

Reading Ecclesiastes as parental discourse

Spalding, Andrew David

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READING ECCLESIASTES AS PARENTAL DISCOURSE

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Moore Theological College, Sydney

**This thesis is being submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy at Moore Theological College**

DECLARATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts a genre-appropriate method of reading Ecclesiastes, with a specific aim of describing its normative theological contribution and didactic strategies. It focuses on its discourse setting of parental instruction, which is a key but neglected feature of wisdom literature. A preliminary study of the book of Proverbs (chapter 2) establishes the probability of a parental discourse setting on the basis of external and internal data, challenging the prevailing view that it is a textbook for scribal or courtly preparation. After a thorough articulation of a rhetorical-critical method (chapter 3), the thesis is tested inductively on the book of Ecclesiastes (chapters 4–9). These chapters defend the unity of the book and the integrity of the epilogue (chapter 4), establish the epilogist as the implied author and Qohelet as a fictional character (chapter 5), identify that the father's rhetorical goals are to deter his son from self-reliant wisdom and to 'goad' him towards covenantal obedience (chapter 6), and analyse the father's strategic rhetorical design of Qohelet's words in three key texts: 7:23–29; 11:7–12:7; 4:17–5:6[5:1–7] (chapters 7–9).

When read as parental discourse, the central message of Ecclesiastes is that self-reliant 'wisdom' is in fact folly, and that covenantal obedience is the foundation of all wise living. The theological contribution of the book is thus closely related to the teaching of Proverbs (e.g. 1:7; 3:1–6), with its own distinct emphases: obedience to divine (not just parental) commands and *possibly* eschatological judgment.

Our study of key texts highlights three didactic strategies that the father employs to instruct his son. First and most prominently, the father's use of an ambiguous character, whose words dominate the book. While Qohelet is portrayed as a great Solomon-like king and wise scribe, his exaggerated discourse exposes him as the embodiment of self-reliant wisdom. Secondly,

Qohelet shares his reliable first-hand knowledge of the limitations and trajectory of his epistemology. Thirdly, Qohelet's words unknowingly allude to Israel's religious traditions. This dramatic irony provides further critique of Qohelet's mode of wisdom and also commends the law as a superior wisdom.

Reading Ecclesiastes as parental discourse provides solutions to many of the long standing problems in the interpretation of the book. It gives permission to Qohelet to have his own dissenting voice, rather than seeking to harmonise his words with the canon. It accounts for the relationship between the epilogist and Qohelet—especially their common diction but differing perspectives—as that of implied author and his character. Most significantly, it explains the uncomfortable tension between Qohelet's heterodox views and orthodox expressions as part of the *father's* strategy of allusion.

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|------------|--|
| AB | The Anchor Bible |
| ABRL | Anchor Bible Reference Library |
| ABS | Archaeology and Biblical Studies |
| AcBib | Academia Biblica |
| <i>AEL</i> | <i>Ancient Egyptian Literature</i> . Miriam Lichtheim. 3 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973–80 |
| AIL | Ancient Israel and Its Literature |
| ANE | ancient Near East(ern) |
| AOTC | Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries |
| ApOTC | Apollos Old Testament Commentary |
| Aq. | Aquila |
| ATD | Das Alte Testament Deutsch |
| ATAT | Arbeiten zu Text und Sprache im Alten Testament |
| <i>BBR</i> | <i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i> |
| BC | before Christ |
| BCOTWP | Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms |
| BDB | Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907 |
| BETL | Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium |
| BHQ | <i>Biblia Hebraica Quinta</i> . Edited by A. Schenker et al. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004– |

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| BHS | <i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> . Edited by Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983 |
| <i>BibInt</i> | <i>Biblical Interpretation</i> |
| BKAT | Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament |
| BLS | Bible and Literature Series |
| <i>BM</i> | <i>Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature</i> . Benjamin R. Foster. 2 vols. Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1993 |
| <i>BN</i> | <i>Biblische Notizen</i> |
| <i>BSac</i> | <i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i> |
| <i>BT</i> | <i>The Bible Translator</i> |
| BWANT | Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament |
| <i>BZ</i> | <i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i> |
| BZAW | Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft |
| <i>CBQ</i> | <i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i> |
| CBQMS | Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series |
| CC | Continental Commentaries |
| ch(s). | chapter(s) |
| col(s). | column(s) |
| ConcC | Concordia Commentary |
| cont. | continued |
| <i>COS</i> | <i>The Context of Scripture</i> . Edited by William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997–2016 |

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|--------------|--|
| CSB | Christian Standard Bible |
| <i>CTR</i> | <i>Criswell Theological Review</i> |
| <i>CurBR</i> | <i>Currents in Biblical Research</i> |
| <i>EBib</i> | <i>Etudes bibliques</i> |
| ed(s). | editor(s) |
| esp. | especially |
| ESV | English Standard Version |
| ET | English translation |
| <i>EvQ</i> | <i>Evangelical Quarterly</i> |
| fem. | feminine |
| FCB | Feminist Companion to the Bible |
| FRLANT | Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments |
| Gk. | Greek |
| GKC | <i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> . Edited by E. Kautzsch, revised and translated by A.E. Cowley. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1910. |
| <i>HALOT</i> | <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999 |
| HAT | Handbuch zum Alten Testament |
| Hb. | Hebrew |
| HKAT | Handkommentar zum Alten Testament |

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| <i>HS</i> | <i>Hebrew Studies</i> |
| HThKAT | Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament |
| <i>HTR</i> | <i>Harvard Theological Review</i> |
| <i>HUCA</i> | <i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i> |
| ICC | International Critical Commentary |
| <i>Int</i> | <i>Interpretation</i> |
| ITC | International Theological Commentary |
| <i>ITQ</i> | <i>Irish Theological Quarterly</i> |
| IVP | Intervarsity Press |
| JB | Jerusalem Bible |
| <i>JBL</i> | <i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i> |
| JCS | Journal of Cuneiform Studies |
| <i>JHebS</i> | <i>Journal of Hebrew Scriptures</i> |
| <i>JETS</i> | <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i> |
| <i>JJS</i> | <i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i> |
| <i>JNSL</i> | <i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i> |
| Joüon | Joüon, Paul. <i>A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew</i> . Translated and revised by T. Muraoka. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006. |
| JPS | The Jewish Publication Society |
| <i>JQR</i> | <i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i> |
| <i>JSJSup</i> | <i>Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism</i> |
| <i>JSOT</i> | <i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i> |

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| JSOTSup | Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series |
| <i>JSS</i> | <i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i> |
| KJV | King James Version |
| LBH | Late Biblical Hebrew |
| LD | Lectio Divina |
| LHBOTS | Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies |
| LTP | Laval théologique et philosophique |
| LXX | The Septuagint |
| masc. | masculine |
| MH | Mishnaic Hebrew |
| mg. | margin |
| ms(s) | manuscript(s) |
| MT | Masoretic Text |
| n. | footnote |
| NAC | New American Commentary |
| NASB | New American Standard Bible |
| n.d. | no date given |
| NEB | New English Bible |
| NICOT | New International Commentary on the Old Testament |
| NIV | New International Version |
| NJB | New Jerusalem Bible |
| NJPSV | The Tanach: New Jewish Publication Society Version |

| | |
|------------|--|
| NKJV | New King James Version |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |
| NT | New Testament |
| OBO | Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis |
| OLA | Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta |
| OT | Old Testament |
| OTE | Old Testament Essays |
| OTL | Old Testament Library |
| <i>OTS</i> | <i>Oudtestamentische Studiën</i> |
| p(p). | page(s) |
| pl. | plural |
| <i>RB</i> | <i>Revue biblique</i> |
| repr. | reprint(ed) |
| RSV | Revised Standard Version |
| <i>RTR</i> | <i>The Reformed Theological Review</i> |
| SBL | Society of Biblical Literature |
| SBLDS | Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series |
| SBLMS | Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series |
| SBLSS | SBL Semeia Studies |
| SBM | Stuttgarter biblische Monographien |
| SBS | Stuttgarter Bibelstudien |
| SBT | Studies in Biblical Theology |

| | |
|---------------|---|
| <i>Sem</i> | <i>Semitica</i> |
| sing. | singular |
| SJLA | Studies in Judaism in late Antiquity |
| <i>SJOT</i> | <i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i> |
| SP | The Samaritan Pentateuch |
| SPAW | Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften |
| <i>SR</i> | <i>Studies in Religion</i> |
| Sym. | Symmachus |
| Syr. | Syriac |
| <i>TAD</i> | <i>Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt</i> . Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni. 4 vols. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1986–99 |
| <i>TDOT</i> | <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringren. 15 vols. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1974–2006 |
| <i>Them</i> | <i>Themelios</i> |
| Tg. | Targum |
| <i>TynBul</i> | <i>Tyndale Bulletin</i> |
| UBCS | Understanding the Bible Commentary |
| <i>UF</i> | <i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i> |
| v(v). | verse(s) |
| vol(s) | volumes(s) |
| <i>VT</i> | <i>Vetus Testamentum</i> |

| | |
|------------|--|
| VTSup | Supplements to Vetus Testamentum |
| Vulg. | Vulgate |
| WBC | Word Biblical Commentary |
| WMANT | Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament |
| <i>WTJ</i> | <i>Westminster Theological Journal</i> |
| <i>ZAW</i> | <i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i> |
| ZBK | Züricher Bibelkommentare |

Translations are the author's unless indicated otherwise.

This thesis follows *the SBL Handbook of Style (Second Edition)* with the exception of using single quotation marks and the external placement of punctuation.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In 1976, James L. Crenshaw declared wisdom literature ‘an orphan in the biblical household’, referring to its marginalised status in modern biblical scholarship.¹ Since that time, there has been a steady flow of historical and literary studies on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. Nevertheless, these books have remained neglected within Old Testament theology. This neglect is primarily a result of two characteristics: canonical dissimilarity and foreign resemblance.²

The dissimilarity of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job to the rest of the canon is obvious in their apparent lack of interest in historical acts of salvation or Yahweh’s covenant relationship with Israel.³ Walther Zimmerli classically argued that the structure of wisdom thought is anthropocentric. It is concerned with ‘what is good for man’, specifically in the sense of an autonomous individual *rather* than a member of the covenant people.⁴ Even

¹ James L. Crenshaw, ‘Prolegomenon’, in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*. ed. James L. Crenshaw (New York: Ktav, 1976), 1–60[1].

² Crenshaw also claims that its association with the deuterocanonical Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon has had a negative impact. Crenshaw, ‘Prolegomenon’, 2.

³ Penchansky is a more recent advocate of seeing the wisdom books as alien to the rest of the OT. He says that the sages simply did not consider the covenant to be important. David Penchansky, *Understanding Wisdom Literature: Conflict and Dissonance in the Hebrew Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 81–83.

⁴ Significantly, Zimmerli argues from Ecclesiastes, where this question is more obvious. Walther Zimmerli, ‘Concerning the Structure of Old Testament Wisdom’, in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*. ed. James L. Crenshaw (New York: Ktav, 1976), 175–207[176–77]. Preuss observes ‘It is striking that, proportionately speaking, the Book of Qoheleth takes up the general topic of “human beings” within its twelve chapters more often than the thirty-

where covenantal and sapiential ethics overlap, wisdom literature is to be understood as commending reflection and independent decision rather than universally applicable precepts.⁵

Secondly, biblical wisdom literature bears strong similarities to the literature of Israel's 'pagan' neighbours. The early twentieth century saw advances in Egyptology and the appreciation of Egyptian scribal culture.⁶ Adolf Erman's 1924 discovery of the direct literary connection between Prov 22:17–23:11 and the much older Instruction of Amenemope led to a revival of interest in wisdom literature in the sphere of biblical studies,⁷ yet in biblical theology these foreign associations have been more of a liability. A secondary result of these connections to Egyptian and Mesopotamian literature is the school hypothesis that has continued to dominate the field.⁸ All of this has deepened the impression that wisdom literature is a 'secular' corpus, distinguished by its *Sitz im Leben*, and reflecting the class ethic of scribes, officials, or other members of the elite.⁹

These twin characteristics of biblical wisdom literature mean that it has an uneasy relationship with the task of biblical theology, which has tended to emphasise salvation history. The emblematic example of this is Gerhard von Rad's treatment of the wisdom literature in his *Old Testament Theology*, where

one chapters of the Book of Proverbs do.' Horst D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology: Volume II*, OTL, trans. Leo G. Perdue (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 131.

⁵ Zimmerli, 'Structure', 178–184.

⁶ Bernhard Lang, 'Schule und Unterricht im alten Israel', in *La sagesse de l'Ancien Testament*. ed. Maurice Gilbert, 2nd ed. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990), 186–201.

⁷ Adolf Erman, 'Eine ägyptische Quelle der "Sprüche Salomos"', *SPAW* 15 (1924): 86–93.

⁸ See further chapter 2.

⁹ E.g. Robert Gordis, 'The Social Background of Wisdom Literature', *HUCA* 18 (1943): 77–118.

it features as an appendix to his first volume, where it forms part of 'Israel's answer' to salvation history.¹⁰ Despite the recent championing of the natural theology of the wisdom literature,¹¹ there has been little gain for Old Testament theology. While there is indeed a growing tendency to include wisdom literature in recent theological works, this is more of a reflection of the post-modern theologian's comfort with 'biblical diversity' than a maturation of our understanding of the relationship of wisdom literature to the rest of the Old Testament.¹²

Perhaps the most promising development in the study of wisdom literature is, ironically, the questioning of the category altogether. On the basis of his study of wisdom vocabulary throughout the Old Testament, R. N. Whybray finds no evidence that the wisdom books are the work of a professional class.¹³ He concludes that, at most, the wisdom books point to an intellectual tradition—

¹⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, Volume I: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (London: SCM, 1975), 418–459. While he gives a more substantial treatment in his later work, it is less theological in focus. Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1975).

¹¹ Brueggemann attributes this to von Rad, Murphy, Crenshaw and Whybray. Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 144–176; Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 682–684; James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 197–200; Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 111–132.

¹² Wisdom literature is thus accepted as a separate stream of theological discourse to the special revelation that accompanies Israel's salvation history; e.g. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology: Volume II*, 126–127; Brueggemann, *Theology*, 682–684; Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 11–12; Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 215–224.

¹³ R. N. Whybray, *The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament*, BZAW 135 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), 6–54.

a way of thinking rather than an institution.¹⁴ Moreover, the influence of this intellectual tradition can be detected across significant portions of the canon.¹⁵

Stuart Weeks likewise undermines the hypothesis of a school or courtly origin of wisdom literature in Israel.¹⁶ He argues that the ‘assured results’ of the school hypothesis largely depend upon discredited assumptions regarding education in ancient Israel, the significance of literary borrowing, the use of חכמים to refer to a class in Israel, and the import of courtly sayings in Proverbs. He concludes: ‘the Israelite [wisdom] literature might make elevating reading for adults or children, but would be of little use in training them either for a profession or for a way of life.’¹⁷

More recently, Mark R. Sneed has questioned the concept of ‘wisdom literature’ at a more literary-theoretical level, charging it with relying upon the defunct concept of generic realism.¹⁸ He argues that genres do not encapsulate worldviews; rather, a culture’s worldview is the sum of its genres.¹⁹ Thus it is erroneous to claim that the sages did not have salvation history as part of their

¹⁴ Whybray, *Intellectual Tradition*, 55–70.

¹⁵ Gen 2–3 (possibly also 11:1–9); 37–40; Deut 1–4; 32; 2 Sam 9–20; 1 Kgs 1–2; 3–11; Pss 1; 19:8–15; 37; 49; 51; 73; 90; 92; 94; 104; 107; 111; 119; Isa 1–39; Jer; Ezek 28; Dan; Hos 14:10; Mic 6:9. Whybray, *Intellectual Tradition*, 154.

¹⁶ Stuart Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); Stuart Weeks, *An Introduction to the Study of Wisdom Literature*, T&T Clark Approaches to Biblical Studies (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 127–144.

¹⁷ Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom*, 159.

¹⁸ Mark R. Sneed, ‘Is the “Wisdom Tradition” a Tradition?’, *CBQ* 73.1 (2011): 50–71; Mark R. Sneed, ‘“Grasping after the Wind”: The Elusive Attempt to Define and Delimit Wisdom’, in *Was There a Wisdom Tradition?: New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom Studies*. ed. Mark R. Sneed, AIL (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 39–67.

¹⁹ Sneed, ‘Grasping’, 39–41.

worldview, simply because it is not mentioned.²⁰ Instead, the distinguishing feature of wisdom literature is its didactic and moralising mode.²¹

This growing scepticism towards the distinct categorisation of ‘wisdom literature’ is a reflection of the difficulties faced by the interpreter in accounting for the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, and relating them to the rest of the Old Testament. Viewed positively, it is an invitation to consider the genre(s) of wisdom literature from another angle.

1.2 Problem

The most acute crisis in the study of wisdom literature is the interpretation of Ecclesiastes. This is undoubtedly because deficiencies in the study of wisdom literature are laid bare by the oddities of this wisdom text—a mysterious pseudonym, an unusual diction of repeated words and expressions, an intense first person discourse, alternations between despair and joy, a tension between orthodoxy and scepticism, an unclear structure, and an epilogue that sits uncomfortably with the overall tenor of the book. As a result, scholars find themselves taking polarised positions on the most fundamental issues of interpretation.

Three major disagreements regarding the interpretation of Ecclesiastes are of particular concern. First, there is the basic issue of whether Qohelet’s overall message is positive or negative. Among those who read Qohelet positively, Whybray is most famous for his designation of Qohelet as a ‘preacher of joy’, giving pride of place to Qohelet’s escalating calls to enjoy life as the answer to the vanity that he observes.²² Graham S. Ogden and Eunmy P. Lee similarly

²⁰ Sneed, ‘Grasping’, 53–56.

²¹ Sneed, ‘Tradition’, 68–69.

²² R. N. Whybray, ‘Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy’, *JSOT* 23 (1982): 87–98.

emphasise Qohelet's positive response to life's enigmas,²³ and Daniel C. Fredericks says that the book affirms the enjoyment of life in answer to its transitoriness.²⁴ Also noteworthy is Craig G. Bartholomew's reading, in which Qohelet's discourse gradually emerges as a positive message of enjoyment after a struggle between his Greek autonomous epistemology and his Jewish materialist heritage.²⁵ Each of these readings attempts to harmonise Qohelet's teaching (or part of it) with the rest of the canon.

By contrast, a stream of negative interpretation views Qohelet as a sceptic sharing the bitter lessons of his youth or criticising the traditional maxims of the wisdom tradition.²⁶ A number of interpreters take a mediating position, seeing Qohelet as a realist who re-examines tradition in new circumstances.²⁷

²³ Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 14; Eunhy P. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet's Theological Rhetoric*, BZAW 353 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 32–82.

²⁴ Daniel C. Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', in *Ecclesiastes & The Song of Songs*, eds. Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, ApOTC 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 15–263[23–30].

²⁵ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 93–96.

²⁶ E.g. Aarre Lauha, *Kohelet*, BKAT (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 11–20; James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, OTL (London: SCM, 1988), 23–28; Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1995), 69–86, 112–22. Longman and Shields also belong here, however, they make a distinction between the negative message of Qohelet and the message of the book, which includes the normative words of the epilogist. Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 32–39; Martin A. Shields, *The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 106–109.

²⁷ E.g. Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 91–92; Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary*, CC, trans. Sean McEvenue (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 4–6; Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary*, Hermeneia, trans. O. C. Dean Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 1–4.

These two readings allow Qohelet to have a unique voice vis-à-vis the rest of the canon.

Secondly, there is persistent disagreement as to the relationship between the epilogist and Qohelet. On the one hand, the epilogist is seen as fundamentally at odds with Qohelet, such as a pious editor who sought to safeguard an orthodox interpretation of the book,²⁸ or the implied author who uses Qohelet as a foil for his teaching.²⁹ On the other hand, the epilogist may be an editor who largely agrees with Qohelet,³⁰ or the implied author who wants to make sure that his character has been correctly understood.³¹ What is at stake here is whether the epilogue is central or peripheral to the theological contribution of the book.

Thirdly, commentators cannot agree on how to understand the uneasy relationship between Qohelet's use of orthodox expressions and his more radical comments. This is most obvious in the treatment of his imperatives to 'fear God' (5:6[7]) and 'remember your creator' (12:1). One solution is to delete or emend these words.³² Those who maintain their originality either take them as proof that Qohelet is affirming the tradition³³ or else transforming

²⁸ E.g. Carl G. A. Siegfried, *Prediger und Hoheslied*, HKAT (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1898), 12; A. H. McNeile, *Introduction to Ecclesiastes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), 24–26; George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ICC (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), 44–45; Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste*, EBib (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1912), 157–160.

²⁹ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 32–39; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 106–109.

³⁰ Though perhaps selectively; e.g. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 339–341.

³¹ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 359–373.

³² Lauha, *Kohelet*, 209–210; Charles F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought*, BZAW (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979), 95; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 185.

³³ Ogden, *Koheleth*, 199; R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 75, 163; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 207–08, 354; Fredericks,

traditional terminology in creative ways.³⁴ Whether or not these tensions or contradictions are an intentional feature of Qohelet's discourse remains an open question.

1.3 Aim

Our aim is to attempt a reading of Ecclesiastes that elucidates its normative theological contribution and didactic strategies. We will argue that a distinguishing feature of wisdom literature is a discourse setting of parental instruction.³⁵ When this feature is given prominence in a reading of Ecclesiastes, it brings formal and conceptual unity to the book, evincing both its message and pedagogy.

The significance of this study is its potential to advance the understanding of the book of Ecclesiastes specifically, and the genre of wisdom literature more broadly. This will, in turn, promote further dialogue about the place of wisdom literature in Old Testament theology.

1.4 Method

The method of this study is primarily literary, as suggested by the term *discourse* setting, as opposed to *historical* or *social* setting. In other words, the object of study is not the identity of the empirical author or audience, or the historical

'Ecclesiastes', 40.

³⁴ Norbert Lohfink, 'Warum ist der Tor unfähig, böse zu handeln? (Koh 4, 17)', in *XXI. Deutscher Orientalistentag. Ausgewählte Vorträge. Vom 24. bis 29. März 1980: Vorträge* Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft Supplement 5 (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1983), 117–18, 137–39; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 237; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 36; Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, The JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 34; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 110–111; Antoon Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 400.

³⁵ The implications for Job are briefly considered on p. 368.

occasions of composition or subsequent use. Rather, our interest is in the literary framing of the text and the setting that the author *invokes*.

There are two reasons for this approach. First, the gap between implied author and empirical author can only be assessed with external evidence, which is not available to us in this case. Second, the generic identity of the ‘father’ and his ‘son’, suggests that these are literary constructs rather than historical figures.

We will provide an extended defence of a genre-appropriate method in chapter 3, since we believe that many of the missteps in interpreting wisdom literature occur at the literary-theoretical level.

1.5 Overview

The starting point of this thesis is the deficiency we have already highlighted in the understanding of the genre of wisdom literature. As such, chapter 2 examines a distinctive feature of this genre, namely the discourse setting indicated by the use of ‘my son’ (בְּנִי). It will be argued that Proverbs—Israel’s definitive specimen of wisdom literature—employs a parental discourse setting.

In chapter 3, we develop a method for reading Ecclesiastes as parental discourse in order to test the findings of chapter 2 with respect to the book of Ecclesiastes. A method of rhetorical criticism, which treats texts as social discourse, is specifically crafted in light of its literary shaping and obscure origins.

The subsequent chapters apply the developed method to the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter 4 delimits the rhetorical unit, and demonstrates that reading the book as parental discourse renders the entire text of Eccl 1:1–12:14 comprehensible. Chapter 5 establishes the discourse setting of Ecclesiastes, namely by identifying the implied author and reader, and determining the literary categorisation of Qohelet. In chapter 6 we identify the rhetorical goals

of the implied author, which reveal his communicative intent for the book as a whole. In chapters 7–9, we analyse three key texts (7:23–29; 11:7–12:7; 4:17–5:6[5:1–7]), in which we pay particular attention to the contribution of the ‘parts’ to the implied author’s ‘whole’, the rhetorical strategies utilised by the implied author, and any possible solutions this approach brings to longstanding problems in the interpretation of Qohelet’s words.

Each chapter contains a concluding section with a discussion of any contributions made to the aim of the research. A concluding chapter draws together all of these findings in answer to the problems of Ecclesiastes interpretation that we have identified above, considers the broader implications of these findings, and identifies areas for future research.

CHAPTER 2

THE DISCOURSE SETTING OF BIBLICAL WISDOM LITERATURE

The ongoing crisis in the study of wisdom literature and the recent questioning of the entire genre is an invitation for a different approach, with the hope that it will yield greater insight into its place within biblical theology. The present study will focus on one hitherto neglected aspect of wisdom literature at greater depth: its *discourse setting*, which refers to ‘the textual setting in which the discourse self-referentially places itself.’¹

A common feature of wisdom literature is that it addresses a young man. This is most evidently true of Proverbs, in which the speaker addresses ‘my son’ (בני) or plural ‘O sons’ (בנים) twenty-seven times.² The epilogist of Ecclesiastes also uses בני to address his audience (Eccl 12:12), while Qohelet himself uses the address ‘young man’ (בחור in 11:9). The address ‘my son’ likewise appears throughout Sirach³ and in additional sapiential texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁴

The convention of addressing ‘my son’ is also present in non-Israelite didactic texts of the ancient Near Eastern.⁵ The earliest known use of ‘my son’ in a

¹ Though this term belongs to narrative theory, O’Neill notes that it is not limited to narrative, or even literary texts at all. Patrick O’Neill, *Fictions of Discourse: Reading Narrative Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 155.

² Prov 1:8, 10, 15; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:1 (בנים), 10, 20; 5:1, 7 (בנים), 20; 6:1, 3, 20; 7:1, 24 (בנים); 8:32 (בנים); 19:27; 23:15, 19, 26; 24:13, 21; 27:11; 31:2 (ברי).

³ Sir 2:1; 3:12, 17; 4:1; 6:18, 23, 32; 10:28; 11:10; 14:11; 16:24; 18:15; 21:1; 26:19; 31:22; 37:27; 38:9, 16; 40:28.

⁴ E.g. 4Q185; 4Q412.

⁵ John Day, ‘Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom of Israel and Its Appropriation in the

didactic text is in the Instruction of Shuruppak, which is a Sumerian work of the mid-third millennium BC.⁶ It is used consistently throughout Mesopotamian history and is also found in the Akkadian wisdom of Shubawilum discovered in Ugarit.⁷ Egyptian literature does not typically use this vocative address within the body of its instructions; however, it commonly frames these texts with an older man speaking to his son or successor. The Aramaic Words of Ahiqar contains both the framework of a man addressing his nephew and the address ‘my son’ throughout the body of the work.⁸

Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are the only writings in the Hebrew canon that explicitly address an individual, which they do through singular addresses such as בְּנִי and consistent use of singular imperatives and other related verb forms.⁹ The legal and prophetic books speak corporately to the people of Israel with frequent second person plural verbs and appeals such as ‘Hear (שִׁמַע) O Israel’ (Deut 5:1) or ‘Hear (שִׁמַעוּ) the word of Yahweh’ (Jer 2:4).¹⁰ Similarly, the hymns of the Psalter speak to the congregation with calls to praise (הַלְלוּיה). Historical narratives speak to their audiences only indirectly; although lacking

Book of Proverbs’, in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J.A. Emerton*. eds. John Day, Robert P. Gordon and Williamson H. G. M. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 68–70; Richard J. Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature, Interpreting Biblical Texts* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 1998), 31.

⁶ COS 1.176:31, 34.

⁷ BM, 332–35.

⁸ TAD C1.1:82, 96, 127.

⁹ The main occurrence of plural imperatives or volitive *yiqtol*s in Proverbs is in the speeches of Lady Wisdom, who (rhetorically) addresses a wide audience (1:22–23; 8:5, 10, 32–33; 9:5–6). The ‘father’ of Proverbs 1–9 occasionally addresses ‘sons’ (4:1–2; 5:7; 7:24), although these are far outweighed by the 282 second person *singular* verb forms. No second person plural verbs are present in Ecclesiastes, in contrast to the 67 singular forms.

¹⁰ These two examples illustrate how both singular and plural imperatives are used in the Law and the Prophets to address a corporate entity.

an explicit addressee they still have an implied audience, which is most likely corporate (exilic and post-exilic) Israel. Less commonly, there are also prophecies and psalms that ostensibly address the nations (e.g. Obad; Psalm 117).¹¹

The sapiential address to ‘my son’ not only characterises the addressee as an individual, but it also highlights another important feature of the discourse setting of biblical wisdom literature: a narrator who uses first person speech. While first person narration appears in psalms of thanksgiving and lament, prophetic report and lament, and the memoir portions of Ezra and Nehemiah,¹² it is only in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes where the first person narrator addresses an individual other than God. This feature cannot be limited to an editorial framework, since the address to a young man is maintained throughout the various collections of Proverbs (e.g. Prov 19:27; 23:15, 19, 26; 24:13, 21; 27:11) and the discourse of Qohelet, who himself uses singular imperatives and addresses a young man (11:9). The book of Job does not appear to share the same discourse setting as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. At this point we will limit ourselves to the two texts that are most relevant to this study, and only afterwards consider the implications for the book of Job.¹³

¹¹ These addresses are most likely literary devices, rather than characterising the implied audience.

¹² Of course, historical narratives record conversations of one individual to another, and prophets momentarily address other individuals like kings or false prophets. Our concern is with complete biblical books and the characterisation of their discourse as a whole.

¹³ The less than straightforward relationship of Job to Proverbs and Ecclesiastes is not a new observation; its designation as ‘wisdom literature’ has been questioned by commentators past and present because of differences of form and content; e.g. Paul Volz, *Hiob und Weisheit*, Die Schriften des Alte Testaments 3.2, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921), 1–2; Artur Weiser, *Das Buch Hiob*, ATD 13, 7th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), 9–11; Katharine J. Dell, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature*, BZAW 197

Our study of discourse setting will examine the possible social contexts that an author may *invoke* as the setting for a didactic text in ancient Israel.¹⁴ This chapter will begin with a brief survey of the social contexts that have been previously identified as relevant in some way to wisdom literature, either as the *Sitz im Leben* of its source materials or the social setting of its extant literature.¹⁵ These proposals then will be assessed on the grounds of historical plausibility, by weighing the external evidence. Finally, a literary study of the book of Proverbs will defend the most likely discourse setting on the basis of the form and content of the book.

The literary study of this chapter will focus upon the book of Proverbs for several reasons. Proverbs is widely recognised as the foundational biblical wisdom text. This is suggested by its attribution to King Solomon (Prov 1:1), who was reputed to be the wisest man in Israelite history (1 Kgs 5:9–14[4:29–34]). As a compendium, we may also infer that it represents the choicest wisdom of Israel—at least in the eyes of the editor. The use of the address בְּנִי is also the most pervasive in Proverbs and thus provides the most data for a deductive study of discourse setting. Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, only makes its discourse setting explicit at the very end of the book (12:9–14). In many ways, it appears to presume the existence of Proverbs: its literary forms,

(Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), 57–108.

¹⁴ To *invoke* a discourse setting means that an author fictively imitates a social setting, which is suitable for the framing of the text. The most likely discourse setting for a didactic text is the one that most resembles either historical practice or intended usage. For example, a historical king addressing his son would provide an effective literary framework for a manual of courtly preparation; likewise, an anonymous teacher addressing his students would be an appropriate discourse setting for a scribal textbook.

¹⁵ Ansberry equates discourse setting with *Sitz im Buch* in contrast to *Sitz im Leben*. Christopher B Ansberry, *Be Wise, My Son, and Make My Heart Glad: An Exploration of the Courtly Nature of the Book of Proverbs* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 1–2, 6–7.

questioning outlook, and of course, its use of בְּנִי. Moreover, we have identified a number of critical problems with the interpretation of Ecclesiastes.¹⁶ But while these oddities make it unstable ground for deductive argument, they do not exclude it for use in an inductive study—in fact they commend it for such. Because of this, the discourse setting deduced from the book of Proverbs in this chapter will be tested in a reading of Ecclesiastes in subsequent chapters. This approach also has the added benefit of reducing circularity.

2.1 Overview of Possible Discourse Settings

This section surveys the possible discourse settings for the book of Proverbs. Discourse setting has not received much attention in biblical scholarship, but it is related to *Sitz im Leben*, which considers how a text and its sources originated or were used within Israelite society. However, instead of viewing texts as candidates for use in particular social settings, a study of discourse setting weighs the suitability of social contexts to be fictively invoked by the author as a literary framework. Given the likelihood that the discourse setting of a text resembles either its intended usage or a related historical practice, we can consider the proposed *Sitze im Leben* of wisdom literature as candidates for its discourse setting.

2.1.1 The Scribal School

The first proposed *Sitz im Leben* of wisdom literature in modern research is the scribal school. In this view, Proverbs is generally understood as a textbook for either a child learning literacy, or the slightly older student being trained for the scribal profession.

Bernhard Lang credits August H. Klostermann with the ‘discovery’ of the

¹⁶ See pp. 23-26.

school system of ancient Israel.¹⁷ In 1908, he theorised the existence of a school that taught the children of the wealthy to read and write on the basis of three texts: Isa 50:4–9; 28:9–13; Prov 22:17–23:11. He identified Proverbs as a school text because of its didactic character and its reference to fees (4:5; 17:16).¹⁸

Klostermann's theory was prior to the advances in Egyptology and Assyriology, which identified schools for scribes and officials and uncovered their own didactic texts and proverbs. As such, his position was not widely adopted until Erman uncovered the close literary relationship of Proverbs to the Instruction of Amenemope in 1924.¹⁹ Hugo Gressmann explained this literary contact by proposing that the author of Proverbs was a scribe just like the authors of the Egyptian instructions.²⁰ Paul Humbert similarly claimed that wisdom literature was written for the training of scribes.²¹

More recently, André Lemaire focused his attention upon the epigraphical and archaeological evidence for the school, identifying what he believes is a classroom and several scattered abecedaries that hint at students practising their literacy skills.²² Although he argues that Proverbs comes from the royal court,

¹⁷ Lang, 'Schule und Unterricht', 186.

¹⁸ August Klostermann, *Schulwesen im alten Israel* (Leipzig: Böhme, 1908).

¹⁹ Erman, 'Quelle', 86–93.

²⁰ Hugo Gressman, 'Die neugefundene Lehre des Amenemope und die vorexilische Spruchdichtung Israels', *ZAW* 42 (1924): 272–296.

²¹ Paul Humbert, *Recherches sur les sources égyptiennes de la littérature sapientiale d'Israël*, Mémoires de l'Université de Neuchâtel 7 (Neuchâtel: Secrétariat de l'Université, 1929), 181.

²² André Lemaire, *Les écoles et la formation de la Bible dans l'ancien Israël* (Fribourg: Presses Universitaires, 1981); André Lemaire, 'Sagesse et écoles', *VT* 34.3 (1984): 270–281; André Lemaire, 'The Sage in School and Temple', in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*. eds. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 165–181.

he claims the epigraphical evidence points to a far broader educational system in ancient Israel.²³

In summary, the main arguments in support of a scribal setting for biblical wisdom literature include: biblical references to schooling and literacy, similarities between Israel's wisdom tradition and the scribal traditions of its larger neighbours, and epigraphical and archaeological evidence for schools. The existence of a prominent scribal school with a connection to the wisdom traditions of Israel would make it highly credible that the discourse setting of Proverbs consists of a school teacher instructing his pupil.

2.1.2 *The Royal Court*

The second major proposal for the *Sitz im Leben* of wisdom literature is the royal court, or a school that specifically trained potential future monarchs or government officials. Given the likely importance of scribal roles within the court administration, there is an interrelatedness of the first two settings. This means they share a number of arguments, and some proponents do not clearly delineate between the two positions.

Hans-Jürgen Hermisson's examination of the earliest proverbs (10:1–22:16; 25–29) concluded that they originated from an educated class of teachers and students in the royal school. In contrast to the single-line folk saying (*Spruchwort*), the two-line indicative proverb (*Aussagewort*) and the imperative admonition (*Mahnwort*) point to a setting of education.²⁴ Von Rad followed his student Hermisson in adopting a royal school setting for the present form of Proverbs, primarily on the basis of their form and interest. He additionally

²³ Lemaire, *Les écoles*, 67–68.

²⁴ Hans-Jürgen Hermisson, *Studien zur israelitischen Spruchweisheit*, WMANT 28 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1968), 92–93.

proposed the birth of wisdom in Israel during a ‘Solomonic enlightenment’.²⁵ E. W. Heaton further developed this theory and proposed that the rapid development of Israel as a state under Solomon necessitated the borrowing of much Egyptian civilisation, particularly its royal administration and supporting schools. Rather than being a purely elite document, the book of Proverbs reflects the education of middle class men for these new roles.²⁶ Most recently, Christopher B. Ansberry has re-examined the teaching of Proverbs, both its topics of instruction and its pedagogy, and concluded that its discourse setting is the royal court.²⁷ Ansberry, however, does not argue specifically for a royal school, but rather the royal family.

