as argued under "Authorship," takes into account the presence of two speakers — Qohelet, who refers to himself in the first person in 1:12–12:7, and a second, unnamed wise person, who describes Qohelet to his son (12:12) in the third person (1:1-11 and 12:8-14).[123] In effect, the speech of Qohelet is a quotation, which

117. See Jerome's commentary on 2:24, in "Commentarius in Ecclesiasten," p. 1070.

118. See Jarick, *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase,* p. 316, who cites J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina,* vol. 16 (Paris: Migne, 1845), col. 1274; M. M. Beyenka, trans., *Saint Ambrose: Letters,* The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, vol. 26 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1954), p. 319.

119. W. C. Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes;* R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes,* NCB (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989); and "Qohelet, Preacher of Joy," *JSOT* 23 (1982): 87-92; G. S. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1987); M. A. von Klopfenstein, "Kohelet und die Freude am Dasein," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 47 (1991): 97-107; G. R. Castellino, "Qohelet and His Wisdom," *CBQ* 30 (1968): 15-28.

120. See D. C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transcience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1993), p. 44.

121. It is not to be denied that there are ancient precedents to this view in Rashbam (A.D. 1085-1155); see S. Japhet and R. B. Salters, *Rashbam on Qohelet* (Jerusalem: Magnes; Leiden: Brill, 1985); and in M. Luther, "Notes on Ecclesiastes," pp. 7-11.

122. So W. C. Kaiser (*Ecclesiastes,* pp. 86-91) on 7:16-17 and N. Lohfink (*Kohelet,* Neue EB [Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1980], p. 6). S. Schloesser (" 'A King is Held Captive in Her Tresses': The Liberating Deconstruction of the Search for Wisdom from Proverbs through Ecclesiastes," *Church Divinity* [1989-90]: 205-28) argues that Ecclesiastes dates from the third century and has as its purpose offsetting the secularization that was brought in by Hellenization. Thus, the effect of the book is "consolation." In Schloesser's words (see p. 219): "The common intention of the various third-century philosophers [by which he means Greek philosophers] was the construction of a philosphy of consolation (ataraxy) through a deconstruction of essentialist philosophies no longer relevant in a time of social upheaval." In the view of these scholars, Ecclesiastes is such an attempt at ataraxy (see p. 206) in an Israelite context.

123. Fox, "Frame-Narrative"; and *Qohelet and His Contradictions,* pp. 155-62; as well as T. Longman III, "Comparative Methods in Old Testament Studies: Ecclesiastes Reconsidered," *TSF Bulletin* 7, 4 (March-April 1984) 5-9; and "Structure" in the present volume.

is framed by the words of the second speaker, who is the narrator/author. Thus, in keeping with the structure of the book, we must examine its theology in two parts. First, Qohelet's theology, and then the theology of the frame narrator, which is the normative theology of the book as a whole.

XII. QOHELET'S THEOLOGY

In considering the message of Qohelet himself (1:12–12:7), we must recognize that he is a wisdom teacher who struggles with the traditions of his people, including the normative traditions of a book like Proverbs. His most frequent refrain (and there are several refrains) is "Meaningless, meaningless! All is meaningless!" He uses the term "meaningless" *(hebel)* in well over thirty passages,[124] and indeed the second wise person introduces and concludes Qohelet's teaching with the refrain (1:2 and 12:8), as if to say this is Qohelet's basic conclusion.

Qohelet is not satisfied merely to state that everything is meaningless; he specifies a number of areas and shows why they have no value. For one thing, toil *(ʿāmāl)* is meaningless. He gives a number of reasons why toil cannot give ultimate satisfaction. Someone might work hard and succeed, but then die and have to leave it all to someone who has not worked for it (2:17-23). Furthermore, the motivation to work hard itself is evil because it springs from envy (4:4). What does Qohelet advocate in terms of toil? It is hard to say. On the one hand, he quotes a proverb to the effect that to cease work leads to destruction (4:5); on the other hand, he quickly follows this with a second proverb that encourages a tranquil lifestyle (4:6).

