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THE GENRE OF *QOHELET*

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Resumen
El *Qohelet* pertenece al género de "crítica", ya que procura provocar a los lectores para que cuestionen sus presuposiciones básicas acerca de la vida, y de lo que es deseable y valioso. La crítica del Qohelet opera sobre la base de un canon de principios y, en este sentido, las nociones de "dios", "vida bajo el sol", "muerte", "eternidad", y "juicio" se demuestran como cardinales. El concepto de "vida bajo el sol" se relaciona con la noción complementaria de "eternidad". Este concepto y su asociación con el sol eterno eran conocidos en Fenicia. En *Qohelet*, sin embargo, el Señor de la eternidad es Dios, y no el sol. Los tres poemas de los capítulos 1, 2 y 13 resultan centrales para la comprensión del libro.

Abstract
Qohelet belongs to the genre of "critique". It aims to provoke readers to question basic assumptions about life, and about what is desirable and worthwhile. *Qohelet's* critique operates from a canon of principles, and in this respect, the ideas of "god", "life under the sun", "death", "eternity" and "judgment" emerge as cardinal. The concept of "life under the sun" is related to the complementary notion of "eternity". This concept, associated with the eternal sun, was known in Phoenicia. In *Qohelet*, however, the Lord of eternity is God, not the sun. The three poems in chapters 1, 3 and 12 are central to a reading of *Qohelet*.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present study will look at three main issues connected to the study of *Qohelet*. Firstly, it will present a selective overview of recent scholarly views of *Qohelet's* genre. Secondly, I will present a critique of these views, which will be followed by the presentation of my thesis as to *Qohelet's* genre. I use italics to refer to the book of *Qohelet*, but dispense with them when referring to the sage whose words (whether written, oral, or both) are transmitted in the book of *Qohelet* (i.e., "the Qohelet"). I do not seek to enter the debate about the dating of *Qohelet*. In an earlier study, I concentrated upon providing a reading of *Qohelet* based in part on the readings of the medieval schoolmen, and in part using a method of comparative spirituality.[1] It is my intention here to focus on the genre of *Qohelet*. In the intervening period my researches have caused me to modify some of the positions in that article, and, indeed, to blush at certain errors. In considering the genre of *Qohelet*, one must form views as to the overall meaning and significance of the text.

[1] Joseph Azize, "Considering the Book of *Qohelet* Afresh," *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 37 (2000): 183-214.

2. Overview of Recent Scholarly Views of *Qohelet's* Genre

In 1992, Murphy observed, "one can hardly deny the existence of some poetic lines in the book (not only 3:2-8, but 11:1-4)" and suggested that there is a poem at 1:4-11.[2] Murphy concluded that while the genres of the "diatribe" and the "reflection" might explain some features of the book, they were inadequate to explain the whole. He also observed that "example stories" are included at 4:13-16 and 9:13-16. Murphy saw *Qohelet* as an "instruction", a "mode of persuasion, especially employing command or admonition." [3]

Young's *Diversity in Pre-Exilic Hebrew* highlighted the linguistic diversity in the Hebrew tradition.[4] Young preferred a pre-exilic date for *Qohelet*.[5] In later work, he has argued that Late Biblical Hebrew could have been used together with "the typologically older SBH." Indeed, he now contends that "it is not a priori impossible that the various varieties of Biblical Hebrew all had their roots in the post-exilic period."[6] In other words, in the state of our present knowledge, linguistic evidence will not assist us in judging whether *Qohelet* is to be dated to the Persian or Hellenistic periods, or earlier. Young's research into the contents of *Qohelet*, as set out in *Diversity in Pre-Exilic Hebrew*, would indicate that a pre-exilic date is possible if not, indeed, the most plausible. If Young is correct, it would mean that there cannot be any question of *Qohelet* belonging to a Hellenistic philosophical genre.

In 1997, Seow argued for a Persian period date.[7] Seow considered the putative affinities with Greek philosophy to be superficial. Longman has made a detailed study of genre theory and reflected that: "Genre distinctions do not fall from heaven. They are approximate ways by which we may speak of similar texts."[8] The entire text can be

2 Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC 23A; Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1992), xxviii-xxix.

3 Ibid., xxxii.

4 Ian Young, *Diversity in Pre-Exilic Hebrew* (FAT 5; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 31.

5 Ibid., 140-157

6 Ian Young, "Late Biblical Hebrew and Hebrew Inscriptions," in *Biblical Hebrew: Studies in Chronology and Typology* (ed. Ian Young; JSOTSup 369; London-New York: T & T Clark International, 2003), 278; with other relevant references at 299, and in the essay "Concluding Reflections", ibid., 312-17, esp. 316. I thank Dr Young for his generosity in providing this material to me before its very recent publication. There are numerous studies devoted to the language of *Qohelet*: two representative examples are Daniel C. Fredericks, *Qohelet's Language: Re-evaluating its Nature and Date* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988) and Antoon Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words* (OLA 41; Leuven: Peeters, 1992). Fredericks is skeptical that linguistics can date *Qohelet*, but Schoors rejects Fredericks' arguments and favors a later date.

7 Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (AB 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 12.