A royal or governmental discourse setting of a teacher training future officials, or a monarch addressing his successor, can be considered likely if the following arguments hold up to scrutiny: the historical and sociological analogy to the royal administration of Egypt or Mesopotamia, the connection of Israel’s wisdom tradition to its monarchy, and the prominence of courtly interest within biblical wisdom literature itself.

2.1.3 *The Family*

The third possible discourse setting of wisdom literature is the Israelite family.

²⁵ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 15–52.

²⁶ E. W. Heaton, *Solomon’s New Men: The Emergence of Ancient Israel as a National State*, Currents in the History of Culture and Ideas (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974). And more recently E. W. Heaton, *The School Tradition of the Old Testament: The Bampton Lectures for 1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

²⁷ Ansberry, *Be Wise*, 184–187. Ansberry follows the basic arguments of Brown, who himself develops Van Leeuwen’s ideas. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, ‘The Book of Proverbs’, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible 5* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 23, 105; William P. Brown, ‘The Pedagogy of Proverbs 10:1–31:9’, in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation*. ed. William P. Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 150–182.

Such a setting opts for a literal interpretation of ‘my son’. Biblical wisdom literature is thus read as parental discourse, in which a father instructs his biological son. This view is also related to research that has proposed a folk setting to the book of Proverbs.

According to Claus Westermann, many of Israel’s proverbs have their *Sitz im Leben* among the common folk; he claimed these proverbs originally existed as one-line sayings (*Sprichwörter*).²⁸ Friedemann W. Golka argues even more strongly for a folk setting, noting the similarities of many of the biblical proverbs to African proverbs. He shows that even the royal proverbs (*Königssprüche*) can be understood in a tribal setting, and hence argues for a popular origin for all of Proverbs 10–29. He provocatively entitles one of his articles ‘The Israelite Wisdom School or “The Emperor’s New Clothes”’.²⁹

More recently, a few interpreters have suggested that whereas wisdom originally had its home in the royal court, in post-exilic times the family became increasingly dominant and took over this tradition.³⁰ A minority of interpreters similarly accept the authenticity of the parental setting in Proverbs 1–9, although not necessarily the subsequent collections.³¹

²⁸ Claus Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples*, trans. Charles, J. Darryl (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 1–3.

²⁹ Friedemann W. Golka, ‘Die israelitische Weisheitsschule oder “Des Kaisers neue Kleider”’, *VT* 33.3 (1983): 257–270. He provides a translation of this article in Friedemann W. Golka, *The Leopard’s Spots: Biblical and African Wisdom in Proverbs* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 4–15.

³⁰ Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, BLS 11 (Decatur, GA: Almond, 1985), 233–254; Ronald E. Clements, *Wisdom in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1992), 18–19; Alan Moss, ‘Wisdom as Parental Teaching in Proverbs 1–9’, *HeyJ* 38 (1997): 426–439.

³¹ James L. Crenshaw, ‘Education in Ancient Israel’, *JBL* 104.4 (1985), 615; Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC 14 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman,

The challenge mounted by Weeks against the school hypothesis is also relevant to this discourse setting. He systematically attacks the assumptions that underlie each of the main arguments supporting a school setting. Though he himself does not propose a positive solution, his arguments against the school clearly support a literal interpretation of the father-son setting in the absence of a viable alternative.³²

This view will need to find its support in the historical practice of parental instruction, and a close examination of the book of Proverbs: its narratee and narrator, its portrayal of education, the content of its instruction, and its pedagogical strategies and goals.

2.2 Assessment of the Data

This section assesses the data that has been used in support of the above positions. The first three categories of evidence can be described as external evidence as they fall outside the book of Proverbs. While itself inconclusive, this historical background is important for confirming the existence of and illuminating the didactic contexts that could plausibly be invoked as discourse settings for the book of Proverbs. The fourth and most significant category of evidence is the book of Proverbs itself.

2.2.1 Biblical Evidence

The most detailed source of information about social and institutional life in ancient Israel is the Old Testament. School advocates claim several types of evidence in the biblical data: the explicit mention of a school by Ben Sira,

1993), 23–28; Michael V. Fox, ‘The Social Location of the Book of Proverbs’, in *Texts, Temples, and Traditions*. ed. Michael V. Fox (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 80–83; Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 62–63.

³² Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom*, 4.

schooling practices reflected in the training of the prophets, possible references to scribal exercises and students, and subtle intimation of royal schools.

The first explicit mention of an Israelite school does not come until the second century BC, when Ben Sira extends an invitation to enter his **בית מדרש** or 'house of instruction' (Sir 51:23). While it is likely that Ben Sira did not establish this institution himself, Heaton claims too much in suggesting its relevance to the book of Proverbs. He argues that the wisdom tradition is highly stable, conservative, and sits in basic continuity with millennia of scribal education in Egypt and pre-exilic Israel.³³ Two problems emerge with Heaton's basic contention. First, it is widely recognised that Sirach represents a significant development of the wisdom tradition, namely the identification of wisdom with the Mosaic law. Arguably, there may also be a departure from the setting of earlier biblical wisdom. Secondly, the expression **בית מדרש** is possibly a metaphor for the book itself, which would explain why the tuition is free (Sir 51:25).³⁴

While the Old Testament itself does not clearly speak of any scribal or royal school, there are practices that suggest the concept of schooling was a familiar one in ancient Israel. Eli's tutelage of Samuel (1 Sam 1–3) provides an example of a child entrusted into the care of an adult for special religious development.³⁵ His birth narrative (1 Sam 1), however, makes it clear that Samuel was a special case. Additionally, Samuel is trained by Eli as an individual, and partly as an adopted son in the place of his wayward biological sons (1 Sam 2:12–36).

³³ Heaton, *Solomon's New Men*, 101; Heaton, *School Tradition*, 1–23.

³⁴ Fox, 'Social Location', 236. However, note the Gk. of Sir 51:28, which says that learning is acquired with a very large sum of silver, thus contradicting v. 25.

³⁵ Lemaire, 'Sagesse et écoles', 274.

Closer to a school is the entourage of Elijah and Elisha's disciples known as the **בני הנבים** (1 Kgs 20:35; 2 Kgs 2:3, 5, 7, 15; 4:1, 38; 5:22; 6:1; 9:1), which included at least fifty members (2 Kgs 2:7) and a communal place of dwelling (6:1–2). In both of these examples we discover the use of familial language: Eli the priest speaks to his young disciple Samuel as **בני**. Similarly, within the Elijah–Elisha cycle, Elisha speaks to his mentor as **אבי** (2 Kgs 2:12).³⁶ Even if we are to grant that these examples bear similarities to schooling, they are still far from proving the existence of a scribal or royal school and may simply reflect the practice of an older man speaking to a younger man as **בני** (e.g. Josh 7:19; 1 Sam 3:16; 2 Sam 18:22).

The earliest arguments for a scribal school in Israel were based upon Klostermann's interpretation of two key texts in Isaiah, which make reference to scribal exercises (28:9–13) and scribal students (50:4).³⁷ Isaiah 28:9–13 speaks of the people of Israel ridiculing the prophet who had been sent to them; they compare his words to that of a recently weaned child (v. 9), and liken them to the practising of elementary alphabetic constructions: **צו לצו**: **צו לצו**.³⁸ Golka contends that the age of the child (v. 9) makes it more likely that the reference is to small children being educated by their parents.³⁹ Lemaire rejects this proposal and claims that v. 9 is a way to describe leaving the care of the mother generally, which was somewhere between 3 and 6 years. He points to children attending school at

³⁶ Daniel J. Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1–9*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 94–95.

³⁷ See p. 33 above. Consideration of his third key text, Prov 22:17–23:11, will be deferred to the relevant section of this chapter.

³⁸ These are possibly old names for Hebrew letters; cf. *HALOT*, s.v. 'צו'.

³⁹ Golka, *Leopard's Spots*, 6–7.

this age in Egypt and later Rabbinic schools.⁴⁰ The argument that this is a reference to a school exercise, however, significantly weakens the ridicule of Isaiah and fails to recognise the force of v. 9, which shows these children are only toddlers. It also does account for v. 13, where the same words are now the unrecognisable speech of a foreign army brought in judgment by Yahweh. This suggests we are to hear these words as a child practising their first (unintelligible) sounds rather than an older child learning literacy.

In Isa 50:4, the prophet (or anonymous speaker) tells of having received from Yahweh ‘a tongue of the taught ones’ (לשון למודים). The speaker himself is not claiming a school education, but rather that he has been instructed by Yahweh. The word למודים is allegedly a technical word for students. But the language could be drawn just as easily from teaching in the home.⁴¹ Elsewhere in Isaiah, the same word (למודים) is used to describe Isaiah’s disciples (8:16) and also in a spiritual sense (54:13). The most straightforward reading is that this language non-technically describes the learning that comes from close association with a master: Isaiah in the case of 8:16 and Yahweh in the case of 54:13.⁴²

Lemaire provides additional references that he believes indicate a royal school: Rehoboam having grown up with other young men (1 Kgs 12:8), Ahab’s children having trustees (2 Kgs 10:1, 5, 6), and Jehoshaphat appointing officials to teach (2 Chr 17:7–9). First Kings 12:8 is the most compatible with the existence of a royal school, but there are many other possible explanations for

⁴⁰ Samuel too leaves his mother at this age (1 Sam 1:24). Lemaire, ‘Sagesse et écoles’, 274.

⁴¹ James L. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 90–93.

⁴² John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 427–428.

Rehoboam's peer group, and nothing technical about the description that they grew up (גדלו) with him. The need for a trustee (האמנים) over Ahab's children is evidently due to their great number and the death of their father, rather than the institution of a school. Second Chronicles 17:9 clearly speaks of the instruction of the law with the assistance of the Levites, thus having no obvious connection to a royal school.

Lemaire readily admits the biblical examples he uses are 'très vagues et insuffisants pour prouver l'existence de ces écoles'.⁴³ After all, Lemaire believes his epigraphical evidence is strong enough by itself, so he only needs the biblical evidence to understand the nature of education in Israel, not to prove its existence.

So far we have seen that the biblical evidence adduced for the existence of scribal or royal schools in Israel is open to doubt. We may also cautiously propose some arguments against the existence of such schools and, therefore, their likelihood of providing the setting to the wisdom literature.

First, the scribal profession appears to have been practised within certain families or clans (1 Chr 2:55), just like other professions (1 Chr 4:21–23). The role of the king's scribe or secretary was a hereditary one (2 Sam 8:17; 1 Chr 18:16; 1 Kgs 4:3; Jer 26:24; 36:9–13), as were the roles of many other officials (Ezra 2:55; Neh 7:57).⁴⁴ This implies, but does not prove, that scribal training occurred within the family.

Secondly, the biblical silence on the existence of schools is damaging to claims of a pre-exilic royal school. Heaton strongly criticises any approach which uses

⁴³ Lemaire, *Les écoles*, 41.

⁴⁴ Aaron Demsky, 'Education in the Biblical Period', in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971), 388–89, 392; Golka, *Leopard's Spots*, 8–9.

an absence of evidence as evidence for absence, noting that there is no-one who doubts that ancient Israel had courts, medical treatment, leather-workers, or brick-makers.⁴⁵ Yet this comparison is hardly appropriate given the prominent role that the monarchy and the royal court play in the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles.⁴⁶ In light of the biblical records of administrative roles within the courts of David and Solomon (2 Sam 8:16–18; 1 Kgs 4:1–19; 1 Chr 18:15–17), the lack of teachers or wise men (חכמים) is more telling that Heaton admits.⁴⁷

Thirdly, in contrast to the vague and ambiguous references to the school, the Old Testament makes clear references to teaching occurring in the home.⁴⁸ In Deuteronomy parents are charged with teaching Israel's law to their children (6:7–9), and children are obliged to honour both father and mother (5:16). Relatedly, parents are expected to explain the theological significance of Israelite history (Deut 32:7; cf. Ps 78:1–8), rituals (Exod 12:26–27; 13:8, 14–15), and artefacts (Josh 4:6–7, 21–22).⁴⁹ These parental responsibilities are specifically that of religious instruction, but from this we can argue *a fortiori* that parents were also to instruct their children in the wisdom of everyday life. As Aaron Demsky points out, the family is an institution whose existence and

⁴⁵ Heaton, *School Tradition*, 1–2.

⁴⁶ Crenshaw makes a similar form of this rebuttal, although he focuses on the failure of the book of Proverbs to mention the school. We will consider this argument in more detail below; cf. Crenshaw, *Education*, 90–93.

⁴⁷ Golka, *Leopard's Spots*, 8–9.

⁴⁸ For this argument see Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 80–83.

⁴⁹ The historical narratives rarely relate examples of parental instruction—religious or otherwise—taking place (1 Kgs 2:1–9); however, they confirm the expectation in a negative way by portraying the dire consequences of a father's failure in this role (e.g. 1 Sam 2:12–36; 8:1–5; 1 Kgs 1:6).

importance cannot be doubted: 'One institution, the family, has remained a vital educational influence in Israel from biblical times to the present.'⁵⁰

In summary, there is no clear biblical evidence to support the prominence or even existence of a royal or scribal school in ancient Israel. In contrast to this, the Old Testament points to the importance of the family unit in religious and also possibly professional education.

2.2.2 Archaeological and Epigraphical Findings

Since the existence of schools in ancient Israel is unclear from the biblical evidence, we now turn to consider whether archaeological and epigraphical findings can shed any light on the matter.

The best archaeological evidence for the school setting of biblical wisdom literature would be the discovery of multiple practice texts found in close proximity to a location near the temple, palace, or other administrative centre. Discoveries such as this confirm the existence of schools in Mesopotamia and Egypt.

The Sumerian *edubba* (or 'tablet house') was a school located in private homes across Mesopotamia in locations such as Ur and Nippur from as early as 2500 BC.⁵¹ Hundreds of clay tablets have been found that are almost certainly students' practice exercises, with the teacher's writing on one side and the student clumsily copying on the other.⁵² Furthermore, a number of texts reveal the life of the student in detail, for example: the Scribe and His Delinquent

⁵⁰ Demsky, 'Education', 387.

⁵¹ Samuel N. Kramer, 'The Sage in Sumerian Literature: A Composite Portrait', in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*. eds. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 31–44.

⁵² C. J. Gadd, 'Teachers and Students in the Oldest Schools' (paper presented at School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1956), 10–11.

Son,⁵³ and a Dialogue between a Student and His Examiner.⁵⁴

In Egypt, the existence of schools is indicated by countless practice texts written on papyri and ostraca. Many of these fragments come from the Ramesside period (c. 1292–1069 BC), but contain copies of didactic texts from the Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2181 BC), thus demonstrating the use of Egyptian ‘classics’ as a staple in scribal education.⁵⁵ Similar to Mesopotamia, we have additional texts that refer to the scribal school, which describe the model student as prompt, diligent and learning silently.⁵⁶ The inscription of the statue of high priest Bekenhons (who served under Ramses II) describes his own education and professional development: four years in the temple school of Mut in Karnak, eleven years serving as apprentice in royal stables. He then became a priest of Amun and four years later a high priest.⁵⁷

Lemaire argues for the existence of schools on the basis of a number of Palestinian texts that he believes are school exercises. He studies epigraphic findings at eight different locations and discovers eleven categories of evidence: abecedaries, single or unordered letters, letters grouped according to their similarity, words written several times, proper names, a letter introduction

⁵³ Åke W. Sjöberg, ‘Der Vater und sein missratener Sohn’, *JCS* 25.3 (1973): 105–169; Kramer, ‘Sage’, 31–44.

⁵⁴ *COS* 1.186; cf. Leo G. Perdue, *Scribes, Sages, and Seers: The Sage in the Eastern Mediterranean World*, FRLANT 219 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 25–26.

⁵⁵ Miriam Lichtheim, *AEL* 2:165; Ronald J. Williams, ‘The Sage in Egyptian Literature’, in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*. eds. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 19–30.

⁵⁶ E.g. Papyrus Anastasi V, 22.7–23.7 in Ricardo A. Caminos, *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies*, Brown Egyptological Studies 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 262–265; Perdue, *Scribes, Sages, and Seers*, 18–19.

⁵⁷ Perdue, *Scribes, Sages, and Seers*, 18–19.

formula, lists of months, numerals, sequences of numbers and units of measure, drawings, foreign language (Phoenician) practice. At one of the locations (Kuntilat-Ajrad) he finds a room with benches, which he conjectures was used as a school or classroom.⁵⁸

Golka notes the relative paucity of these findings compared to that of Egypt and Mesopotamia, and he expresses surprise that Lemaire attempts to build a case from such meagre evidence.⁵⁹ This criticism prompted Lemaire to clarify what he believes is a misunderstanding of the nature of archaeology and paleo-Hebrew epigraphy. Since much of antiquity has been lost or destroyed, arguments cannot be made from silence. The problems of archaeology are even more exaggerated in the case of epigraphy because writing generally used perishable materials, which did not last long in the Palestinian climate. Our findings are limited to elementary lessons in literacy, because advanced learning probably used papyrus as in Egypt.⁶⁰ Lemaire re-emphasises his conclusions and points to further evidence: numerous clay bullae—which have easily outlasted the papyrus documents that they sealed—indirectly show a considerable development of literacy from 800 BC. The use of names on these seals instead of figural representation and the rise of the written prophets around the same time ‘montrent clairement que non seulement il y avait des écoles dans l’Israël de l’époque royale (à la manière antique!) mais encore qu’il y en avait jusque dans les villages et les petites forteresses.’⁶¹

Although dismissing the Gezer Calendar as an unlikely school text, Lang is largely in agreement with Lemaire’s interpretations of the abecedaries. The

⁵⁸ Lemaire, *Les écoles*, 7–33.

⁵⁹ Golka, *Leopard’s Spots*, 9.

⁶⁰ Lemaire, ‘Sagesse et écoles’, 276–279.

⁶¹ Lemaire, ‘Sagesse et écoles’, 280.

consistency of handwriting and a lack of errors point to school training. He finds the alphabet fragments at Lachish particularly convincing, especially due to their proximity to the palace steps. He also points to more alphabet fragments that have been found since Lemaire first published, and another letter introduction.⁶² Davies also accepts the epigraphic evidence, although he does not believe it points to an education system as extensive as that proposed by Lemaire.⁶³

Despite this acceptance of Lemaire's conclusions, most interpreters have been more critical of his handling of the evidence. David W. Jamieson-Drake attempts to develop a sociological framework to interpret the epigraphic evidence by studying luxury artefacts, settlement and public works. This enables him to build a picture of ancient Israel in order to contextualise the epigraphic data. His view is that Israel did not appear to be a centralised state prior to the eighth century BC, with Jerusalem reaching its greatest prominence in the seventh century BC.⁶⁴ This leads him to be dismissive of a complex system of schooling, especially prior to this centralisation of power.⁶⁵ It is unlikely that the teaching of literacy occurred outside of Jerusalem, and the most that can be said of the epigraphic evidence is that it proves literacy, not a school.⁶⁶ Even if one does not accept his minimalist conclusions, his work

⁶² Lang, 'Schule und Unterricht', 188–192.

⁶³ Graham Davies, 'Were There Schools in Ancient Israel?', in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J.A. Emerton*. eds. John Day, Robert P. Gordon and Williamson H. G. M. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 199–211.

⁶⁴ David W. Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah: A Socio-Archeological Approach*, The Social World of Biblical Antiquity 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 136–139.

⁶⁵ Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools*, 157.

⁶⁶ For example, the Lachish inscription (first five letters on a step) does appear to be someone learning to write, but is hardly evidence for a school especially given its location on a step.

demonstrates the fragility of any argument built upon fragmentary archaeological findings.

An even greater scepticism towards Lemaire's epigraphic evidence leads some interpreters to reject his conclusions completely. Menahem Haran makes a strong critique of the assumption that an abecedary points to the existence of a school.⁶⁷ He claims that many of these so called school texts are not found in appropriate locations for a school. The cave of Nahal Micmash, where an abecedary was found, was only accessible by a ladder and was clearly the home of a single family.⁶⁸ Weeks likewise concludes that the remote location of the 'classroom' at Kuntilat-Ajrud was more likely to have served a religious purpose.⁶⁹ Similarly, the inscriptions examined by Lemaire do not use suitable materials to be school exercises. Inscriptions engraved on stone, or a clay vessel before or after its firing, or ink on a plastered wall are all highly unlikely to be student exercises since they are fragile and non-reusable. Ink inscriptions on ostraca are more suitable, but even here we never find any of the corrections of a teacher as we do on Egyptian student writings.⁷⁰ In Haran's view, Lemaire has not adequately considered alternative explanations for the practicing of

All it shows is 'an interest in learning to write by someone with access to the environs of the palace.' Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools*, 155–156.

⁶⁷ His arguments have since been followed by Crenshaw and Weeks. Menahem Haran, 'On the Diffusion of Literacy and Schools in Ancient Israel', in *Congress Volume: Jerusalem 1986* VTSup 40 (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 81–95; Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom*, 132–151; Crenshaw, *Education*, 100–106.

⁶⁸ Haran, 'Diffusion', 85–91.

⁶⁹ Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom*, 149–150. See also Émile Puech, 'Les écoles dans l'Israël préexilique: Données épigraphiques', in *Congress Volume: Jerusalem 1986* VTSup 40 (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 192.

⁷⁰ Haran, 'Diffusion', 85–91.

letters and names, such as the tinkering of a craftsman.⁷¹

It is clear that there is little we can firmly conclude from the epigraphical and archaeological data. It appears that there was some literacy (the ability to read and write) in pre-exilic Israel, although far from extensive.⁷² It is unclear how this literacy was acquired, and it is even less possible to connect its acquisition to the biblical wisdom literature.

2.2.3 Historical and Sociological Analogies

Since direct and unambiguous evidence for Israelite schools is unavailable from the biblical or archaeological record, we can attempt to make inferences based on the more well-known education systems of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Comparisons with these cultures may serve to elucidate the existence of schooling in ancient Israel as well as the role of wisdom literature within it. John Ray expresses this reasonable assumption in typical form:

All the literate societies of the area needed to train an administrative class, and all probably approached the problem in much the same way: complex writing-systems required long training, with emphasis on rote-learning and reverence for the past, and the combination of tradition, didacticism, and repeatable sentiment encouraged the use of proverbs

⁷¹ Haran, 'Diffusion', 91–95.

⁷² Young argues that none of the precursors for widespread literacy existed in ancient Israel and that the biblical evidence suggests that literacy was limited to priests, government officials, the ruling class, and skilled craftsmen. Ian Young, 'Israelite Literacy: Interpreting the Evidence: Part I', *VT* 48.2 (1998): 239–253; Ian Young, 'Israelite Literacy: Interpreting the Evidence: Part II', *VT* 48.3 (1998): 408–422; Ian Young, 'Israelite Literacy and Inscriptions: A Response to Richard Hess', *VT* 55.4 (2005): 565–568; Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age*, *ABS 11* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2010), 127–135.

and rules for successful or ethical behaviour.⁷³

There are two main arguments based on analogies between Israelite and other ancient Near Eastern cultures. The first argument focuses upon the development of a royal administration in Israel at a time when there were strong diplomatic ties with Egypt (1 Kgs 3:1; 9:16; 10:28–29). The administrative needs of the monarchy, including the training of a large number of officials and scribal competency in languages of international diplomacy (e.g. Akkadian) make it a likely inference that there were schools to train men for these roles, just as there were in other monarchies. Heaton claims that borrowing is all the more likely because of the speed of the expansion of Israel under David and Solomon. Though the school is never mentioned in the biblical accounts, Heaton claims that much of what is described of Solomon's bureaucracy appears to be based on Egyptian models, such as the roles of secretary of state (ספר), herald (מזכר), and steward (על-הבית), practices of crown property and patronage, administrative districts, taxation, corps of the chariotry, and forced labour.⁷⁴

The second argument concerns the analogous literature in Israel and the ancient Near East. Hermisson argues that the didactic form of the earliest proverbs points to an educational setting, but since none is known in the Old Testament we can infer from the ancient Near Eastern use of such texts in the school.⁷⁵ Biblical wisdom literature indeed bears a strong relationship to Egyptian instructions and other ancient Near Eastern didactic texts: there is

⁷³ John D. Ray, 'Egyptian Wisdom Literature', in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J.A. Emerton*. eds. John Day, Robert P. Gordon and Williamson H. G. M. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 17–18.

⁷⁴ Heaton, *Solomon's New Men*, 47–60).

⁷⁵ Hermisson, *Studien*, 92–93, 133–34; von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 26.

attribution to a royal figure,⁷⁶ explicit attribution of other passages to foreign wise men or courts (Prov 30:1; 31:1), and a clear literary connection between Proverbs 22:17–23:11 and the Instruction of Amenemope, which was written to a future scribe.⁷⁷

The strength of both of these analogies is that they help to explain the presence of foreign wisdom within the book of Proverbs. The borrowing of an institution would explain these literary borrowings. Furthermore, an interest in foreign literature is understandable for a scribal or royal school.

There have been several rebuttals of these arguments by analogy, which we will consider in turn. First, there was a considerable difference between the size and development of the Israelite monarchy and that of Egypt and Mesopotamia, such that the comparison is far from certain.⁷⁸ Even if Jamieson-Drake's claim that Israel was only a 'chiefdom' until the eighth century BC is exaggerated, the population and size of its administration would still mean that 'institutions for teaching writing as an integral part of information management and regional control in [that] period would have been quite different from those which developed in Egypt and Mesopotamia.'⁷⁹

Golka similarly contends that a sociological comparison would be more appropriate than a chronological one. By this he means that the early monarchy would have reflected the Egyptian Old Kingdom rather than the contemporary

⁷⁶ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 15; Davies, 'Schools', 202; Elisabeth Sevenich-Bax, 'Schule in Israel als Sitz der Weisheit', in *Die Weisheit – Ursprünge und Rezeption: Festschrift für Karl Lönig zum 65. Geburtstag*. eds. Martin Fassnacht, Andreas Leinhäupl-Wilke and Stefan Lückig, Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen 44 (Münster: Aschendorff, 2003), 67.

⁷⁷ *AEL* 2:162.

⁷⁸ Crenshaw, 'Education', 601–615; Crenshaw, *Education*, 111–112.

⁷⁹ Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools*, 154.

Egyptian empire. At that earlier time in Egypt, training of scribes and officials occurred in a master-apprentice scheme.⁸⁰ Lemaire responds that in the case of two nations in constant contact with each other, a sociological comparison is absurd. He likens Golka's analogy to a comparison of nineteenth century United States with eleventh or twelfth century England.⁸¹ Nevertheless, the critique of the chronological comparison remains: it cannot be assumed that Israel adopted foreign institutions that were so far beyond its administrative needs.⁸²

Secondly, there are differences in language that need to be considered. Even if the societies were comparable, the relative simplicity of the paleo-Hebrew script would mean that we cannot assume scribal schools were necessary.⁸³ Frequently, Albright is quoted to support this argument:

Since the forms of the letters are very simple, the 22-letter alphabet could be learned in a day or two by a bright student and in a week or two by the dullest; hence it could spread with great rapidity. I do not doubt for a moment that there were many urchins in various parts of Palestine who could read and write as early as the time of the Judges...⁸⁴

As well as being exaggerated,⁸⁵ Albright's claim does not recognise the

⁸⁰ Golka, *Leopard's Spots*, 10–11.

⁸¹ Lemaire, 'Sagesse et écoles', 275–276.

⁸² According to anthropological theory, one can only understand the introduction of such structures in terms of the need to adapt for survival. Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools*, 27.

⁸³ Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools*, 153.

⁸⁴ W. F. Albright in Carl H. Kraeling and Robert M. Adams, eds. *City Invincible: A Symposium on Urbanization and Cultural Development in the Ancient Near East Held at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, December 4-7, 1958*. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 123.

⁸⁵ Lang, 'Schule und Unterricht', 190–192.

difference between writing and writing well,⁸⁶ or the possibility that schools taught additional languages for diplomacy (e.g. Akkadian). Yet, a more moderate form of Albright's claim could still be made that the basic needs of a nascent kingdom with a simple script could be met without schools,⁸⁷ especially if professional skills were transmitted within family units.

Thirdly, a literary borrowing does not mean a similar *Sitz im Leben*. Weeks rightly considers this underlying assumption of the school hypothesis to be highly suspect.⁸⁸ A 'literary relationship' could mean many different things. It is critical to consider both *how* and *why* foreign sources are used in Proverbs.

Regarding the question of *how*, it is more than possible, for example, that the Instruction of Amenemope was known to the author of Proverbs only by an Aramaic translation.⁸⁹ Such an indirect literary relationship between Israelite and Egyptian wisdom would undermine the argument that Israel had copied Egypt's school system. There is also the matter of adaptation to consider: Proverbs 22:17–23:11 is far from a simple copy of the Egyptian text but shows considerable reworking. Below we will consider the implications of some of these changes for the discourse setting of the book.

The reason *why* an author chooses to use a particular source is potentially

⁸⁶ Davies, 'Schools', 201.

⁸⁷ Weeks points out that by the eighth century, Aramaic would have been sufficient for diplomacy (2 Kgs 18:26). Certainly, we can agree with him that Middle Egyptian and Sumerian would have been no use in diplomatic relations by this time. Weeks, *Introduction*, 131–132.

⁸⁸ Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom*, 16–17.

⁸⁹ It is difficult to conceive that Israelite scribes would learn hieratic at a time when it was already an archaic and poorly understood language even in Egypt. Whybray, *Intellectual Tradition*, 40; Weeks, *Introduction*, 16–17; Michael V. Fox, 'From Amenemope to Proverbs: Editorial Art in Proverbs 22,17–23,11', *ZAW* 126.1 (2014), 77.

irrecoverable. It is worth acknowledging that a common social setting is only one way to explain a literary borrowing. It would be just as plausible to propose the source text was chosen simply because of its universal appeal or malleability to the author's agenda.⁹⁰

Finally, the scribal analogy may even rely upon a misrepresentation of Egyptian 'wisdom' literature. The genre of instruction (*sebayit*), which is usually equated with the biblical category of wisdom, is only one of many types of literature produced by scribes and copied in the schools. In addition to the copying of instructions, writing was taught to students by the copying of letters, hymns, prayers, and onomastica of professions, titles, plants, animals, geographical, and meteorological terms.⁹¹ Michael V. Fox also claims that the instructions show no sign of being composed for the schools; in fact, they were studied as 'classics' rather than school textbooks.⁹² This major observation has significant ramifications for the school hypothesis.

In summary, the existence of schools for teaching literacy and training officials for government positions in Egypt and Mesopotamia makes it possible that Israel had equivalent institutions. This can be argued on the basis of 1) the development of the Israelite monarchy during a time of good relations with Egypt, and 2) the existence of comparable didactic literature. A number of objections, however, cast doubt on whether Israel's royal administration required such an institution, or whether the literary relationships that exist between biblical wisdom literature and Egyptian instructions point to a

⁹⁰ Weeks claims that the general nature of wisdom literature is sufficient to explain its broad dissemination. Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom*, 16–17.

⁹¹ Lichtheim, *AEL* 2:167; Williams, 'Sage', 22–23.

⁹² Fox, 'Social Location', 229–230. cf. Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom*, 18–19.

common practice of schooling.

2.2.4 *The Self-Testimony of Proverbs*

The external evidence surveyed above has provided minimal support for the existence of a school—either scribal or royal—in ancient Israel, and has established no firm connection between this school and biblical wisdom literature. By contrast, there is no such issue with proving the existence of the family in ancient Israel or its importance in religious and professional education. Nevertheless, the absence of evidence for a school does not constitute evidence of absence.⁹³ It is prudent to continue with the possibility that schooling did exist in ancient Israel, and that it is one of the contexts that could plausibly be invoked as the discourse setting of biblical wisdom literature. In continuing to evaluate the school hypothesis, we now turn to the self-testimony of Proverbs—the prime example of biblical wisdom literature.

i. Narratee(s) and Narrator(s)

Two key components of a discourse setting are the narrator and narratee. In biblical wisdom literature, the narrator addresses the narratee as ‘my son’ (בני or equivalent). The majority of these addresses appear in the book of Proverbs (twenty-seven times), especially chs. 1–9 (nineteen times).⁹⁴ The epilogist of Ecclesiastes also uses it once to address his audience (Eccl 12:12).

For some interpreters this address is self-evidently the way that a school teacher addresses his pupils and is an established social convention of the ancient Near East.⁹⁵ A clear case of familial language within a school setting can be found in

⁹³ Heaton, *School Tradition*, 1.

⁹⁴ Prov 1:8, 10, 15; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:1 (בנים), 10, 20; 5:1, 7 (בנים), 20; 6:1, 3, 20; 7:1, 24 (בנים); 8:32 (בנים); 19:27; 23:15, 19, 26; 24:13, 21; 27:11; 31:2 (ברי).

⁹⁵ E.g. Gordis, ‘Social Background’, 83–84; G. D. Pemberton, ‘The Rhetoric of the Father: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Father/Son Lectures in Proverbs 1–9’ (Doctor of Philosophy

the Sumerian tablet houses of the early second millennium BC, where the teacher was known as ‘the father’ and the students were his ‘sons’. The teacher also had assistants who would work more directly with the students as ‘big brothers’.⁹⁶ Crenshaw argues that this father-son language had its origin in parental instruction, but that this terminology was retained even as professional teachers took over the role of education.⁹⁷

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, an equivalent address to the narrator’s ‘son’ also appears in Mesopotamian and Egyptian wisdom literature.⁹⁸ A closer examination of Egyptian instructions suggests that the father-son language is meant in a literal sense. In these texts, fathers speak to their biological offspring. Fox points to Duachety, Amenemope, and Any as authors who are from modest situations and are unlikely personas for a fictionalised account.⁹⁹ In some cases, the father-son setting is necessarily fictional, such as when King Amenemhet speaks from beyond the grave, yet even here the implied setting is parental discourse and never a scribal school.¹⁰⁰ The fact that these instructions were studied in scribal schools does not automatically deem them student texts, since instructions were just one of many types of literature that were composed, read, and copied there.

The most relevant consideration for the significance of בִּנְי in biblical wisdom

diss., The University of Denver (Colorado Seminary), 1999), 94–95; Katharine J. Dell, ‘Scribes, Sages, and Seers in the First Temple’, in *Scribes, Sages, and Seers: The Sage in the Eastern Mediterranean World*. ed. Leo G. Perdue, FRLANT (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 125–144.

⁹⁶ Gadd, ‘Teachers and Students,’ 15–20.

⁹⁷ Crenshaw, *Education*, 188.

⁹⁸ Day, ‘Foreign Semitic’, 55–70; Clifford, *Wisdom Literature*, 31; Crenshaw, *Education*, 188.

⁹⁹ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 80–83.

¹⁰⁰ Fox, ‘Social Location’, 230.

literature is the texts themselves and their narrators. In Proverbs, the nearest antecedents are the wise men and the wise woman mentioned in the titles of the book (1:1; 10:1; 25:1; 30:1; 31:1; cf. 22:17; 24:23). However, in most cases it appears that these titles are grammatically separate to what follows.¹⁰¹ Proverbs 1:1 appears to stand as a title for the whole book, particularly looking forward to the sections that also bear Solomon's name (10:1; 25:1). Proverbs 10:1 and 25:1 attribute collections of proverbs to Solomon, within which the narratorial voice is far less dominant than chs. 1–9. The editing role given to Hezekiah's men in 25:1, makes it less likely that we are to hear Solomon's (or Hezekiah's) voice in the section that follows, even if the wisdom itself is to be so attributed. In contrast to these examples, it appears that we are to hear the voice of Agur (30:1) in the chapter that bears his name, at least in the first person dialogue that begins this section (vv. 1–3). Yet there is no addressee in this section, a 'son' or otherwise.

Proverbs 31:1–9 is highly significant for the connotation of 'my son' in the book of Proverbs. These words are undeniably spoken by the mother of King Lemuel, whom she addresses ברי.¹⁰² Similarly, the addresses to 'my son' in 23:15, 19 belong to the section of Proverbs that has been adapted from the Instruction of Amenemope (22:17–23:11)—a work in which a father addresses his son.

We can conclude from the above that Proverbs has a number of narrators or 'instructors', at least some of whom are the biological parents of its narratees. With these observations we now turn to Proverbs 1–9, which contains the

¹⁰¹ Arthur Keefer, 'A Shift in Perspective: The Intended Audience and a Coherent Reading of Proverbs 1:1–7', *JBL* 136.1 (2017), 105–106. Contra Ansberry, *Be Wise*, 45–46.