Qohelet also pronounces the world meaningless in light of the oppression that he sees everywhere he turns (4:1-3). The government itself is responsible for much of the suffering of the people (5:7-8 [English 5:8-9]). He is obviously moved by what he sees, but he never seeks ways to soften the suffering of the oppressed or even to become one of the comforters that they lack (4:1). He never considers action (doubly surprising if he is actually a king) and seems resigned to it all: "Observe the work of God, for who is able to straighten what he has bent?" (7:13).

Perhaps most surprising of all is his attitude toward wisdom. If there was anything that should have appealed to a wise person in Israel, it would have been the value of its wisdom (throughout the book of Proverbs, especially

124. See 1:12 (4 times), 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:6, 9 (English 5:7, 10); 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14 (2 times); 9:9 (2 times); 11:8, 10; 12:8 (3 times).

Prov. 2:1-22 and 8:1-36). For Qohelet, however, wisdom has only limited, relative significance in comparison to folly. An examination of Ecclesiastes 2:12-16 illustrates his attitude. In the initial phase of his comparison between wisdom and folly, he sounds very similar to the teaching of Proverbs and concludes that "there was more profit to wisdom than folly" (v. 13). Wisdom allows a person to "get on" in the world (v. 14a). However, this advantage turns out to be short-lived as Qohelet then contemplates the long run. Both fool and wise die, rendering void the benefits of wisdom (vv. 14b-16).

Qohelet's search for meaning led him to consider many different areas of life on earth. He not only explored wisdom and toil but also considered political power (4:13-16), riches, large families, and long life (5:7–6:12 [English 5:8–6:12]). In each of these areas he encountered "meaninglessness" and expressed his frustration that life is the way it is. As we read his reflections, we are struck by two inescapable facts of human existence that are the source of his anguish: (1) death and (2) the inability to control and know the appropriate time to do anything.

In terms of the latter, it must be remembered that it was of crucial importance for a wise teacher to know the right time. The book of Proverbs does not give a list of truths that are always, everywhere appropriate, but a series of principles that are to be applied at the right time. They know the conditions under which they should answer a fool (Prov. 26:5) and when they should refrain (Prov. 26:4). As a wise man, Qohelet knew that there were right times for certain activities: "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven" (Eccles. 3:1). He also understood, however, that he could not share God's knowledge of them. As a human being, he could never be certain that a given moment was the "right time," and this lack of knowledge, this lack of certainty, frustrated him to the point that he thought that life "under the sun" was meaningless. Humans cannot know what will happen to them in this life or the next: "No one knows what will happen. Who can tell anyone what is going to happen after him?" (10:14). "For no one knows what will happen, because who can say when it will happen?" (8:7). This leaves humans at the mercy of "time and chance" (9:11). They cannot even know when they are going to die: "Indeed, no one knows his time. Like fish that are entangled in an evil net and like birds caught in a snare, so people are ensnared in an evil time, when it suddenly falls on them" (9:12).

Yet humans do know one thing for certain. They know that they will die — "For the living know they will die" (9:5) — and this knowledge frustrated Qohelet so much that he reflected on it at great length. He concluded that death rendered every human "achievement" and status useless. After all, they will pass away and will not be remembered.

We have already seen how death nullified wisdom's advantage over

folly (2:12-16). The same is true for hard work and the riches that come from work. Why bother working hard all your life when at your death the wealth gained will go to some worthless person or even a person that you do not know (2:17-23). Death rendered every status and achievement of this present life "meaningless."