8 Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich./Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 1998), 17. Longman also observes that genres are not necessarily exclusive in that the one piece of literature may simultaneously fall within several genres (ibid., 15-17).

viewed, he argued, as a "framed wisdom autobiography", a genre which appears in Mesopotamian literature.[9] Four chief forms can be identified in the text: the reflection (an observation which is then considered), the proverb (a concise maxim expressing a truth), the anecdote (a short story told to make a point) and the wisdom instruction (where the instructor seeks to influence the reader's behavior or belief).[10]

In 1999, Fox noted that there is no close parallel to *Qohelet* anywhere. He agreed that there were elements of autobiography, proverbs, reflections and counsels. In the end, however, its "broad genre […] is Wisdom Instruction, because it purports to teach the reader the rules of successful living, doing so without appeal to divine revelation or specific traditions, but only by recourse to human reason."[11] Fox concluded that *Qohelet* shares some features of the royal testament and didactic autobiography, and that an ancient reader would have identified the text as a royal autobiography, and may even have realized that the kingly speaker was a convention.[12] Noting that the text is marked by "reflections",[13] Fox deduced that: "Perhaps the best way to characterize *Qohelet* would be 'reflective autobiography,' as opposed to a celebratory autobiography that narrates deeds and accomplishments."[14]

The reader is referred to two recent and subtle attempts to date *Qohelet* to the Hellenistic period. The first, by Machinist,[15] studies the biblical concepts aligned with our concept of "fate", showing that in effect, fate comprised an element of the divine scheme.[16] He also noted a number of words such as *miqreh*, *'et*, *zeman*, *'ôlam*, *'aḥarît*, *sôp* and *ro'š*, *re'šît*, which—with others—formed a field of 'patterned time'. This field "brings the individual sections of *Qohelet* together into a larger coherence."[17] In 2001, van der Toorn, to some extent relying upon Machinist, concluded that even if the author of *Qohelet* did "encounter" the philosophy of ancient Greece, he nonetheless "did not adopt the literary genre of these traditions. The correspondence with the Greek

9 Longman III, *Book of Ecclesiastes*, 17-19.

10 Ibid., 19.

11 Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up* (Grand Rapids, Mich./Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 1999), 153, and also p. 5.

12 Ibid., 153-55.

13 Fox defines a "reflection" as "a report of an inner contemplation of an issue" (ibid., 155).

14 Ibid.

15 Peter Machinist, "Fate, *miqreh*, and Reason: Some Reflections on Qohelet and Biblical Thought" in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C Greenfield* (ed. Ziony Zevit et al.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 159-75.

16 Ibid., 162.

17 Ibid., 165.

diatribe is tenuous at best."[18] However, van der Toorn firmly holds that *Qohelet* was written in the second half of the third century BCE.[19]

3. A CRITIQUE OF SCHOLARLY VIEWS AS TO *QOHELET'S* GENRE

What then, of the arguments for a philosophical Hellenistic genre? One intriguing view is Machinist's contention, outlined above, that in *Qohelet* we see "Greek second-order thinking". Machinist cites as authority Lloyd's works on Greece, and an essay by Elkana.[20] Elkana states that: "[…] our thoughts about knowledge are second-order thinking,"[21] and that legal thinking is second-order. In this respect, codification of laws with a distinction "between intentional and unintentional action, between murder and manslaughter" is "second-order psychological thinking."[22] Further, Elkana states that:

> […] if we accept the validity of the still somewhat unexplained phenomenon that during the Axial Age a number of civilizations underwent critical change more or less simultaneously and with no clear mutual influence on each other, and that the breakthroughs are characterized by a "strain towards transcendentalism", by creating a gap or tension between that newly created transcendental realm and the mundane, by an urgent need to bridge that tension, and by the emergence of new elites with autonomous norms which will serve as the bridge, THEN the very strain towards transcendentalism is second-order [capitals in the original].[23]

That Axial Age is said to include amongst its number the Pythagoreans, Sophists, Chinese literati, Hindu Brahmins, Judaic prophets and the Islamic ulema, and to have taken place between 800 and 200 BCE.[24] I should note that in his introduction to the volume, also cited by Machinist in support,[25] Eisenstadt observes that pre- and post-Axial conceptions could and did co-exist in the one culture.[26]

I am skeptical. I see little value in the concept of an "Axial Age" which spans 600 years. Further, if Elkana is serious about the Islamic ulema, then we are speaking of

18 Karel van der Toorn, "Echoes of Gilgamesh in the Book of Qohelet?", in *Veenhof Anniversary Volume* (ed. W. H. van Soldt; Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2001), 503-14, esp. 513.

19 Ibid., 511.

20 Machinist, "Fate, *miqreh*, and Reason", 175, n. 41.

21 Yehuda Elkana, "The Emergence of Second-Order Thinking in Classical Greece," in *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (ed. Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1986), 40.

22 Ibid., 50.

23 Ibid., 41.

24 Ibid., 42-43.

25 Machinist, "Fate, *miqreh*, and Reason," 175, note 41.

26 Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, "Introduction: The Axial Age Breakthrough in Ancient Greece," in *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (ed. Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1986), 29-30.

well over 1.000 years, and with respect, the concept becomes useless. But if the Hebrew prophets evidence a "strain towards transcendentalism", and "the very strain towards transcendentalism is second-order", then there is no impediment to a pre-exilic date for *Qohelet*. There is evidence of "second order thinking" even in Old Babylonia: Hammurabi's laws distinguish between intentional and unintentional assault.[27] More pointedly, this distinction is made in cases of murder, in Numbers 35:22-24. Considerable sophistication was evident in ancient Phoenicia: Poseidonios states that Mochos of Sidon was responsible for the atomic theories of Demokritos and Epikouros—placing him in or before the Persian period.[28]