¹⁰² The Aramaic address is suggestive of the north-west Semitic origin of this instruction rather than intending to mark any semantic distinction to the Hebrew address.

majority of the addresses to a 'son', and arguably provides the interpretive framework for the interpretation of the compendium.

After a short prologue (1:1–7), the section begins immediately with an appeal: 'Listen, my son (בְּנִי), to the instruction of your father; and do not neglect the teaching of your mother' (1:8; cf. 4:3; 6:20). A similar sentiment is found in the equally prominent location of 10:1. The sole mention of a father would have made it ambiguous as to whether this is a reference to a teacher or a parent. The mention of the mother must be literal, since the role of a schoolmarm is unknown in all of the schools of the ancient Near East.¹⁰³

Lang claims that in Prov 1:8 a teacher (the speaker) is pointing the student to the instruction of his biological father as a way of identifying his teaching with the teaching of the home. In other words, the teacher draws upon the authority of the parents and refers to them for rhetorical reasons.¹⁰⁴ Against this, we should note the almost identical appeals in 2:1; 3:1; 4:10, 20; 5:1; 7:1 to heed 'my words', 'my commandments', 'my teaching', 'my wisdom' and 'my understanding'. If we follow Lang's argument to its logical conclusion, then it would appear that the role of the teacher is little more than to pass on parental teaching. Such a conclusion, renders the role of the teacher superfluous and, therefore, unlikely. A similar phenomenon can be found in the Solomonic collections, where the same expressions describe the father and teacher's delight in the son's learning:

A wise son makes his father glad (יִשְׂמַח) / a foolish son—the grief of his mother. (10:1; cf. 15:20; 27:11)

My son, if your heart is wise / so too, my heart will be glad (יִשְׂמַח).

¹⁰³ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 80–83.

¹⁰⁴ Lang, 'Schule und Unterricht', 193–195; Sevenich-Bax, 'Schule', 66.

(23:15; cf. 27:11)

Proverbs 4:1–9 deserves further consideration, because it mentions not just the teaching of the teacher, but the teaching of the teacher's parents (v. 3). Pemberton claims that there is no reason to assume that the teacher is giving an example of instruction with the same setting as his own teaching.¹⁰⁵ But not only would this weaken the rhetorical effect of the teaching,¹⁰⁶ it once again shows the redundancy of the teacher's role: his subject matter is the same as what is taught at home.

Two arguments for the location of the narrator and narratee in the school come from relatively ambiguous expressions in the book of Proverbs. First, in Prov 5:13 a hypothetical incorrigible 'student' speaks of **מורי** and **מלמד**.¹⁰⁷ However, even school advocates such as Davies concede that these participles need not specify a professional role, nor are they translated as such by the LXX.¹⁰⁸

Secondly, the mention of the acquisition or 'purchase' (**קנה**) of wisdom in Prov 4:5, 7; 16:16; 17:16; 19:8; 23:23 is thought to indicate the payment of school fees.¹⁰⁹ However, the financial connotations in these verses may be simply be a way of describing the value of wisdom. This seems to be the force of Prov 4:7 (in light of v. 8), the comparison of 16:16, and possibly also 23:23. Proverbs

¹⁰⁵ G. D. Pemberton, 'Rhetoric of the Father,' 93–94.

¹⁰⁶ The instructor in the book of Proverbs cites wisdom from a number of sources; however, what is unique in this case is that the instructor is additionally relating his own learning experience with which he wishes his students to identify. This identification depends upon the didactic context being the same, or at least very similar.

¹⁰⁷ Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 46.

¹⁰⁸ Davies, 'Schools', 200.

¹⁰⁹ Davies, 'Schools', 200.

19:8 does not appear to have any financial connotation. In Prov 17:16, the idea that wisdom can be bought is the notion of the fool, whose words can hardly be considered trustworthy.¹¹⁰

It appears from the above that the narrator and narratee of the book of Proverbs are depicted as father and son. The address to ‘my son’ is necessarily literal in Prov 31:1–9; 1:8; and 10:1, and likely to be interpreted literally elsewhere. Conversely, there is nothing in the book of Proverbs that explicitly indicates a school teacher or his student. Nevertheless, we require further confirmation that this is indeed the literary framework of the book rather than simply a superficial metaphor for scribal or royal instruction.

ii. Locus of Education

A study of the concept of education in the book of Proverbs provides further insight into the discourse setting of the book. If the father-son language were a simple fiction, we would expect the school to be described or implied elsewhere in the book, particularly when reference is made to learning. The interest of this section is thus the locus of education; or in other words, where learning takes place.

For many interpreters the attributions to Solomon (1:1; 10:1; 25:1), Hezekiah’s men (25:1), and King Lemuel (31:1) establish a sufficiently strong court connection to assume the book of Proverbs finds its social location in a royal school.¹¹¹ Such a view, however, does not explain the presence of an anonymous fatherly voice (1:8–9:18) or the words of a scribe (Amenemope)

¹¹⁰ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 632–633.

¹¹¹ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 15; Nili Shupak, *Where Can Wisdom Be Found?: The Sage’s Language in the Bible and in Ancient Egyptian Literature*, OBO 130 (Fribourg: Presses Universitaires, 1993), 349–351; Sevenich-Bax, ‘Schule’, 67.

instructing his son (22:17–23:11). We should consider, therefore, that the royal attributions serve a different function altogether.

The most prominent royal attribution is to King Solomon. His name stands at the beginning of the book (1:1), even though only half of the material claims to come from him (10:1–22:16; 25–27). As with other biblical books, this attribution says more about the source and authority of the work than its audience. It is surely no accident that the wisdom of Proverbs is associated with the wisest king in all of Israel's history.¹¹² This connection of the book of Proverbs to the royal court does not imply a great deal about its intended readers, other than they would have known Solomon's reputation for wisdom.

A closer reading of Prov 25:1 also casts doubt upon the claim that it indicates a royal school discourse setting. It seems unlikely that wisdom teachers would be called **אנשים** (men); such a non-specific description avoids any suggestion that they have significantly contributed to this wisdom.¹¹³ Similarly, the *hiphil* stem of **עֲתַק** should be translated 'transcribe' rather than 'edit', with the implication that Hezekiah's men moved this wisdom out of 'storage' to its new literary home rather than composed it themselves.¹¹⁴ Once again, Prov 25:1 seeks to attribute the wisdom of the following section to Solomon rather than suggesting a particular location of learning in the royal court.

The claim that Prov 31:1 points to a royal school setting is even more tenuous. In fact, Prov 31:1 specifically refers to the teaching King Lemuel received in the home—from his mother!—rather than in a school. While such teaching

¹¹² This phenomenon of attributing a work to a great figure of history is ubiquitous in the OT and the ANE. Many consider such attributions to be pseudonymous and retrospective; however, this would not change their purpose. Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom*, 10–11.

¹¹³ Whybray, *Intellectual Tradition*, 52.

¹¹⁴ Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom*, 44–46.

could naturally form part of a schoolbook for a potential monarch or official, the point remains: nowhere does Proverbs describe a school (royal or scribal) as the locus of instruction.

It is thus more likely that the titles in Proverbs are to be understood as pointing to the source, and hence the authority and reliability of the wisdom that the instructor uses, rather than indicating the discourse setting of the book. The court may be a repository of wisdom that is commended to the student ('the wise and their riddles' in 1:6; cf. 13:14, 20), but it is not portrayed as the locus of instruction.

While we do not hear of learning occurring in a court or scribal school, we frequently read of instruction in the home. We have already seen that this is the case for the father-son language of Prov 1–9 and the instruction of King Lemuel in 31:1. In addition to this, the home is frequently on view in each of the collections of the book. These collections remind the reader of the happiness the wise son can bring to his parents and conversely the shame caused by the foolish son (Prov 10:1, 5; 13:1; 15:5, 20; 17:21, 25; 19:13, 26; 23:24; 28:7; 29:3). By comparison, there are no such concerns for his supposed teacher. Other proverbs provide guidance for the instruction of the narratee's own children: 13:24; 19:18; 29:17, but never anticipate the possibility that he will one day have his own students to instruct. Finally, it is noteworthy that the excellent wife is a source of wisdom and teaching (מוֹסֵר) in Prov 31:26.

One other location that is mentioned as a locus of education in the book of Proverbs is the public setting of the city streets, markets, and gates (Prov 1:20–22; 8:1–3; 9:3). The possibility of finding wisdom in these places is proclaimed by Lady Wisdom, a figure who supports the teaching of the father in chs. 1–

9.¹¹⁵ Lang takes this as evidence of itinerant wisdom teachers, or that schools met in public places.¹¹⁶ As a fictional character, however, we ought to be careful about making such inferences. One would not argue for a school of folly on the basis of Lady Folly's words in Prov 9:13–15. The stress of Lady Wisdom's words is the availability of wisdom to all who seek it, rather than presenting an invitation to a school that meets in a public space.

The book of Proverbs—despite its royal attribution(s)—shows no expectation of education taking place anywhere apart from the home. This provides further confirmation of a parental discourse setting for the book.

iii. Content of Instruction

A more indirect route to consider the setting of biblical wisdom literature is to examine its teaching, and the social world that is described and implied by its content. Robert Gordis identifies three categories of evidence in support of his contention that Proverbs is a school textbook for elite youths: the environment of the book, its morality and its worldview. Additionally, we may also consider whether any topics of instruction reveal specifically scribal, courtly, or folk concerns.

Gordis argues that in the book of Proverbs, one encounters the environment of the wealthy: the excessive consumption of food and drink (Prov 21:17; 23:6–7, 30–31), married women whose homes are filled with tapestry and linen (7:16), and precious stones (3:14; 8:10, 19).¹¹⁷ Upon closer reading, however, Gordis' argument is highly tenuous. The first example wrongly assumes that the lower classes were not vulnerable to gluttony and drunkenness due to their

¹¹⁵ We will consider the pedagogical function of Lady Wisdom below.

¹¹⁶ Lang, 'Schule und Unterricht', 200–201.

¹¹⁷ Gordis, 'Social Background', 92–93.

relative poverty—this is an assumption that King Lemuel’s mother would seem to contradict (31:4–7). The last two examples confuse literary creation with the world of the narratee. The book of Proverbs use hyperbolic descriptions of pleasure and luxury to heighten the danger that the adulterous woman presents to the young man. Similarly, the comparison of wisdom to precious stones would easily be understood by any class; it is irrelevant whether the young man was likely to own or acquire literal treasures. We should also note Gordis’ selective use of images; for example, he is silent about the images from the agricultural world (27:23–27).

The morality of Proverbs, according to Gordis, is likewise most applicable to the upper classes or those aspiring to political significance: for example, standing before kings and rulers (Prov 22:29; 23:1; 14:35), the dangers of lending (11:15), bribery (21:14), and the portrayal of wealth as a good and poverty as an evil (10:4).¹¹⁸ Once again, Gordis is selective and ignores the moral advice that points to lower classes: not associating with common criminals (1:10–19), or being a lazy worker (20:4; 21:25).¹¹⁹

Gordis asserts that the worldview of Proverbs is also that of the upper class. In particular, the theology of individual retribution reflects the optimism of the wealthy, who are most able to secure blessing in the present world.¹²⁰ Similarly, Leo G. Perdue claims that Proverbs reflects a politically conservative worldview. Unlike the prophets who are deeply dissatisfied with society, Proverbs does not advocate any change and instead equates the existing order of the world—kings and their subjects, the wealthy and the poor—with the

¹¹⁸ Gordis, ‘Social Background’, 93–97.

¹¹⁹ Crenshaw, *Education*, 269.

¹²⁰ This is in contrast to the eschatology of the prophets or apocalyptists. Gordis, ‘Social Background’, 101–104.

divine order.¹²¹ Another frequently identified characteristic of the worldview of Proverbs is its apparent ‘humanism’. Though not in a secular way, the human being is viewed as an active agent in his world. Zimmerli says that this accords most closely with the perspective of a shrewd courtier: ‘how do I make use of the bounds fixed about me to my own advantage?’¹²²

Proverbs indeed presents a relatively stable view of the world, particularly in its early collections. The numerous antithetical proverbs of chs. 10–15 portray a black and white world, where outcomes are closely connected to one’s actions (*Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang*) or character (*Haltung-Schicksal Zusammenhang*).¹²³ In subsequent collections, however, there is clearly a qualified assessment of wealth (Prov 15:16–17, 16:16, 19), acknowledgement of injustice (30:14),¹²⁴ and criticism of those in authority (28:15–16; 29:2, 12).¹²⁵

The lacunae of salvation-historical teaching in the book as well as its ‘humanistic’ perspective is not nearly as severe as claimed. Yahweh, God’s covenant name, appears eighty-eight times throughout the book, with a fairly even distribution—there are only four chapters where it does not appear. Wisdom is identified with the fear of Yahweh (Prov 10:27; 14:26; 15:16, 33; 19:23; 22:4). More specifically, there is a concern with righteous worship (14:9; 15:8; 16:6; 21:3), an awareness of divine judgment (15:11; 20:22; 21:12) and God’s testing of the heart (17:3; 21:2; 22:12), the recognition that wicked

¹²¹ Perdue, *Wisdom Literature*, 75.

¹²² Zimmerli, ‘Structure’, 177–178.

¹²³ Cf. Ansberry, *Be Wise*, 77.

¹²⁴ Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, ‘Wealth and Poverty: System and Contradiction in Proverbs’, *HS* 33 (1992): 25–36.

¹²⁵ Golka, *Leopard’s Spots*, 16–35.

conduct is an abomination to Yahweh (11:1, 20; 15:9; 17:15), and an acknowledgement that he is the defender of the poor (19:17; 22:2). These are all covenant themes, which the Torah closely relates to Israel's experience of salvation from Egypt.

The distinction between the worldview of Proverbs and other biblical literature is clearly overdrawn. The unique emphases reflect the fact that the addressee is an individual, who has already received teaching throughout his childhood on the history of the nation and the significance of its rites and rituals.¹²⁶ The concern with worldly success suggests preparation for adult independence.¹²⁷ These distinctions are insufficient to claim that the teaching of the book represents the 'in group' worldview of a professional class (*Standesethik*).¹²⁸

Specific topics of instruction also provide insight into the setting of biblical wisdom literature. Most significant for the hypothesis of a royal school are the *Königssprüche* or court sayings, which Hermisson logically claims could not have their origin anywhere apart from the royal court. They are best understood as teaching for a prospective king or courtier.¹²⁹ Ansberry largely follows this line of argument, although he seeks to situate it within the larger moral discourse

¹²⁶ Many have suggested that the theological omissions in wisdom literature vis-à-vis the rest of the canon reflect a different interest or purpose rather than an alternate worldview. The mention of 'fear of Yahweh' deliberately maintains a connection between wisdom literature and the larger framework of canonical thought. See, for example, Estes, *Hear*, 21–38; Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, 'Wisdom Literature', *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (2005): 847–850; Weeks, *Introduction*, 109–111.

¹²⁷ Hence Zimmerli notes that wisdom literature answers the question: 'How do I as man secure my existence?' Zimmerli, 'Structure', 190.

¹²⁸ Contra Brian W. Kovacs, 'Is There a Class-Ethic in Proverbs?', in *Essays in Old Testament Ethics*. eds. James L. Crenshaw and John T. Willis (New York: Ktav, 1974), 171–189.

¹²⁹ Hermisson, *Studien*, 71–72.

of the book.¹³⁰

Golka rejects the suggestion that the *Königssprüche* indicate an origin in the royal court by giving examples of African proverbs that deal with the king/chief and his court but were coined by the people.¹³¹ After comparing these with the biblical proverbs he concludes: 'There is not one single royal or court saying, where popular origin is excluded. When the sayings are critical of the court or king, popular origin is very probable.'¹³² Clearly, it is plausible that those outside of the royal court would have had an interest in the king; however, there are reasons not to wholeheartedly accept Golka's conclusions. Africa was known to have kings, and there is also the possibility of biblical influence upon modern African tradition.¹³³

Weeks observes that these sayings are distributed unevenly, and do not appear at key points such as early in the book or at its seams. Royal sayings are also present in post-exilic wisdom (Eccl 4:13; 5:9; 8:2, 4; 10:16–17, 20; Sir 7:4–5; 8:2; 10:3, 10; 11:5; 38:2), which shows the inertia of tradition; in other words, it suggests something of the origin of the wisdom but need not relate to its present literary role.¹³⁴

Conversely, many have argued for a folk or village setting for much of the teaching in Proverbs. Westermann takes a form-critical approach and identifies short one-line sayings as the earliest Israelite wisdom that arose orally in tribal Israel. He does not see an elite class represented in the proverbs; rather, '[the]

¹³⁰ Ansberry, *Be Wise*, 7–8.

¹³¹ Golka, *Leopard's Spots*, 16–28.

¹³² Golka, *Leopard's Spots*, 34.

¹³³ Fox, 'Social Location', 234–235.

¹³⁴ Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom*, 46–54.

scenario portrayed in Proverbs ... is clearly and unequivocally one of life in a small farming village.¹³⁵

Several topics clearly portray the need for wisdom to be exercised within the family. For example, respectful treatment of parents (Prov 19:26; 20:20; 28:24; 30:11, 17), the importance of choosing the right wife (12:4; 18:22; 19:14; 31:10; cf. 19:13; 21:19; 25:24; 27:15), the father's extended warnings on avoiding adultery (2:16; 5:1–23; 6:24–35; 7:5–27), and discipline of one's own children (13:24; 19:18; 29:15, 17). These concerns are no less relevant to the ordinary Israelite, than one preparing for royal or scribal service.

Considering the book as a whole it is clear that its teaching would provide inadequate training for royal administration. There is some teaching relevant to such service, such as respectful treatment of superiors and carefulness in speech. Yet such topics are hardly the dominant focus of the book and arguably have applicability in other spheres of life. One could object that Proverbs is a school text from an elementary stage of learning before subsequent training specific to one's role. Yet such basic moral training would leave a young man no more prepared for being a vizier, than a craftsmen or farmer. The content of instruction thus provides little to challenge and much to affirm the proposed discourse setting of a father preparing his son for adult life.

iv. Pedagogical Strategies

In addition to the preceding study of the content of instruction, we can also support the argument for a parental discourse setting to the book of Proverbs from its pedagogical strategies, namely the literary forms of the book, its arrangement, use of sources, and mode of instruction.

¹³⁵ Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom*, 24.

a) *Literary Forms*

The two dominant literary forms in the book of Proverbs are the instruction and the saying. While these forms are found in ancient Near Eastern didactic texts, the specific use of these forms in the book of Proverbs points to parental instruction and a wide audience.

Proverbs 1–9 closely resembles the Egyptian genre of instruction, which is characterised by longer sections, with a fatherly voice speaking in the first person to the addressee and employing a large number of imperatives. Moreover, Prov 22:17–23:11 is borrowed and adapted from the Instruction of Amenemope. Yet certain differences suggest that we cannot assume an identical discourse setting between biblical and Egyptian instructions.¹³⁶

More important than the generic similarities between Proverbs 1–9 and Egyptian instructions are the particularities of its usage within the book of Proverbs. Rather than specifically training the reader for scribal or courtly service, these opening chapters have the more modest goal of motivating the learner to seek wisdom, particularly as it is found in the subsequent collections.

The first and most obvious way the instructions focus the learner is through the frequent appeal to listen and seek wisdom (e.g. 1:8; 4:1, 10; 8:6, 8:33). This accounts for a large number of the imperatives and is also the key topic of instruction: the importance of seeking wisdom. The general nature of this instruction is clearly preparatory for the detailed content to follow.

The second way Proverbs 1–9 motivates the son to pursue wisdom is by confronting him with a clear dichotomy between the paths of wisdom and folly, their personified counterparts of Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly, and the

¹³⁶ As we have seen above (p. 54), viewing Egyptian instructions as school texts is also open to challenge.

specific area of instruction regarding the adulterous woman and marital fidelity. The presentation of this sharp dichotomy characterises the implied reader as facing an intellectual or moral crossroads, which has been described in anthropological terms as a state of liminality—a period of ‘betwixt and between’.¹³⁷ Perdue points to a comparable liminal setting of Egyptian instructions, in which a young man is leaving his former stage of life and approaching an elevation of status.¹³⁸ Ansberry similarly describes the audience of Proverbs as a young adolescent man (נער) who moves to a seat of royal power over the course of the book.¹³⁹ However, there is little in Prov 1–9 to suggest that the period of liminality faced by the addressee is a professional one. Instead the dominant sexual concern of these chapters suggests that the young man is on the verge of adulthood: ‘In this sexually volatile period, a natural topic for instruction is relationships with women, to discourage adultery and to promote marital fidelity’.¹⁴⁰

The third motivating feature of the opening instructions in the book of Proverbs is the figure of Lady Wisdom. The debate surrounding the origins of Lady Wisdom often overshadows her didactic function, which is itself sufficient to explain her existence. The personification of Lady Wisdom fulfils two functions. First, it enhances the authority of the parental teaching by

¹³⁷ Victor Turner, ‘Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage’, in *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93–111.

¹³⁸ Leo G. Perdue, ‘Liminality as a Social Setting for Wisdom Instructions’, *ZAW* 93.1 (1981): 114–126.

¹³⁹ Ansberry, *Be Wise*, 68–69.

¹⁴⁰ Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, ‘Liminality and Worldview in Proverbs 1–9’, *Semeia* 50 (1990), 113. Van Leeuwen, however, does not accept this teaching at face value, but instead believes it is part of the metaphorical system of the sages. Nevertheless, his characterisation of the narratee of chs. 1–9 is correct.

connecting it to the created order and attributing to it a divine authority.¹⁴¹ This function is evident in the way that Lady Wisdom claims for herself what the parents teach about wisdom (Prov 8:22–31, cf. 3:19–20; 8:32–36, cf. 3:13–18; 8:17–21, cf. 4:1–9).¹⁴² Secondly, the specifically feminine portrayal of wisdom ‘takes a particular moment in a youth’s coming of age and uses it as an analogy’.¹⁴³ In other words, the pertinent issue of young male adulthood in avoiding sexual immorality and founding a family, is viewed as the epitome of all the moral choices that will confront the addressee as he transitions to adult independence.

The following sections of Proverbs are dominated by the two-line indicative proverb (*Aussagewort*), or less commonly imperative admonition (*Mahnwort*), which is closer in form to the opening exhortations of chs. 1–9. Lang suggests, on the basis of the system of education in ancient Greece, that it is likely that collections of proverbs were used as shorter texts for elementary training in literacy, before proceeding to longer texts (which he claimed were the instructions of chs. 1–9).¹⁴⁴ This parallel is clearly a strained one. In the book of Proverbs, the longer more complex teaching (in terms of literacy) appears first. Egypt, which in every other respect is claimed to provide the closest parallel to the Israelite education system, did not produce sentence literature until the Late Period.¹⁴⁵ The more obvious benefit of the brief form of proverbial sayings is the ease with which they can be memorised, which is why they are so popular in oral cultures.

¹⁴¹ Van Leeuwen, ‘Liminality’, 115; Moss, ‘Parental Teaching’, 426–439.

¹⁴² Moss, ‘Parental Teaching’, 432–434.

¹⁴³ Clifford, *Wisdom Literature*, 56.

¹⁴⁴ Lang, ‘Schule und Unterricht’, 195–196.

¹⁴⁵ Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom*, 9–10.

As succinct statements of ethics or experience, proverbs are well suited to the wisdom of everyday life. Their brevity and style makes them highly memorable and it is for this reason that proverbs are a feature of almost every culture, both ancient and modern. Westermann thus claims that unlike the didactic setting of the instructions, the sayings of Prov 10–21; 25–29 have a folk origin, originally as one-line sayings. They would have served a variety of purposes: trading knowledge and ethics, legal proceedings, and philosophy.¹⁴⁶

Despite the putative folk origin of proverbs, Westermann claims that their present form—two-line sayings that utilise parallelism and other forms of wordplay—reflects a literary development that took place in the school.¹⁴⁷ The fact that the *book* of Proverbs was composed by someone literate is self-evident; however, we must not mistake the event of composition with the discourse setting that the literature invokes.¹⁴⁸ It is doubtful that the implied audience of a two-line statement can be restricted to a royal or scribal student for literary reasons alone. In light of the entrenchment of parallelism in oral Hebrew expression, such statements likely have broad appeal.

In sum, the biblical use of the literary form of instruction in Proverbs 1–9 has no clear connection to a royal or scribal setting, but seeks to motivate the learner to pursue wisdom by confronting him with emblematic choices that face the young man on the verge of adulthood. Similarly, the form of the saying

¹⁴⁶ Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom*, 6–11, 144–45. cf. Hermisson, *Studien*, 36; von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 25–34.

¹⁴⁷ Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom*, 109–110.

¹⁴⁸ Secular paremiological research actually suggests that the origin of proverbial sayings is usually the reverse of Westermann's claim—a gifted individual gives expression to a particular sentiment, which then is given currency by the people. Wolfgang Mieder, 'Origin of Proverbs', in *Introduction to Paremiology: A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies*. eds. Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Melita A. Varga (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 28–48.

that dominates Proverbs 10–29 is memorable and has broad appeal, and thus has no scribal or courtly implications for the discourse setting.

b) Arrangement of the Book

The arrangement of the book as a whole also reveals something of a didactic strategy, as proposed by William P. Brown and Christopher B. Ansberry.¹⁴⁹ As we have already seen, the introduction orients and motivates the son to the compendium of wisdom that follows. The collections of proverbs also have a discernible pattern of development. They begin with a simple monochrome portrayal of the world (in the antithetical sayings of 10:1–15:33), before developing these same themes in synonymous parallelism (or variation thereof). A personalised form of instruction reappears in 22:17–24:34 to confirm this teaching. The Hezekian collection is more varied in form, serving to model the art of elocution and thrusting the reader into a world of conflict. A more abstract and sophisticated understanding then emerges in the sayings of Agur (ch. 30), before concluding with the applied examples of King Lemuel and the excellent wife (ch. 31).

Along with the increasing complexity of wisdom, Ansberry notices a shift in subject matter from the family in early proverbs to an interest in the court and political life, culminating in the characterisation of the addressee as a king in Prov 31:1–9.¹⁵⁰ The observation of development in the teaching of Proverbs

¹⁴⁹ The following is brief summary of Ansberry, *Be Wise*, 36–183. Ansberry builds upon the didactic structure claimed by Brown, ‘Pedagogy of Proverbs’, 150–82.

¹⁵⁰ Ansberry gives the most detailed account of this development. The first collection (Solomon 1A; 10:1–15:33) contains only two *Königssprüche* (14:28, 35). A more elaborate portrayal of the royal institution appears in Solomon 1B (16:1–22:16). Practical matters relating to royal affairs like table manners, conduct towards king, and military strategy are addressed in Sayings of the Wise 1 and 2 (22:17–24:34). The final Solomon Collections (25:1–27:27; 28:1–29:27) show not only their court setting (25:1), but assume ‘an aristocratic

from simple to complex appears to be broadly correct. It is not certain, however, that a higher volume of *Königssprüche* is anything more than incidental. The simple fact is that that the fatherly instructions of 1:9–9:18 contain no royal instruction,¹⁵¹ and 10:1–15:33 contains only three probable *Königssprüche* (11:14; 14:28, 35). The vast majority of *Königssprüche* appear in 16:1–22:16 and 25–29.¹⁵² The infrequency of these proverbs makes statistical arguments uncertain and may simply reflect the differing origin of the sources of the book rather than a deliberate pedagogical program.

It is extremely difficult to argue that Proverbs shows a continual development of courtly interest, when it is entirely absent from ch. 30 and when the final teaching of the book (31:10–31) is firmly located in the home. While the excellent wife and her husband and enjoy prosperous ventures (31:11) and have good standing in the community (31:23), they are clearly not royal figures (*pace* Ansberry).¹⁵³ The excellent wife is, above all, concerned with the welfare of her household (31:11, 12, 15, 21, 23, 27, 28), and her physical labours (31:13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 24, 31)—though enterprising—are unbecoming for a queen. As we will shortly see, this is telling for the pedagogical goal of the book.

In summary, the arrangement of the book is suggestive of a pedagogical strategy of a movement from a simple way of seeing the world, to a more nuanced and

addressee who has access to the court' (25:2–15). Ansberry, *Be Wise*, 80–84, 118, 124, 127–29, 160.

¹⁵¹ Ansberry tenuously points to the 'aristocratic accessories' that the parents use to characterise wisdom (1:9; 3:22; 4:9) and claims that righteousness, justice, and equity are especially attributes of the king. Ansberry, *Be Wise*, 46–50.

¹⁵² Prov 16:10, 12–14; 19:10, 12; 20:2, 8, 18, 26; 21:1, 22; 25:1–7; 28:2–3, 15–16; 29:2, 4, 12, 14, 26.

¹⁵³ 'While the king defends the rights of the weak (31:8–9), the אִשְׁת־חַיִל provides for their practical needs (31:20).' Ansberry, *Be Wise*, 181.

sophisticated understanding of how the world works. Yet, contrary to Brown and Ansberry such an arrangement does not reveal much specifically about the identity of the addressee other than an expectation of his growth in wisdom.

c) Use of Sources

Very closely related to the arrangement of the book is its use of sources and how this characterises the audience. Most prominent in this regard is the attribution to Solomon, but the book also makes clear mention of others: 'the wise', Agur, and King Lemuel.

It is commonly argued that these attributions indicate a school within the royal court. More accurately, however, these attributions point to the origin of the wisdom of Proverbs but not necessarily its addressee. This origin is not just the Israelite royal court, but also a non-Israelite wise man, and a family within a foreign royal court (30:1). The adaptation of the Instruction of Amenemope also shows that some of Proverbs has its origin within the home of an Egyptian scribe. Such diverse origins for the book of Proverbs makes it problematic to use these sources to locate the addressee and points to another possible function.

In the prologue to the book of Proverbs (1:1–7), v. 6 indicates that part of the acquisition of wisdom involves understanding 'words of wise men' (דברי חכמים). In the following chapters, the father enjoins his son to seek wisdom wherever he can find it. Later in the book the same expression from 1:6 is used to describe the teaching of 22:17–24:22, and a similar title is attached to Prov 24:23 (גם אלה לחכמים). It would also be reasonable to understand Solomon, Agur, and King Lemuel as חכמים. In this light, the sources of Proverbs point to a particular pedagogical strategy of pointing the learner to the wisdom of history's great wise men.

d) Mode of Instruction

It is significant that the method of learning assumed throughout the book is listening. The father's repeated appeal in chs. 1–9 is to 'hear' or 'listen' (שמע), with the only two instructions to write being metaphorical (3:3; 7:3). The subsequent sections of the book are consistent with this portrayal of learning, with only one significant mention of a written text (22:20), which itself comes from the section adapted from the Instruction of Amenemope. It is worth noting that the learner is not to hear in order that he may write (learning by dictation); rather, he is to accept the learning and take it to heart (e.g. 2:10; 3:1). Shupak gives a more detailed reconstruction of the stages of learning in Proverbs based on the vocabulary used in the book: listening/obedience, observance, assimilation, understanding, mastery, and searching/pondering.¹⁵⁴ While she may err in assuming the terms are used technically with a precise definition, her basic conclusion is correct: learning was by listening and memorisation, with a movement from passive to active learning.

The pedagogical strategies of the book of Proverbs in no way supports a school setting. The genre of the proverb—despite any literary flourish—reflects the daily instruction that a father and mother might impart to their child, rather than a school curriculum. While the arrangement of the book does roughly exhibit something of a movement from a simple to a complex understanding of the world, it does not show a comparable movement from familial to professional concerns. Similarly, the use of sources reflects the strategy of a father pointing his son to the great wise men of the ancient Near East, rather than holding up career models. Finally, there is nothing in the book that suggests a concern with learning to write; proverbs are to be memorised and

¹⁵⁴ Nili Shupak, 'Learning Methods in Ancient Israel', *VT* 53.3 (2003): 416–426.

taken to heart.

v. Pedagogical Goals

The final aspect of Proverbs that sheds light on its discourse setting is its pedagogical goals. These can be understood from the prologue to the book (Prov 1:1–7), key passages from its introductory framework (chs. 1–9), purpose statements, its adaptation of the Instruction of Amenemope, and the ending of the book.

The book of Proverbs opens with a prologue that provides a purpose statement. Proverbs 1:1 should be understood as the title of the book, grammatically independent from the verses that follow.¹⁵⁵ This then makes the purpose statements (ל plus infinitive construct) of vv. 2–4 grammatically dependent upon v. 5,¹⁵⁶ which is an invitation for the wise to hear and obtain guidance from the reading and understanding of the contents that follow (v. 6).¹⁵⁷

The explicit purposes of such learning are growth in wisdom (v. 2), ethical conduct (v. 3), and the ability to instruct others (v. 4). Keefer is correct in an active translation of v. 4 as the most natural reading, which he supports by showing that the term simple (פְּתִי) is a negative character profile (cf. Prov 1:22), with whom the addressee is not to align himself.¹⁵⁸ It should be noted that these three stated aims of the book are very general. The ability to instruct others comes closest to envisaging some kind of professional role, but is probably better understood as expressing the social benefits of growth in

¹⁵⁵ Keefer, 'Shift in Perspective', 105–106.

¹⁵⁶ Keefer, 'Shift in Perspective', 106–108.

¹⁵⁷ It is unclear whether we are to understand the following terms in a technical or general sense: proverb (מִשְׁל), saying (מְלִיצָה), and riddles (חִידוֹת). For a discussion of the possible meaning of these terms, see Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 54–67.

¹⁵⁸ Keefer, 'Shift in Perspective', 106–108.

wisdom and ethical conduct for the wider community (cf. Prov 10:21; 11:11; 14:34; etc.).

Proverbs 1:7 is widely recognised as a programmatic statement for the book of Proverbs.¹⁵⁹ It should not be understood as an additional pedagogical goal in addition to those already described. Rather, the fear of Yahweh is the defining quality of the wisdom and conduct that is commended in Israelite wisdom. This is confirmed by its usage throughout the book as both a descriptor of humble epistemological posture (1:29; 3:7; 9:10; 15:33; 22:4) and righteous behaviour (8:13; 14:2; 16:6). Its significance in qualifying the pedagogical goals of the book is illustrated by its appearance in prominent locations in the words of Lady Wisdom at the start (1:29) and end (9:10) of the introductory framework, and its reappearance as the very final quality of the excellent wife (31:30).

The fear of Yahweh is undoubtedly a desirable characteristic in a prospective king (Deut 17:19), but it is also commanded of every Israelite, who is likewise commanded to teach their children to fear Yahweh (Deut 4:10). Similarly, the particular terms used to describe the ethical conduct of Prov 1:3 (צדק משפט (מישרים) have been understood as terms of social justice fitting for a king (e.g. 2 Sam 8:15; 1 Kgs 10:9; Isa 9:7).¹⁶⁰ These terms also describe the ethical

¹⁵⁹ E.g. Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 67–68; Estes, *Hear*, 41–45; Clifford, *Wisdom Literature*, 45; Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 73.

¹⁶⁰ Ronald R. Clark Jr., 'Schools, Scholars, and Students: The Wisdom School *Sitz im Leben* and Proverbs', *ResQ* 47.3 (2005), 166–167; Ansberry, *Be Wise*, 46–50. In defending his thesis from the charge that the book of Proverbs is too general in its concerns to be considered a courtly document, Ansberry says, 'The broad applicability of these principles is not surprising, for the royal establishment was not above the socio-moral values of the community (Deut 17:14–20).' However, this argument could also work in reverse to explain applicability of 'royal attributes' to ordinary Israelites; cf. Ansberry, *Be Wise*, 84.

qualities of Yahweh as divine king, and it is in fact only in reference to him that all three terms appear together (Ps 99:4). Thus the verse can be understood as holding up the moral qualities of the divine king, qualities which are applicable to every member of his covenant (Exod 23:1–9).

We have already seen how the introductory framework to the book of Proverbs (chs. 1–9) serves to motivate the listener to seek wisdom and ensure receptivity to the teachings of the wise men and women that follows. If professional development was a particular goal of the book, we would expect it to feature here. The opening and closing chapters, however, once again illustrate the broad scope of the pedagogical aims of the book.

The introduction to the book begins with the father's admonition of his son to heed his instruction (1:8–9), before immediately giving an example of an ethical dilemma that demonstrates the need for that instruction. Proverbs 1:10–19 describes the destruction that ill-gotten gain brings upon those who pursue it. The voice of Lady Wisdom then appears to support the voice of the father,¹⁶¹ angrily reproaching those who refuse to listen to her and announcing the consequences of such failure to listen to wisdom or pursue the fear of Yahweh (1:26–29). Her words close with an alternative to the self-imposed disaster: listen to wisdom and find safety (v. 33). The pedagogical aim of this opening 'lecture' to the book of Proverbs can be described as preserving life.