Further, as far as Qohelet knew for certain, death was the end of the story.[125] He is not drawing his hearers/readers to the edge of despair just to tell them about the bliss of an afterlife. According to Qohelet, "the dead know nothing. There is no longer any reward for them, for the memory of them is forgotten" (9:5). In the long run there is no difference between humans and animals, for "both go to the same place. Both come from the dust, and both return to the dust" (3:20). Indeed, Qohelet's last words in the book are a sad and moving reflection upon death, describing a person's end using three image clusters. (1) Growing old and dying is like watching the storm clouds move in and ruin a sunny day (12:1-2). (2) It is also like an unmaintained house, slowly falling apart (12:3-5). (3) Lastly, it is like a severed rope, a broken bowl, a shattered pitcher, and a ruined wheel (12:6). Life is valuable in the short run — the rope is silver after all — but it is completely ruined at death, when the process of creation is undone and the body turns to dust and the spirit returns to God. The fundamental unity of a person as established at creation (Gen. 2:7) is thereby reversed. Qohelet has no hope that things will be "put right" after death.

What is the theological message of Qohelet's autobiography (1:12–12:7)? Life is full of trouble and then you die. Some interpreters attempt to mitigate this hard message by appealing to six passages that they interpret as offering a positive view toward life (2:24-26; 3:12-14; 3:22; 5:17-19 [English 5:18-20]; 8:15; 9:7-10).[126] One must admit, however, that Qohelet only suggested a limited type of joy in these passages. Only three areas are specified — eating, drinking, and work. In addition, Qohelet's introduction to pleasure was hardly enthusiastic. For instance, in 2:24 he merely concedes that "there is nothing better for people than. . . ." In the commentary section we will argue that here Qohelet expresses resignation rather than affirmation. Then, further, he believed that God was the only one who could allow people to experience enjoyment, a situation that brought him no ultimate satisfaction (see 2:26c where he pronounced it "meaningless"). Indeed, it is clear

125. See Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* p. 26; and A. Schoors, "Koheleth: A Perspective of Life after Death?" *ETL* 61 (1985): 295-303, for a discussion of Qohelet's view of life after death. Even some scholars who interpret Ecclesiastes positively (e.g., Fredericks, *Coping with Transcience,* p. 47) realize that Qohelet did not have a strong view of the afterlife.

126. Whybray, "Qohelet, Preacher of Joy"; and A. B. Caneday, "Qohelet: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?" *GTJ* (1986): 21-56.

throughout the book that Qohelet did not consider himself a person so blessed by God (see commentary at 5:17–6:12 [English 5:18–6:12]).

It is more in keeping with the book as a whole to understand these passages as they have been taken through much of the history of interpretation, that is, as a call to seize the day *(carpe diem).* In the darkness of a life that has no ultimate meaning, enjoy the temporal pleasures that lighten the burden (5:18-19 [English 5:19-20]).

This raises the issue of Qohelet's view of God. As measured against other wisdom books, Qohelet certainly speaks of God fairly frequently, but what is his view of God? Does God provide any relief to Qohelet's pessimistic view of life?

If we isolate Qohelet's statements from the context of the entire book, it is possible to interpret some of them as positive. God is a giver of all good gifts (2:26), is sovereign over everything (7:13-14), is our Creator (12:1), and is the one to whom we owe our very existence (12:7). Indeed, R. R. Scott, a student of Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., has attempted to defend such a positive view of God in the book of Ecclesiastes.[127] However, reading Qohelet's statements about God in context leads one to side with those scholars who characterize Qohelet's God as distant, occasionally indifferent, and sometimes cruel.[128]

The commentary proper will present a fuller account of the intepretation of the passages mentioned here, but a brief defense of this conclusion is appropriate. I begin with the general observation that Qohelet refers to God by the generic *'ĕlōhîm,* never by God's personal, covenantal name Yahweh. This leaves the reader with a sense of distance between God and Qohelet. After all, "Yahweh" would invoke warm, covenantal feelings and memories. Furthermore, while it is true that Qohelet believes that any enjoyment that a person is fortunate enough to have comes from God, that enjoyment is superficial, temporary, and restricted to a very few, among whom Qohelet would not count himself. Indeed, that joy is simply a narcotic that numbs the recepient to the true nature of reality (5:19 [English 5:20]).