Thus, the argument that *Qohelet* evidences "second order thinking" and must therefore be Hellenistic, seems circular. Even if we assume that *Qohelet* demonstrates this phenomenon of "second-order thought", the question of *Qohelet's* date is still open, as it could well be that this thinking began in Israel, not Greece.[29]

Blenkinsopp's discernment of the concept of *eukairia* in *Qohelet* could be used to date it and fix its philosophical genre. But, in my view, Blenkinsopp's argument is flawed if not only because he does not date when the concept of *eukairia* appeared in Stoicism, and cites only sources which, on any view, are later than *Qohelet*. One would imagine from this article that all Stoics held that idea from the inception of the Stoa, and that it was a staple doctrine.[30] The major text books I consulted do not list *eukairia* in their indices.[31] Von Arnim has only five references to this and related words, one to εὐκαίρημα, three to εὐκαιρία, and one to εὔκαιρος.[32] The first of these references, to a late passage in John Stobaeus (a Christian bishop) simply lists εὐκαίρημα among a number of virtues.[33] The same comment can fairly be made for the reference to εὔκαιρος,

27 M. E. J. Richardson, *Hammurabi's Laws* (BibSem 73/STS 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2000), 104-5, reproducing laws 206 and 207.

28 It is other authors, not Poseidonios, who place Mochos of Sidon "before the Trojan wars". The literature on this topic is not to be handled briefly. It suffices here to refer to the quote from Poseidonios in Strabo 16.2.24 and the other material in Ludwig Edelstein and I. G. Kidd, *Posidonius I. The Fragments* (Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries 13; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 253, 286; and in I. G. Kidd, *Posidonius II. The Commentary, (ii) Fragments 150-293* (Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries 14; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 971-75.

29 As noted (note 24 above) the Hebrew prophets are seen as being part of the "Axial Age".

30 Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1-15: Another Interpretation," *JSOT* 66 (1995): 58: "According to Stoic ethics an essential requirement is to know the right time to act or abstain from acting."

31 For example, the concept is not even listed in Donald J. Zeyl, ed., *Encyclopedia of Classical Philosophy* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997).

32 *SVF* 59, of the "index verborum … ad Stoicam doctrinam pertinentium."

33 *SVF* III 136.29.

also found in Stobaeus.[34] The remaining three references all come from Cicero's *De finibus*.[35]

Let us assume that the concept of εὐκαιρία existed in Stoicism from its inception.[36] I find no evidence of it in *Qohelet*. For *Qohelet* the passing of time, the impermanence of things, is the essence of the הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים, "vanity of vanities," which he decries. Blenkinsopp suggests that in Qoh 3:2-8 we may have "a citation from a stoicizing Jewish sage, or a Stoic composition translated into Hebrew", and so it might be suggested in Qoh 3:2 that there is an appropriate time for suicide.[37] This sentiment would be in contradistinction to לָלֶדֶת, "to give birth".[38] There are lexical problems, and Blenkinsopp concedes that his reading of suicide here "is not the most obvious way to translate".[39] However, the translation is not merely "not obvious", it shatters the sense of the entire poem. Then, favoring Greek influence for *a priori* reasons, Blenkinsopp overlooks the most palpable and credible known parallel of all for this idea: the Eshmunazor inscription. The funerary inscription of Eshmunazor II of Sidon, who probably ruled from 465-451 BCE,[40] relevantly reads:

dbr mlk 'šmn'zr mlk ṣdnm l'mr ngzlt bl 'ty bn msk ymm[41]

The words of Eshmunazor king of the Sidonians: I was snatched away not at my time, a child (lit. "son") of a few days […]

The lament is predicated on the assumption that there is an appropriate time—the word is *'ty*, "my time,"—for death. The parallel with Qoh 3:2 is readily apparent. The sentiment that there is a time for dying is therefore attested in a civilization close in space, language, culture and perhaps time. It is also a sentiment of the type which fits the particular tone of the poem, detailing how all the things we encounter have their season.

A more profound difficulty with Blenkinsopp's view is that on a careful reading, the resemblance between the Stoic concept and the ideas in *Qohelet* is a misleading one. *Qohelet* does not exhort one to find happiness by living or even dying opportunely. Rather, it teaches that there will be a time for every conceivable purpose. The Stoic concept addresses how to live, while *Qohelet's* is a reflection upon God's disposi-

34 *SVF* III 161.3.

35 *SVF* III 140.32; 141.4 and 190.2.

36 The concept was clearly a part of Greek Stoicism before Cicero. Unfortunately, we do not know how old it was. Nothing in Cicero points to its centrality or its age.

37 Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1-15: Another Interpretation," 59.

38 Ibid., 56-57.

39 Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1-15: Another Interpretation," 59. I note that Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, has this article in his bibliography but does not discuss it in his text.

40 See Brian J Peckham, *The Development of the Late Phoenician Scripts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 87.

41 *KAI* 14.2-3.

tion of his universe.[42] Both ideas lead to a conclusion that one should act as the times demand, but they have very different premises. To put it another way, the concepts in *Qohelet* may be consistent with one conclusion to be drawn from Stoic εὐκαιρία, but they are fundamentally broader and must be narrowed down if they are to be read as Blenkinsopp maintains.