Lady Wisdom's reappearance at the end of the introduction also informs our understanding of the pedagogical goals of the book of Proverbs. Here we find what appears to be a portrait of the potential graduate of her schooling: 'By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by me princes rule, and nobles, all

¹⁶¹ Moss, 'Parental Teaching', 426–439.

who govern justly.’ (8:15–16 ESV).¹⁶² Though promising for the royal school hypothesis, in context these verses offer little support. At the beginning of her instruction, Lady Wisdom issues an invitation to all people (8:4) including the simple and the foolish (v. 5). Thus her words are not specifically addressed to prospective rulers. Instead the reference to the use of her wisdom by kings and rulers is used to highlight the potency and efficacy of her product. Exalting the value of wisdom is the purpose of all her words from vv. 12–31, which include a comparison of her words to the finest of treasures (v. 19), and her claim to be the first of Yahweh’s creatures (v. 22).

The results of such wisdom are stated in Prov 8:32–36, where they are again broadly defined as life and divine favour. Her speech continues into 9:1–12, where she reissues a wide invitation (v. 3) that again includes the simple (vv. 4–6). When Lady Wisdom speaks for the final time she points to the fear of Yahweh (v. 10), which leads to long life (vv. 11–12). Before the introduction ends, Lady Folly presents her counter-offer of ill-gotten gain (v. 17). But the reader is told that this only leads to death (v.18), the very opposite of the result of wisdom.

In summary, the introductory framework to the book of Proverbs (chs. 1–9), which is framed by the words of Lady Wisdom, describes the goal of wisdom as the receiving of life and divine favour on the one hand, and the avoidance of death and destruction on the other.

The collections of proverbs that follow the introduction provide teachings, which are often more concrete than those encountered in the introduction, yet they remain consistent in their stated goal. Despite the attempted characterisation of the teaching of proverbs as scribal or courtly, the proverbs

¹⁶² Ansberry, *Be Wise*, 59–60.

offer nothing more than the promise of life in terms of earthly prosperity and divine favour (e.g. 10:2, 4, 7, 9, 16; 16:3, 6, 17, 20, 22; 25:16–17; 28:10, 13, 18–20). Advice for advancement in the professional world (e.g. 25:6–7) is but one of many categories of earthly prosperity.

Also instructive for the pedagogical goals of the book are the particularities of the adaptation of the Instruction of Amenemope found in Prov 22:17–23:11. Davies claims that its original purpose of training officials in a future role as teacher or courtier remains unchanged.¹⁶³ However, in reaching this assessment he does not account for the extent of the reworking of the text.

The scribal setting of the Instruction of Amenemope is illustrated by: 1) the identity of its author as a scribe in the ministry of agriculture speaking to his son, and 2) the final exhortation: ‘The scribe who is skilled in his office, he is found worthy to be a courtier.’ Regarding the former feature, the book of Proverbs removes the identity of the author, thus making the implied author that of a generic parent. Regarding the latter feature, this ‘purpose statement’ has been re-worded in the Proverbs version to describe a man (אִישׁ) rather than a scribe (22:29): ‘whereas Amenemope spoke specifically of the scribe who is adept in his office - again really thinking of his son, who will be a scribe as he is - the author widens the lens to view ‘the *man* who is adept.’¹⁶⁴

Additionally, the ethics of Amenemope have been given a Yahwistic focus, with the fear of Yahweh appearing frequently and at important junctures. Thus it appears that a treatise of Egyptian ethics has been used for its specific teachings, which are put to use with a distinctively Israelite perspective.

The final place to discern the pedagogical goals of Proverbs is the ending of

¹⁶³ Davies, ‘Schools’, 199–211.

¹⁶⁴ Fox, ‘From Amenemope’, 85.

the book, namely the instruction to King Lemuel (Prov 31:1–9) and the encomium of an excellent wife (31:10–31). As we have already seen, the use of ‘my son’ is undeniably literal in 31:1–9. It is a very difficult stretch to argue from the existence of teaching in the home of a foreign court that there was a royal school in Israel.

Proverbs 31:1–9 is a highly important text for Brown and Ansberry, who argue, not specifically for a school, but that the teaching of Proverbs is intended for a prospective monarch. For them, the increasingly courtly nature of the book becomes explicit, with the addressee now located in the court. As a result, Ansberry concludes about Proverbs as a whole: ‘When the material is read within the discourse setting of the book, it appears to be a work of the court, by the court, and for the court, but in the interests of the people.’¹⁶⁵

It is indisputable that parts of Proverbs are ‘by the court’, in the sense that some its teaching has its oral or written origin there (10:1; 25:1; 31:1). The Instruction to King Lemuel (31:1–9) is clearly set in the royal court, but this does not establish who this teaching is *for*, or the role that this teaching plays within the book of Proverbs. Ansberry’s position also does not adequately explain the very last teaching of the book, the excellent wife of Prov 31:10–31.

The excellent wife is praised for a variety of attributes, none of which characterise her as a woman of the court.¹⁶⁶ She appears to be a woman of wealth and prominence in light of her trade (v. 16), clothing (v. 21–22) and maidservants (v. 15), but the very point of these descriptions is that she has secured all this by her own endeavours rather than belonging to a particular

¹⁶⁵ Ansberry, *Be Wise*, 189.

¹⁶⁶ She cannot be understood as the female counterpart to King Lemuel in terms of her class. Contra Ansberry, *Be Wise*, 181.

ruling class. This, after all, is the promise of wisdom. This woman thus embodies the characteristics of wisdom in the various spheres of everyday life, both the family (vv. 11–12, 15, 21, 23, 27–28), and work, agriculture, and business (vv. 13–16, 18–19, 31).

Rather than attempting to argue that either Prov 31:1–10 or 11–31 are more important for the setting of Proverbs, it is better to recognise that they function together as a couplet. This couplet gives two snapshots of the height of wisdom operating in two very different spheres: the royal court and the town. Wisdom is not confined to the court or school, but transcends socio-economic boundaries. The same wisdom, which enables kings to reign (cf. 8:15–16) also enables a woman to succeed and prosper in everyday life.

The pedagogical aims of Proverbs are apparently broad, pointing to the way of prosperous life and favour with God for those venturing into adulthood. Thus it is especially fitting that the closing of the book is not a satire of the trades—a common feature of Egyptian school texts ridiculing any non-scribal profession—but rather an encomium of a self-made woman.

2.3 Summary and Conclusions

A common feature of wisdom literature is its discourse setting, which is most recognizable by the characteristic address to ‘my son’. This chapter has argued that this discourse setting is the author’s fictive invocation of a social context, specifically a didactic setting familiar to the original audience.

The *Sitze im Leben* that have been proposed as suitable homes of wisdom literature provide the possible discourse settings for the book: the scribal school, the royal court, and the family. The question of literacy in ancient Israel is a hotly debated topic, and it is even less certain how such literacy was acquired. There is no clear evidence to be found for a scribal school in ancient

Israel, although this does not disprove its existence. Similarly, there is little to illuminate the means of education and training within the royal court of Israel, and it is uncertain whether any system of schooling was, or even needed to be, copied from the superpowers of the ancient Near East. By contrast, there is no difficulty establishing the existence of the family, or of discerning its importance in religious and professional instruction. None of this decides the discourse setting of Proverbs, although it provides important background to its didactic features, and allows us to weigh the probability of their recognition as either scribal, courtly, or parental.

A study of the book of Proverbs confirms what the historical background could only hint at: a parental discourse setting. The explicit narrators and narratees of the book are parents and their children. Nowhere does the use of familial language appear to be mere metaphor, and there is an instance where a literal interpretation is the only option (Prov 31:1–9). There is no mention of either scribal or royal schooling within the book, yet the father speaks of both his own education in the home (4:3–4) and expects his son to continue the tradition (13:24). The contents of Proverbs are broad and it indeed includes materials that are suitable for courtly advancement. But as a whole, the book would be inadequate training for a future official and contains much more that pertains to everyday life. The pedagogical strategy of the book is to present the wisdom of the wisest people of Israel and its neighbours, but does not specifically point to schooling or writing. Finally, the goals of the book are far too broad to suggest a scribal or courtly discourse setting: earthly prosperity and divine favour. These goals make it clear that the father-son setting is no mere metaphor, but integral to the overall presentation of the book.

Consistent with the external and internal data is the proposal of a parental discourse setting. Accordingly, in the book of Proverbs, a father instructs his

son on the verge of adulthood, calling him to hear the great wisdom of his Israelite heritage and beyond, in order that he may fear Yahweh. Through this instruction he prepares his son for ethical and prosperous living at work (whether that is agriculture or politics), in the family (with a godly wife and disciplined children), and in all his relationships (friends, superiors, and the poor).

The deductive approach of this chapter has drawn conclusions specifically for the book of Proverbs—the prime example of biblical wisdom literature, where most of our data can be found. Our contention is that the epilogue of Ecclesiastes (12:9–14) also invokes this parental discourse setting by its use of the characteristic address to בְּנֵי.

In order to test this thesis, we must now define a suitable method for reading Ecclesiastes as parental discourse. The necessity of this next step is due to the faulty—or at least unarticulated—assumptions that have given rise to divergent interpretations of Ecclesiastes.

CHAPTER 3

A METHOD FOR READING ECCLESIASTES AS PARENTAL DISCOURSE

In chapter 2 we challenged the view that the wisdom books are to be read as royal or scribal school texts. Instead, we made the case that a distinctive feature of biblical wisdom literature is a discourse of parental instruction. This was argued deductively with regards to the book of Proverbs. We must now select or define a suitable method in order to test this thesis with regards to Ecclesiastes, the other canonical wisdom text to employ the address ‘my son’. Although our study of Proverbs was largely intuitive, the difficulties we encounter in reading Ecclesiastes require us to be far more cautious and deliberate in our approach.

Our concern is to find a genre appropriate method, which does justice to the discursive and didactive features of the text. In particular, our reading of wisdom texts as parental discourse is interested in hearing the implied author’s pedagogical goals and strategies for instructing his son (the implied reader).

The development of a method for reading parental discourse will be completed via: 1) A survey of the current interpretive approaches to the book of Ecclesiastes and an identification the method most conducive to the present task: rhetorical criticism. 2) A detailed review of rhetorical-critical interpretation of the Old Testament. 3) A reformulation of rhetorical criticism such as it will be employed in subsequent chapters.

3.1 A Survey of Interpretive Trends in the Study of Ecclesiastes

After a slow start, the book of Ecclesiastes has received a generous amount of

attention in the modern era. This survey will present the major contributions to the interpretation of Ecclesiastes, with a special focus on methodology. Each method will be briefly assessed on theoretical grounds and considered for its potential to elucidate the author's pedagogical goals and strategies.

The relevant treatments of Ecclesiastes fall into the two broad categories of historical criticism and literary criticism, or in linguistics terms, diachronic and synchronic analysis. These categories are not mutually exclusive and many interpreters of Ecclesiastes exhibit a combination of historical and literary concerns. Nevertheless, this bipolar scheme is a helpful starting point for categorising the presuppositions and goals of each method.

3.1.1 Historical-Critical Interpretations

The approaches that fall under the umbrella term *historical criticism* treat the text as a historical source, or conversely, consider the historical origins of the text as essential to determine its meaning. Most relevant to the present area of research are the attempts to locate the empirical author and his intended audience within history and society.

Most attempts to date the book of Ecclesiastes place its composition at some point in the post-exilic era, yet there is little agreement about anything more specific than this, since the book makes no explicit reference to actual historical events.¹ Unlike other biblical genres, wisdom literature has little historical

¹ That is, beyond the memory of David's kingship (1:1) or other kings in Jerusalem (1:16). The historical allusions claimed by Barbour are of a far more cryptic nature: 'Israel's historical traditions push to the surface in Ecclesiastes in a variety of ways: as citations, as ironic retellings of old stories, as fragmentary and jumbled snippets of memory, as turns of phrase with a traditional resonance, and by many other means.' Jennifer Barbour, *The Story of Israel in the Book of Qohelet: Ecclesiastes as Cultural Memory*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3. More recently, Athas has argued that the author shows 'considerable hindsight over Judean history'. For example, in 4:13–16 he identifies the

interest and instead focuses more broadly on the nature of human existence in God's world.

The economic interests of Ecclesiastes and its descriptions of its cultural world have also been used to locate it in history, yet the very same arguments have been adduced to date it in the Persian era² and Hellenistic era.³ The language of Ecclesiastes would seem to suggest it is among the latest books in the Hebrew canon, due to the presence of two Persian loanwords (פרדס in 2:5; פתגם in 8:11) and a large number of Aramaisms or even similarities to Mishnaic Hebrew.⁴ Yet it is difficult to be more precise in this assessment due to a range of methodological issues in linguistic dating.⁵ Tremper Longman III raises another issue in dating the book using internal data: the literary

old foolish king as Antiochus II Theos (261–46 BC), and the two youths as his sons, Seleucus II and Antiochus Hierax. Athas proposes that the veil of anonymity is Qohelet's attempt to avoid a charge of slander (cf. 10:20) as well as to evoke the cultural memory of earlier events in Israel's history that exhibit the same pattern. Whether or not this is Qohelet's intent, the result of this obfuscation for the modern reader is that such historical reconstructions will always be open to question. George Athas, *Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs, The Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

² Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 21–37.

³ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 8–12.

⁴ Whitley, *Kobeleth*, 119–121; Antoon Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qobeleth. Part I: Grammatical Features*, OLA 41 (Leuven: Peeters, 1992), 221–223; Choon-Leong Seow, 'Linguistic Evidence and the Dating of Qohelet', *JBL* 115.4 (1996): 643–666.

⁵ Ian Young, 'Biblical Texts Cannot Be Dated Linguistically', *HS* 46 (2005): 341–351; Eva Mroczek, '“Aramaisms” in Qohelet: Methodological Problems in Identification and Interpretation', in *The Words of the Wise are Like Goats: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century*. eds. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III and Cristian G. Rata (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 343–363.

setting may be different from its historical setting.⁶

In addition to attempts to determine the occasion of Ecclesiastes' composition, interpreters have tried to locate its author and audience in a particular social strata or group. An early representative of this approach is Gordis, who claims that the students of wisdom literature are elite young men.⁷ More recently, Sneed employs the social theory of Max Weber and places Qohelet in the Ptolemaic era. He is part of a disillusioned retainer class writing to future scribes living in a world in which traditional wisdom will not work.⁸ Sneed criticises other sociological interpretations for assuming that literature simply reflects the social milieu of the author—what Marxist critics call 'vulgar materialism'.⁹ Nevertheless, his view of literature as a *response* to societal problems represents only a marginal improvement, as it still requires an equal measure of mirror reading.

In the service of reading Ecclesiastes as parental discourse, a strictly historical approach would attempt to shed light on the text by discovering, at most, the identity of the father and his son, or at a minimum, their historical or social location. This would indeed aid the appreciation of the father's communication to his son; it would add context to the issues faced by the son that the father seeks to address and provide an avenue for testing interpretations where the meaning of the text is unclear. The aforementioned difficulties in dating

⁶ Tremper Longman III, 'Determining the Historical Context of Ecclesiastes', in *The Words of the Wise are Like Goats: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century*. eds. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III and Cristian G. Rata (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 96–99.

⁷ Gordis, 'Social Background', 77–118.

⁸ Mark R. Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social-Science Perspective*, AIL 12 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012).

⁹ Mark R. Sneed, 'Qohelet and his "Vulgar" Critics: A Jamesonian Reading', *The Bible and Critical Theory* 1.1 (2004), 1.

Ecclesiastes, however, mean that the book scarcely lends itself to such a reading.

Another observation regarding historical-critical approaches also detracts from their suitability to the task: all of the data for historical inquiry into the father and the son comes from the text itself. Moreover, the generic characterisation of the 'father' and the 'son' makes any inference about their identity highly speculative. Consequently, we cannot confidently speak of empirical author and audience, but only the implied author and implied audience. Though ultimately the final interpretation will need to have historical plausibility, the focus must be upon the text and this arguably commends a literary approach.

3.1.2 Literary-Critical Interpretations

Although *literary criticism* previously referred to source criticism, it is now the standard term for any method which approaches the text as literature as opposed to a historical source. Literary approaches are more diverse in their aims in reading the text than historical approaches, but all begin from the basis that there is a text to be read and that it ought to be read as a unified whole (a final form reading). Often these readings have little or no interest in the author or his intended audience, instead seeking meaning in the features of the text (as in the case of New Criticism), literary conventions (as in the case of structuralism, and in a different way, biblical poetics, and some forms of rhetorical criticism), or the reader's experience of the text (so reader-response interpretation).

i. New Criticism

A clear example of a New Critical approach comes from Addison G. Wright.¹⁰

¹⁰ Addison G. Wright, 'The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth', in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*. ed. James L. Crenshaw (New York: Ktav, 1976), 245–

He seeks to use verbal repetitions and patterns as objective criteria, by which he determines the structure of the book and hence extracts its key themes: the vanity of human endeavour (1:12–6:9) and the human inability to understand the work of God (6:10–11:6). There is no discussion of historical context of the book, and mention of ‘the author’ is only ever a shorthand way of saying ‘what the text says’. The objectivity of Wright’s approach has made it an influential proposal for the structure of the book.¹¹ The excesses of a New Critical approach can be found in his less cited follow-up articles that attempt further confirmation of his findings by counting verses, adding up the numerical value of key phrases, and even ‘discovering’ a prime numbers series.¹² There is nothing to suggest that any of these calculations—nor even the versification that Wright utilises—were present in the mind of the biblical author.¹³ Unsurprisingly, he has not been followed by subsequent commentators.

ii. Structuralism

The best contender for a structuralist approach to Ecclesiastes is J. A. Loader, who finds the meaning of the book conveyed through a series of polar opposites held together in tension within the units of the book.¹⁴ His approach is only

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¹¹ Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 44–46; Gary D. Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric: Private Insight and Public Debate in Ecclesiastes*, JSOTSup 327 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 147–51, 159; Lee, *Vitality*, 15–18.

¹² Addison G. Wright, ‘The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth’, *CBQ* 42.1 (1980): 38–51; Addison G. Wright, ‘Additional Numerical Patterns in Qoheleth’, *CBQ* 45.1 (1983): 32–43.

¹³ Furthermore, Wright’s calculations take a number of liberties in order to arrive at the desired sums; cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 44–46; Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, LHBOTS 541 (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 77–78, n. 1.

¹⁴ J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qoheleth* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979).

structuralist at the superficial level since he considers the tensions that exist to have arisen from historical developments within the wisdom tradition of Israel after the exile. This means that he manages to avoid many of the excesses of biblical structuralism. The aim of structuralism is to uncover the mechanism by which a normal reading of the text works, but in practice structuralism tends to identify novel readings in light of constraints foreign to the author and his reader.¹⁵

iii. Narrative Criticism

Not all literary criticisms are so disinterested towards the author and his audience. Narrative criticism has quite a lot to say about author and audience, although in its own way. Narrative readings naturally afford a greater sensitivity to plot, framing, levels of narration, and characterisation. Most significantly for the present task, they introduce the terminology of implied author, implied reader, narrator, and narratee.¹⁶ Crucially, all of these are viewed as constructs of the text. The empirical author remains hidden and inaccessible behind the text and can only be known by how he chooses to present himself—this persona is the implied author. The empirical author does not have final control over who reads the text, but can only invite his text to be read in a particular way—this is what characterises the implied (or ideal) reader. The narrator and narratee refer respectively to those characters who address and are addressed in the text, and often differ from the implied author and audience.

This has all been applied to Ecclesiastes to varying degrees. Fox makes some steps in this direction with his classification of Ecclesiastes as ‘narration’ and

¹⁵ John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 121–122.

¹⁶ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 74–75.

observing the interplay of voices.¹⁷ Eric S. Christianson argues for a more extensive narrative reading on the basis of narrative elements such as first-person narration, framing, characterisation, and a time sequence.¹⁸ As a result, he gives priority to the character of Qohelet in bringing unity to the book and shaping its message. Qohelet writes as an old man, narrating the folly of his youth. He seeks wisdom but fails to obtain it because of the absurdity of the world, and so he exhorts the obtainable enjoyment of life.¹⁹ Gary D. Salyer believes it is not quite correct to call Ecclesiastes a narrative; he considers it 'an argumentative text which utilizes narrative features.'²⁰

The basic distinction of the implied versus empirical author is a helpful one for remembering that our access to the author is only via the text. Similarly, when we speak of readers we can describe only whom the author intended to address and how he hoped them to respond. In its most exaggerated form, however, narrative criticism risks detaching the text entirely from reality. Like New Criticism, it is a tool more appropriate for some texts than others. To read a text as an artefact rather than a vehicle of meaning is valid when the author's aim is art or expression. The biblical texts, although they are artistic and literary, are best understood as communicative acts.²¹ Accordingly, the distance between the implied author and empirical author can be only so great.

The way that literary criticism privileges the text as the locus of meaning over

¹⁷ Michael V. Fox, 'Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet', *HUCA* 48 (1977): 83–106.

¹⁸ Eric S. Christianson, *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes*, JSOTSup 280 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 19–50.

¹⁹ Christianson, *Time to Tell*, 246–247.

²⁰ Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 85.

²¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 281–350.

and above the author and his intentions is inherently unstable. Words of themselves do not mean things, but people mean things with words.²² When literary critics refer to ‘what the text means’, often this equates to ‘what the text would mean if I had written it’. In this way, the natural development of literary criticism is to reader-response interpretation. Here the author continues to fade further into the background and the audience that comes into focus is the contemporary reader.

iv. Reader-Response Interpretation

Salyer presents a quintessential reader-response interpretation to Ecclesiastes, the aim of which he describes as ‘what does this do?’ rather than ‘what does this mean?’²³ In particular, he considers the gaps of the text as inducements to the reader to create meaning. From a Christian perspective, the reader-response interpretation stops the text from being stuck in the past. Instead, the text contains a surplus of meaning that allows us to ‘actualize the meaning of the text in a legitimate manner for our age.’²⁴ The risk, of course, is that readers use the text simply as a canvas to imprint their own values and ideas, and the text itself is disregarded.

Douglas Ingram is more conservative in his application of reader-response theory. While he claims the text is open to interpretation, he claims this is intentionally so.²⁵ Ambiguity is a key feature of the book and is used to teach that world itself is ambiguous and open to interpretation. Again, we can see the shortcoming of a reader-response interpretation in Ingram’s conclusion

²² Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 202.

²³ Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 90–108.

²⁴ Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 57.

²⁵ Douglas Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*, LHBOTS 431 (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 36–37.

that Ecclesiastes is a very postmodern text, which sounds much like a reflection of the interpreter's own image.

Reader-response interpretations of Ecclesiastes are valuable for their insights into the effects of its literary features upon the reader. Although their consideration is the contemporary reader, it is at least a step towards exploring the discursive function of language and literary features. The great danger of reader-response criticism is that the distancing of the text from its author and setting leaves the book lost in a sea of self-referentiality, with its meaning left for the contemporary reader to decide.

v. Rhetorical Criticism

Another interpretative approach that warrants consideration is rhetorical criticism. It is commonly classified as a literary approach because it focuses upon the makeup of the text. In other forms it also shares historical concerns by viewing the text as a means of the empirical author to persuade his audience. The literary mode of rhetorical criticism is advocated by James Muilenburg, who argues for careful attention to the artistry and particulars of the text as a supplement to form criticism. His interest is primarily with Hebrew literary conventions.²⁶ George A. Kennedy represents another form of rhetorical criticism, which employs the concepts and terminology of classical rhetoric in the interpretation of biblical texts.²⁷ In Kennedy's mode of rhetorical criticism, the text is studied as a communicative act and discourse is construed as *social* discourse.

Many interpreters recognise rhetorical devices within Ecclesiastes, although

²⁶ James Muilenburg, 'Form Criticism and Beyond', *JBL* 1 (1969): 1–18.

²⁷ George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

usually without espousing a rhetorical theory. This is true of historical critics such as Sneed, who describes Qohelet's rhetoric as epideictic and notes his pervasive use of pathos (i.e. his pessimism).²⁸ More often it is literary critics who describe the rhetorical strategies of Qohelet or the book. Fox speaks of the interplay of voices in the book as a rhetorical device²⁹ and identifies Qohelet's introspective autobiography as an attempt by the author to persuade by empathy.³⁰ It is also common to speak of the rhetorical effect of Qohelet's adoption of a Solomon persona.³¹ Salyer considers the effect of these features upon the reader, although naturally his focus is on the contemporary reader.³² His main interest is the pervasive first person discourse of Qohelet, which he describes as a 'gamble' that seeks to convince the reader but risks being received as subjective.³³

Naoto Kamano and Douglas B. Miller provide the most comprehensive rhetorical studies of the book of Ecclesiastes.³⁴ Kamano's interest is in the pedagogy of the book, which he finds in the composition of Qohelet's discourse.³⁵ Kamano does not provide a methodological defence of how the concepts of pedagogy and artful composition relate. Pedagogy would seem to imply authorial intent (of a teacher), which is not a concern of the

²⁸ Sneed, *Politics of Pessimism*, 170–174.

²⁹ Fox, 'Frame-Narrative', 73.

³⁰ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 79.

³¹ Christianson, *Time to Tell*, 128–167; Longman, 'Determining', 91–92.

³² Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 34–37.

³³ Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 11–14.

³⁴ Naoto Kamano, *Cosmology and Character: Qoheleth's Pedagogy from a Rhetorical-Critical Perspective*, BZAW 312 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002); Douglas B. Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet's Work*, AcBib 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

³⁵ Kamano, *Cosmology*, 13–14.

methodology he adopts from Muilenburg.

Miller bases his study of Ecclesiastes upon classical rhetorical theory.³⁶ He argues that Qohelet's emotive speech is deliberative discourse rather than simply a venting of frustration.³⁷ Central to Qohelet's rhetorical program is ethos, which he develops through literary dexterity, a sense of intellect, the use of the Solomon persona, and personal experience.³⁸ The use of הָבַל as a tensive symbol (or 'shape-shifting metaphor') also contributes to Qohelet's ethos, since the invitation to solve a complex puzzle is a compliment to the reader. Qohelet additionally employs a complex program of destabilisation and restabilisation. He destabilises the reader through rhetorical questions, the parody of King Solomon, a parody of wisdom forms, criticism of choices and values, and emphasising human limitations like death and old age. Conversely, he restabilises the reader through the use of wisdom sayings and imperatives.³⁹

Miller's rhetorical approach has found acceptance in the works of Sneed and Jerome M. Douglas, who employ his findings with some slight modifications.⁴⁰ Crenshaw independently describes the rhetorical strategy of Qohelet, although without an explicit rhetorical theory.⁴¹ His treatment is a more intuitive wrestle with Qohelet as a teacher who employs idiosyncratic means to instruct his students.

³⁶ Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric*, 27–30.

³⁷ Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric*, 163.

³⁸ Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric*, 164.

³⁹ Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric*, 164–167.

⁴⁰ Sneed, *Politics of Pessimism*, 170–174; Jerome N. Douglas, *A Polemical Preacher of Joy: An Anti-Apocalyptic Genre for Qoheleth's Message of Joy* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 152–154.

⁴¹ James L. Crenshaw, *Qoheleth: The Ironic Wink*, Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2013).

As can be seen, a number of recent interpretations of Ecclesiastes go beyond merely listing rhetorical devices and succeed in describing a rhetorical strategy. Yet they all share a common feature and point of departure from the proposed reading of this thesis: they treat Qohelet as the communicative agent instead of the epilogist.⁴² Even though Kamano speaks of the epilogist using Qohelet's discourse to achieve his pedagogical goals, he effectively equates the two: 'Qoheleth's pedagogy should be defined as the frame-narrator's pedagogy through the reported speech of Qoheleth, by which the frame-narrator persuades his narratee, namely, his "son" (12:12).'⁴³

Rhetorical criticism is not without its detractors. John Barton, who sees value in most methods of biblical interpretation, offers two significant criticisms. First, he claims that as a largely 'in house' tool among biblical scholars, it lacks the methodological rigour of historical and literary methods that have been introduced from secular studies. Secondly, he contends that rhetorical criticism is an apologetic tool for claiming special access to authorial intent.⁴⁴ We will attempt to allay Barton's first concern in the remaining sections of this chapter. As to his second issue, this is not the place for a philosophical defence of meaning.⁴⁵ If we hold authorial intent to be fundamental to interpretation,

⁴² See chapter 4 for the justification for reading the epilogue as an integral part of the book. See chapter 5 for arguments supporting the identification of the epilogist as the implied author.

⁴³ Kamano, *Cosmology*, 6. Though Kamano raises the question of the relationship between Qohelet's pedagogy and the epilogist's pedagogy in his introduction (p. 12), the body of his work remains silent on this issue. It is not until his conclusion that he entertains the possibility that the epilogist's goals (12:13b) may go beyond that of Qohelet: 'his discourse surprisingly leads the reader to the orthodoxy of orthodoxies in Israel, the observance of the Torah.' (p. 253).

⁴⁴ Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 199–204.

⁴⁵ For this, see Vanhoozer, *Meaning*.

then rhetorical criticism commends itself as a method. This is because it seeks authorial intent via the text itself rather than the history behind it or reader in front of it.

3.1.3 Survey Results

The promise of historical criticism is its offer of objectivity to the task of interpretation. In practice, however, we often have meagre information about the composition of texts and their historical setting. With Ecclesiastes, this situation is greatly exacerbated, with the result that historical criticism can offer little more than untestable hypotheses.

Literary criticism, on the other hand, has all of the materials that it needs for a thoroughgoing interpretation: the text. Yet, in its preoccupation with the text and the experience of reading it, literary interpretation loses sight of questions of authorial intent. Not all literary methods head in this direction; rhetorical criticism shows the way that diachronic and synchronic concerns can be held together, by considering the text as the proper object of study yet regarding it as a communicative act.

Reading Ecclesiastes as parental discourse involves more than just a study of the text; it additionally seeks to hear this text as a purposeful and strategic communication between a father and his son. The promise of rhetorical criticism is to hold together author, text, and audience, and thus it is a strong contender for the task at hand. Yet its broad and conflicting usage demands a careful articulation of its definition and practice before it can be employed in this study.

3.2 A Review of Old Testament Rhetorical Criticism

The preceding survey highlighted the potential of rhetorical criticism as a method for reading Ecclesiastes as parental discourse because of its ability to

straddle both historical and literary concerns and its construal of texts as social discourse. A hurdle to its employment in this thesis is its diversity in both theory and practice. In the present section we will review the two dominant schools of rhetorical criticism as represented by James Muilenburg and George A. Kennedy.

3.2.1 *James Muilenburg*

The most influential figure in Old Testament rhetorical criticism is James Muilenburg with his oft-cited presidential address at the 1968 SBL conference, entitled ‘Form Criticism and Beyond’.⁴⁶ Few dispute that Muilenburg’s address heralded a paradigm shift and inaugurated rhetorical criticism of the Old Testament.

Muilenburg strongly affirmed the contribution of form criticism to biblical studies, particularly as practised by Gunkel. Form criticism focuses upon the *Gattung* of the pericope and its function within the life of the community or individual.⁴⁷ But where form criticism falls short is its tendency to generalise and to ignore the uniqueness of a given passage. In fact, ‘Exclusive attention to the *Gattung* may actually obscure the thought and intention of the writer or speaker.’⁴⁸

Muilenburg’s call is not for the rejection of form criticism—hence the title of his article—but rather proposes that it be supplemented with rhetorical criticism. By this he means ‘a responsible and proper articulation of the words in their linguistic patterns and in their precise formulations’, which he claims

⁴⁶ Muilenburg, ‘Form Criticism and Beyond’, 1–18.

⁴⁷ Muilenburg, ‘Form Criticism and Beyond’, 2–3.

⁴⁸ Muilenburg, ‘Form Criticism and Beyond’, 5.

‘will reveal to us the texture and fabric of the writer’s thought’.⁴⁹ The two tasks of rhetorical criticism are 1) defining the limits of the literary unit, indicated by the features of the text; and 2) recognising the structure of composition and devices that mark sequences in the pericope, which include, for example, parallelism, refrains, key words, the particle **וְ**, deictic markers, vocatives, rhetorical questions, and repetitions of words or lines.⁵⁰

Though he speaks of the intention of the writer, Muilenburg does not explain what he means by this. In regard to the three components of discourse (speaker, text, audience), his focus is exclusively on the composition of the text. The reason for calling this proposed method ‘rhetorical criticism’ is because it considers it studies linguistic and literary conventions—what Muilenburg calls ‘rhetorical practice’.⁵¹ It is likely that he did not consider it fitting to call this greater attention to the literary particularity of the text ‘literary criticism’, because of the previous attachment of this term to source criticism.

3.2.2 Muilenburg’s Legacy

Muilenburg’s immediate legacy can be seen in the 1974 Festschrift written entirely by his students, most of whom heed his called to pay attention to the literary composition of the text.⁵² Many of the essays in this volume show how the details of certain texts (e.g. Gen 7; 11; Isa 28) can be understood apart from

⁴⁹ Muilenburg, ‘Form Criticism and Beyond’, 7.

⁵⁰ Muilenburg, ‘Form Criticism and Beyond’, 9–17.

⁵¹ Muilenburg, ‘Form Criticism and Beyond’, 18.

⁵² Jared J. Jackson and Martin Kessler, *Rhetorical Criticism: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1974). And similarly see the essays in David J. A. Clines, David M. Gunn and Alan J. Hauser, *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature*, JSOTSup 19 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982).

the source-critical assumptions of a composite text, or otherwise exhibit a close reading of the text (e.g. 1 Sam 2; 13).

Phyllis Tribble also largely follows Muilenburg's approach, working with his contention that 'proper articulation of form yields a proper articulation of meaning'.⁵³ She thus coins the term 'form-content' to stress the interrelation of these two features of the text.⁵⁴ Her presentation of Muilenburg's methodology is greatly enriched by her time spent in his classroom.

In her study of the background of rhetorical criticism, Tribble endeavours to show Muilenburg's close relationship to classical rhetoric. She stresses that classical rhetoric has two concerns: oral persuasion and literary discourse. Muilenburg's interest in the aural qualities of the text corresponds to the former and his study of literary devices corresponds to the latter. His method of close reading overlaps with the classical interest in *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio*.⁵⁵ Although he was not concerned with persuasion, Tribble maintains that Muilenburg's purpose was to identify the intent of the author.⁵⁶ In this section of her book, Tribble is defensive against claims that Muilenburg's rhetorical criticism is not really related to rhetoric at all. Although her recollection of Muilenburg's classroom teaching cannot easily be scrutinised, there is little indication of this connection to classical rhetoric in Muilenburg's SBL address, which is his mature reflection upon his interpretive practice.

Tribble's own approach leans heavily on Muilenburg's practice: the study of 'form-content' in order to articulate meaning, for which she provides a series

⁵³ She cites this phrase from Muilenburg's classroom. Phyllis Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 27.

⁵⁴ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 91.

⁵⁵ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 25–32.

⁵⁶ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 95–97.

of guidelines. Where she differs most from Muilenburg is in her understanding of meaning. Although she recognises that there are some features of the text that are undeniably intended, there are many meaningful features that are not intended and carry meanings apart from the author.⁵⁷

Jack R. Lundbom completed his doctoral studies on the rhetoric of Jeremiah under the supervision of Muilenburg.⁵⁸ Aware of the revival of classical rhetoric in the American academy in the early twentieth century, Lundbom defends Muilenburg's approach as appropriate to the biblical text. He claims that even in the case of the prophets, where the situation is best, we lack sufficient biographical and historical information to determine the rhetorical situation and are left to determine it from the text itself.⁵⁹ Accordingly, Lundbom stresses the importance of delimiting units and determining their structure, especially as indicated by *inclusio* and *chiasmus*. He also maintains the importance of style, which he considers closely related to intended effect.⁶⁰ Finally, he allows a place for considering the audience: 'Once discourse and literary units have been delimited and rhetorical criticism has done its full complement of work on the text, insights will be forthcoming on the speaker's interaction with his audience.'⁶¹ In practice, Lundbom maintains a close relationship to form criticism and gives minimal consideration of audience and effect.

⁵⁷ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 228–230.

⁵⁸ Most recently published as Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah: A Study in Ancient Hebrew Rhetoric*, 2nd ed. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997).

⁵⁹ Lundbom, *Jeremiah*, xxix–xxx.

⁶⁰ Lundbom, *Jeremiah*, xxxiv.

⁶¹ Lundbom, *Jeremiah*, xlii.

3.2.3 *Evaluation of Muilenburg and His Legacy*

The most common criticism of Muilenburg's rhetorical criticism is that it is little more than stylistics. This charge correctly recognises Muilenburg's approach as study of the composition of the text, but it fails to admit a key distinction from New Criticism or study of the text's aesthetics. Rhetorical criticism in this mode is ultimately concerned with meaning. In other words, it does not simply identify refrains, motifs, or other formal features—it explains their interrelationship to content. As Tribble recites what she heard in the classroom: 'proper articulation of form yields a proper articulation of meaning'.⁶²

Aside from the interrelation of form and content, Muilenburg's rhetorical criticism does not have a significant theoretical basis. Its real strength is in its practice—a close reading of a text with literary sensitivity—rather than its theory. Instead, it is more of an adjunct to form criticism, a task which is considered a necessary prerequisite.⁶³ As such it assumes the conjectural reconstructions of social or cultic settings that lie behind the final form, and adopts the pericope as the default unit of study. Even if Muilenburg's rhetorical criticism deals primarily with the text, it rests upon uncertain ground with unclear benefit to understanding whole books.