God's sovereignty is affirmed by Qohelet (3:9-18; 7:13-14; 8:16–9:1; 11:5), but this sovereignty actually calls into question God's concern for his people. He has a plan but does not reveal it to his people and those who want to know what it is (3:11; 8:16-17; 11:5). There will be a judgment in the future, but Qohelet does not expect to find justice there (3:16; 9:1). After all, there is no certainty of an afterlife for Qohelet (3:18-21). Qohelet may well believe in divine providence, but it is no source of comfort to him as he faces the unpredictable chaos of life.

127. R. R. Scott, "Qoheleth and Christian Interpretation: An Investigation of the View of God in Ecclesiastes" (M.A. thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1985).

128. See discussion and bibliography in Scott, "Qohelet and Christian Interpretation," pp. 73-81.

This raises the question of how to understand 4:17–5:6 [English 5:1-7]). As discussed in the commentary, the whole section may be interpreted one of two ways: either as reverent and thoughtful concern to be careful before a powerful God or as despair that the universe is ruled by a God that just does not seem to care much about earthly concerns ("God is in heaven and you are on earth"). I will argue that the latter understanding correctly identifies Qohelet's attitude.

Indeed, Qohelet calls on his hearers to "fear God" (5:6 [English 5:7]; 7:15-18; 8:12-13), but, as argued in the commentary, the contexts of these passages lend credence to those who believe that the fear advocated here is that of fright before a powerful and dangerous being, not respect or awe for a mighty and compassionate deity.[129]

The point is that oppression (4:1-3) and evil in the world cast doubt on a compassionate and caring deity. Qohelet sees nothing in the present or the future that gives him any confidence that God will reward the devout righteous on the one hand and punish the sinner on the other (7:15-18; 9:1-12). After all, according to Qohelet, "There are righteous people who are treated as if they did wicked deeds, and there are wicked people who are treated as if they did righteous deeds" (8:14). God is certainly powerful, however, and it is meaningless to try to change his ways in the world (6:10).

My understanding of Qohelet's thought is closest to that articulated by James Crenshaw.[130] He identified Qohelet as a prime representative of skepticism in Israel. He argued that "Israel's skeptics severed a vital nerve at two distinct junctures. They denied God's goodness if not his very existence, and they portrayed men and women as powerless to acquire essential truth."[131]

While correctly identifying the tenor of Qohelet's thinking, Crenshaw errs in identifying Qohelet's message with the message of the book, never making a distinction between the body of the book and the epilogue (for which see below). His characterization of Qohelet and his admiration for his contribution to Israel's theological development thus differs substantially from mine; I look not to Qohelet but to the frame narrator's concluding word for the normative theological contribution of the book. To that we now turn.

129. D. B. Macdonald, *The Hebrew Philosophical Genius* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936), p. 70; see discussion in Scott, "Qohelet and Christian Interpretation," pp. 73-81.

130. See especially his "Birth of Skepticism in Ancient Israel," in *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God's Control of Human Events,* ed. J. L. Crenshaw and S. Sandmel (New York: KTAV, 1980), pp. 1-19.

131. Crenshaw, *The Divine Helmsman,* p. 15.

XIII. THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK AS A WHOLE

Qohelet's pessimistic theology is not the concluding voice in the book. A second voice is heard at the beginning of the book (1:1-11) and at the end (12:8-15), placing a frame around Qohelet's speech and providing the perspective through which we should read his opinions. Many interpreters have acknowledged this function of the epilogue, though different explanations have been provided.[132] When the structure of the book is taken into account, then we can understand how this rather unorthodox teacher can stand in the canon.