A methodological issue arises. The attempts to find "Stoic", "Greek philosophical", or even simply "Greek" influence have in common a methodological idiosyncrasy which is both their chief attraction and their greatest weakness. That is, they choose as the source of influence a body of doctrine so large that no one could fail to find parallels. Differences can be disposed of by arguing that the influence was "incipient" or acquired not from the philosophers themselves, but indirectly. Gammie's method is even more plastic: he accepts that there are similarities between some concepts in *Qohelet* and some in Greek philosophy, but where there are differences between *Qohelet* and the Stoics, then, he says, *Qohelet* is in polemic with the Stoics.[43] By that procedure one can maintain a thesis that any given philosophical or religious system influenced any later one, if only some means of transmission is available. The case for "Stoic" or "Greek" influence is so elusive that it is of no utility even to its theorists.

A related problem which arises from too easy an identification of Greek influence is exemplified in van der Toorn's recent article. Starting from a position that "We do know with a reasonable amount of certainty that *Qohelet* wrote his book in Jerusalem in the second half of the third century BCE,"[44] he goes on to reason that *Qohelet* cannot have known Gilgameš at first hand, but only through "the channel of Ptolemaic Egypt".[45] Van der Toorn cites Lichtheim as authority for the last of these propositions, referring to the Egyptian use of certain wisdom literature. But van der Toorn seems to imply that verses from Gilgameš were transmitted to *Qohelet* through a Ptolemaic Egyptian tradition.[46] Lichtheim does not state this.[47] I emphasize that van der Toorn does not cite Lichtheim as explicitly asserting this. Rather, he refers to Mesopotamian wisdom literature (which Lichtheim does indeed treat in just this context), and then moves to Gilgameš.

Is this approach consistent? Having stressed that there is no direct evidence that the Akkadian Gilgameš was known in Jerusalem of the third century BCE, van der

42 Qoh 3:11 makes it clear that God is responsible for this seasonality.

43 John G. Gammie, "Stoicism and Anti-Stoicism in Qoheleth," *HAR* 9 (1985): 182, 184-85.

44 Van der Toorn "Echoes of Gilgamesh in the Book of Qohelet?," 511, provides no authority for this statement. On page 505, note 16, van der Toorn cites Seow, who argues for a Persian period date.

45 Ibid., 511-14.

46 Ibid., 514 and note 65.

47 Miriam Lichtheim, *Late Egyptian Wisdom Literature in the International Context* (OBO 52; Göttingen/Fribourg: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht/Universitätsverlag, 1983), 13-24.

Toorn conjectures that excerpts from it were known in Ptolemaic Egypt, and that the Egyptian material was itself known in Hellenistic Israel. But the evidence for this last proposition is "a comparative study".[48] Yet, previous comparative studies have concluded that Gilgameš was known to Qohelet.[49] There is some evidence that Gilgameš was known to the writer of Daniel 1-5. Parpola recently concluded that: "Numerous other themes and details in Daniel 1-5 indicate that the author had read his Gilgameš well and deeply absorbed its religious and philosophical imagery and values."[50]

This is not the only evidence that the author of the first five chapters of *Daniel* was acquainted with the Akkadian cuneiform tradition.[51] Indeed, given the strong evidence for the tenacity of the Akkadian and Sumerian cuneiform tradition in certain centers (including Babylon) into Seleucid times and even beyond,[52] it would be surprising if learned Hebrews in Babylon were not familiar with some of it.

Before leaving this topic, I shall consider the genre of the "diatribe". Although Loretz dismissed the idea that *Qohelet* belonged to that particular "Darstellungsform," I will briefly examine just what the Greek diatribe was, a question which Loretz assumed.[53]

The "diatribe" can be defined as: "A Graeco-Roman form of moralizing lecture characterized by a conversational style with abundant rhetorical figures, anecdotes, examples, and at least some hint of dialogue or reference to an imagined opponent."[54] The early diatribe is thought to have employed an informal setting, distinguishing it from the more serious philosophical treatise. This is speculative, as only fragments of early diatribes have survived.[55] Pearson believes that by Zeno's day, "diatribe" had developed the sense of a "short ethical treatise."[56] Scholars do not agree on how to identify a diatribe: one erudite person listed 28 stylistic characteristics, including use of everyday language, proverbs, hyperbole, paradoxes, personifications, etc.[57] The most recent study of any length known to me concludes that: "[…] the diatribe is full of

48 This is van der Toorn's phrase: "Echoes of Gilgamesh in the Book of Qohelet?," 513.

49 See the studies referred to in van der Toorn, "Echoes of Gilgamesh in the Book of Qohelet?," 503-5 and esp. note 10 on page 505.

50 Simo Parpola, "The Esoteric Meaning of the Name of Gilgameš," in *Intellectual Life of the Ancient Near East* (ed. Jirí Prosecky; Prague: Oriental Institute, 1998), 328.

51 See also David Instone Brewer, "*Mene Mene Teqel Uparsin*: Daniel 5:25 in Cuneiform," *TynBul* 42 (1991): 310-16.

52 Mark J. Geller, "The Last Wedge," *ZA* 87 (1997): 44-56.

53 Oswald Loretz, *Qohelet und der Alte Orient* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), 54-55.

54 Barbara Price Wallach, "Diatribe" in *Encyclopedia of Classical Philosophy* (ed. Donald J Zeyl; Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), 181-83.

55 Wallach, "Diatribe", 182.

56 Alfred C. Pearson, *The Fragments of Zeno and Cleanthes* (New York: Arno Press, 1973 [reprint of 1891 original]), 30-31.