Muilenburg speaks about the intent of the author; however, this seems to mean little more than 'what the text says', rather than an agent who purposefully addresses an audience. Tribble takes this even further, claiming that the text can have meanings that the author did not intend. This is mostly taken for granted

⁶² Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 27.

⁶³ Muilenburg, 'Form Criticism and Beyond', 1–18.

in secular literary theory,⁶⁴ although not without challenges.⁶⁵

At its best, this type of rhetorical criticism promotes a careful reading of the text, which identifies significant features of prosaic and poetic discourse, and explains the way that they shape the meaning of the text. By itself, however, it is inadequate for our task because it does not analyse texts as social discourse. Worse still, this mode of interpretation can become preoccupied with finding obscure chiasms or other features that can scarcely have been intended by the author or perceived by the original readers.

3.2.4 George A. Kennedy

At least since Augustine, Paul's epistles have been regarded as bearing the marks of classical rhetoric, and this persisted throughout medieval times and the Reformation.⁶⁶ Interest in reading Paul's epistles this way was revived as a by-product of Muilenburg's reintroduction of the term 'rhetoric' to biblical studies. Though his interest was in composition, his use of the term resulted in others reconsidering the value of classical theory.

The most influential proponent of a method of biblical interpretation employing classical rhetorical theory is classics professor George A. Kennedy. He came to write *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* as a result of numerous post-graduate biblical studies students sitting his subject as an outside minor.⁶⁷

Expanding the classical definition to include written texts, Kennedy defines

⁶⁴ E.g. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

⁶⁵ E.g. E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

⁶⁶ Duane F. Watson and Alan J. Hauser, *Rhetorical Criticism of the Bible: A Comprehensive Bibliography with Notes on History and Method*, BibInt 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 101–102.

⁶⁷ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, x.

rhetoric as ‘that quality in discourse by which a speaker or writer seeks to accomplish his purpose.’⁶⁸ Rhetorical criticism thus ‘takes the text as we have it, whether the work of a single author or the product of editing and looks at it from the point of view of the author’s or editor’s intent, the unified results, and how it would be perceived by an audience of near contemporaries.’⁶⁹ Kennedy maintains that such a formulation of rhetorical criticism offers to fill the void between form criticism and literary criticism,⁷⁰ or in other words, encompasses both diachronic and synchronic concerns.

Kennedy asserts the applicability of his method to the New Testament on three grounds. First, the New Testament is not merely authoritative proclamation as opposed to rational persuasion. The biblical authors often provide reasons for their audience to listen and obey,⁷¹ persuading their audience to believe or to believe more strongly.⁷²

Secondly, rhetorical criticism of the New Testament is historically justified. Greek education was prevalent throughout the Roman empire, and rhetoric was the core of secondary school. Furthermore, rhetors were known throughout Palestine. This means that even if Paul and the other New Testament writers were not specifically trained in classical rhetoric, they would have been exposed to it.⁷³

Thirdly, rhetorical criticism of the New Testament is philosophically justified because rhetoric is ‘a universal phenomenon which is conditioned by basic

⁶⁸ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 3.

⁶⁹ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 4.

⁷⁰ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 3.

⁷¹ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 6–7.

⁷² Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 3.

⁷³ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 9–10.

workings of the human mind and heart and by the nature of all human society.⁷⁴ What is unique about Greek rhetoric is that it has been conceptualised.⁷⁵

After summarising the major tenets of classical rhetoric, Kennedy proposes five steps of biblical analysis that incorporate much of the classical theory.⁷⁶

1. Determine the rhetorical unit, which will usually be a speech marked by signs of opening and closure. Sometimes, as with an epistle, the unit may be the whole work.
2. Define the rhetorical situation of the unit. This is the circumstance (or ‘exigence’) that gave rise to the discourse and importantly includes a consideration of the audience.
3. Identify the rhetorical problem. This is the core issue within the situation that the speaker or author seeks to overcome, and it relates to the classical concepts of stasis (question at issue) and species (whether judicial, deliberative, or epideictic).
4. Consider the arrangement of material, such its subdivisions, development of arguments, devices, or style. This is the largest step and involves line-by-line analysis.
5. Evaluate rhetorical effectiveness in meeting the situation. This confirms whether the analysis in step 4 is consistent with the preliminary steps.

3.2.5 Kennedy’s Influence

Unsurprisingly, Kennedy’s work prompted a steady stream of rhetorical-critical

⁷⁴ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 10.

⁷⁵ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 10–11.

⁷⁶ The following is a summary of Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 33–38.

study of the New Testament, particularly of Paul's epistles. The main controversy in this field is whether the influence of classical rhetoric upon the New Testament is direct, indirect, or simply a reflection of the universals of human communication.

In his earlier work Kennedy briefly discusses the rhetoric of the Old Testament, although not with a view to rhetorical criticism. In particular, he points to its oral shape and persuasive intent, and so classifies the rhetoric of the Old Testament as 'preconceptual'.⁷⁷ Although Kennedy applied his rhetorical criticism only to the New Testament, it is clear that two of the three justifications he provided for this application also hold true for the Old Testament: the universals of human communication and the persuasive intent of the text. As a result, there have been a growing number of studies of Old Testament rhetoric that have employed his methodology.

Yehoshua Gitay, having studied classical rhetoric under Kennedy,⁷⁸ was among the first to examine the Old Testament using his approach. His work on the prophetic literature stems from his dissatisfaction with source and form criticism's failure to account for its nature as public address.⁷⁹ Rhetorical study of Deutero-Isaiah is especially relevant because it seeks to persuade rather than to compel with threats of judgment.⁸⁰

For Gitay, the essence of rhetorical criticism is the study of the interrelation of speaker, speech, and audience. Though he acknowledges that 'the prophet

⁷⁷ George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 120.

⁷⁸ Yehoshua Gitay, *Prophecy and Persuasion: A Study of Isaiah 40-48* (Bonn: Lingustica Biblica, 1981), vi.

⁷⁹ Gitay, *Prophecy and Persuasion*, 26-27.

⁸⁰ Gitay, *Prophecy and Persuasion*, 34-35.

obviously did not follow any classical conventional school of rhetoric',⁸¹ the framework and terminology of classical rhetoric is used as a guide. In addition to identifying the classical parts of rhetoric (*invention, dispositio, elocution*), Gitay follows Kennedy in making the rhetorical situation critical to his interpretation.⁸² He argues that rhetorical discourse requires a rhetorical situation because 'an utterance without a context (or situation) is meaningless.'⁸³

While Gitay claims to use classical rhetoric only as a guide, he sticks to it closely, especially when it comes to *dispositio*. He is able to discern a classical rhetoric-type structure in most pericopes.⁸⁴ As a result his methodology appears to impose alien categories upon the text.

The reception of Kennedy's rhetorical criticism and its application to the Old Testament has been mixed. Gitay's method featured in an introduction to biblical criticisms published in 1993,⁸⁵ but was subsequently replaced in the 1999 revision with a broader conception of rhetorical criticism by Patricia K. Tull.⁸⁶ By contrast, Wilhelm H. Wuellner writes about the future of rhetorical criticism and suggests it lies closer to Kennedy's approach, although he

⁸¹ Gitay, *Prophecy and Persuasion*, 36.

⁸² Gitay, *Prophecy and Persuasion*, 36–41.

⁸³ Gitay, *Prophecy and Persuasion*, 42.

⁸⁴ This is even more striking in his later work: Yehoshua Gitay, *Isaiah and his Audience: The Structure and Meaning of Isaiah 1–12* (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1991).

⁸⁵ Yehoshua Gitay, 'Rhetorical Criticism', in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*. eds. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 135–149.

⁸⁶ Patricia K. Tull, 'Rhetorical Criticism', in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*. eds. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 156–180.

advocates the study of the context of the text *and* the act of reading.⁸⁷

In recent decades, rhetorical criticism has been understood more in line with Kennedy's definition than Muilenburg's. In a 1994 article, David M. Howard Jr. calls for the redesignation of Muilenburg's Old Testament rhetorical criticism as simply literary criticism, so that the path is clear for a properly called rhetorical criticism, which can focus on the suasive aspects of biblical discourse.⁸⁸ Developments in biblical studies have since made this possible. The term *literary criticism* is now an accepted term to describe the study of the literary qualities of the text, having detached itself from its older association with source criticism. At the same time, an enlarged methodological vocabulary—including reader-response interpretation, deconstruction, feminist, and post-colonial readings—has freed the term rhetorical criticism to describe the kind of approach developed by Kennedy.

3.2.6 *Evaluation of Kennedy and His Influence*

The rhetorical criticism of Kennedy has a strong theoretical basis. This is largely by virtue of building upon a well-tested discipline and by Kennedy's own expertise in classical rhetoric. There are three key strengths of this theory that make it well suited to biblical analysis.

First, meaning is tied to the intention of the author. This assumption is a natural one in the world of ancient rhetoric: a speaker who addresses a court

⁸⁷ Wilhelm H. Wuellner, 'Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?', *CBQ* 49.3 (1987): 448–463. This is similar to the rhetorical criticism of Patrick and Scult, Tull, and Salzer, who see rhetorical criticism shading into a form of reader-response interpretation, where the interest in audience extends beyond the original audience to the present day reader. Dale Patrick and Allen Scult, *Rhetoric and Biblical Interpretation*, JSOTSup 82 (Sheffield: Almond, 1990), 19–25; Tull, 'Rhetorical Criticism', 156–80.

⁸⁸ David M. Howard Jr., 'Rhetorical Criticism in Old Testament Studies', *BBR* 4 (1994): 87–104.

or ceremony is the one to decide what he wants to achieve, what he will say, and how he will say it. It is the mark of a good orator that he is heard, understood, and received by his audience as he intended. In a similar way, a written text can function as a communicative act, specifically the author's communicative act. The Bible can be helpfully studied within this same framework: it is intended to be heard as a public address and was written to engender a particular response among the believing community. Despite the contribution of editors and redactors—or even because of them—biblical texts have a purposeful construction.

Secondly, the intention of the author is very much shaped by the setting of his address. Kennedy's analysis of the text considers here the rhetorical situation and problem to be addressed. This is where he explores what it is that prompted the writing of the biblical book, hence viewing it as social discourse. The author is a communicator with a specific goal rather than a poet expressing timeless truths.⁸⁹ This distinction suggests that some genres are more suitable candidates for rhetorical criticism than others. In practice, texts exist along a spectrum of direct communication to free expression.

Thirdly, the text is the focus of study because it is here that the author shapes the audience. In the case of biblical texts, it is the text itself that is the main source of information about the author and the audience, and often it is the only direct source. Hence Kennedy's rhetorical criticism is one that rightly gives the majority of attention to the written text as it considers the author's choices regarding *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio*.

⁸⁹ This important distinction was made by Herbert A. Wichelns, 'The Literary Criticism of Oratory', in *Landmark Essays on Rhetorical Criticism*. ed. Thomas W. Benson (Davis, CA: Harmagoras Press, 1993), 25–29.

Despite these strengths, there are some significant problems with this mode of interpretation, and they are magnified when the Old Testament is its object of study. In the case of the New Testament texts, scholars debate the decade—and even sometimes the year—of their composition, not the century. With the Old Testament, we deal with texts without a clear origin, often a vague context, and sometimes no explicit rhetorical situation. In this respect, the wisdom literature is arguably the worst offender.

Another problem with applying Kennedy's rhetorical criticism to the Old Testament is the danger of imposing foreign categories upon the text. Even in the case of the New Testament, Kennedy has been criticised for assuming too much Greco-Roman influence in a Palestinian context and failing to account for the differences between oral and written discourse.⁹⁰ Duane F. Watson argues for a more measured assessment of the value of classical rhetoric in biblical interpretation: 'It is more accurate to say that this method discovers and uncovers rhetorical techniques utilized in the composition of the New Testament whether consciously or unconsciously applied.'⁹¹ The Old Testament, in addition to being a written text, was composed in a world largely untouched by classical rhetoric. Kennedy himself describes the rhetoric of the Old Testament as pre-conceptual, yet many of his followers nevertheless apply rhetoric as conceptualised by Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian.

Better applications of Kennedy's rhetorical criticism to the Old Testament use classical rhetoric only as a loose template. They remain sensitive to unique features, forms, and suasive strategies of the Hebrew text. They also seek to account for the imprecise historical setting of the book in some way. Less

⁹⁰ Watson and Hauser, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 111.

⁹¹ Watson and Hauser, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 112.

helpful rhetorical criticism in this mode simply uses the classical categories to label the features of the biblical text, which means that the text is read through a pre-defined framework rather than being attentive to its own particularities. Kennedy's rhetorical criticism may also encourage the reconstruction of a historical setting in which to interpret the text, even when there is little or no evidence to support it.

3.3 A Reformulation of Rhetorical Criticism

In the previous section we reviewed the two broad approaches to rhetorical criticism of the Old Testament associated with Muilenburg and Kennedy. In the course of this review, we have considered the philosophical assumptions that inform their theories, observed examples of their practical implementation, and made a comparison of their relative strengths and weaknesses.

With this methodological awareness we will now attempt to reformulate a rhetorical criticism that is both theoretically sound and practically suited to Old Testament texts, with Ecclesiastes particularly in mind. Rather than abstracting theory from practice, the following refinement of rhetorical-critical method will outline key steps with integrated theoretical reflection. This method will be employed in subsequent chapters for the task of reading Ecclesiastes as parental discourse.

3.3.1 Delimit the Rhetorical Unit

Both Muilenburg and Kennedy begin with the delimitation of the rhetorical unit. This task is self-evident in its necessity, but interpreters frequently conflict in their conclusions. This is true even among those operating with the same methodology.

Muilenburg's focus is the pericope, which is a unit of the text that is based on

an earlier oral form. The pericope is assumed to be relatively short because of the limitations of oral transmission. Muilenburg does not depart from these form-critical assumptions but seeks to bolster the objective grounds for delimiting the pericope by observing Hebrew literary conventions, such as a ballast line (a climactic bicolon or tricolon) or the repetition of key words at the beginning and end of a unit.⁹²

Kennedy, working with the New Testament, also identifies the rhetorical unit with a particular source such as a speech in Acts, of which the boundaries are often clearly marked by the narrative. He acknowledges that there may be an overall rhetoric of a book, particularly in the case of the epistles, but says that ‘the rhetoric of large units often has to be built up from an understanding of the rhetoric of smaller units.’⁹³

The core task of this thesis, and arguably interpretation in general, is reading. This has two important implications for determining the rhetorical unit. First, reading—unlike historical inquiry—focuses on the text as it stands. The only appropriate unit for rhetorical study is the one that exists (the final form), as opposed to speculated sources or oral histories.

Secondly, the act of reading naturally seeks to grasp the whole. Even where the parts of a text are perceived, these are understood within the context of the whole. These subunits may have their own rhetorical goals, but the fact of their inclusion means that these goals are subordinate to the goals of the larger text, which is the reverse of what Kennedy claims. Therefore, priority in rhetorical analysis must be given to the largest unit of reading—it is this that we define as the rhetorical unit.

⁹² Muilenburg, ‘Form Criticism and Beyond’, 8–10.

⁹³ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 33.

In many cases this step will be almost unnecessary. Most biblical books present themselves as discrete textual units and unified wholes. There may be some instances when a literary unit has been divided for practical reasons like scroll length (e.g. 1–2 Samuel; 1–2 Kings; Ezra-Nehemiah; 1–2 Chronicles) or presented as a collection of companion pieces (e.g. Psalter; Isaiah; the Book of the Twelve). There may also be need for textual-critical decisions to establish the text or to decide between competing recensions, as in the case of Jeremiah. In these instances, the evidence will need to be carefully weighed to determine the rhetorical unit.

Despite the self-evidential nature of this step, the history of biblical interpretation—and interpretation of Ecclesiastes is not exception—is such that an argument for reading a work as a unified whole is justified. This argument should rely upon the evidence within the text, similar to how Muilenburg approaches the pericope: attention to opening and closing of the unit, repetition of key words that link the whole, and other textual clues. This justification does not need to account for all of the diversity within the text; it just needs to make a case that the text in its present form was prepared for reading as a whole.

3.3.2 Establish the Discourse Setting

After delimiting the rhetorical unit, Kennedy considers the rhetorical situation that gives rise to the need to communicate, while Muilenburg moves straight to studying the composition of the text. Kennedy's approach has greatest applicability to New Testament epistles, where the historical setting is often explicit. Paul, for example, provides the background to his writing to the Romans (Rom 1:8–15; 15:22–33). In the Old Testament, however, the conditions are never like this. This is why Lundbom claims that Kennedy's approach (curiously he calls this 'rhetorical criticism of the broad type') is

impossible, even in Jeremiah, which provides frequent historical references:

[C]onditions for doing rhetorical criticism of the broad type could hardly be worse. Little or no background information is available. We lack biographical material on the speaker, and relevant historical data on the speech, such as date, what the occasion was, or who the audience happened to be, is scanty at best, usually unavailable. There is only the speech, and to make matters worse, speeches are placed end to end in the biblical text, making delimitation difficult, if not impossible. Interpolations are common. In some instances, part of a speech appears to be missing ... we are therefore left inferring a rhetorical situation from the text itself.⁹⁴

Lundbom is operating within the framework of form-criticism. Hence, when he states that the rhetorical situation must be inferred from the text, he is speaking of the circumstances of Jeremiah's actual public address. If our focus is upon the text of Jeremiah rather than the person of Jeremiah, the question of setting is not the historical situation within the text, but the situation that shaped its publication.

Though Lundbom laments the difficulty of determining the rhetorical setting of Jeremiah, the circumstances surrounding the publication of the wisdom literature is even more obscure. The *book* of Jeremiah can be dated to a short period after his ministry (i.e. the exile or at least shortly thereafter),⁹⁵ but the dates of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes are far more contentious. They are almost completely lacking in historical references, meaning that estimates of

⁹⁴ Lundbom, *Jeremiah*, xxix.

⁹⁵ Even if one subscribes to a complex process of composition (à la McKane), we can at least approximate when the 'corpus' began 'rolling'. William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah: Introduction and Commentary on Jeremiah I–XXV*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), lxxxiii.

date vary by centuries.

For this reason, the only setting that we can study with any great certainty is the discourse setting of the book. We define the discourse setting as the setting which is implied by the ostensible form of the discourse. It relates to the narratological terms ‘implied author’ and ‘implied reader’, discussed above.⁹⁶ The implied author and the implied reader inhabit the world of the text and are reflected in the form of the discourse. It is this enclosed system that can be called the discourse setting.

Discourse setting is not a term with great currency, although it has some precedent. For Ansberry, it is synonymous with discursive context or *Sitz im Buch*, which is the new performance context of proverbs in contrast to their *Sitze im Leben*.⁹⁷ His study of the discourse setting of Egyptian instructions shows that it comprises a text’s author, addressee, and context,⁹⁸ which he understands specifically as the historical author and addressee.⁹⁹ Ansberry, thus considers the discourse setting to be the historical setting of the final version of the text. With such a definition, however, discourse setting is no more accessible than the *Sitz im Leben*.

Despite the fact that Ecclesiastes is evidently orphaned from the historical setting of both its sources *and* its composition, there is no shortage of studies that attempt to recreate these from the meagre clues within the text and then build an interpretation upon this recreation.¹⁰⁰ An interpretation is only as

⁹⁶ See p. 92.

⁹⁷ Ansberry, *Be Wise*, 7–8.

⁹⁸ Ansberry, *Be Wise*, 12–19.

⁹⁹ This is evident from his rationale in studying the content of these works in order to confirm that the implied audience is the intended audience.

¹⁰⁰ See above for the evaluation of historical readings of Ecclesiastes, which all take this basic

valid as its foundations, and if these are mostly speculation then the interpretive endeavour is jeopardised. It is far safer to work with the implied setting, and to build upon what is concrete instead of what is hypothetical.

Admittedly, importing narratological concepts comes with risks: it was developed for the interpretation of secular fictional works. Though employing fictive elements, the biblical literature does not present itself as fictitious. As religious literature it makes metaphysical and historical claims. These claims ought not be obscured by the use of secular literary theory. Nevertheless, the biblical text contains enough narrative elements for this borrowing to remain valid.

3.3.3 Identify the Rhetorical Goal(s)

Following the determination of the discourse setting the interpreter is well placed to identify the rhetorical goal or goals of the implied author. The author writes to the reader for a particular purpose, which may be either explicitly stated or implicit within the work. The goal is specifically that of the implied author, the persona of the author that is determined from the text rather than from a reconstruction of historical context; hence this rhetorical goal should be closely related to the discourse setting.

This step assumes a greater level of coherence in a work than admitted by Muilenburg, who is prepared to speak about the author's intent only at the level of the pericope.¹⁰¹ As we have already affirmed, the goal of reading means that our interest is with the present form of the text in its entirety. Subunits may have their own goals, but by definition these subunits serve the purpose of the rhetorical unit, hence their inclusion within the text. The analysis of

approach.

¹⁰¹ Muilenburg, 'Form Criticism and Beyond', 9.

subunits and their relationship to the whole properly belongs in the final step. Kennedy speaks about the goal of a rhetorical unit in terms of the problem that the author addresses. An important consideration here is the species of the rhetoric: whether judicial, deliberative, or epideictic. These roughly correspond to whether the problem lies in the past, future, or present.¹⁰² While Kennedy claims that this time orientation may be universally applicable and relevant to biblical interpretation, the usage of these terms is more specific than this in Greco-Roman rhetoric. Judicial rhetoric is for persuading a jury about a past action, deliberative rhetoric is for advocating a political decision, and epideictic rhetoric is used to praise or blame at festive occasions. Not only were these genres of rhetoric formed with these specific occasions in mind, but they also were created without regard for the unique genres of the Old and New Testament. It is doubtful that Aristotle considered them exhaustive for all speech and literature.¹⁰³

The rhetorical goal may be described as the intended effect that an author wishes to produce in his writing, presumably something within the power of the audience—either collectively or individually. It may indeed, as Kennedy affirms, concern the past, present, or future, and be loosely related to the classical categories. Yet we need not limit ourselves to these categories, and ought to describe the goal of the rhetorical unit with as much detail as the text allows.

¹⁰² Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 35–37.

¹⁰³ This is Olbricht's main criticism of the use of classical rhetoric in biblical interpretation, and so coins the genre 'confrontational rhetoric' to describe Galatians. Thomas H. Olbricht, 'Rhetorical Criticism in Biblical Commentaries', *CurBR* 7.1 (2008): 11–36.

3.3.4 Analyse the Composition of the Text

The final and most detailed step is the study of the composition of the text. In terms of classical rhetoric, this encompasses two canons—*inventio* and *dispositio*. *Inventio* refers to the first step of producing a speech, in which the rhetor identifies the arguments that he has at his disposal, including the artistic and non-artistic proofs. *Dispositio* is the arrangement of these arguments and the structuring of the speech, at minimum containing both statement and proof. The orator may organise the speech more elaborately than this, including other components including proemium, narration, refutation, interrogation, and epilogue.

The canons of rhetoric known as *inventio* and *dispositio* are helpful at a general level, but when it comes to dealing with the specifics of the text they risk imposing foreign concepts. Speakers and writers not trained or influenced by classical rhetoric cannot be expected to value the same arguments, components of speech, or their order. Unless there are reasonable grounds for believing that a text has been composed with classical rhetorical concerns in mind, this terminology is better avoided.

There are two other demands of Old Testament interpretation that require distancing from a classical approach. First, we have to account for some distinction between written and oral communication. Classical rhetoric has three specific types of occasions in mind, for which a speech was written to be delivered orally. It therefore addresses a concrete audience and has a narrow objective. Written texts may also have a very specific purpose, but this is not necessarily the case. They will be far more diverse in goal and execution than the speeches expected by classical rhetoric. Both written and oral texts, however, can be analysed for their aural effect in view of the fact that even ancient written texts were intended to be heard; they would have been read

only by the few with scribal training.¹⁰⁴

Secondly, we have to re-engineer the concept of rhetoric from a set of prescriptions formulated to assist the author of a speech to an analytic task that interprets the ‘speech’ after the fact. This involves working backwards from the form and content of the text to the intention of the author. This distinction justifies a reordering relevant to this particular step: it is more intuitive to study the order of the text before the individual arguments contained therein.

Having taken these specific conditions of biblical interpretation into account, we find ourselves approaching Muilenburg’s method of interpretation. His delineation of units finds its proper place here. Since, however, the rhetorical unit is the entire text, this third step involves a consideration of macro-structure, in order to determine the function of a given section within the whole.

This fourth step also incorporates Muilenburg’s second step: examining the particularities of the text. Here Muilenburg is most useful, as he is well attuned to the features of Hebrew literature and the integration of form and content. We will also benefit from the increasing focus upon the literary qualities of the Old Testament in recent decades.¹⁰⁵

Despite our distancing from the classical style of rhetorical criticism, the canon of *inventio* helpfully prompts us to consider the arguments that are available to the implied reader. This will largely depend upon the discourse setting of the

¹⁰⁴ Kennedy also argues that since all literature was originally oral, early written literature naturally imitated forms of oratory. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*, 110–111.

¹⁰⁵ Most notably Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

book in question, specifically the characterisation of the father and his son. But generally speaking, within a biblical text, arguments will be based upon revelation or the received tradition. As we are dealing with written texts, we will consider the possibility of literary allusions, evaluating them on the basis of lexical and thematic similarities. This will require particular care in the book of Ecclesiastes due to the debated nature of Qohelet's relationship to the wisdom tradition (like Proverbs) and orthodox Israelite belief.

Although it may borrow much of its expertise, our rhetorical reading does not end at the same point as literary interpretation. The goal of this step is not only to describe what the text says or the forms it employs in saying it, but to answer the question: 'what does this do?' or even, 'what is the implied author doing with it?' Thus each section is studied for its contribution to the whole, which is governed by the implied author's rhetorical goals. And similarly, each component of the text is considered for the way in which it serves the contribution of the section.

3.4 Summary and Final Considerations

The contention of this chapter is that the method most suited to reading Ecclesiastes as parental discourse is rhetorical criticism. In general terms, the preferred approach takes much of the theory of Kennedy's method along with the sensitivity to the particularities of Hebrew writing shown by Muilenburg. This involves delimiting the largest unit of reading possible, establishing the implied author and audience from the text itself (which constitute the discourse setting), identifying the rhetorical goal that the implied author seeks to achieve, and finally, analysing the composition. The final step does not only demand a description of the content and form of the text (as literary interpretations do), but relates it to the rhetorical goal.

In view of the proposed method's focus upon the discourse setting rather than the historical setting of the book, this approach is can be considered a sub-category of literary criticism—it is the text itself that receives the greatest attention and greatest weight in interpretive decisions. Since the 'father' and the 'son' belong the text, we can only study them as literary constructs. Nevertheless, this does not rule out the possibility of historical investigation *after* interpretation. Put differently, historical speculation is not suitable for the basis of reading, but a careful reading is a good basis for historical investigation. The reason for omitting this as a final step in the present study is that interpretation is invariably recursive, and any subsequent step influences the preceding ones, even if unconsciously.

In our next chapter we will begin the process of applying this method to the book of Ecclesiastes. As defended above, the first step in reading Ecclesiastes as parental discourse is to delimit the rhetorical unit. This step is essential because not all interpreters operate with the same 'Ecclesiastes'.

CHAPTER 4

THE RHETORICAL UNIT: ECCLESIASTES 1:1–12:14

In the last chapter, we defined a method of rhetorical criticism for the task of reading Ecclesiastes as parental discourse. This variant of rhetorical criticism is a primarily literary mode of interpretation, as it reads texts as the implied author's address to the implied reader. Although we maintain a philosophical commitment to authorial intent, we can only hear the author as he presents himself in the text. To understand the text as he intends, we must orient ourselves the discourse as he has crafted it.

The first step in this method is to delimit the rhetorical unit; that is, to find the largest unit of the text that has been prepared for a coherent reading, or the 'whole' that governs the 'parts'. Though we have previously defended a methodological commitment to read biblical texts in their entirety,¹ the applicability of this commitment to Ecclesiastes needs further defence. This is especially true in light of the historical-critical attempts to distinguish the words of Qohelet from later additions by various authors and editors, as well as more recent literary interpretations that have defined their unit of reading as other than Eccl 1:1–12:14.

This chapter will also pursue a second more subtle goal: to characterise the coherence of the rhetorical unit in order to shape our expectations as readers. A highly segmented text, such as a loosely edited compendium or crudely redacted memoir, is still likely to have some overall coherence or broader purpose that justifies its existence. But the significance of this broader purpose has a smaller effect on the interpretation of subunits. A more unified text is

¹ See pp. 113–115.

composed of units that are closely related to the author's or editor's purpose. In this case, the interpretation of subunits is highly influenced by the overall rhetorical goals of the text. In this chapter we will assess where Ecclesiastes falls on this spectrum.

4.1 Historical-Critical Interpretation of Ecclesiastes

Interpreters have wrestled with the unity of Ecclesiastes since ancient times. Early Christian interpreters such as Gregory Thaumaturgus, Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, and Gregory the Great explained the apparent contradictions as a combination of the vacillations of a tempted soul, the searching of an evasive truth, or the dialogue of a fool or sceptic and his teacher.² Despite the recognition of 'problems' with the text, the unity of authorship and composition was thus maintained.

Modern scholarship turned attention to the nature of composition to resolve textual difficulties. Most elaborately, G. Bickell proposed that the original text had been written on the pages of a book and that these were accidentally displaced prior to publication.³ Aside from the difficulty of reconstructing a shuffled text, Bickell's theory requires the use of a codex well before its invention by the Romans.⁴

The most influential contribution to the historical-critical study of Ecclesiastes came from C. G. A. Siegfried, who is largely to be credited with the theory of multiple contributors. Unlike the Pentateuchal documentary hypothesis, which conceived of editors joining independent sources, Ecclesiastes was considered to be the result of an original work supplemented and corrected by

² See further, Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste*, 142–143.

³ Cf. Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste*, 148–150.

⁴ McNeile, *Ecclesiastes*, 29.

a succession of glossators and editors, who sought to bring its message into line with their own perspective. Siegfried proposed a total of at least nine contributors: The author (Q1) who is a pessimistic Jew with a shipwrecked faith, an 'Epicurean' Sadducee (Q2) who commends the enjoyment of food and drink, a wise man (Q3) who commends wisdom, a pious Jew (Q4) who reaffirms the moral order, a series of less prominent contributors (Q5), a redactor who added 1:1–2; 12:8 (R1), an epilogist favourable towards Qohelet (12:9–10), a second epilogist with a negative appraisal (12:11–12), and a Pharisaic redactor (R2) who believed in final judgment (12:13–14).⁵

A. H. McNeile mediated Siegfried's work to the English speaking world. He similarly affirmed that the traditional explanations did not adequately account for the suddenness of the change of thought, or the presence of the neutral proverbs. Yet he also recognised many of Siegfried's distinctions to be arbitrary and reduced the number of contributors to four: a prominent man who wrote a journal reflection upon on the sadness of life, an unknown admirer/editor, a wise man, and a pious Jew.⁶

E. Podechard also accepted Siegfried's theory of multiple contributors, although claimed that his conclusions go beyond the facts. Many of Siegfried's 'contributors' are merely abstractions of a belief rather than a person, since people are capable of more than one conviction.⁷ Thus, like McNeile, Podechard also reduced the contributors to four: after the original composition of the book it was edited by a disciple (the epilogist) who speaks about the author (1:2; 7:27; 12:8, 9–12), then a *basid* whose simple prose additions

⁵ Siegfried, *Prediger*, 3–12.

⁶ McNeile, *Ecclesiastes*, 21–28.

⁷ Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste*, 51–56.

contradict Qohelet's conclusion of joy (2:26a; 3:17; 7:26b; 8:2, 5–8, 11–13; 11:9b; 12:1a, 13–14). Finally, a *hakam* added most of the proverbial statements in 7:1–12 and chapter 10.⁸

Despite significant disagreement about the details, historical-critical interpreters of the early twentieth century were in general agreement: far from being a unified whole, the book of Ecclesiastes is the result of multiple redactions. Even for interpreters who consider the canonical form to have some priority, it is best understood in relation to the original unmodified form.⁹

As the twentieth century progressed, interpreters moved away from theories of multiple redactions. Kurt Galling and Aarre Lauha both argue that, despite the lack of apparent order to the text and possible use of sources, it has a basic unified theme.¹⁰ Lauha is more strident in his critique of the multiple redactions theory, claiming that it is the result of the imposition of western logic and a lack of stylistic instinct. When the genre of the book is appreciated, the basic unity emerges: 'Das Predigerbuch ist kein festgebauter Traktat über die Nichtigkeit allen Geschehens, sondern eine Sammlung von Sentenzen, die wegen der zu Grunde liegenden gemeinsame Anschauung eine Einheit bilden.'¹¹

In addition to composition and genre, explanations of the tensions within Ecclesiastes have been found in the man Qohelet. Gordis thus claims the unity of the book and explained its pious sentiments as Qohelet falling back to the

⁸ Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste*, 156–170.

⁹ Morris Jastrow Jr., *A Gentle Cynic: Being the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1943), 116–117. Jastrow reconstructs this 'original' version of Ecclesiastes on pp. 201–241.

¹⁰ Kurt Galling, 'Der Prediger', in *Die fünf Megilloth* HAT, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1969), 75–76; Lauha, *Kohelet*, 4–7.

¹¹ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 5.

only abstract vocabulary he knows.¹² His complex relationship with Israel's sapiential tradition also gives rise to his use of quotations, with which he sometimes disagrees.¹³

A more extreme view of Qohelet's conflicted mind is advanced by Frank Zimmerman, who takes a Freudian-psychological approach to the book:

Qohelet is more than a mere skeptic, or simply critical of an idea or doctrine, or at variance with hallowed Jewish teaching. His doubts are not intellectualized as a result of prolonged study. He is a pathological doubter of everything, stemming from a drastic emotional experience, a psychic disturbance. He is doubtful about himself as a person of worth and character. He has no self-esteem or value of himself. His doubt has destroyed all values. He is an inferior, of no account, and he demeans himself constantly. His doubt comes from a parathy, a disease of the mind which he shares with many neurotics.¹⁴

A number of recent interpretations have sought to explain the basic unity of Ecclesiastes—or at least the words of Qohelet—by appeal to the historical context of the book. Martin A. Shields approaches the entire text as a unity, including the epilogue. He argues that Qohelet's teaching was 'leaked' by the epilogist in order to deter prospective sages. Qohelet's words, in their sceptical and contradictory form, thus show that the wisdom movement has reached a dead end.¹⁵

¹² Gordis, *Kobelet*, 73–74.

¹³ R. N. Whybray, 'The Identification and Use of Quotations in Ecclesiastes', in *Congress Volume: Vienna, 1980*, ed. J. A. Emerton, VTSup 32 (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 435–451; Gordis, *Kobelet*, 95–108.

¹⁴ Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qohelet* (New York: Ktav, 1973), 8.

¹⁵ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 6.

Sneed similarly makes sense of the words of Qohelet in a particular socio-historical context, namely that of scribes within the retainer class during the Ptolemaic era.¹⁶ He writes at a time when the oppressive and irrational nature of society rendered traditional wisdom ineffective and so commends his *carpe diem* rhetoric as more appropriate.¹⁷ The epilogue, on the other hand, is self-evidently the work of a glossator, who was attracted to certain aspects of Qohelet's teaching, such as the sovereignty of God and the fear of God, and thus adapted it for his own community.¹⁸

The early consensus of historical criticism—that the disordered and chaotic text of Ecclesiastes is the result of multiple redactions—was eventually overtaken by alternative explanations: genre, the man Qohelet, or the historical setting of the book. Its surviving legacy, with few exceptions, has been to consider the epilogue a late and secondary addition and thus non-essential to interpretation.

4.2 Literary-Critical Interpretation of Ecclesiastes

The literary turn in biblical scholarship has led to a reappraisal of the apparent contradictions in the book. Rather than considering these contradictions a sign of disunity, literary interpreters read them as a feature of the book and fundamental to its meaning.

The defining study for the literary interpretation of Ecclesiastes is the work of Fox who, although recognising the longstanding separation of Qohelet and the epilogist, claims the book is a unity: 'I suggest that all of 1:2–12:14 is by the same hand—not that the epilogue is by Qohelet, but that *Qohelet* is “by” the

¹⁶ Sneed, *Politics of Pessimism*, 131–137.