An analogy with the book of Job further clarifies the situation. The two books are similar in structure and also evoke a similar reading strategy. The body of both books contains dubious teaching when judged in the light of the rest of the canon. For instance, the arguments of the three friends, Elihu, and even Job concerning the reasons for Job's suffering are too narrow in their understanding, and therefore all of them misunderstand God's relationship to Job's situation. Not that everything that they say is wrong, but much is out of keeping with the divine perspective revealed in the Yahweh speeches at the end of the book.

Similarly, the body of the book of Ecclesiastes, composed of the introspective autobiography of Qohelet, contains much that offends traditional OT sensibilities. The positive teaching of both books comes at the end with Yahweh's speech from the whirlwind in Job and the second wise man's warnings to his son in Ecclesiastes.

To understand the book of Ecclesiastes, then, it is important to read the epilogue closely. Even the traditional translation of a few phrases in the epilogue is suspect. Following the suggestive comments of Michael Fox,[133] I interpret 12:8 as the beginning of the frame narrator's last contribution to the book (contra the chapter divisions proposed by the NIV). The frame narrator summarizes Qohelet's thought using the latter's own refrain, "Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" Next, he pays his respects to Qohelet's efforts. He acknowledges that Qohelet was a wise man who worked hard at his task. It is important, however, to note that, while true wisdom is always characterized by righteousness and godliness (Prov. 1–9), the office of wisdom teacher was occasionally occupied by some nonorthodox, even wicked, people (most notably Jonadab; cf. 2 Sam. 13:3).

132. For instance, 1:12–12:7 is the speech of Solomon as a young man and 12:8-14 contains his reflections late in life; see C. Bridges, *Ecclesiastes* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1961 [1860]), p. x.

133. Fox, "Frame-Narrative," pp. 83-106; and *Qohelet and His Contradictions,* pp. 311-21.

The next few verses are increasingly critical of Qohelet. The following translation is defended in the commentary and is dependent upon Fox:[134]

> "Completely meaningless," Qohelet said. "Everything is meaningless." Furthermore, Qohelet was a wise man. He also taught the people knowledge. He heard, investigated, and put in good order many proverbs. Qohelet sought to find words of delight and to write honestly words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and like firmly implanted nails are the masters of collections. They are given by a shepherd.
>
> Furthermore, of these, my son, be warned! There is no end to the making of many books, and much study wearies the body. (12:8-12)

The epilogue begins with the second wise man's summary of the teaching of Qohelet. By quoting the now familiar "meaningless" refrain, the frame narrator indicates what he considers Qohelet's ultimate conclusion: "Everything is meaningless." From this point, he proceeds with his evaluation, which begins with praise and then moves to doubt and finally to criticism.

Though faint, it is praise when the frame narrator begins by commending Qohelet's efforts as he "sought to find words of delight" and also that he "sought . . . to write honestly words of truth." This praise falls quite short of an affirmation of Qohelet's view, however, when it is recognized that the frame narrator echoes the language of 7:1-29. There Qohelet admits that he seldom succeeded in finding anything he was looking for.

The metaphors that follow (goads and implanted nails), while usually understood positively (goading the student on to learning and establishing them firmly in the truth), are better taken as negative and harmful (as argued in the commentary section). Lastly, the famous v. 12, quoted by so many students pointing out that there is "no end to the making of many books," includes, rather than excludes, Qohelet's own writings (see commentary section).

Thus, if Qohelet's lengthy speech is pessimistic and out of sorts with the rest of the OT, why is it included in the canon? Qohelet's speech is a foil, a teaching device, used by the second wise man in order to instruct his son (12:12) concerning the dangers of speculative, doubting wisdom in Israel. Just as in the book of Job, most of the book of Ecclesiastes is composed of the nonorthodox speeches[135] of the human participants of the book, speeches that are torn down and demolished in the end.