57 Stanley K. Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1981), 7-9.

common rhetoric: direct address to imaginary participants, short dialogues with questions and answers."[58] *Der Neue Pauly*, one of the works cited by van der Toorn, states similarly that:

> […] die urspr. synonym mit *dialogos* jede Form eines Gesprächs meinte, dann aber im Sprachgebrauch der Philosophen und Rhetoren jenen Lehr-, aber auch unterhaltenden Vortrag, in dem dialogische Elemente wie vom Redner fingierte, also nicht in der Redesituation durch das Publikum selbst eingebrachte Zwischenfragen und Einwände (*fictivus interlocutor*) […].[59]

If *Qohelet* is not a diatribe, what of the suggestion that it belongs to the genre of fictional royal autobiography?[60] Even if *Qohelet* does—in whole or in part—belong to this genre, that does not help us in understanding the work. As Fox stated of Wright's theory of *Qohelet's* arrangement, it has: "no more effect on interpretation than a ghost in the attic."[61] Even if *Qohelet* does speak as a king, nonetheless, I would suggest, the (modern) category which best illuminates the text for us is that of the critique.

4. The Genre of *Qohelet*

Qohelet is not just any critique: it is fundamentally a spiritual text. The final verses confirm this, and provide important information about the Qohelet and the text:

9 וְיֹתֵר שֶׁהָיָה קֹהֶלֶת חָכָם עוֹד לִמַּד־דַּעַת אֶת־הָעָם וְאָזַן וְחִקֵּר תִּקֵּן מְשָׁלִים הַרְבֵּה
10 בִּקֵּשׁ קֹהֶלֶת לִמְצֹא דִּבְרֵי־חֵפֶץ וְכָתוּב יֹשֶׁר דִּבְרֵי אֱמֶת
11 דִּבְרֵי חֲכָמִים כַּדָּרְבנוֹת וּכְמַשְׂמְרוֹת נְטוּעִים בַּעֲלֵי אֲסִפּוֹת נִתְּנוּ מֵרֹעֶה אֶחָד

9 Furthermore, Qohelet was wise, and he also taught the people knowledge and having listened and investigated, he composed many sayings.

10 Qohelet sought to find pleasing words and wrote the most honest words of truth.

11 The words of the sages are like goads, and the [words of] masters of collections are like implanted nails set by a shepherd.[62]

I have presented Fox's translation of this difficult but critical passage. It contains, in my view, the key to the genre of *Qohelet*. This commentator either was, or knew, the Qohelet. It seems to be a contemporaneous characterization of this enigmatic thinker's production. There are some questions of translation: for example, Longman and Fox among others present respectable arguments in favor of reading וְאָזַן as a Piel

58 Dirk M. Schenkeveld, "Philosophical Prose" in *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period 33 B.C.—A.D. 400* (ed. Stanley E. Porter; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 232.

59 *Der Neue Pauly*, "Diatribe," column 531.

60 See, for example, the nuanced discussion in Longman III, *Book of Ecclesiastes*, 6-19.

61 Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 149. See also the careful critique of Wright's views in Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 44-46.

62 Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 349.

form meaning "listen".[63] However, the overall sense of these verses is that the Qohelet sought out, arranged and taught wisdom. It does not say that he simply repeated the sayings: rather, he either "composed" or "arranged" (תִּקֵּן) them, or perhaps both. Whybray and Seow note that this verb covers a relatively wide lexical range, and came to have the sense of "set in order".[64] The next line does not necessarily restrict its reference to the proverbs of the line before. The text seems to say that the sage conducted two activities: one as an original thinker, and one as an editor of existing sayings. The editing, but not the original writing, seems to be limited to the proverbs.

I am by no means certain that אֲסֻפּוֹת does not refer to "assemblies of people", as Seow observes to be possible.[65] In that case, בַּעֲלֵי אֲסֻפּוֹת would be a synonym for "sages" and for the noun *qohelet* itself. It could in fact be a reference to a tradition of persons like the Qohelet who convened groups of people to hear their ideas. However, we lack evidence. Qohelet's words are spurs: they will not allow one to remain where one has been, staid and complacent. In and for itself, this life is futile: so remember your creator (בּוֹרְאֶיךָ).[66] A positive doctrine is, otherwise, not set out in Qohelet in any details, but it is implicit in the lines of attack. This demonstrates how apt the metaphors in 12:11 are. Similarly, the shepherd with his goads drives his flocks towards the planned destination.

Therefore, verses 12:9-11 describe exactly the sort of material which we find in *Qohelet*: the collected maxims are set in an order which supports the overall thesis of the book. That thesis, the book's unique contribution, is set out in the three main poems of chapters 1, 3 and 12. The whole tenor of that thesis is to point the reader to eternity, to god, and to disabuse the reader of hope in what is "under the sun". Thus *Qohelet* can state at 3:11:

> 11 אֶת־הַכֹּל עָשָׂה יָפֶה בְעִתּוֹ גַּם אֶת־הָעֹלָם נָתַן בְּלִבָּם מִבְּלִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִמְצָא הָאָדָם
> אֶת־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹהִים מֵרֹאשׁ וְעַד־סוֹף
>
> 11 He has made everything fitting in its time and even given eternity in their heart, without man being able to grasp the doing which 'Elohim (god) has done from the beginning to the end.

There is a dispute about the meaning of עוֹלָם here; for example, Fox favors a meaning of "toil", as opposed to "world", "eternity" or "ignorance".[67] As Longman

63 Longman III, *Book of Ecclesiastes*, 275, note 62; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 352.

64 Roger N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 171; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 385.

65 Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 387. Martin A. Shields, "Ecclesiastes and the End of Wisdom," *TynBul* 50 (1999): 130, is of the same opinion.