¹⁷ Sneed, *Politics of Pessimism*, 173.

¹⁸ Sneed, *Politics of Pessimism*, 275.

epilogist.’¹⁹ The epilogist is thus not to be conceived as an editor or compiler, but the narrator (cf. 7:27) who visibly emerges at the end to give instructions on how to relate to the character of Qohelet. In a later work, Fox studies the contradictions of the book in detail; rather than finding them an obstacle to reading he makes them his starting point.²⁰

A similar approach to contradiction in the book of Ecclesiastes is taken by Loader, who understands the book as a series of polar opposites. Each of these pairs produces a tension that proves Qohelet’s **הכל** thesis and undermines traditional wisdom.²¹ Despite holding together the contradictions within 1:2–12:8, Loader considers the title (1:1) and the epilogues (12:9–11, 12–14) to be later additions to the book.²²

Rather than considering the tensions in the book to be (only) a function of Qohelet’s thought or argument, T. A. Perry discerns a dialogical quality in the text. Perry identifies a pious sage-narrator (P), who speaks throughout the work, writes the epilogue, and uses the words of a sceptic (K) as a stimulus to his own reflection.²³ Shields points out the most obvious difficulty with this view: the book clearly describes the words of the body as that of Qohelet and

¹⁹ Fox, ‘Frame-Narrative’, 91. Note, however, that Fox subsequently adopted Seow’s arguments for reading 12:13b–14 as postscript by a later scribe. Choon-Leong Seow, “Beyond Them, My Son, Be Warned”: The Epilogue of Qoheleth Revisited’, in *Wisdom, You Are My Sister: Studies in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*. ed. Michael L. Barré, CBQMS 29 (Washington, DC: Catholic Bible Association, 1997), 139; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 359.

²⁰ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 3–4.

²¹ Loader, *Polar Structures*, 128–131.

²² J. A. Loader, *Ecclesiastes: A Practical Commentary*, trans. J. Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 1, 133–36.

²³ T. A. Perry, *Dialogues with Qohelet: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

provides no single marker of dialogue.²⁴

Narrative criticism overcomes the main objection to a dialogical interpretation by recognising the different ‘voices’ of the text as belonging to Qohelet. Christianson, for example, identifies two different personas of Qohelet: his youthful foolish self and old man Qohelet, who makes sense of his futile search for the reader. Despite finding this coherence within the words of Qohelet, the epilogue is still seen as a secondary addition by a conservative and reluctant scribe.²⁵

Salyer similarly finds different layers of narration within Ecclesiastes and believes they are all the work of the implied author. Like Christianson, Salyer notes the poor matching of book’s frame (epilogue) with its picture (Qohelet), but says that this is a deliberate rhetorical ploy to lend the credentials of orthodoxy to Qohelet’s radical voice.²⁶ Since Salyer takes a reader-response approach, he does not seek to resolve the ‘problems’ of the book, but rather considers their effect on the reader.

Sharing much in common with narrative approaches to Ecclesiastes, Bartholomew claims that Ecclesiastes is a performative rather than kerygmatic text.²⁷ Qohelet is on a search for truth, with his Israelite materialist heritage breaking through against his Greek autonomous thought. This allows for tensions within his own mind as well as turning points that contradict earlier thoughts.

²⁴ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 3–4.

²⁵ Christianson, *Time to Tell*, 119.

²⁶ Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 212–219.

²⁷ Craig G. Bartholomew, ‘The Theology of Ecclesiastes’, in *The Words of the Wise are Like Goads: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century*. eds. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III and Cristian G. Rata (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 367–386.

As a result of renewed interest in the reader, a number of recent studies have turned to consider the rhetoric of the book, normally with respect to the contemporary reader. Here Qohelet's contradictions are not seen as a problem to be resolved, but are intended to affect the reader in some way. Miller, for example, interprets the apparent disparity between Qohelet's sense of futility and the *carpe diem* passages as part of a rhetoric of destabilisation and re-stabilisation.²⁸

Similarly, Lee does not see the need for harmonisation because Qohelet recognises the tensions and contradictions in the world.²⁹ The book's rhetorical strategies exploit these contradictions: it leads the reader to a conclusion only to frustrate and dismantle it.³⁰ She also conceptually links the categories of fear of God and enjoyment,³¹ which historical-critical interpreters considered the clearest example of contradiction in the book.

The trend towards accepting contradiction as part of the book's design is most extreme in the case of Ingram, who embraces Ecclesiastes as ambiguous by design. His work finds ambiguity everywhere, but without much attempt to understand or explain it.³² Similarly, Crenshaw in his *Qoheleth: The Ironic Wink* accepts the ambiguity of the book as its key feature and remains uncommitted to an explanation:

Qoheleth's pedagogy is dialogic. He presented two sides of an issue, often leaving his own view lurking in the shadows. His reason may have been a rhetorical tease, or he may not have been able to make up his

²⁸ Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric*, 163–167. cf. Sneed, *Politics of Pessimism*, 170–174.

²⁹ Lee, *Vitality*, 8.

³⁰ Lee, *Vitality*, 26–29.

³¹ Lee, *Vitality*, 125.

³² Ingram, *Ambiguity*, 45–55.

mind. Time's passage may also have brought changes in the answers he gave to complex questions. Perhaps he even recognized the limitations of his own perspective and chose a rhetoric of erasure.³³

Even in the case of such literary reading that seek to read the text as it stands and are happy with tension and contradiction, there remains a tendency to consider the epilogue to be late and secondary.³⁴

4.3 Arguments for Accepting Ecclesiastes 1:1–12:14 as the Rhetorical Unit

In this section, we will consider the arguments for accepting Eccl 1:1–12:14 as the rhetorical unit. A unit requires 'unity', but this can be variously understood. There are evidently contradictions in the book of Ecclesiastes in addition to the change of speaker in the epilogue. Nevertheless, there is a case to be made for reading the whole, rather than divorcing its parts.

First, a preliminary argument for reading Eccl 1:1–12:14 in its entirety is that it *can* be read this way. The most obvious testimony to the possibility of reading Ecclesiastes as a unit is that many interpreters have already done so. Today, 1:2–12:8 is accepted as a unified whole by a majority of interpreters and a small number also consider the epilogue to be integral. Regardless of the history of composition, there is a text that exists and has been recognised by the canon, ancient readers, and many modern readers. For a purely literary reading, one needs little more justification than this.

Secondly, there are a number of formal indications that, at the very least, Eccl 1:2–12:8 has been deliberately prepared as a unit.

1. The opening (1:2) and closing (12:8) verses make clear statements that

³³ Crenshaw, *Ironic Wink*, 113.

³⁴ Crenshaw, *Ironic Wink*, 93–107.

what is contained within are: 1) the words of Qohelet, and; 2) a coherent work, which can be summarised by the theme **הבֹּל הַבָּלִים**.³⁵ Historical-critical interpreters give tacit acknowledgement to this unity by claiming it is the summary of a later editor.³⁶ The possibility of a summary suggests at least a measure of coherence. Even if Qohelet's words were composed from previously independent sayings, the book presents them as united by a common theme.

2. Moving inwards, 1:3–11 and 12:1–7 are both vivid poems, which illustrate the key theme with the physical world and old age, respectively. The balance this gives to the work is indicative of a design.³⁷
3. Throughout 1:12–11:10, Qohelet's discourse is punctuated by calls to enjoyment (2:24; 3:12–13, 22; 5:17–19[18–20]; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:9–10). The consistent exhortations that are given throughout Ecclesiastes give it coherence, but they also show a development of thought as they grow in intensity.³⁸
4. The book has a very distinctive style, which is maintained with consistency. First, the language of the book contains difficult vocabulary, grammar, and syntax.³⁹ This has been explained in various ways: a translation from an Aramaic original,⁴⁰ the influence of Phoenician,⁴¹ or very late biblical Hebrew with similarities to the

³⁵ Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 8; Lee, *Vitality*, 15–18.

³⁶ McNeile, *Ecclesiastes*, 21.

³⁷ Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 8; Lee, *Vitality*, 15–18.

³⁸ Whybray, 'Preacher of Joy', 87–98; Lee, *Vitality*, 32–82.

³⁹ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 11–15.

⁴⁰ Frank Zimmermann, 'The Aramaic Provenance of Qohelet', *JQR* 36.1 (1945): 17–45.

⁴¹ Mitchell Dahood, 'The Phoenician Background of Qoheleth', *Bib* 47.2 (1966): 264–282.

Mishnah.⁴² Second, Ecclesiastes has a narrow set of key words that it uses with great frequency and often in a unique way: לב, עת, הבל, ידע, חכם/חכמה עשה/מעשה, עמל, אמר, כסיל, מצא, ראה, היה, אלהים, טוב, אדם.⁴³ Third, the book is littered with repeated expressions: '(vanity and) a chase after wind', which appears eight times in 1:12–6:9; 'not find out'/'who can find out', which appears seven times in 6:10–8:17; and, 'do not know'/'no knowledge', which appears nine times in 9:1–11:6.⁴⁴ Once again, this demonstrates a thematic unity to Qohelet's words, even if a logical flow in his thought is not always evident.

5. Additionally, many interpreters have claimed identifiable subunits that focus on a given topic.⁴⁵ Beyond the grouping of similar themes, however, there is little agreement regarding the structure of the book.

There is no denying that Qohelet's thought often appears conflicted, but the above formal indications hold the book together in a way that forces the reader to grapple with its tensions.

Thirdly, in addition to the unity of Eccl 1:2–12:8, the voice of the epilogist appears integral to the present form of the book. Fox claims that the third person voice that introduces Qohelet's speech in 1:2; 7:27; and 12:8 is naturally heard as the same voice which speaks about Qohelet in the epilogue.⁴⁶ This

⁴² Whitley, *Kohleth*, 144–146.

⁴³ Antoon Schoors, 'Words Typical of Qohelet', in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*. ed. Antoon Schoors, BETL 136 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 17–39.

⁴⁴ Wright, 'Riddle of the Sphinx', 245–66.

⁴⁵ For example, Loader identifies the following pericopes: 3:1–4:16 on time; 5:10–6:9 on riches; 6:10–8:1 on human incompetence and wisdom; 8:10–9:10 on wisdom and retribution; 9:11–10:11 on wisdom; 10:12–20 on speech and silence. Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 8.

⁴⁶ Fox, 'Frame-Narrative', 84–85.

voice is unlikely to be that of a passive editor, since the mid-sentence insertion at 7:27 shows he is active at the level of composition.⁴⁷ Fox thus proposes that we read the book as narration:

That is to say, the epic situation of the third-person voice in the epilogue and elsewhere is that of a man who is looking back and telling his son the story of the ancient wise-man Qohelet, passing on to him the words he knew Qohelet to have said, appreciatively but cautiously evaluating his work in retrospect.⁴⁸

Fourthly, the entire text of Ecclesiastes is framed by a conventional title (1:1; cf. Prov 1:1) and emphatic closing formula (12:13a), before a final word (12:13b–14).⁴⁹ This presents the contents within as a unit and separates it from texts that may precede or follow it. Gerald H. Wilson claims that Eccl 12:9–14 was written in light of Prov 1–9 in order to bind these two works together and also claims that early canonical arrangement was consistently Proverbs–Ecclesiastes,⁵⁰ such that ‘each must be read in the larger context of the other and in light of the hermeneutical principle laid down in prologue and

⁴⁷ Fox, ‘Frame-Narrative’, 85–90.

⁴⁸ Fox, ‘Frame-Narrative’, 91.

⁴⁹ Seow follows Barton’s suggestion that the original ending of the book would have been v. 13a: סוף דבר הכל נשמע. In support, he notes the comparable terse colophons that often end Egyptian instructions and that there are no syntactical clues that vv. 13b–14 are linked. However, Hebrew texts have great variety in the way they end, and vv. 13b–14 can easily be understood as appositional to v. 13a. Seow himself concedes that vv. 13b–14 are ‘not contradictory’ to the rest of the book, but we may go even further and claim that they are characteristic of the paternal figure of Proverbs 1–9, who has already addressed ‘my son’ in v. 12. Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 199; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 394–395.

⁵⁰ Gerald H. Wilson, “‘The Words of the Wise’: The Intent and Significance of Qoheleth 12:9–14’, *JBL* 103.2 (1984): 175–192.

epilogue.⁵¹ While his work notes important intertextual connections between the books and has value for canonical interpretation, he appears to overstate the strength of the connection of Eccl 12:9–14 to Prov 1–9 and understates its connection to the rest of Ecclesiastes.⁵² The connection of the epilogue to the words of Qohelet is far stronger than its connections to any other texts, both thematically and lexically.

Fifthly, the epilogue bears striking linguistic similarity to the body of the book. This includes a large number of Qohelet's favourite or distinctive terms: יתֵר, אדם, האלהים, יגע, זָהָר, דָּבָר, חִפִּץ, מִצָּא, בָּקֶשׁ, הִרְבָּה, תִּקֵּן, דַּעַת, עוֹד, חֶכֶם, נִעְלָם, מַעֲשֵׂה. When one adds to this the more common vocabulary shared between these two portions of the book it yields a compelling statistic—the epilogue constitutes 1.9% of the text of Ecclesiastes but uses 29.5% of its vocabulary.⁵³ This commonality extends beyond individual words to identical expressions: דְּבָרֵי חֲכָמִים (12:11; cf. 9:17), אֵין קֵץ (12:12; cf. 4:8, 16), and כָּל־הָאָדָם (12:13; cf. 3:13; 5:18[19]; 7:2); and other expressions with strong similarities: אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים יֵרָא (12:13; cf. 3:14; 5:6[7]; 7:18; 8:12–13) and הָאֱלֹהִים יִבָּא בַּמִּשְׁפָּט (12:14; cf. 11:9).

As far as can be discerned from the small sample size, the epilogue also reflects the morphological and syntactical idiosyncrasies of Qohelet's language. This includes the use of שׁ (12:9),⁵⁴ nouns with adverbial function (יתֵר in 12:9, 12;

⁵¹ Wilson, 'Words of the Wise', 190.

⁵² See, for example, Gerald T. Sheppard, 'Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary', *CBQ* 39.2 (1977): 182–189.

⁵³ A. G. Shead, 'Ecclesiastes 12:9–14: Reading the Epilogue of Ecclesiastes as an Epilogue' (MTh diss., Australian College of Theology, 1995), 9; Andrew G. Shead, 'Reading Ecclesiastes 'Epilogically'', *TynBul* 48.1 (1997): 67–91.

⁵⁴ Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 138–144.

יִשָּׁר in 12:10),⁵⁵ the use of an infinitive absolute as a consecutive verb (12:10),⁵⁶ the orthographic interchange of ש and ס (מִשְׁמְרוֹת in 12:11),⁵⁷ a tendency to use nominal clauses negated with אֵין (12:11),⁵⁸ the placement of an object before the imperative (12:13),⁵⁹ and the erratic use of the definite article.⁶⁰

Noting *some* of the similar vocabulary, Gordis claims the epilogist was from the same period and environment as Qohelet.⁶¹ However, this hardly accounts for the extent of the similarities, unless the epilogist was also seeking to replicate Qohelet's diction. While it is impossible to prove common authorship based on similarity of language, the similarities commend it as a strong possibility. At the very least, it is clear that both parts of the book are intended to be read together.

Sixthly, the textual witnesses are in agreement in their presentation of Ecclesiastes, including the epilogue, and maintain the present order of the text. The Qumran texts are fragmentary, recording only 5:13–17[14–18]; 6:3–8; 6:12–7:6; 7:7–10, 19–20 (4QQoh^a); and 1:10–14 (4QQoh^b). However, each fragment agrees in order and content with the MT, with only minor orthographic variants. The complete textual witnesses that do exist give little indication that copyists struggled with the fundamental unity of text. The Hebrew text is well preserved and variants in the LXX and Vulgate reflect the

⁵⁵ Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 114–116.

⁵⁶ If one accepts the repointing of כְּתוֹב proposed by Schoors. Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 178–180.

⁵⁷ Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 19.

⁵⁸ Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 151.

⁵⁹ Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 159–160.

⁶⁰ It is lacking from the construct chain סוּף דְּבַר, and although present after the *nota accusativi* in 12:9, 13 it is absent in 12:14. Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 164–168.

⁶¹ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 339.

difficulty of the thought and language rather than the existence of any alternate recensions.⁶² Even if one accepts a theory of redaction, the textual witnesses would suggest that the final version was promoted so forcefully or received so unanimously that—unlike Jeremiah, Proverbs, and the Psalter—no other recensions of the text survived or influenced subsequent translations.

4.4 Summary and Conclusions

Historical-critical interpretations of Ecclesiastes claim that the final form of the text is the result of a long history of editing, which has eradicated the unity of the book. Though such interpretations of Ecclesiastes have become less radical over time, it is still largely accepted that the epilogue(s) is late and secondary. The movement in biblical studies towards literary criticism has resulted in more persistent attempts to deal with the text its final form, yet even these readings often consider the epilogist to be an outside intruder.

In this chapter we have argued for a rhetorical unit of Eccl 1:1–12:14, that is, the entire text including the epilogue. Despite the influence of historical criticism, Ecclesiastes has a long history of unified reading, showing that the book *can* be read this way. More significantly, the book itself has formal indications of unity: thematic summary statements, opening and closing poems, consistent exhortations, a distinctive and persistent style, and groupings of common topics. Furthermore, the third person voice of the epilogist is not easily excised, appearing at three critical junctures (1:2; 7:27; 12:8). The book as a whole, including the epilogue, is bounded by clear opening (1:1) and closing (12:13–14) statements, and Qohelet and the epilogist share common vocabulary and diction. Most problematic of all for theories of redaction, there is no external evidence or textual testimony for alternate

⁶² Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, WBC 23A (Dallas: Word, 1992), xxiv.

recensions of the text.

Any of the arguments presented above would be sufficient to *attempt* a unified reading, but their cumulative weight suggests that such a reading is to be favoured. Our expectation, according to the book's own self-presentation, is that Eccl 1:1–12:14 is a unity and that the epilogue cannot be excluded from its message.

Before we can study the authorial intent that determines the meaning of this text, we must identify the author himself, his audience, and the occasion of the address. Since we are studying these as features of the text, they are more precisely the *implied* author, *implied* audience, and *ostensible* occasion—a constellation of literary features we have termed 'discourse setting'.

CHAPTER 5

THE DISCOURSE SETTING OF ECCLESIASTES

So far in our rhetorical-critical reading of Ecclesiastes we have argued that the entire canonical text should be recognised as the rhetorical unit. In other words, Eccl 1:1–12:14 is the ‘whole’ that shapes the meaning of its ‘parts’. The next step is to establish the discourse setting of this rhetorical unit.

At the corresponding stage of Kennedy’s rhetorical criticism of the New Testament, he examines the rhetorical situation of the unit. This involves an assessment of the circumstances that prompted the author’s address of his audience. He considers this to be a rough equivalent of *Sitz im Leben*, although it usually involves a more specific description of the text’s historical setting.¹ Although this stage of interpretation may be fruitful for a text with a clear historical setting—for example, Paul’s epistle to Galatians—one encounters multiple obstacles when approaching the wisdom literature in the same way.

The social setting of wisdom literature and the circumstances of its composition are obscured due to its uncertain historical setting as well as its focus upon universal concerns of human existence.² These two factors mean that we cannot establish the rhetorical situation of Ecclesiastes à la Kennedy. Nevertheless, it remains possible to study the implied author and implied reader, and to investigate whether the text ostensibly addresses a particular

¹ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 33–34. Here Kennedy quotes Lloyd F. Bitzer, who explains the importance of considering a text’s complex of persons, events, objects, and relations: ‘a particular discourse comes into existence because of some specific condition or situation which invites utterance ... the situation controls the rhetorical response in the same sense that question controls the answer and the problem controls the solution.’ Lloyd F. Bitzer, ‘The Rhetorical Situation’, *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1.1 (1968), 4, 6.

² Zimmerli, ‘Structure’, 176–177.

problem. It is this intra-textual setting that we have previously defined as the discourse setting of a text.

In chapter 2 we examined the discourse setting of biblical wisdom literature, specifically that invoked by the book of Proverbs. We argued for a parental discourse setting on the basis of external and internal data. The external data, while unable to provide the circumstances of composition, points to a father instructing his son as the most probable social setting to be invoked by the author or editor of Proverbs. Though a school or royal setting has strong support among interpreters, its existence in Israel prior to Ben Sira relies upon questionable conjecture. The internal evidence, which is fundamental to a study of discourse setting, points in the same direction: the narratee(s) and narrator(s) of Proverbs, the locus of education, the content of instruction, and the pedagogical strategies and goals of the book all confirm a discourse setting of parental instruction.

The study of Ecclesiastes' discourse setting in the present chapter has a similar aim, but will proceed along different lines. We will not rehearse the possible historical antecedents for the discourse setting of the book; instead, we will mostly confine ourselves to a study of implied author, implied reader, and their (literary) world which has given rise to the discourse. A correct understanding of these features of the book is essential for a genre-appropriate reading.

5.1 The Implied Author and Implied Reader

Studies of the setting of Ecclesiastes fall into three different categories with regards to where they locate the authorial voice of the text: Qohelet, a textual construct inferred from both Qohelet and the epilogist, and the epilogist himself. Each of these candidates for the implied author also has a corresponding audience. We will summarise and evaluate each of these

positions, with a further study of the preferred option below.

5.1.1 *Qohelet and His Students*

For the vast majority of interpreters—mostly following a historical-critical method—Qohelet is the true ‘author’ of the book. A study of his words and the epilogist’s evaluation of him can be used to build a personality profile and to locate him and his audience in history.

Many modern interpreters who consider Qohelet to be the author of the book identify him as a teacher or sage in Jerusalem during the reign of the Ptolemies in the mid-to-late third century BC.³ While earlier commentators claimed that Qohelet’s teaching was influenced by Greek philosophy,⁴ these arguments have been largely discarded since it is difficult to defend anything more than a general semblance of Greek ideas, many of which also have antecedents in earlier ancient Near Eastern works.⁵ Instead, most recent proponents of a Hellenistic date argue the following:

³ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 2–3; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 50; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 8–12; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 63–67; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 4–6; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 19–22; Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, HThKAT (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2004), 101–103; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 2–9.

⁴ Siegfried, *Prediger*, 6–9; Harry Ranston, *Ecclesiastes and the Early Greek Wisdom Literature* (London: Epworth, 1925); R. Braun, *Kohelet und die frühhellenistische Popularphilosophie*, BZAW 130 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973); Whitley, *Koheleth*, 165–175. More recently, and to varying extents, see Dominic Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001); Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 6; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 54–59.

⁵ Longman, ‘Determining’, 89–102; Martin A. Shields, ‘Qohelet and Royal Autobiography’, in *The Words of the Wise are Like Goads: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century*. eds. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III and Cristian G. Rata (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 117–136. For further connections to ANE literature, see William H. U. Anderson, ‘Ecclesiastes in the Intertextual Matrix of Ancient Near Eastern Literature’, in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*. eds. Katharine J. Dell and Will Kynes, LHBOTS 587 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 157–175.

- 1) The language of the book appears to be late. The vocabulary contains two Persian loanwords (פרדס in 2:5; פתגם in 8:11), many Aramaisms, and its syntax has many similarities to Mishnaic Hebrew.
- 2) Qohelet's concerns reflect a time of economic development and prosperity (e.g. 2:18–23; 5:12–16[13–17]; 6:1–2), which can be explained by increased trade and the opportunities presented to the upper classes during this time.
- 3) The book gives no hint of the nationalism of the Maccabees and may also be known by Ben Sira, yielding a *terminus ante quem* of approximately 180 BC.

Even within a Hellenistic setting, Qohelet has been variously characterised. Gordis colourfully portrays Qohelet as a teacher in the hypothetical wisdom academy, who began his spiritual journey with a love of life, but was led on an unsatisfying search for wisdom by his Jewish concern for justice. He eventually returns to his love of life, although as an aged bachelor he is unable to enjoy it. This occasions his writing of the book, addressing young men and urging them to enjoy themselves while they still can.⁶

Another Ptolemaic reconstruction of Qohelet is provided by Norbert Lohfink. Qohelet is to be associated with the Jerusalem temple school, which existed in competition with the Greek elementary schools attended by the growing elite class. His teaching is one that seeks to profit from the Greek understanding of the world, deconstructing the earlier wisdom tradition of Israel, without giving up on its distinctive emphases. In this regard, Qohelet is to be thought of as a radical on the margins of the school system, who offered his teaching publicly

⁶ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 69–86.

(12:9) rather than in the schools.⁷ The two epilogues suggest that the work was later included in the temple library, although probably reserved for advanced students.⁸

According to Choon-Leong Seow, a strong case can be made for dating Ecclesiastes to the Persian era. He suggests that the unusual language of the book is colloquial rather than literary Hebrew.⁹ He also provides a detailed account of how the book reflects the economic times of this era, which saw the democratisation of wealth, minting of the Persian daric, the rise of rich proprietors, and increased economic opportunities and risks. One of the key terms (שִׁלְטָה) reflects the language of land ownership rights from this era.¹⁰ Seow does not see anything to suggest that Qohelet taught in the school—Eccl 12:9 says he taught הָעָם. He also disagrees that Qohelet himself belongs to the elite, and instead maintains that mention of slave ownership (7:21) reflects only his audience.¹¹

Despite having some doubts about the strength of Seow's linguistic arguments, Brown also accepts a Persian date.¹² Nevertheless, Seow's work has not succeeded in shifting the consensus, since many of his arguments also support a Hellenistic date.

Sneed has highlighted a number of methodological problems in historical

⁷ Lohfink, *Qobeleth*, 6–11.

⁸ Norbert Lohfink, 'Les épilogues du livre de Qohélet et les débuts du canon', in *Ouvrir les écritures: Mélanges offerts à Paul Beauchamp à l'occasion de ses soixante-dix ans*. eds. Pietro Bovati and Roland Meynet, LD 162 (Paris: Cerf, 1995), 76–96.

⁹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 20–21.

¹⁰ Seow, 'Linguistic Evidence', 643–666; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 21–36.

¹¹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 37.

¹² William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, Int (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2000), 7–10.

approaches to dating Ecclesiastes.¹³ Most damaging of all is the assumption that everything written reflects something of the author and his society:

to assume that [Ecclesiastes] literally depicts the social/historical circumstances of its time, that these circumstances conveniently connect with what little is known of the Ptolemaic period, and that it ultimately owes its origin to these very circumstances is ludicrous! ... Perhaps the creativity and literary skill of the author have been vastly underestimated.¹⁴

Similarly, Longman questions the assumption that literature reflects the historical era of its composition. Job, for example, appears to have a patriarchal setting but was written many centuries later. He claims that everything in Ecclesiastes sits comfortably in the Solomonic era, to which the author appears to be alluding.¹⁵

The linguistic arguments for a Hellenistic or even Persian date also have their detractors. Fredericks points to the widespread use of Aramaic well before the fourth century BC, and shows that many of the linguistic peculiarities of the book can be found in earlier biblical Hebrew.¹⁶ He also contends that a pre-exilic date would better explain the courtly interest of the book, which would have little relevance for post-exilic Jews, even during the Ptolemaic or Seleucid

¹³ Mark R. Sneed, 'The Social Location of the Book of Qoheleth', *HS* 39 (1998): 41–51.

¹⁴ Sneed, 'Social Location', 50–51. Despite this impassioned criticism of identifying socio-historical location of Qohelet, Sneed still concludes that Qohelet was an upper class intellectual of the Ptolemaic period. He also draws far more specific conclusions about Qohelet's social location in his later work. See Sneed, "'Vulgar" Critics', 1–11; Sneed, *Politics of Pessimism*, 125–154.

¹⁵ Longman, 'Determining', 96–99.

¹⁶ Daniel C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language: Re-evaluating Its Nature and Date*, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies* 3 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1988).

kingdoms.¹⁷

Frederick's work has been criticised for failing to acknowledge the cumulative weight of the evidence.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it has cast doubt upon the strength of the linguistic arguments,¹⁹ and has permitted a minority of commentators to maintain the traditional belief in Solomonic authorship.²⁰

The vast majority of scholars—even those of the historical-critical variety—have no hesitation in identifying the Solomonic portrayal of Qohelet as fictional. Typically, it is claimed that Qohelet speaks as a king in 1:12–2:26, and thereafter the fiction is dropped. After this point there are no other references to his kingship, and neither does the epilogist consider Qohelet to be anything more than a wise man (12:9).

The signals of Solomonic fiction are well recognised. Qohelet's boasts are historically implausible and undermined by his own teaching. His great claims to wisdom (1:16), works (2:4–6), and possessions (2:7–8) in excess of his predecessors could only be true of Solomon.²¹ Yet, as Longman notes, there is much in the text that sits uncomfortably with Solomonic authorship:

1. 'I was king' (הייתי מלך; 1:12) most naturally reads as a retrospective statement, even though we know of no time that Solomon was not

¹⁷ Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', 32–34. See also William H. U. Anderson, 'The Problematics of the Sitz im Leben of Qoheleth', *OTE* 12.2 (1999): 233–248.

¹⁸ Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 14–15, 221–23. cf. Longman, 'Determining', 93–96.

¹⁹ Longman, for example, questions the accuracy of linguistic dating in Longman, 'Determining', 93–99.

²⁰ Garrett, *Proverbs*, 258–265; James Bollhagen, *Ecclesiastes*, ConcC (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 2011), 6–13.

²¹ Weeks challenges this interpretation, instead suggesting that Qohelet sounds more like a businessman than a king. Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 26–28.

king.²²

2. 'All who were over Jerusalem before me' (1:16) sounds odd from the second Israelite king in Jerusalem.
3. After chapter 3 there is no further reference to Qohelet's kingship; rather, his teachings speak about such authority from a distance and are often critical of it (4:1–3; 5:7–8[8–9]; 10:20).²³

The inconsistency of viewing Qohelet's Solomonic persona as fictional, but otherwise assuming him to be a historical figure seems to be lost on most interpreters. Indeed, there are a number of other signals of fiction throughout Qohelet's discourse that suggest we ought to view him as a fictional character in his entirety, and not to be equated with the implied author.

First, the otherwise unknown designation קהלת itself is a clue to the fictionalised nature of the protagonist.²⁴ In most cases it does not have the article and is thus used as a proper name, not a title.²⁵ The exceptions in 7:27 and 12:8 (הקהלת) are possibly scribal glosses that reflect a later association of Qohelet with Solomon,²⁶ or else serve a rhetorical function (at least in the case of 7:27).²⁷ We know of no other figure by this name and especially no (Davidic)

²² It should be admitted that this is not the only possible translation. Weeks says that it may be part of an introduction and translated ingressively, 'when I became king, I set my heart...' Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 22–23; Stuart Weeks, 'Solomon and Qoheleth', in *Issues in the Megilloth: The Shape of Contemporary Scholarship*. ed. Brad Embry (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2016), 80–95.

²³ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 5–7. See also Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 188–193.

²⁴ Rüdiger Lux, "Ich, Kohelet, bin König.": Die Fiktion als Schlüssel zur Wirklichkeit in Kohelet 1,12–2,26', *EvT* 50.4 (1990), 336–337.

²⁵ Joüon §137b.

²⁶ Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 33.

²⁷ See p. 253 below.

king by this name (1:1, 12). Even as a title, there is no known role of **הַקְהֵלֵת**.²⁸ While there is the possibility of an allusion to Solomon's convening (**קָהַל**) of the leaders of Israel at the dedication of the temple (1 Kgs 8:1, 22),²⁹ it is rarely observed that this function was not unique to Solomon but is also applied to other kings and leaders of Israel (e.g. Exod 35:1; Num 16:19; Deut 4:10; 31:28; 1 Kgs 12:21; 1 Chr 13:5; 15:3). The name Qohelet is thus more of a tease than a pseudonym.

Secondly, Qohelet's discourse has a number of exaggerated features that are best described as 'caricature'. Qohelet's excessive first person speech has been particularly noted by Salyer. He considers it a risky rhetorical device, which results in a mixed response from the reader.³⁰ Qohelet uses 81 first person verbs, often emphasised with the addition of a superfluous independent personal pronoun (twenty-nine times). Suffixed pronouns appear on nouns and prepositions a total of fifty times. The extent to which Qohelet speaks about himself, for himself, and to himself raises the question of whether a historical figure would plausibly speak this way. The idiosyncratic and exaggerated style of Qohelet's discourse, however, can be easily understood as part of the portrayal of a fictional character.

Similar to his first person speech, Qohelet's discourse is also strongly marked by the repetition of key phrases, which encapsulate his approach to wisdom and his experience of the world. From the very outset (1:3), Qohelet specifies

²⁸ Moreover, Weeks notes that the feminine ending is more problematic than often claimed. There is no established phenomenon of using the feminine form as titles. **הַסְפֵּרָה** and **פְּכֵרֶת** (Ezra 2:55–57; Neh 7:57–59) are probably just family names; although derived from titles, this may have occurred long ago. Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 181–183.

²⁹ Note also the discrepancy between the *hiphil* use of **קָהַל** in the action of Solomon, and the *qal* form of the 'title' **הַקְהֵלֵת**. Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 181, n. 5.

³⁰ Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 167–196.

that his search for gain (יתרון) is conducted under the sun (תחת השמש). He continues to use this term, or the synonymous תחת השמים to specify the realm of his observations and of human endeavour. Though unknown elsewhere in the Old Testament, Qohelet uses these terms a total of thirty-one times. Again this would be a peculiar degree of repetition for a historical figure, although understandable as the words of a character who is intended to embody a particular view.

We ought to consider Qohelet's well known use of the term הבל in a similar light.³¹ Again, there is excessive repetition in his discourse as הבל appears thirty times, mainly as Qohelet's evaluation of his experiences and observations. Additionally, the narrator uses the term another eight times in summary of Qohelet's teaching (1:2; 12:8). Alongside these evaluations, Qohelet also use the expression רעות רוח (1:14, 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9) or רעיון רוח (1:17; 4:16), which are similar metaphorical evaluations of Qohelet's own experiences or observations of the world. Once again, this level of repetition points towards a character who is acting as the embodiment of a particular worldview.

This brief survey of authors who maintain Qohelet as the author of the book of Ecclesiastes has revealed a number of difficulties. The identity of Qohelet is obscured by uncertainty surrounding his historical and social location. Those who identify him as the author of the book often give him a detailed characterisation that relies far more upon speculation than it does upon the text. Despite acknowledging the Solomonic features of Qohelet's persona as fictional, this view fails to similarly admit the signals of fiction throughout his discourse: his name, exaggerated personal style, idiosyncratic diction, and the repetition of expressions ad nauseam. A genre-appropriate method of reading

³¹ For the meaning of הבל, see the excursus on pp. 165–170.

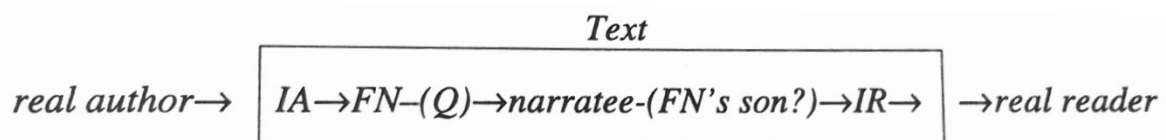
must, therefore, recognise Qohelet as a fictional character.

5.1.2 *The Author of Both Qohelet and the Epilogist*

In modern literary theory, the concept of authorship has become more complicated. Most significantly, the connection between author and text has been distanced and even severed entirely. We can speak only of the implied author, who is an interpretive construct evoked by the text. And unlike the above historical-critical methods, there can be no assumption that this impression of authorship projected by a text is tied to the historical event of composition.

One of the earliest literary readings of Ecclesiastes was proposed by Fox.³² He recognised the essential unity of the book and articulated that the relationship between the two voices ‘is that of a man who is looking back and telling his son the story of the ancient wise-man Qohelet, passing on to him the words he knew Qohelet to have said, appreciatively but cautiously evaluating his work in retrospect.’³³ The epilogist, however, is not the implied author but a literary creation in addition to Qohelet.³⁴

More recently, Christianson has argued that Qohelet and his quest for knowledge commends the book for a narrative reading. As part of this reading he studies the implied author and audience, as well as the two layers of narration that comprise the text:³⁵



³² Fox, 'Frame-Narrative', 83–106.

³³ Fox, 'Frame-Narrative', 91.

³⁴ Fox, 'Frame-Narrative', 104–105.

³⁵ Christianson, *Time to Tell*, 59.