God does not speak out of the whirlwind in the book of Ecclesiastes, but a second voice appears at the end to give the normative teaching of the book in the last two verses: "The end of the matter. All has been heard. Fear

134. Fox, "Frame-Narrative," pp. 96-98.

135. That is, nonorthodox according to normative OT teaching. They would consider themselves orthodox, even fastidiously orthodox.

God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of humanity. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil" (12:13-14).

In brief compass, the second wise man, who is the implied author of the book, summarizes the message of the OT. First, he directs his son to "fear God." This phrase calls him to a right relationship with God, a relationship that understands his dependence and subordinate status with God. Second, he moves to the nature of his son's continuing relationship with God. He urges him to "keep his [God's] commandments." If the phrase "fear God" reminds the reader of the beginning of Proverbs (1:7) and the wisdom tradition, so the second imperative brings to mind the law. Finally, the frame narrator reminds his son that God "will bring every deed into judgment." He invites his son to live in the present, in the light of the future. Using modern terminology, he injects an eschatological perspective into his thinking and perhaps alludes to the prophetic material of the Bible. In a masterfully succinct manner, then, the book ends with three phrases that point away from skeptical thinking and toward a theology consonant with the rest of the OT: wisdom, law, and prophets.

XIV. FROM A NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE

Ecclesiastes is never quoted in the NT, but there is an allusion to the message of the book in Romans 8:18-21:

> I consider our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to *frustration,* not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

The word translated "frustration" *(mataiotēs)* is the word used in the Septuagint to translate the motto word of Ecclesiastes, "meaningless" *(hebel).* While Qohelet sounds nonorthodox in the light of the rest of the canon, he presents a true assessment of the world apart from the light of God's redeeming love. His perspective on the world and life is restricted; he describes it as life "under the sun," that is, apart from heavenly realities, apart from God. In other words, his hopelessness is the result of the curse of the fall without recourse to God's redemption.[136]

136. In a recent article, D. M. Clemens ("The Law of Sin and Death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1–3," *Themelios* 19 [1994]: 5-8) has shown that much of Qohelet's language and thought reflects the narrative of the fall.

Qohelet sounds modern because he so vividly captures the despair of a world without God. The difference, though, is that the modern world believes that God does not exist; Qohelet believed that God existed but questioned his love and concern (4:16–5:6 [English 5:1-7]). As a result, nothing had meaning for Qohelet, not wealth, wisdom, charity. After all, death brought everything to an end. Qohelet is preoccupied with death throughout the book (2:12-16; 3:18-22; 12:1-7) because he sees nothing beyond that point.

On one level, therefore, Qohelet is exactly right. The world ("under the sun") without God is meaningless. Death ends it all, so he alternated between "hating life" (2:17) and taking what meager enjoyment God hands out (2:24-26).

As we have seen above, the message of the book is found in the simple instruction in the last few verses, not in Qohelet's speech. Nonetheless, we may still admit that Qohelet has rightly described the horror of a world under curse and apart from God. What he did not have was hope.

As we turn to the NT,[137] we see that Jesus Christ is the one who redeems us from the vanity, the meaninglessness under which Qohelet suffered. Jesus redeemed us from Qohelet's meaningless world by subjecting himself to it. Jesus is the son of God, but nonetheless he experienced the vanity of the world so he could free us from it. As he hung on the cross, his own father deserted him (Matt. 27:45-46). At this point, he experienced the frustration of the world under curse in a way that Qohelet could not even imagine. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13; cf. earlier discussion of Rom. 8:18-21).

As a result, Christians can experience deep significance precisely in those areas where Qohelet felt most oppressed. Jesus has restored meaning to wisdom, labor, love, and life. After all, by facing death, Jesus conquered the biggest fear facing Qohelet. He showed that for believers death is not the end of all meaning, but the entrance into the very presence of God.

XV. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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137. See S. Woudstra, "Koheleth's Reflections on Life" (Th.M. thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1959), for a stimulating discussion of the biblical theology of the book of Ecclesiastes.