66 Qoh 12:1. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 351, notes that the "more serious problem is with the meaning of the word." I cannot see any real problem. Suggested emendations seem to stem from a desire to harmonize *Qohelet* to what is thought to be a more consistent theology, and as such strike me as unduly subjective.

67 Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 210-11.

notes, when one considers the usage of the word in this book, one will naturally conclude that it means "eternity".[68] Apart from the fact that a reading of this verse as a whole makes the translation "ignorance" most doubtful indeed, there is a deeper issue. Can the word not be used in more than one sense, at once? Few translators try to find "the" translation of a text, or even "the best" translation. Most scholars recognize that texts are often multivalent, and that words may be obscure or even mysterious to native scholars of the language. This is not trite. The words selected for use in certain works, especially perhaps, poetical works, cannot be converted or reduced to other words.[69] As Seow observes, of the word בּוֹרְאֶיךָ in 12:1, "the author may indeed intend to evoke other connections in using this word."[70] In reading works in the spiritual tradition, one may lose a great deal of their significance or connotations, by trying to be too precise about what they denote.[71]

Consistent with Seow's observation, the word עוֹלָם in verse 3:11 may mean "eternity" and yet have been intended to make the reader think also of "world", or even "labor". These senses further *Qohelet's* line of thought: although we cannot comprehensively understand what god has done, we are not indifferent to that issue, it haunts us, for we have "the world" (or, "labor") in our hearts. This would mean that the *Qohelet* (or his editor) was operating at a very sophisticated literary level, but many scholars come to the same conclusion even without specific regard to 3:11. I have doubts about the type of argument Fox employs against the translation "eternity". For example, he states:

> An ancient explanation construes *ha'olam* as 'eternity' (LXX αἰῶνα). This too can make sense only if considerably amplified, for example, "… [God] has also established in man an impulse leading him beyond that which is temporal toward the eternal."[72]

With respect, it is not clear that Fox is correct here. *ha'olam* makes sense. It is dense, even poetic, perhaps even enigmatic, but that is no argument against the natural reading: it only signifies that the natural reading is dense, poetic, or enigmatic. However, should we today wish to articulate our understanding of this verse, then a rephrasing may well be required. I am not arguing against rephrasing: it is often useful.[73]

68 Longman III, *Book of Ecclesiastes*, 118-21.

69 John Coulson, *Religion and Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 18-20.

70 Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 351.

71 See, for example, Kathleen Raine, "On Symbolism," in *Defending Ancient Springs* (Suffolk: Golgonooza Press, 1985). That essay considers these issues in relation to religion, poetry and myth, but is not restricted to symbolism as such. I would contend that Raine's approach is applicable, with certain qualifications, to *Qohelet*. In another study, I shall consider whether *Qohelet* may not have a place in the spiritual tradition of "unsaying". "Unsaying", the "apophatic way," has been the subject of many works, but recently Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2-4.

72 Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 210.

73 For example, Fox's (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 227) rephrasing of the story of the young man (Qoh 4:13-16) is quite valuable and he does not have to avoid any *prima facie* meanings.

I only contend that the rephrasing must commence from the natural meaning of a word.

Perhaps the most common observation about *Qohelet* is that it falls within the tradition of Israel's wisdom literature. As that literature is often seen as instructional, this would tell against the theory that *Qohelet* is a critique.[74] This is true, and yet it is equally legitimate to remark that unlike *Proverbs*, *Wisdom of Solomon* and *Ben Sirach*, there is no exhortation to anyone, whether child, son, ruler or judge, to hearken to what is said and take it to heart, until the final poem is introduced at 12:1, and even then, the form is different from what we find elsewhere. The terms of the book of *Qohelet* are not those of an earnest prophet abjuring Israel to repent its ways. They are not maxims or proverbs for a useful life, as it were. Even when he uses proverbs, the Qohelet aims at reducing one's complacent view of the world to confusion. The texts selected to go into *Qohelet* are intended to dissolve the smug satisfaction of the reader either by reminding one of unpalatable truths (e.g. 1:15) or by bringing even the proverbs into collision. Examples of this last strategy are, firstly, 9:1-6 where he states consecutively that death deprives life of value, then that life is still better than death; and secondly 9:13-10:3 where wisdom is praised but then shown to be less potent than folly. Is either view endorsed? It seems to me that the two sentiments are made to clash and that this conflict is deliberately left unresolved precisely because they relate to life under the sun, and that, as we know from the opening, is הֶבֶל הֲבָלִים.

That the sayings are often incompatible has been the occasion of a great deal of mental gymnastics, trying to find meaningful ways to harmonize the parts of the text.[75] But if my view of *Qohelet's* genre is correct, this is not the point. The text intentionally goads, even by provoking one to ask how the contents can be reconciled. In this respect the Qohelet is thorough and consistent in his deliberate use of discordant ideas. When I wrote my earlier *Qohelet* essay, I cited the opinion of Ambrose and the medieval schoolmen who followed him that this text was in fact a sort of critique. Their view, it will be remembered, was that Solomon wrote *Qohelet* in order to teach us to "value eternity and to devalue the perishable world."[76] I did not then appreciate how deeply this insight went. From the opening blast, הֶבֶל הֲבָלִים הַכֹּל הָבֶל, through to the poem on inevitable infirmity, disease and death, the entire thrust of the book is to challenge fixed beliefs and make one ask: why do we live, toil, collect wealth, and so on? Nothing escapes the Qohelet's critical eye: wisdom and knowledge bring trouble (1:18 and elsewhere), wine, women, wealth and pleasure are illusory gains (2:1-11), and

74 See, for example, Fox's view (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 153-55).

75 I therefore fundamentally differ from the approach taken by Martin Rose, *Rien de nouveau: nouvelles approches du livre de Qohéleth* (OBO 168; Göttingen/Fribourg: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht/Universitätsverlag, 1999) that *Qohelet* was successively remodeled and at different points endorses diverse points of view. I have not specifically addressed this question as the general direction of my essay makes my position clear.