For Christianson, the inner frame of Qohelet and his narratee dominates the outer frame of the epilogist and his son. The role of the outer frame is to grant validation to the story by putting the story into the words of a reliable figure. The frame narrator is presented as a reluctant scribe who is uncomfortable with the teaching of Qohelet.³⁶ This tension—created by the implied author’s use of two narrators—leaves room for readers to make up their own mind on Qohelet’s story.³⁷

In addition to the two narrators, the text also contains two corresponding narratees. The epilogist’s narratee is his son. Qohelet’s narratee is unnamed but can be reconstructed from Qohelet’s topics of instruction: he is a worshipper at synagogue (4:17–5:6[5:1–7]), a young man (11:9), possibly a court sage (8:2–5; 10:4, 20), and an inquisitive person (7:16; 11:5). He may have a wife (or woman) (9:9) and servants (7:21). The lack of precise identification of this narratee means that there is a merging with the implied reader, who is able to take his place.³⁸

It is also worth noting Salyer’s reader-response approach to Ecclesiastes. He is slightly more conservative than Christianson in his assessment of the narrative shape of Ecclesiastes, calling it ‘an argumentative text which utilizes narrative

³⁶ Christianson, *Time to Tell*, 119.

³⁷ Christianson, *Time to Tell*, 56–60. Christianson’s work is closely followed by von Ehrenkrook, who also speaks of both Qohelet and the epilogist as textual voices created by the author. The implied author’s voice emerges through their juxtaposition, which the reader is forced to consider. J. Q. von Ehrenkrook, ‘Contextualizing Wisdom: A Socio-Rhetorical Analysis of Ecclesiastes’ (Master of Theology diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2002), 58–59.

³⁸ Christianson, *Time to Tell*, 245.

features'.³⁹ Similar to the literary readings described so far, Salyer understands both Qohelet and the epilogist as masks employed by the implied author. The epilogist's contribution softens Qohelet's message and 'guides the reader's response by lending the credentials of orthodoxy and normalcy to this radical voice from the depths of scepticism'.⁴⁰ Salyer's work contains some equivocation on the location of the implied author, identifying him in the third person intrusion of 7:27 and also entertaining the possibility that the epilogist is indeed the implied author. This is seen in his final summary of the 'characters' of the text:

All the major characters one would expect in a fictionalized wisdom debate are here: the old professor (Qoheleth), the middle-aged colleague (the implied author/Epilogist), the debutante student (the narratee), and the third-party colleague or friend who listens in on this debate (the implied reader).⁴¹

From recognising the two voices in the text, literary readings have moved towards identifying multiple personas in a way that approaches the complexity of earlier theories of redaction. The result of the above literary readings is not only that the historical author is rendered inaccessible, but that even the implied author is so abstracted that the reader cannot perceive him without going cross-eyed: 'if one gazes long enough, what emerges is the rhetorical face of the narrator and also the implied author who created this persona'.⁴²

It is, of course, impossible to positively disprove that the implied author is hiding behind two different masks, obscuring himself almost completely from

³⁹ Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 85.

⁴⁰ Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 215–219.

⁴¹ Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 378.

⁴² Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 165.

view. Yet such complex explanations of the text are undermined if a more straightforward solution can be found that can also adequately explain the data.

Another weakness of this view is that it hands the reader the freedom to decide the meaning of the text, which is not fully present in either Qohelet's teaching or the epilogist's remarks but somehow transcends them both. In Salyer's explicitly reader-response approach, the blanks and gaps in the text are an inducement to create meaning.⁴³ While ambiguity is almost certainly a feature of the *Ecclesiastes*, it is premature to conclude a text's meaning is indeterminate when coherent readings are possible.

5.1.3 *The Epilogist and His 'Son'*

In addition to the above two categories there is a mediating position that recognises the sophisticated literary nature of the text, without maintaining that the authorial voice—and ultimately, meaning—is inaccessible. This is, arguably, the most straightforward and coherent reading.

For Longman, the epilogist is not only the implied author, but he alone provides the normative theological contribution of the book. Qohelet is a character recounted by the epilogist, to be a foil that the latter uses to warn his son of the dangers of speculative wisdom. Positively, the epilogist's message is one that points to the conventional wisdom of Proverbs, as well as the Law and Prophets.⁴⁴

Shields is in general agreement with Longman: 'The epilogist is—in a literary sense—the implied author of the entire book, and this invests the words of the epilogue with particular significance in shaping meaning for the book as a

⁴³ Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 90–108.

⁴⁴ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 38.

whole.’⁴⁵ Shields draws an equally sharp distinction between the words of Qohelet, which undermine the wisdom enterprise, and the epilogist, who ‘leaked’ them. However, Shields describes the discourse setting rather differently: the epilogist is a sage or insider from the wisdom movement, dissuading prospective students and pointing them to orthodox wisdom.⁴⁶

A different understanding is presented by Bartholomew, who contends that Qohelet and the epilogist essentially affirm the same message. Qohelet’s words are to be understood as a search for truth by one caught in a tension between Greek autonomous epistemology and Israelite materialist convictions. Ultimately, Qohelet’s teaching deconstructs itself and arrives at ‘remember your creator’ (12:1).⁴⁷ For Bartholomew, the epilogist is the implied author, who ensures a fool-proof reading of the book.⁴⁸

In a series of articles, Jean-Jacques Lavoie contends that the epilogist is the implied author, who uses the fictional character of Qohelet to give voice to his own courageous and subversive teaching.⁴⁹ In the epilogue, the implied author praises the truth of Qohelet’s teaching (vv. 9–10) and ironically warns the son not to pursue the same study as Qohelet (vv. 12–14). Thus his message, like that of Qohelet, promotes a path of moderation.

Even if there is no clear consensus on the epilogist’s view of Qohelet—whether

⁴⁵ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 49.

⁴⁶ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 6.

⁴⁷ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory*, AnBib 139 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1998), 255–257.

⁴⁸ Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 245.

⁴⁹ Jean-Jacques Lavoie, ‘Un éloge à Qohélet (Étude de Qo 12,9–10)’, *LTP* 50.1 (1994): 145–170; Jean-Jacques Lavoie, ‘Ambiguïtés et ironie en Qohélet 12,11’, *Theoforum* 38.2 (2007): 131–151; Jean-Jacques Lavoie, ‘Qohélet 12,12 ou l’autocritique ironique’, *LTP* 66.2 (2010): 387–405.

it is positive, negative, or mixed, there are good reasons to accept the common thread that the epilogist is the implied author.

The clearest indication of the implied author of the book comes from the third person voice, which intrudes at key locations (1:2; 7:27; 12:8). From the very beginning, a marker of direct discourse (אמר קהלת) alerts the reader that Qohelet's words are a quotation. The near verbatim repetition of 1:2 in 12:8 presents these verses as a thematic summary of the teaching contained within. The gratuitous appearance of this narratorial voice at 7:27 emphasises further still that Qohelet is being narrated rather than narrating.⁵⁰

It is natural to recognise this voice as one and the same with the epilogist, who also speaks about Qohelet in the third person.⁵¹ If this is indeed the case, then this same narratorial voice not only introduces, carries, and concludes Qohelet's discourse, but also has the 'final word' on its interpretation.

These arguments lend their support to literary readings that view the epilogist as the narrator of Qohelet rather than the writer of a later addendum. Such readings, however, mostly distinguish between the narrator and the implied author. They follow Wayne C. Booth, the originator of the term 'implied author', who maintains it consists of the 'intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole'.⁵² A dogmatic application of Booth's literary theory thus demands the implied author to be found lurking behind both Qohelet and the epilogist. Yet modern literary theory cannot be applied blindly to ancient biblical literature. In the case of Ecclesiastes, such a reading would disregard the clear construction of the text, which grants the epilogist the presentative

⁵⁰ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 7.

⁵¹ Fox, 'Frame-Narrative', 84–85.

⁵² Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 74–75.

control of Qohelet through direct discourse markers as well as his final evaluation. It is these features of the text that imply that the epilogist is the author of Qohelet—in this sense, he and no-one else can be considered the implied author.

The view that the epilogist is the implied author, in addition to being Qohelet's narrator, also coheres with a biblical norm. As Meir Sternberg notes, biblical narrative utilises an omniscient historian as its narrator, which cannot be distinguished from the implied author, in order to present an authoritative interpretation of history.⁵³ Though wisdom literature operates somewhat differently, its parental voice seems to play an equivalent role as reliable guide rather than one voice out of many.

5.2 The Characterisation of the Epilogist and His 'Son'

In light of the conclusion that the epilogist is the implied author of the work, we must now attend to his characterisation and that of his audience, and note anything else that relates to their setting.

A common claim of interpreters is that the epilogist and his audience belong to the scribal school.⁵⁴ In particular, we find specific references to Qohelet's teaching and scholarly activities (12:9) and a general reference to excessive reflection and literary production (12:12). While it may be a reasonable assumption that the implied author and implied reader belong to the same social setting, it is far less certain that the implied reader would belong to the same social setting as a character within the text. It is commonly observed that

⁵³ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 74–75, 81.

⁵⁴ Oswald Loretz, *Qohelet und der alte Orient* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), 140; Lauha, *Kohelet*, 220; Lohfink, 'Les épilogues', 76–96.

Qohelet's royal persona is a literary device used to give his findings more authority; the same may be true of his scribal endeavours. In chapter 6, we will argue that the portrayal of these scribal endeavours serves to emphasise the excessive labour he expended in his search for the secret to earthly fulfilment, rather than to address particular issues in the scribal world.

Gordis takes a different approach to the characterisation of the audience, focusing on the topics of Qohelet's address rather than his role. He notes that much of Qohelet's discourse is applied to an upper class young man as he expects his audience has the means to enjoy good food and wine (9:7) and have servants (7:21).⁵⁵ Once again, the same criticism applies to Gordis' view—as he is a character, Qohelet's relationship to the audience of Ecclesiastes may not be straightforward.

The most revealing detail about the implied author and audience is the address בְּנִי (12:12). This is frequently taken as another indication that a wisdom teacher is addressing his student in the school.⁵⁶ However, as we have argued in chapter 2, the use of this address in the book of Proverbs invokes a discourse setting of parental instruction. Further examination is needed to discern if there is sufficient connection between these two texts to justify the application of our findings to Ecclesiastes.

Excursus: Proverbs 1–9 and the Epilogue of Ecclesiastes

The relationship of Proverbs—particularly chapters 1–9—to the epilogue of Ecclesiastes has been variously understood. Gerald T.

⁵⁵ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 69–86.

⁵⁶ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 221–222; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 173; Norbert Lohfink, 'Zu einigen Satzeröffnungen im Epilog des Koheletbuches', in *"Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit...": Studien zur israelitischen Weisheit; Diethelm Michel zum 65. Geburtstag.* eds. Anja A. Diesel et al., BZAW 241 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), 133–134; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 550.

Sheppard identifies subtle differences in emphasis and language: in Proverbs יְהוָה is always the object of יִרָא and the *nomen regens* of יִרְתָּ, while the epilogist follows Qohelet in using אֱלֹהִים. Furthermore, Proverbs consistently parallels fear of Yahweh with turning from evil (Prov 3:7; cf. 14:2; 24:21; 28:14) rather than obedience to commandments. When commandments are mentioned in Proverbs they are usually the father's (Prov 2:1; 3:1; 4:4; 6:20, 23; 7:1, 2).⁵⁷ Sheppard argues that linguistically the epilogue is much closer to words of Qohelet, and ideologically it reflects Sirach's correlation of the Mosaic law and wisdom (e.g. Sir 1:26–30; 2:15; 15:1; 19:20)⁵⁸ The epilogue thus reflects an abstraction of the teaching of Qohelet and places it within a 'canon conscious' definition of wisdom that postdates both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.⁵⁹

A closer inspection reveals that Sheppard over-interprets the stylistic differences between Prov 1–9 and Eccl 12:9–14 by mispresenting the theological framework of Proverbs. Wilson points to wide ranging examples of Deuteronomic thought and terminology in Proverbs 1–9:

1. Obedience to commandments is the basis of life (Prov 3:1–2; 4:4; 6:23; 7:1–2; cf. Deut 6:1–2; 4:1, 40; 5:28–29; 8:1–2).
2. Commandments are to be bound to the body (Prov 6:20–23; 7:1–3; cf. Deut 6:6–9).
3. God's discipline is that of a father (Prov 3:11–13; cf. Deut 8:5–

⁵⁷ Sheppard, 'Epilogue', 184–185. Note, however, that in Prov 10:8; 13:13; 19:16 the issuer of the commandments is not specified.

⁵⁸ Sheppard, 'Epilogue', 187. Frydrych claims this is a movement away from empirical knowledge towards revelation, which is antithetical to the epistemology of both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Tomáš Frydrych, *Living under the Sun: Examination of Proverbs and Qoheleth*, VTSup 90 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 82, 125, 206.

⁵⁹ Cf. Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979).

- 6).
4. Life is dominated by a tension between the ways that lead to life and death (Prov 3:33–35; 4:10–19; 8:32–36; cf. Deut 11:26–28; 30:15–18).
5. Righteousness is the means to possess the land (Prov 2:20–22; cf. Deut 5:32–33).
6. Wisdom is the consequence of divine revelation (Prov 1:7; 2:1–8; 3:5–7; 9:10; cf. Deut 4:6).⁶⁰

Two conclusions can be drawn from these observations. First, Deuteronomic thought and terminology characterise the wisdom of Proverbs 1–9. Secondly and subsequently, the exhortation in Eccl 12:13 to fear God and keep *his* commandments, which can also be characterised as Deuteronomic,⁶¹ is at home within such a framework.

While it has even been suggested that the epilogue of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs 1–9 have the same editor,⁶² this is not necessary to maintain that an equivalent discourse setting is being invoked nor is it possible to prove. A different author invoking the same setting would best explain both the similarity in thought and key terminology, while accounting for the stylistic differences (e.g. preference for **האֱלֹהִים**) that reflect Qohelet.

From the above excursus, it is clear that the similarities between Proverbs and the epilogue of Ecclesiastes go beyond the common use of **בְּנִי**, as both texts also speak with a similar didactic intent: wisdom grounded in Deuteronomic

⁶⁰ Wilson, 'Words of the Wise', 183–189.

⁶¹ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 118–119.

⁶² Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good?: A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, ITC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 3–4.

faith. The findings of chapter 2, namely that בְּנִי is indicative of parental discourse rather than that of a court or scribal school, are therefore applicable to a study of the discourse setting of Ecclesiastes. We can thus describe this discourse setting as that of a father instructing his son.

Further confirmation of this basic characterisation emerges when we compare the relationships that the epilogist and Qohelet have with their respective audiences. Qohelet's autobiographical search for wisdom is highly introspective,⁶³ which is illustrated by the sheer volume of first person verb forms and pronouns. Maurice Gilbert suggests that he is more interested in himself than educating disciples.⁶⁴ He does not directly address anyone until 4:17[5:1], where he begins to use second person masculine singular imperatives, volitive *yiqtol*s, and second person pronouns. His *carpe diem* passages, which are generally agreed to be the core of his 'advice', are explicitly directed to his audience only in their final two iterations (9:7–10; 11:9–10).⁶⁵

Qohelet's only vocative address of his audience is in Eccl 11:9, calling him בְּחֹרֶר—a term for a young man, often used to describe someone eligible to serve in the military.⁶⁶ In context, Qohelet is clearly speaking to someone who is still young enough to enjoy life's pleasures and is of marriageable age (cf. 9:9). His term of address is manifestly impersonal—he uses neither name nor relation to call his audience to attention, but merely a descriptor of his station

⁶³ Harold Fisch, 'Qohelet: A Hebrew Ironist', in *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation*. ed. Harold Fisch (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 158; Christianson, *Time to Tell*, 33–42; Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 194–196.

⁶⁴ Maurice Gilbert, *L'antique sagesse d'Israël: Études sur Proverbes, Job, Qohélet et leurs prolongements*, EBib 68 (Pendé, France: Gabalda, 2015), 50.

⁶⁵ Whybray, 'Preacher of Joy', 87–88.

⁶⁶ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 349.

in life: 'young man'. By contrast, the epilogist uses the familial language of 'son' and further heightens the intimacy of this address with the first person pronominal suffix 'my'.⁶⁷ Despite Qohelet's preference for first person speech, he reserves it for his thoughts and endeavours rather than his audience.

Unlike the introspection of Qohelet, the words of the epilogist are clearly for the benefit of his son. He does not speak about himself, but provides his son with an evaluation of the teaching of Qohelet (12:9–11). He gives his own further instructions in clear and direct imperatives (12:12–14), which recalls the form of instruction in Prov 1–9.⁶⁸

Apart from the familial relationship between the father and his son, there is little that can be known about their setting. There are no clues of their time or place, and the circumstances surrounding the father's instruction of his son can only be inferred. Arguably, the father's direction to his son in Eccl 12:13 does not require any specific exigence, as it falls within the general duty placed upon parents in Deut 6:4–7.⁶⁹ This command, however, comes immediately after a warning (Eccl 12:12), which implies a general situation of covenant faith being imperilled.

It appears, therefore, that this discourse setting is a type-situation, that gives it broad applicability to the instruction of Israel's young and aspirational. Similarly, the father's ultimate goal for his son is applicable to all people (כל-הָאָדָם).

⁶⁷ Cf. Lady Wisdom who addresses the receptive audience of Proverbs as 'sons' (8:32) without a pronominal suffix.

⁶⁸ In Proverbs 1–9, the address בְּנִי is used to introduce an imperative in 1:8; 4:10; 5:1; 6:3, 20; 7:1; (cf. 23:19, 26; 24:13, 21; 27:11) and volitive *yiqtol*s in 1:15; 3:1, 11.

⁶⁹ For the relationship between Deut 6:4–7 and parental instruction of the wisdom literature, see Wilson, 'Words of the Wise', 186.

An assumption of our rhetorical method is that an author's address is comprehensible and relevant to his audience. The exhortation to covenant obedience—particularly in such abbreviated terms—suggests that the son is no stranger to the covenant faith of Israel. As one of the latest books of the Hebrew canon, it is to be expected that this reader is already familiar with Israel's law and wisdom traditions.

5.3 Summary and Conclusions

The goal of this chapter has been to establish the discourse setting of Ecclesiastes, namely by identifying and characterising the implied author, implied audience, and the ostensible occasion of their discourse.

Despite the popularity of recognising Qohelet as the implied author, this view fails because it misses the clues in the text that present him as a character. Although the fictional nature of Qohelet's Solomonic attributes are widely recognised, interpreters of this approach naively assume that all other features of Qohelet's persona are factual.

A number of literary readings that recognise Qohelet as a character within the text also claim the same of the epilogist. However, unlike Qohelet, there is nothing in the text that presents the epilogist as a character or keeps him at a distance from audience in the same way. Much like the omniscient narrator of biblical narrative, the epilogist is the one who presents Qohelet, gives his own evaluation and has the final word. There is no other author implied by the text or accessible to the reader.

The epilogist addresses his son and admonishes him in a way that is strongly reminiscent of Prov 1–9 and contrastive to Qohelet's distance to his own audience. This leads us to conclude that, based upon the findings of chapter 2, that Ecclesiastes also invokes a discourse of parental instruction. This discourse

setting is a likely type-situation, chosen due its broad applicability. A general exigence of the risk of lapsing in covenantal obedience is suggested by the father's commands, and so it is apparent that the son is familiar with the covenant faith of Israel and its texts.

Among those who recognise the epilogist as the implied author, there is little agreement over where he stands in relation to Qohelet and how he uses him to instruct his son. After a brief excursus, the examination of the epilogue in the next chapter will explore this relationship and account for the father's 'use' of Qohelet and his teaching. It will also bring us as close as possible to 'authorial intent', which is determinative for the theological contribution of the book.

EXCURSUS

THE MEANING OF הַבֵּל IN ECCLESIASTES

In the previous chapter we highlighted Qohelet's use הַבֵּל, which is a term that warrants a study in itself. Although the arguments for each proposed translation of הַבֵּל are well rehearsed, its meaning bears so much weight upon the interpretation of the book that we must defend the translations used throughout this thesis. To this end we will consider the semantic range of the word, the objects or situations that Qohelet describes as הַבֵּל, and the co-ordinate expressions he employs.

The traditional translation of 'vanity' or its modern variants, 'futility' or 'worthlessness', are supported by Crenshaw and Sneed.¹ Longman prefers 'meaninglessness' because in modern speech 'vanity' refers to self-pride.² However, 'meaningless' is also open to misunderstanding, as something of a spiritual evaluation; it is thus rejected by Sneed for implying a *contemptus mundi* interpretation of Qohelet's teaching.³

A second category of translation focuses upon the short-lived nature of Qohelet's worldly endeavours: 'transience', 'fleetingness', and 'ephemerality'. While it is common for interpreters to identify some of Qohelet's uses of הַבֵּל to describe transience, only a few interpreters claim this is the dominant meaning.⁴

¹ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 57–59; Sneed, *Politics of Pessimism*, 155–164. cf. Klaus Seybold, 'הַבֵּל', *TDOT* 3:313–20.

² Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 61.

³ Sneed, *Politics of Pessimism*, 157–164.

⁴ Daniel C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life*, The Biblical Seminar (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 11–32; Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', 46–54. Similarly, Meek consider הַבֵּל to be an allusion to Abel, whose existence was all too brief. Russell L.

A third proposed translation is ‘enigma’ or ‘mystery’. While Ogden and Lee understand this in the more positive sense of human awe at the unknown,⁵ Bartholomew maintains that הַבֵּל expresses the confusion that arises from Qohelet’s reliance upon Greek epistemology.⁶

Fox claims that ‘enigma’ and ‘mystery’ do not go far enough in capturing Qohelet’s frustration and instead proposes ‘senselessness’ or ‘absurdity’, which express his dismay at the incongruence between expectations and reality.⁷ As Fox explains: ‘Qohelet is not bowing his head in pious humility before life’s mysteries or modestly confessing an inability to unravel puzzles too great for him. He has discovered that some things are inequitable and senseless.’⁸ While Fox’s thesis has been accepted by a number of interpreters,⁹ it has also been criticised for imposing modern existentialist philosophy upon an ancient text where no such concerns are present.¹⁰

Meek, ‘The Meaning of הַבֵּל in Qohelet: An Intertextual Suggestion’, in *The Words of the Wise are Like Goats: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century*. eds. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III and Cristian G. Rata (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 241–256.

⁵ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 17–22; Graham S. Ogden, ‘“Vanity” It Certainly is Not’, *BT* 38.3 (1987): 301–307; Lee, *Vitality*, 30–31. Seow, although retaining the traditional translation ‘vanity’, understands it to mean ‘unpredictable, arbitrary, incomprehensible’ in a somewhat negative sense. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 101–102.

⁶ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 58.

⁷ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 27–31.

⁸ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 35.

⁹ Christianson, *Time to Tell*, 86; Antoon Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth. Part II Vocabulary*, OLA 143 (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 19–29; Shields, *End of Wisdom*.

¹⁰ ‘The reality is that the modern notion of the absurd, as best expressed by Camus, is possible only in the disenchantment of the world brought on by the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution. Only with the dissolution of the premodern religious and ethical moorings does humanity become exposed to the truly absurd character of the world.’ Mark R. Sneed, ‘הַבֵּל

The literal denotation of **הבל** is ‘gas’ or ‘vapour’, which can be seen in Isa 57:13; Ps 62:10[9] and the translation of **הבל** as *ἀτμός* or *ἀτμός* by Aquila, Theodotion, Symmachus.¹¹ The vast majority of uses of **הבל** in the Old Testament are metaphorical, which exploit the way that vapour dissipates quickly (transience), or is without solid form (ineffective, insubstantial, nothingness, futility).¹² Fox categorises the translation of **הבל** outside of Ecclesiastes as ‘transient’ or ‘ephemeral’ (Job 7:16; Ps 39:6[5], 12[11]; Prov 21:6; Ps 144:4), ‘vanity’ or ‘worthlessness’ (Isa 49:4; Isa 30:7; Job 9:29; Lam 4:17; Ps 94:11), ‘false gods’ (Deut 32:21; 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5; 8:19; 14:22; Jon 2:9[8]; Zech 10:2), and ‘senselessness’ (Job 27:12; 35:16).¹³ However, many have struggled to see a clear connection between ‘senselessness’ and the image of vapour.¹⁴

Within Ecclesiastes, Qohelet uses the word **הבל** on thirty occasions and the narrator uses it another eight times to summarise Qohelet’s message (1:2; 12:8). The narrator’s comments are summative, in that they do not specify the referent of ‘everything’ (**הכל**). Similarly, when Qohelet speaks of ‘what is done’ as **הבל** in 1:14 and 2:17 it is unclear whether he is referring to his own actions or the work of God.

Qohelet’s early uses of **הבל** provide the strongest support for a ‘vanity’ translation. There he uses it to describe that the intended results of his labour

as “Worthless” in Qoheleth: A Critique of Michael V. Fox’s “Absurd” Thesis’, *JBL* 136.4 (2017), 888.

¹¹ The LXX has the more interpretative translation of *ματαιότης*. Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 105.

¹² Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 107.

¹³ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 28-31.

¹⁴ Ingram, *Ambiguity*, 109-110; Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 110; Sneed, ‘**הבל** as “Worthless” in Qoheleth’, 889.

did not eventuate (2:1, 11). Similarly, his work and wisdom fail to bring any significant benefit over the fool (2:15), or animals (3:19). He also uses **הבל** as an evaluation of the difficulties or lack of satisfaction associated with work or its results (2:23; 4:4, 7–8; 5:9[10]; 6:9). In these examples, the results of Qohelet's work are not mysterious, transient, or senseless—despite the effort expended, the desired result simply did not eventuate.

The translation of 'fleeting' or 'transient' commends itself most strongly for Qohelet's **הבל** evaluation of a people's fickle respect for their king (4:16), the life of the stillborn (6:4), the days of one's life when death is on view (6:12; 9:9), and the time of youth (11:10). Nevertheless, a separate translation is not necessary for these verses, since the temporary nature of the results of one's work or life is the reason for its vanity, rather than a separate evaluation.

Beyond failing to provide the results that Qohelet sought, a number of situations are described as **הבל** because they are out of human control (2:26) or contrary to human expectation (6:2). Fox thus translates **הבל** as 'senseless' and 'absurd'.¹⁵ Key to this argument is the inversion of outcomes for the wicked and righteous (8:10, 14). Additionally, one can understand excessive words (6:11), the laughter of fools (7:6), and the dark future of old age (11:8) as generally irrational. Yet one must remember that when Qohelet describes the 'mismatch' between actions and results, he is not writing as a neutral observer. Within his search, he is looking for a profitable human existence (1:3; 2:3; 3:9). The frustration he expresses is thus not at the irrationality of the world per se, but that his own actions have not led to the results that he desires. Fox's key text of 8:14, when viewed from the perspective of the righteous person, thus appears to describe a futile situation—the piety of the righteous

¹⁵ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 27–29.

man is of no benefit to him.¹⁶

There is a growing tendency amongst scholars to see multiple nuances carried by the term **הבל**. For example, both Shields and Weeks admit that **הבל** includes the notion of futility, but claim that Qohelet usually goes beyond this to describe something as senseless (Shields) or illusory (Weeks).¹⁷ Miller is the most extreme in viewing **הבל** as a ‘tensive symbol’ that incorporates a ranges of senses, sometimes simultaneously: ‘insubstantiality’, ‘transience’, and ‘foulness’.¹⁸ These views are generally correct in recognising that **הבל** maintains some of its metaphoric value; however, Qohelet’s use of the term—especially in early chapters—would appear to give it a default meaning of ‘vanity’ or ‘futility’, to which context may supply additional detail as to its nature or cause.

The parallel expressions that Qohelet employs confirms what we have argued so far. The two related refrains, **רעות רוח** (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9) and **רעיון רוח** (1:17; 4:16; cf. 2:22), refer to desires and thoughts for that which cannot be grasped or fulfilled.¹⁹ Though the etymology of **רעות** and **רעיון** is debated,²⁰ the implication of ‘futility’ is nevertheless difficult to avoid.

Another category of related expressions that appears alongside Qohelet’s **הבל**

¹⁶ Sneed, *Politics of Pessimism*, 162; Sneed, ‘**הבל** as “Worthless” in Qoheleth’, 890. Similarly, when Schoors speaks of the ‘disparity of toil and result’ (regarding Eccl 2:21, 22–23, 26), he fails to note the implied *futility* of toil. Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part II*, 121.

¹⁷ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 119–121; Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 119.

¹⁸ Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric*, 91–155.

¹⁹ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 114–116.

²⁰ Rather than attempting to connect these words with Hb. **רעה** I (to shepherd), they are best understood as Aramaisms as found in Ezra 5:17; 7:18 (‘wishes’ or ‘decisions’) and Dan 2:29, 30; 4:16[4:19]; 5:6, 10; 7:28 (‘thoughts’ or ‘worries’). Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 112. cf. *HALOT*, s. v. ‘**רעה** III’; cf. *HALOT* 5, s. v. ‘**רעות** II’, ‘**רעיון**’.

refrain includes רעה רבה (2:21; cf. 2:17), ענין רע הוא (4:8; cf. 1:13), and חלי רע הוא (6:2; cf. 5:12[13], 15[16]). While Shields rightly argues that these expressions indicate something of the unfairness of the outcomes that Qohelet observes,²¹ this does not mean that זה הבל itself is a statement of ‘senselessness’. Rather than making an objective or philosophical statement about the irrationality of cosmic justice, Qohelet’s רע(ה) statements simply express (or vent!) the injuriousness of his futile experiences (or observations of others). This is seen most clearly in 2:17—‘it was grievous *to me*’ (רע עלי).

The most important verse for understanding הבל is 2:11, where Qohelet uses the parallel expression אין יתרון (‘no gain’). Here we see that Qohelet’s concern with his הבל judgments is not with God or the rationality of the universe—as in the case of a protest of absurdity—but with his own inability to find the profit he was looking for. As a direct negation of Qohelet’s stated aim, this gives further support to the use of הבל to refer to the failure of an object to deliver the good he labours (עמל) to derive from it, or else a situation in which a person’s efforts are not justly rewarded.

In summary, הבל is principally a statement of failure—the vanity and futility of human endeavours to achieve a profitable existence (יתרון). This meaning is developed most clearly in the early stages of Qohelet’s discourse (1:12–2:26), although it also holds true in the rest of his discourse. While Qohelet may indeed protest the transience of his acquisitions, the injustice of the world, or the unknowability of the deeds of God, these realities ultimately highlight the futility of Qohelet’s wisdom.

²¹ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 117–118.

CHAPTER 6

THE RHETORICAL GOALS OF THE FATHER

So far in our rhetorical study of Ecclesiastes we have defended 1:1–12:14 as the unit of study, and as such the epilogue must be considered as part of the message of the book. Moreover, literary clues point towards the identification of Qohelet as a character within the text, and the epilogist as the implied author. In other words, the discourse setting of the book is that of a father instructing his son, to whom he narrates the person and teaching of Qohelet.

The methodology of the present research, as outlined in chapter 3, now requires a study of the rhetorical goal(s) of the implied author, which is the literary equivalent of authorial intent. Viewing a text as discourse rather than an artefact means that the text is seen as a communicative act with a purpose—the rhetorical goal. This goal governs the presentation and organisation of the materials and brings a measure of coherence to the parts. It also relates to the audience insofar as the author's goals are presumably relevant to the reader's circumstances and aim for something within the reader's reach. The classical species of rhetoric—namely forensic, epideictic, and deliberative rhetoric—may have some *limited* relevance in this step. At the very least, they assist in recognising that the implied author's rhetorical goals may pertain to the past, present, or future.

As in the last chapter, it is the epilogue that is the focus, because this is where the voice of the implied author is heard most fully. The father's rhetorical goals may be implicit in the words of Qohelet, but there we face a far greater risk of misreading. Thus we will be on firmer ground if we begin with the implied author's own voice before we examine the words of his protagonist.

In order to identify the rhetorical goals of the father, this chapter will first

examine the function and structure of the epilogue. The function of the epilogue has a significant bearing upon the force of the father's words, whether they are intended as a kind of supplement to what has been said or as a guide to its interpretation. The structure of the epilogue will assist in locating the father's goals. Then we will analyse the details of the text in a verse by verse fashion. This is necessary to understand what the father is saying to his son; the vast literature on these verses shows that this is more complicated than it first appears.¹ Finally, by combining the results of these two steps and building upon the findings of our previous chapters we will attempt an articulation of the father's rhetorical goals.

6.1 The Function and Structure of Ecclesiastes 12:9–14

6.1.1 Function

i. Is Ecclesiastes 12:9–14 a Supplement?

The most common understanding of Eccl 12:9–14 is that it is supplementary to the words of Qohelet.² In other words, these verses are a subsequent addition to Qohelet's teaching and so are largely superfluous to its interpretation. They may have been given by a disciple of Qohelet in order to commend his work to a wider audience,³ by a pious editor to soften its heterodoxy,⁴ or—in the case

¹ For an overview the many problems, see Jean-Marie Auwers, 'Problèmes d'interprétation de l'épilogue de Qohèlèt', in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*. ed. Antoon Schoors, BETL 134 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 267–282.

² Whybray overstates the scholarly consensus when he says, 'It is universally agreed that this final section of the book is the work not of Qoheleth but of one or more persons who were familiar either with the book in its present form or at least with its contents.' Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 169.

³ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 208.

⁴ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 116.

of those who affirm two epilogists—a combination of both.⁵ Such views claim that the value of the epilogue is that it shows how Qohelet was understood by a near contemporary,⁶ received within the wisdom corpus,⁷ or Old Testament canon.⁸

There are three key arguments in support of viewing the epilogue as supplementary:

1) There is a shift in speaker from Qohelet's first person speech to a third person perspective.⁹ 2) The epilogue speaks about matters such as the fear of God, divine commands, and justice in a way that is alien to Qohelet.¹⁰ 3) ויתר indicates a clear break in the text and indicates supplementary material.¹¹ All of these arguments have significant weaknesses.

1) In the previous chapter, we argued that the shift in speaker need not indicate a change in authorship.¹² The third person voice in Eccl 1:2; 7:27; and 12:8 is seemingly that of the implied author who introduces the voice of the main character. We have already argued that it is most natural to identify the third person voice of the epilogue as one and the same.

⁵ Galling, 'Prediger', 124; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 169.

⁶ Gordis, *Kobelet*, 339.

⁷ Wilson, 'Words of the Wise', 175–192.

⁸ Sheppard, 'Epilogue', 182–189; Childs, *Introduction*, 580–589; Pedro Zamora, 'The Daniel and Qohelet Epilogues: A Similar Editorial Activity? (Qohelet 12:8–14 and Daniel 12:1–13)', in *The Bible as a Human Witness to Divine Revelation: Hearing the Word of God Through Historically Dissimilar Traditions*. eds. Randall Heskett and Brian Irwin, LHBOTS 469 (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 202–222.

⁹ E.g. Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste*, 157; Gordis, *Kobelet*, 339–341; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 394.

¹⁰ Sheppard, 'Epilogue', 186.

¹¹ Lohfink, 'Satzereöffnungen', 132.

¹² See pp. 154.

The assumption that a change in speaker points to redactional activity is also unsupported by ancient Near Eastern precedent. It is common to find the presence of third person language in otherwise first person didactic works, without any suggestion of a redactor. This is apparent in the case in the Instruction of Ptahhotep, the Instruction of King Amenemhet I for his Son Sesostri I, the Complaints of Khakheperre-Sonb, the Satire of the Trades, and the Story of Ahiqar.¹³ Such shifts in speaker are usually intrinsic to the work rather than supplementary.

2) It is true that the epilogist speaks about the fear of God and divine judgment in a different way to Qohelet.¹⁴ Both use the same or similar terminology of **יִבִּיא בַּמִּשְׁפָּט** and **אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים יִרָא**, but have something different in mind. The epilogist equates the fear of God with obedience to God's commands (12:13) rather than circumspection before an inscrutable deity (5:6[7]). For the epilogist, divine judgment is comprehensive and possibly eschatological (12:14), whereas Qohelet has his doubts about the timing and nature of God's judgment (3:16–21). These differences are taken as sure proof that the epilogue is an addition by another hand, but this is only logically the case if Qohelet is the implied author. With the epilogist as the implied author, there is no reason for Qohelet, as a character of his making, to hold identical views. Rather, Qohelet is apparently presented as a more ambiguous character, such as that of Job's friends.

These differences in perspective on the fear of God and divine judgment

¹³ *AEL* 1:62–80; 1:136–39; 1:146–48; 1:185–91; *ANET*, 427–30; cf. Lavoie, 'Un éloge', 149–150.

¹⁴ McNeile, *Ecclesiastes*, 24–26; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 169; Katharine J. Dell, 'Ecclesiastes as Wisdom: Consulting Early Interpreters', *VT* 44.3 (1994): 301–329; Christianson, *Time to Tell*, 124; Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', 245.

obscure the great similarities between the words of Qohelet and the epilogist.¹⁵ As noted above, both voices share common grammatical features and terminology.¹⁶ Moreover, the epilogist seems to deliberately allude to Qohelet's teaching in an ironic or subtly critical manner.¹⁷ The epilogist thus shows a deep knowledge of Qohelet's thought and diction, and the authority to use it to his own ends. This complex relationship is far more suited to that of the implied author of the book than either an admiring disciple or an orthodox critic—an admiring disciple would by no means seek to subvert or criticise Qohelet as freely as the epilogist, and one can only speculate as to why a critic would seek to imitate Qohelet's diction or commend his teaching at all.