76 Azize, "Considering *Qohelet* Afresh," 195.

these themes are reiterated in diverse ways. This does not mean that the Qohelet himself was not capable of systematic thought: it seems to me that the ability to skim over and draw from a large body of material points to a systematic mind, even if one chooses not to express oneself consecutively. This is all the more so when the thinker in question sees their role as being to provoke others into interrogating their own received opinions.

A somewhat similar view (i.e. that *Qohelet* is a critique of "life under the sun") was held by other writers in the ancient, medieval and modern traditions.[77] It is not that there is safety in numbers, but it is significant that many people over a lengthy period of time, using the book as a critique from a religious standpoint, have come to compatible views. There is no reason why a historian should not consider such readings. Even if one does not share the worldview of a writer, one can nonetheless assess and evaluate that view.

But my argument is not based upon the fact of this tradition of interpretation. A historian must start from the most certain facts, and work outward. Apart from the opening and closing verses, it seems to me that all of the book's material has been collected from the writings of the Qohelet himself. The three poems of chapters 1, 3 and 12 stand out. It is especially in these that the Qohelet's own voice speaks most clearly. That is, he does not place proverbs and stories in contradistinction with others here. These three poems stress the ephemerality of the world and the relentless flow of time, that there is nonetheless a time for everything, and that one must not be lazy, otherwise old age will overtake one, and judgment will fall upon us unprepared. If it is accepted that the balance of *Qohelet* is a critique, or at least not significantly different from a critique, many but not all problems concerning its interpretation vanish. The contradictions for which *Qohelet* is notorious are seen to be intended: they challenge the reader's beliefs, for both sides of the contradictory pairing are put in question.

As I contended in my earlier article, the high incidence of the phrase "under the sun" cannot be an accident or an infelicity of style. It is meant to qualify the pessimism of the piece by asserting out that this criticism is aimed at ephemeral life. Even the poem of 3:1-8, while it has a certain dignity and elegance, is really quite impartial between the pleasant and the unpleasant circumstances for which there is a time. Throughout our text, principles are discernible: first, that everything beneath the sun will change. Second, that if one judges success by permanence, there is no success on earth. By this criterion, even wisdom is an illusion. In a detailed study of the Phoenician solar religion, I have concluded that the Phoenician material evidences the following principles:

❶ This passing earthly life is life under the sun, (*tḥt šmš*). It is ephemeral in the original sense of that word.

[77] Shields, "Ecclesiastes and the End of Wisdom," 118 citing Easton and others; compare also Svend Holm-Nielsen, "On the Interpretations of Qoheleth in Early Christianity," *VT* 24 (1974): 168-77.

❷ This life may be described as life "among the living" (*bḥym*).

❸ However, another existence is possible. This is not described as life. It can be described as having a resting place among the Rephaim.

❹ This is existence for eternity (*bʿlm*).

❺ Existence for eternity is not existence under the sun. It is conceived as ruled over by the eternal sun (*šmš ʿlm*). The eternal sun is the sun we know in a different role.

❻ The corollary of this is that the sun measures two different types of time: passing time and eternity.

Whether or not one is prepared to consider this a plausible reconstruction of Phoenician religion or not, it is clearly consistent with world view in *Qohelet*, the polytheistic elements of (❸) aside. Further, there is some support in the Standard Babylonian Gilgameš epic for this view. When Gilgameš passes beneath Mount Mašu, he comes out before (*la-am*) Šamaš.[78] It is in this land that he will find Utnapšitim, for as the Old Babylonian version states, "the gods dwell with Šamaš forever."[79] This land is not, we may infer, covered by Šamaš in his daily circuit, because it is on the other side of the mountain from which Šamaš arises. In Egypt, the association of the sun with eternity and the belief in existence of an afterlife (and the development in that belief over Egyptian history) are too well known to require lengthy citation.[80] But it is worth mentioning that the Egyptians had two words for "eternity", namely *nḥḥ* and *ḏt*. Assmann states briefly the difference between them as: "*nḥḥ* und *ḏt* beziehen sich auf die (endliche oder unendliche) Zeit der Welt, *nḥḥ* auf die 'ewige' Wiederkehr des 'Ersten Males' […] *ḏt* auf die Permanenz des Seienden."[81]

The precise meaning of these words is not without controversy, and they do not evidence the same concept of time found either in Phoenicia or in *Qohelet*: after all, they relate to *eternity*, not to *time* as such. But these Egyptian concepts are analogous to the ideas I contend were held in Phoenicia. Further, while practically all of these concepts can be found in Greek philosophy (even the notion of two different types of time can be found in the third century CE Syrian philosopher Iamblichos) they do not have a prominence in Greek philosophy which approaches their importance in Phoenicia.

78 Gilgameš IX, line 172. Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford World's Classics; rev. ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 99, translates: "... he] came out in front of the sun."

79 The Yale tablet, in R. C. Thompson, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), 27, column IV, line 7. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 144, translates "only the gods dwell (?) with Shamash forever."

80 But for the New Kingdom there is now the magisterial study of Jan Assmann, *Egyptian Solar Religion in the New Kingdom: Re, Amun and the Crisis of Polytheism* (London: Kegan Paul, 1995).

81 Jan Assmann, "Ewigkeit," *LÄ* 2:48.

To turn now to *Qohelet*, we are in a position to appreciate Machinist's concept of "patterned time" from a deeper perspective. In this respect, I think Machinist's key insight comes when he writes that *Qohelet* identifies fate (*miqreh*) only with death, so that "death becomes, then, the predetermined defining point of an abstract notion: *miqreh* as the pattern of time that each individual lives out."[82] But, something is missing here, for even above fate are the overarching realities of god (אֱלֹהִים in *Qohelet*), eternity and judgment. It is precisely because of the fact of these higher realities that death is so important: the breath will then return to god and he will bring all things into judgment (12:7 and 12:14). The phenomena of the poem in chapter 1 are "vanities" because they do not last forever. I do not agree with all of de Jong's conclusion, but he was able to abstract from *Qohelet* six principles about god, and to trace these in the Hebrew Bible, thus showing that *Qohelet* lies, to an extent, within the Hebrew tradition in interpreting existence and death in the light of a faith in the supreme deity.[83]

Machinist is therefore correct to say of עוֹלָם in Qoh 3:11 that "it gives human beings an awareness of the 'eternal' that lies beyond."[84] But he is, I think, wrong in stating that: "In Qohelet, thus, we witness the beginnings of a technical vocabulary created or adapted to deal with the problem of time in human existence."[85] That vocabulary seems to have existed beforehand in Egypt and Phoenicia, and possibly also in Mesopotamia.

It is said that because both the foolish and the wise die and will be forgotten, the quest for wisdom is reduced to an absurdity (Qoh 2:12-17). But this pertains to life under the sun, as 2:17 reminds us. By making this qualification explicit, *Qohelet* thereby exempts from his critique that which is not ephemeral, i.e. eternity. In the words of the polytheistic tradition, as evidenced in the Gilgameš epic, this is "life before the sun." The sun does not play the same role in *Qohelet* that it does in the polytheistic tradition, for Qohelet is a monotheist. However, it seems to me that *Qohelet* was written in a world where the editor assumed that his readers understood the background. As that cultural context changed, and the polytheistic ideas of the sun as marking two different types of time (or perhaps more accurately, marking eternity and passing time) were forgotten, the intellectual context for *Qohelet* was also lost, hence the perplexity of readers and scholars. Critically, in *Qohelet* we are told that the "king" applied himself to diligently learn about the doings under heaven (Qoh 1:13), not the doings of heaven. The book closes with an affirmation of God's omniscient judgment, and the word הַכֹּל reoccurs, forming bookends: the הַכֹּל הָבֶל of 1:2 is resumed at 12:13 by סוֹף דָּבָר הַכֹּל נִשְׁמָע, end of the matter—the "all" has been heard.

82 Machinist, "Fate, *miqreh*, and Reason," 170.

83 Stephan de Jong, "God in the Book of *Qohelet:* A Reappraisal of *Qohelet's* Place in Old Testament Theology," *VT* 47 (1997): 154-67.

84 Machinist, "Fate, *miqreh*, and Reason," 172.

85 Ibid.

As Krašovec observes, *Qohelet* never concludes that death obliterates the difference between the righteous and the wicked, and, accordingly Qoh 3:17[a] refers

> …to the belief that there is a definite time for judgment of the righteous and the wicked. This belief, in the light of God's eternity, is much more important than any complaint of the similarity between human beings and animals, for it is based on a certainty that God's activity in the world is beyond human understanding.[86]

Even when *Qohelet* does not mention eternity, the concept may be implicit. For example, in the story of the poor youth and the foolish king, *Qohelet* brings observations into collision by the device of (a) setting a stage where it is better to be the youth than the king and remarking on how nicely matters turned out the young man (Qoh 4:13-16[a]), and then (b) reflecting that even that youth will be forgotten (4:16[b]). In other words, his triumph will not be eternal. *Qohelet* has in fact subtly reminded us that the new king's followers were הַמְּהַלְּכִים תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, "those walking under the sun" (4:15). Finally, (c) *Qohelet* remarks that even this too is הֶבֶל וְרַעְיוֹן רוּחַ, "vanity and a striving of wind" (4:16[c]). As against this, we have God, whose action is not passing (e.g. 3:14). All things find their end in him (e.g. 3:15 and 12:7). For us, what is eternal is our state in death (12:5[b]) and the judgment of god (3:17 and 12:14), for his judgment, like everything he performs, must by inference, be lasting.

What does that judgment consist in? *Qohelet* does not say. It may be that *Qohelet* presupposes the sort of view that after death the reprobate might lie בְּיַרְכְּתֵי־בוֹר, "in the extremes of the pit" (Ezek 32:23), but it does not tell us, and that is, besides, a different question. The purpose of this essay was to attempt to show that the book functions as an exhaustive critique of the standard goals of life, and that the critique operates from the axiomatic position that god will judge all things. However, these questions of what *Qohelet* may have meant us to understand about eternity and judgment are important questions: they alert us to the fact that *Qohelet* wrote within an assumed context. Of that context, we can say very little, but what we can say is that the context is religious and spiritual, and not at all in the spirit of Greek philosophy.

86 Joze Krašovec, *Reward, Punishment, and Forgiveness* (VTSup 78; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 320.