3) A more objective means to assess the nature of the epilogue with respect to the body of the book is an analysis of syntactic markers, specifically the use of **ויתר** that begins v. 9 (cf. v. 12). **ויתר** is a nominalised participle from the verb **יתר**, and means 'rest', 'excess', or 'advantage'.¹⁸ It (or its *plene* form **יותר**) appears as a noun in 6:8, 11; 7:11, where it is used as a synonym for **יתרון** (cf. 1:3; 2:13; 3:9; 5:15[16]). It is used as an adverb in 2:15; 7:16 with the sense of 'much' or 'very' (parallel to **הרבה**).¹⁹

Gordis opts for an adverbial translation, which he bases upon the common Mishnaic idiom **יותר מן**, meaning 'more than' (cf. Esth 6:6).²⁰ It is used to

¹⁵ As downplayed by Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 189–199; Lohfink, 'Les épilogues', 85.

¹⁶ See pp. 137.

¹⁷ For this, see especially Lavoie's series of articles; Lavoie, 'Un éloge', 145–70; Lavoie, 'Ambiguïtés', 131–151; Lavoie, 'L'autocritique ironique', 387–405.

¹⁸ *HALOT*, s.v. 'יתר'.

¹⁹ Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part II*, 215–218.

²⁰ For example, 'more than the calf wishes to suck the cow wishes to suckle,' **יתר ממה שבעגל רוצה לינק הטרסה רוצה להיניק** (b. Pesah. 112a); 'more than a man wishes to marry, a woman wishes to be married,' **יותר משהאיש רוצה לישא רוצה להנשא** (b.

praise Qohelet as more than a sage, but one who *also* (עוד) taught the people. Such a statement would announce Qohelet as either noble in his concern for using his wisdom for the benefit of others (Sir 37:22–23),²¹ or—far more creatively—as a peripatetic teacher distinguishing him from other sages who taught only in schools for the elite.²²

All of the examples that Gordis provides have the preposition מן, which is absent from v. 9.²³ The disjunctive accent (*zaqeph gadol*) above ויתר in the MT also points to an early tradition of reading it separately, rather than part of an idiom.²⁴ This would suggest a nominal translation like ‘and something remaining’²⁵ or an adverbial translation ‘more [than this]’.

Lauha claims that a nominal translation of ויתר in 12:9 yields a technical literary term (‘Ein Nachtrag:’), which indicates an addendum or something additional.²⁶ As Lohfink points out, there is no external support for such technical usage.²⁷ And while many of the proposed translations for ויתר are functionally equivalent to the sentence adverb ‘additionally’, the semantic range of the ויתר—and its usage by Qohelet in particular—could also express something like ‘moreover’, or ‘furthermore’. That is, what is being said is of

Yebam. 113a). Gordis, *Kobelet*, 341.

²¹ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 170; Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 116.

²² Lohfink, ‘Les épilogues’, 89.

²³ An alternative form (יתר על) is found in 1QpHab VII, 7; 1Q30 I, 2.

²⁴ The LXX is similarly unclear. Fox states that the LXX is probably to be read adverbially, ‘Exceedingly was Qohelet...’; however, it is possible to read *καὶ περισσόν* as ‘moreover’. Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 350.

²⁵ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 350.

²⁶ Lauha, *Kobelet*, 218. He similarly translates מדהמה ויתר in v. 12 as ‘Ein weiterer Nachtrag:’.

²⁷ Lohfink, ‘Satzöffnungen’, 135.

additional importance, rather than additional content of secondary importance. Later Mishnaic usage also points in this direction,²⁸ where יתר מכן ('more than such') is used in exactly this way.²⁹

Pedro Zamora makes an even closer identification of יתר with Qohelet's discourse. He proposes that it is answering his question of what profit (יתרון) one can gain (1:3), and takes the *waw* as an adversative that introduces something of a contrast with the הבל conclusion of 12:8.³⁰ It is unclear why the epilogist would not make this point more explicitly if that were his intention. However, given the epilogist's frequent ironic use of Qohelet's favourite terms and expressions (see interpretation below), a subtle reference to Qohelet's search remains possible.³¹ This may also explain why, as he shifts from narration to direct discourse and exhortation of his son, he uses the idiosyncratic ויעתה, rather than a more conventional ויעתה.

²⁸ It is difficult to assess the exegetical value of Mishnaic parallels without weighing into the extensive debates surrounding the date of Qohelet's language. The position taken here, albeit tentatively, is that of a post-exilic date in the early Hellenistic era. Ecclesiastes meets Hurvitz's prudent criteria for establishing LBH, namely Persian loanwords (פרדס, פתגם), cases of late Aramaic interference (evident throughout), and elements of MH. Frederick's arguments for a pre-exilic date recognise the circumstantial nature of the evidence; however, he refuses to concede to its cumulative force. On the other hand, a post-Maccabean date is unnecessary to explain the similarities to MH. The similarities, though present, are not as great as Whitley claims and can be understood as forms that existed in spoken Hebrew at an earlier time, before emerging in literary Hebrew. There is little to commend Zimmermann's theory of Aramaic translation or Dahood's theory of Phoenician influence. Zimmermann, 'Aramaic Provenance', 17–45; Dahood, 'Phoenician Background', 264–282; Whitley, *Kobeleth*; Fredericks, *Qobeleth's Language*; Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 1–16; Avi Hurvitz, *A Concise Lexicon of Late Biblical Hebrew: Linguistic Innovations in the Writings of the Second Temple Period*, VTSup 160 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 5–11.

²⁹ m. Giṭ. 3:1; m. Ketub. 7:1.

³⁰ Zamora, 'Daniel and Qohelet', 206–207.

³¹ The LXX maintains this relationship by using περισσεία for יתרון and περισσόν for יתר.

It is difficult, therefore, to maintain that the third person speech, thought and diction, or structural markers (וִיתֵר) require viewing the epilogue as supplementary or secondary to the text. On the contrary, the third person speech appears to come from the author or narrator of the book, the complex relationship between the thought and diction of Qohelet and the epilogist similarly points to his identity as the implied author, and וִיתֵר may in fact indicate a movement towards matters of great importance.

ii. *Is Ecclesiastes 12:9–14 a Colophon?*

A comparison with the ending of other ancient Near Eastern texts has led some interpreters to conclude that Eccl 12:9–14 is a colophon.³² Rather than concluding the argument of the text, as in a true epilogue, these verses speak about the author and his literary activity. They commend the author as a wise man and teacher (v. 9a–bα), use technical scribal vocabulary (v. 9bβ–γ), praise the words that have been written (v. 10), compare them with the writings of others (v. 11), and contain a warning about other texts (v. 12).

None of these features, however, is characteristic of a colophon. Instead, a colophon typically focuses upon the copyist and gives his name (cf. Sir 50:27).³³ The epilogist is anonymous and focuses instead upon the protagonist of the work (Qohelet). Lavoie also claims that none of the putative verbs of scribal activity (v. 9bβ–γ) are found in other colophons.³⁴

It is also evident that the epilogist is no mere copyist or scribe. We have already seen that he acts as the narrator introducing the speech of Qohelet (1:2; 7:27;

³² Lauha, *Kohelet*, 217; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 127.

³³ Galling, 'Prediger', 124; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 352. Lavoie insists that the concept of the author is a modern one, and so is unlikely to be praised instead of the copyist in a colophon. Lavoie, 'Un éloge', 165–168.

³⁴ Lavoie, 'Un éloge', 165–168.

12:8).³⁵ In quoting Qohelet's words in 1:2 and 12:8, the narrator provides a summary of Qohelet's teaching. The repetition of the הַבֵּל conclusion at the beginning and end of Qohelet's discourse is not simply an aesthetic framing device, but illustrates that despite his earnest and well-resourced searching, he has made little progress (1:3). It is regarding this result that the narrator wishes to provide further comment (וַיִּתֵּר). His words contain far more evaluation and admonition than one would expect from a copyist.

The final words of Ecclesiastes more closely resemble the exhortatory conclusion of Egyptian instructions.³⁶ The Instruction of Amenemope, for example, concludes with these words to the reader:

Look to these thirty chapters,
They inform, they educate;
They are the foremost of all books,
They make the ignorant wise.
If they are read to the ignorant,
He is cleansed through them.
Be filled with them, *put* them in your heart,
And *become* a man who expounds them,
One who expounds as a teacher.
The scribe who is skilled in his office,
He is found worthy to be a courtier.³⁷

Although the Instruction of Amenemope concludes with words that are

³⁵ Fox, 'Frame-Narrative', 84–90.

³⁶ Krüger, *Qobeleth*, 209.

³⁷ *AEL* 2:162, emphasis added.

unambiguously positive towards to the teaching in the body of the work, Eccl 12:9–14 bears far more in common with them than a colophon. The final words of the Instruction of Amenemope contain an evaluation of the preceding words, conclude with one final exhortation that affirms the good to be pursued by the reader, and also clearly expresses the author's rhetorical goal. The epilogue of Ecclesiastes, including vv. 13b–14, can similarly be considered to be the implied author's conclusion to his work, which he indicates with the expression סוף דבר.³⁸

Reading the epilogue as the conclusion to the book of Ecclesiastes is also suggested by the final phrase of v. 13 (כִּי־זֶה כָּל־הָאָדָם). The expression כָּל־הָאָדָם is used by Qohelet three times. On each occasion he is attempting to grasp concepts of universal human significance. It appears twice in his carpe diem passages (3:13; 5:18[19]) and once as he contemplates death (7:2). It appears that the epilogist is picking up some of Qohelet's key terminology and making his own conclusion, emphasised by כִּי־זֶה. Peter Enns thus paraphrases: 'fearing God and keeping his commandments, *this* (כִּי־זֶה) is what should summarise the human experience.'³⁹

Viewing the final words of Ecclesiastes as a colophon or having a similar redactional function is commonly argued because of the shift in speaker and

³⁸ Contra Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 391–396; Seow, 'Beyond Them', 125–41. Seow excises vv. 13b–14 and claims that the book originally ended with a 'formulaic' סוף דבר on the basis of similarities to Egyptian texts; however, the variations in the examples he cites shows that there is not a fixed formula, nor are these expressions necessarily the very final words of a text (e.g. the Instruction of Papyrus Insinger, *AEL* 3.212).

³⁹ Peter Enns, 'כָּל־הָאָדָם and the Evaluation of Qohelet's Wisdom in Qoh 12:13 or "The 'A is So, and What's More, B' Theology of Ecclesiastes"', in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*. eds. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman, JSJSup 83 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 136. See also J. Q. von Ehrenkrook, 'Contextualizing Wisdom,' 88–90.

the evaluation given of Qohelet. However, both of these features reflect a more modern than ancient editorial practice. The comparison with other ancient Near Eastern texts shows that Eccl 12:9–14 has little in common with true colophons and far more in common with the exhortatory conclusions that are typical of Egyptians texts. Furthermore, the author himself gives ample indication that he is now drawing his work to a conclusion by the use of סוף and the very terminology used by Qohelet to describe what he found of universal importance (כל-האדם). As a result, we must understand the epilogue to be central to the message of the book.

6.1.2 Structure

Since the epilogue is the implied author's conclusion to his work, it is likely to contain his rhetorical goals. A study of the structure of these verses will prepare us for a verse by verse analysis and assist in locating the father's rhetorical goals.

The most obvious structural feature of the epilogue is the twofold repetition of ויתר in v. 9 and v. 12. This feature alone leads most interpreters to identify a twofold structure: vv. 9–11 and vv. 12–14.⁴⁰ The two main interpretations of ויתר, however, have differing structural significance. The sentence adverbial translation of 'moreover' creates the sharpest disjunction, whereas the comparative adverbial translation of 'more than' has no such effect and only *may* suggest a division. We have already rejected the latter interpretation above.

Within the discourse, ויתר appears to function as something of a macro-syntactic marker akin to ועתה, which is used for 'drawing a conclusion, especially ... a practical one, from what has been stated.'⁴¹ The first instance of

⁴⁰ E.g. Lauha, *Kohelet*, 221; Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 208; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 173; Lavoie, 'Un éloge', 147.

⁴¹ BDB, s. v. 'עֲתָה'; cf. HALOT, s. v. 'עֲתָה'; Alviero Niccacci, *The Syntax of the Verb in*

וַיִּתֵּר in v. 9 shifts from the epilogist's summary of Qohelet's teaching in 12:8, to his evaluation of Qohelet. The second instance of וַיִּתֵּר in 12:12 indicates a shift to words of exhortation for the reader. This accords with the common usage of וַעֲתֵדָה in discourse to introduce a shift to imperatives.⁴²

Verses 9–10 both have Qohelet (or his words) as the subject. Verse 11 shifts from singular to the plural, and speaks about דְּבָרֵי חֲכָמִים. Whether this is a technical or non-technical term, the implication is that Qohelet's words are included among them, and thus there is no material shift in subject. The proverbial style of this verse is frequently noted and may alone explain the shift to the plural.⁴³ Otherwise, the purpose is to locate Qohelet among a larger collection of writings.

It would be overly hasty to assume that the two uses of וַיִּתֵּר in the epilogue are identical. The first (v. 9), as argued above, stands alone. It is followed by שׁ, and is accented with a disjunctive *zaqeph gadol*. The second (v. 12) is followed by מִן and does not contain a disjunctive accent. This may belong to a longer expression: וַיִּתֵּר מִהֶמָּה, 'more than these', however it would not be possible for וַיִּתֵּר מִהֶמָּה to be the object of הַזִּכָּר, since the מִן is attached to הֶמָּה and not וַיִּתֵּר.⁴⁴ Hence the two possible translations are: 'moreover, from/of them, my son, be warned', or 'furthermore (literally, 'more than these things'), my

Classical Hebrew Prose, JSOTSup 86, trans. Watson, W. G. E. (1990), 101–102.

⁴² For a similar usage, cf. Amos 7:16; Gen 31:13; Exod 18:19; Num 22:11; Deut 2:13; Isa 30:8.

⁴³ Lavoie first suggested the shift to plural makes v. 11 a transitional verse, but later recognised its proverbial quality. Lavoie, 'Un éloge', 147; Lavoie, 'Ambiguïtés', 134.

⁴⁴ Every other instance of זָכַר uses מִן (or לְבַלְתִּי with a verbal object) to indicate the object of warning (Ezek 3:18, 21; 33:8, 9) with the one exception of Exod 18:20, where the verb is used in a positive sense; cf. Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 356.

son, be warned.'

There are three objections to reading מהמה as the indirect object of הזהר, but each has a suitable explanation. First, זהר never takes an object in the *niphal* stem and rarely takes an indirect object.⁴⁵ Yet זהר commonly appears with מן in the *hiphil* stem, which indicates either the source of the warning (Ezek 3:17; 33:7) or the behaviour that the hearer is to be deterred from (Ezek 3:18; 33:8). Given that the passive or reflexive sense conveyed by the *niphal* stem places the emphasis upon the subject of the verb, it is natural to expect a lower occurrence of direct or indirect objects. However, it is by no means excluded, as the example in Ps 19:12[11] shows (נזהר בהם).

Secondly, the Masoretic accentuation supports a reading of ויותר and מהמה together, as indicated by the conjunctive *merkba* on ויותר and disjunctive *tiphchah* on מהמה.⁴⁶ In response to this argument it is important to remember that the Masoretic accents bear witness only to an oral tradition of reading, and as such their contribution needs to be weighed against the other evidence. Their value is in demonstrating that a reading is possible, rather than original.⁴⁷ The accents here may have been influenced by scribal familiarity with the Mishnaic idiom יותר מכך.

Thirdly, it would be unusual for the (in)direct object to be so far removed from its verb.⁴⁸ However, since we have already rejected ויתר as the object of הזהר, the only word which separates verb and (in)direct object is בני, which is also

⁴⁵ Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 115; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 843.

⁴⁶ Lavoie, 'L'autocritique ironique', 394.

⁴⁷ As with v. 9 above.

⁴⁸ Mark J. Boda, 'Speaking into the Silence: The Epilogue of Ecclesiastes', in *The Words of the Wise are Like Goats: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century*. eds. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III and Cristian G. Rata (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 272–273.

the case in Prov 1:8; 3:11; 5:20; 6:20; 19:27; 23:26; 24:13. Moreover, the location of the (in)direct object before the verb is accounted for by its connection to what comes before.

If we read **ויותר** as a sentence adverb, then we rule out the possibility of understanding **מהמה ויותר** as simply introducing a new point.⁴⁹ This function is achieved by **ויותר** alone, leaving **מהמה** as the (in)direct object of **הזדהר**. The antecedent of **המה** is to be understood as the words of wise men (those like Qohelet's) in v. 11.⁵⁰

The connection that **המה** provides between v. 11 and v. 12 is an argument for reading these verses together. However, **ויותר** indicates a clear shift in the discourse, despite the logical connection that exists between the two halves of the epilogue. That we are to read v. 11 with vv. 9–10, and v. 12 with vv. 13–14 is also confirmed by the shift in tone between the two halves of this passage from description to exhortation, reflected in the dominance of *qatal* forms in vv. 9–11 and imperatives in vv. 12–14. This exhortatory tone is also highlighted by the vocative **בני** that also appears in v. 12.

Finally, the start of v. 13 contains the climactic expression **סוף דבר הכל נשמע**, which introduces the very last appeal. Verse 14 is clearly grammatically dependent upon the exhortation in v. 13b, providing the motivation or reason (**כי**) for the fear of God and obedience to his commands.

In short, the syntax of the epilogue supports a division into vv. 9–11 and vv. 12–14, with a shift from description in vv. 9–11 to exhortation vv. 12–14, and a development within vv. 12–14 itself as the epilogist moves from the

⁴⁹ This goes against interpreters such as Lauha, *Kohelet*, 221; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 84, 86.

⁵⁰ Seow, 'Beyond Them', 134–135; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 356–357; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 369; Lavoie, 'L'autocritique ironique', 394–395.

penultimate appeal (v. 12) to the ultimate (vv. 13–14). In light of this structure we should expect to find the father’s rhetorical goals implicit in what he says about Qohelet in vv. 9–11, and explicit in his charges to his son in vv. 12–14, with the first goal subordinate (v. 12) to the second (v. 13)

6.2 Interpretation of Ecclesiastes 12:9–14

We have established the centrality of the epilogue to the message of Ecclesiastes and the probability that it contains the rhetorical goals of the implied author (the father). Additionally, a structural analysis suggests that within the epilogue these goals will move from being implicit to explicit. In order to identify these goals, the following section conducts a verse by verse analysis of the father’s direct address to his son.

12:9

Moreover, because Qohelet was wise, he constantly taught the people knowledge. By listening intently and carefully investigating, he set in order many proverbs.

The epilogue begins in verse 9 with ויתר, which we have already argued has an equivalent meaning and function to ‘moreover’. The implied author has concluded his presentation of Qohelet, as indicated by the repetition of his הבל summary in 12:8. He now wishes to add something *more*—his own conclusion. ויתר signals a shift in the discourse akin to ועתה, the choice of lexeme arguably being a subtle allusion to Qohelet’s failed search for יתרון (1:3).

The result of this interpretation of ויתר upon the following phrase שהיה כהם קהלת חכם is that it must be treated as grammatically independent. If this is the case, then ו is to be read as a conjunction (like כי) rather than a relative

pronoun,⁵¹ and specifically one that indicates its relation to the subsequent clause. The most suitable function in this context is causal: ‘because ...’;⁵² the causal clause precedes the main clause as in Gen 3:14, 17; Isa 28:15.⁵³

The first statement made about Qohelet is that he is a חכם, which should be understood in a non-technical sense of ‘wise’ or ‘wise man’ rather than ‘sage’. There are, arguably, no Old Testament uses of חכם, which require a technical interpretation.⁵⁴ Moreover, Qohelet’s own usage of חכם is non-technical, as he mostly uses it in contrast to the fool (2:14, 16, 19; 4:13; 6:8; 7:4, 5, 7; 9:17; 10:2, 12).⁵⁵

The next two clauses describe the activities of Qohelet that he pursued *because* he was a wise man. Thus understood, the father is not attributing to Qohelet a remarkable teaching activity for a wise person, but an activity that he did precisely because he was wise (cf. Sir 37:22–23). An important characterisation of Qohelet’s teaching activity is achieved by the use of עוֹד, which indicates repeated action (‘constantly’), rather than meaning ‘also’.⁵⁶ Seow suggests this is a positive comment about Qohelet’s persistence (cf. Gen 46:29; Ps 84:5[4]; Ruth 1:14).⁵⁷ Initially this description of Qohelet’s teaching

⁵¹ Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 138–139.

⁵² Other instances of causal ו include Song 1:6; 5:2; Eccl 2:18; cf. Fredericks, ‘Ecclesiastes’, 243.

⁵³ Cf. *HALOT*, s.v. ‘כִּי II’.

⁵⁴ Whybray, *Intellectual Tradition*, 6–54.

⁵⁵ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 170. The exceptions to this do not demand a technical sense: Eccl 7:19; 8:1; 8:17; 9:1; 9:11, 15.

⁵⁶ Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 116. The translation ‘also’ is forced upon readers who opt for the comparative translation of שֶׁ יֵתֵר ‘more than’, in order to describe the way in which Qohelet was more than a wise man.

⁵⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 384.

activity seems to bolster his ethos, as one who is knowledgeable and reputable. However, Qohelet's use of עֹרֵד in 7:28 discolours this commendation. There he confesses that his repeated (עֹרֵד) searching has yielded nothing. The persistent nature of Qohelet's teaching was perhaps because it was ineffective and hence required more effort (10:10), or else because it was simply one of the burdens of being a wise man. Any criticism the father implies by עֹרֵד is subtle, but less so if we recognise the connection to Qohelet's immediately preceding הִבַּל conclusion (12:8) and the epilogist's deliberate use of Qohelet's language throughout 12:9–14.⁵⁸

The final clause of v. 9 also describes Qohelet's wisdom activities, with three verbs that have been variously interpreted. The unparalleled *piel* form of אָזַן leads a number of commentators to look for an alternative etymology, such as a (mistaken) denominative of מֵאֲזַנִּים ('scales') or related to the Arabic root *wzn*, thus yielding 'weighed', possibly in the sense of scanning poetry.⁵⁹ Since these are only distant possibilities and the ear (אָזַן) is a key organ of wisdom (Prov 2:2; 4:20; 5:1; etc.), it is far more likely that it is a verb of hearing as in the *hiphil* stem.⁶⁰ Longman claims that the unique *piel* stem may be used here in order to conform with the other two verbs, although this by itself seems to be insufficient reason to coin a new form.⁶¹ The intensive sense of the *piel* stem may thus be a factor, hence our translation is 'listened intently'.⁶²

⁵⁸ Both of these observations have been obscured by the legacy of source criticism, which led to the isolation of the epilogue from the rest of Ecclesiastes.

⁵⁹ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 209; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 342; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 831. cf. *HALOT*, s.v. 'אָזַן II'.

⁶⁰ Seow, 'Beyond Them', 127–129.

⁶¹ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 275.

⁶² Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 363; Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', 243.

Much the same can be said of חקֵר, which is otherwise unattested in the *piel* stem. In the *qal* it describes searching to understand (Prov 25:2) or finding out if something is true (Job 5:27).⁶³ The use of the *piel* stem could be simply for the sake of assonance,⁶⁴ but an intensified meaning would also fit well in this context.

The final verb תִּקֵּן describes either composing⁶⁵ or arranging,⁶⁶ which finds support in Sir 47:9 (Hb.) and Mishnaic Hebrew respectively.⁶⁷ Alternatively, Qohelet's own use of תִּקֵּן for 'make straight' (1:15; 7:13) suggests a translation of 'correct'.⁶⁸ Despite Qohelet's previous use of תִּקֵּן, the object (proverbs) would fit better with one of the former options, with the witness of the LXX leaning us towards the sense of arrangement or literary ordering.⁶⁹

The asyndeton of תִּקֵּן presents it as the head verb, modified by אִזַּן and חִקֵּר.⁷⁰ This portrays Qohelet's literary activity (setting in order many proverbs) as one that he achieved only through laborious study and research. As with his teaching activity, this description of Qohelet's literary activity at first appears to bolster his ethos, this time as an industrious scribe. But by using Qohelet's

⁶³ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 385.

⁶⁴ Gordis, *Kobelet*, 342.

⁶⁵ Gordis, *Kobelet*, 342; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 352.

⁶⁶ Cf. Akkadian *taqānu(m)*. HALOT, s.v. 'תִּקֵּן'; Ogden, *Kobelet*, 209; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*.

⁶⁷ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 831–833.

⁶⁸ Lavoie, 'Un éloge', 160; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kobelet*, 543, 46; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 63.

⁶⁹ Though note the nominal translation of the LXX. Whitley claims this is evidence of a *Vorlage* of either תִּקֵּן or תִּקְוֶה (cf. Mishnaic תִּקְוֶה), thus yielding 'he listened and considered the arrangement of many proverbs'. It is more probable that the LXX reflects scribal difficulty (shared by many modern translations) with the asyndeton of תִּקֵּן. Whitley, *Kobelet*, 102.

⁷⁰ GKC §120g–h; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 351–352.

vocabulary, the father may also be hinting at the ironic disjunction between Qohelet's prolific literary activity and his failed attempts to understand life under the sun (1:15; 7:13). Qohelet's diligence is thus not only a statement of literary achievement, but also its failure.

Qohelet's literary output, then, involved careful listening to tradition and the experiences of others, searching for the truth, in order to arrange proverbs (משלים). Admittedly, משל can be used in a far broader sense than proverb, like 'wisdom saying' or even just 'discourse' (Job 27:1; 29:1). Lavoie considers a general meaning preferable, since only a small proportion of his words are proverbs in the narrow sense (mostly chs. 7–10).⁷¹ It is not necessary that this description of Qohelet's literary activity refers specifically or exclusively to his quoted discourse, but rather talks about the kinds of activities that being a wise man involved for Qohelet.

Like his teaching, which was constant or repeated (עוד), the proverbs he arranges are הרבה—great in number, or even excessive. This same word describes Qohelet's abundance of wisdom and knowledge (1:16), and many herds and flocks (2:7), each of which were no significant gain to Qohelet. He also comments that many (הרבה) words are הבל (6:11; cf. 5:6[7]; 10:14) and that one should avoid excess (הרבה) in both righteousness and wickedness (7:16–17).⁷² Even more clearly than עוד, the use of הרבה thus emphasises the endless and futile nature of Qohelet's activity.

In summary, v. 9 provides a less than glowing comment about Qohelet's

⁷¹ Lavoie, 'Un éloge', 160.

⁷² The association of הרבה and הבל in Qohelet teaching is noted by Lavoie and Laurent. Lavoie, 'Un éloge', 162; Françoise Laurent, 'Le livre de Qohéleth ou la retenue de l'écriture', *RevScRel* 79.1 (2005), 11. For a further examination of הבל see the excursus on pp. 165–170.

endless, and even excessive, wisdom endeavours. At first these descriptions of Qohelet seem to bolster his ethos as a great wise man, sharing his knowledge in the spoken and written word as a teacher and a scribe. Yet, contrary to Bartholomew's comparison of this verse with God's vindication of Job (42:7)⁷³ or Kamano's claim that Qohelet is presented as 'the Teacher *par excellence*',⁷⁴ there appears to be a subtle criticism in the description of v. 9. While there is nothing in this verse that suggests that Qohelet's teaching and literary activity is invalid, the characterisation of his work as עֹד, הַרְבֵּה, and the threefold use of *piel* verbs is strongly reminiscent of Qohelet's burdensome and even desperate search for understanding. This deviates from the frequent positive interpretation of this verse; however, it should not be such a surprise—given Qohelet's own ambivalence to wisdom (e.g. 1:17–18; 7:16, 23; 8:16–17; 9:15–16)—that a statement beginning 'because Qohelet was wise...' should then portray his work as less than ideal.

12:10

Qohelet sought to find satisfying words, but he honestly wrote words of truth.

Verse 10 contains two parallel clauses, in which Qohelet remains the subject. The first clause states Qohelet's aims and the second describes what he achieved. While v. 9 speaks about Qohelet's wisdom endeavour generally, the topic under consideration in v. 10 appears more specific to the body of the book. Both clauses mention דְּבָרִים, which recalls the דְּבָרֵי קְהִלָּת of Eccl 1:1. The most common interpretation of this verse understands it to be an affirmation of Qohelet as a model sage, in his mastery of form (v. 10a) and

⁷³ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 366–367.

⁷⁴ Kamano, *Cosmology*, 1.

content (v. 10b).⁷⁵ Yet as Fox has noted, the first clause does not say that Qohelet actually achieved his aim.⁷⁶ Bartholomew questions this and claims that such a negative reading would be incongruous with v. 9, which he interprets as an unmitigated commendation of his wisdom.⁷⁷ But as we have seen, this is not an accurate assessment of v. 9.

Critical to understanding the father's comments in v. 10 is his use of Qohelet's own terminology: **בקש** and **מצא**. As the author of the Qohelet character, it is unsurprising that this is a recurring feature of the epilogue. Since the epilogue contains the author's final words and is the place he evaluates Qohelet and presents his conclusions to his son, any allusions to Qohelet's words should be considered highly significant.

The verbs of seeking (**בקש**) and finding (**מצא**) are found together in three other places. In Eccl 7:25–26 Qohelet explains that he sought wisdom and knowledge, but found the woman who is a trap. In 7:27–28 Qohelet states the findings of his search, namely that he has *constantly* searched and not found (**עוד-בקשה נפשי ולא מצאתי**). The significance of this verse for the presentation of Qohelet's search is emphasised by the appearance of the implied author's voice in v. 27 (**אמר הקהלת**). Finally, in 8:17 Qohelet claims that even the wise person who seeks a knowledge God's works cannot find it (**לבקש**), *even if they claim to have found something*.⁷⁸ The father's allusion to these remarks suggests that Qohelet's search was a failure, at least in the

⁷⁵ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 191; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 125; Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 116; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 364; Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', 246.

⁷⁶ Fox, 'Frame-Narrative', 98.

⁷⁷ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 364–365.

⁷⁸ Lavoie further points out that the results of **בקש** are negative when humans are the subject and **מצא** is negated 7 times. Lavoie, 'Un éloge', 162.

sense of not finding what he was looking for. Qohelet himself admits as much (7:27–28) and puts to rest any suggestion that it might be otherwise (8:17).

The object of Qohelet's search is described as דְּבַר־יִחְפֵּי, that is, words which are pleasing with regards to their aesthetics⁷⁹ or meaning.⁸⁰ The use of חֲפִי elsewhere in Ecclesiastes is not particularly clarifying: it is used for a neutral matter (3:1, 17; 5:7[5:8]; 8:6), divine pleasure (5:3[4]), and the pleasure that a young man can derive from life but an old man cannot (12:1). Given that from the outset Qohelet has described his work as a search for a profitable (יִתְרוֹן) human existence (1:3), it is likely that this is the kind of 'pleasure' that the epilogist has in mind. In other words, דְּבַר־יִחְפֵּי refers to words that are existentially satisfying.

The second clause has a close relationship to the first, although the nature of this relationship is debated. We have already seen that many consider these two statements to praise two related aspects of his work (form and content). On the other hand, Shields considers this to be a contrast between what Qohelet sought to write, and what he actually wrote.⁸¹

To understand the second line, we must decipher וּכְתוּב, which the MT tradition has pointed as a passive participle (וְכָתוּב) and the LXX has similarly translated as γεγραμμένον. The shift from Qohelet as subject, to an impersonal subject 'what was written' is unexpected. This may be explained as emphasising the contrast between Qohelet's aim and the final result,⁸² or possibly suggesting

⁷⁹ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 209; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 171; Gordis, *Koheleth*; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 278.

⁸⁰ Galling, 'Prediger', 124; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 64–65; Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', 244.

⁸¹ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 68.

⁸² Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 68.

that someone else wrote the book from his materials.⁸³ Yet another explanation is that the text has been mispointed, and was originally an infinitive absolute, **וְכָתוּב**.⁸⁴ Driven by context, Longman previously argued in his commentary that **כָּתוּב** functions like an infinitive construct as a second object of **מִצָּא**, hence a statement that Qohelet failed in two respects.⁸⁵ However, Qohelet often uses the infinitive absolute in a way that is more satisfactory to this context, namely that of carrying over the finite sense of a preceding verb (Eccl 4:17[5:1]; 8:9; 9:11).⁸⁶ This reading is reflected by the active translation of a number of ancient Versions (Aq., Sym., Syr., Vulg.), which retain Qohelet as the subject of both clauses.⁸⁷

Despite not meeting his own aims, what Qohelet wrote is described in positive terms. As is common for Qohelet, **יֵשֶׁר** is a noun with adverbial function.⁸⁸ Its

⁸³ Lohfink, *Qobeleth*, 143.

⁸⁴ Podechard, *L'Éclésiaste*, 474; Gordis, *Kobeleth*, 342–343.

⁸⁵ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 275 n. 65.

⁸⁶ Schoors calls this good post-exilic Hebrew. Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 178–180. Longman has since adopted this position in Tremper Longman III, *The Fear of the Lord is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 39.

⁸⁷ Goldman objects to this emendation: ‘Against Podechard and Gordis one might ask, how **וְכָתוּב** could have been missed here and transformed into the difficult **וְכָתוּב**, particularly in Qoh, where this use of the infinitive is a rather frequent syntactic feature.’ The obvious response to this objection is that **כָּתוּב** is common in the OT (38 occurrences) and is something of a semi-technical expression for canonical works (e.g. Josh 8:31; 23:6; 1 Kgs 2:3; 2 Kgs 14:6; Dan 9:13; Ezra 3:2; Neh 8:14; 13:1; 2 Chr 23:18; 25:4; 35:12). By contrast, **כָּתוּב** is found on only one other occasion (Jer 32:44) and could easily have been misread in the present context by a scribe who considered the epilogue to be making a statement of canonical significance. Y. A. P. Goldman, ‘Commentaries on the Critical Apparatus: Qobeleth’, in *General Introduction and Megilloth: Ruth, Canticles, Qobeleth, Lamentations, Esther* BHQ 18 (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004), 112.

⁸⁸ Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 188–191.

meaning can be easily related to ‘honesty’, or ‘uprightness’,⁸⁹ whereas the use of it to describe truthfulness or correctness would be the only instance of it having this meaning and would create an unnecessary repetition of the content of what Qohelet wrote, which is described as דברי אמת. Seow rejects the translation ‘honestly’ because of the way that it anachronistically pits form (cf. v. 10a) against content (v. 10b);⁹⁰ however, since we have already rejected the view that the previous line refers to literary skill, the emphasis would be different.

Although Qohelet’s search did not lead to the existential gains he desired, he is commended for his critical integrity as someone who unflinchingly described his ‘unsought discoveries’.⁹¹ More than honest, what he wrote is also described as true (דברי אמת). Both of these descriptions are applied to Lady Wisdom in Prov 8:6–7 and surely make this the father’s strongest endorsement of Qohelet so far.⁹² Fox takes this entire statement as a superlative by reading ישר דבר אמת as a construct chain, which he translates as ‘most honest words of truth’.⁹³ The only example that Fox can find of a similar construction is Prov 22:21, which is equally debatable. It remains more probable that ישר functions adverbially, with דברי אמת as the direct object.⁹⁴

After having described Qohelet’s search as wearying and exhausting, the father

⁸⁹ HALOT, s. v. ‘יִשָּׁר’.

⁹⁰ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 386.

⁹¹ Michael V. Fox and Bezalel Porten, ‘Unsought Discoveries: Qohelet 7:23–8:1a’, *HS* 19 (1978): 26–38.

⁹² Julie A. Duncan, *Ecclesiastes*, AOTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 181. Contra Lavoie, who thinks that this expression indicates the disconcerting veracity with which Qohelet conducted his search for truth. Lavoie, ‘Un éloge’, 165.

⁹³ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 353; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 68.

⁹⁴ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 386.

proceeds in verse 10 to give a partial commendation of his literary product and hence the body of Ecclesiastes itself. The commendation is only partial because Qohelet—despite his excessive endeavours—did not find the satisfying human existence that he was looking for. Though he came up empty handed, he nevertheless had the integrity to record his unfavourable findings.

12:11

The words of wise men are like goads and the [words of] masters of collections are like implanted nails; they are given by a shepherd.

In verse 11 there is a minor shift of subject from Qohelet to the words of wise men (דברי חכמים). This clearly includes Qohelet's words, whom the father has already identified as a wise man (v. 9). The proverbial style of this verse has already been noted, and thus it is likely that Qohelet's words remain primarily on view, rather than there being a deliberate or contrastive shift in subject.

The use of דברי חכמים in Prov 1:6 and 22:17 (cf. 23:23) has led some to suggest it is a technical expression for wisdom literature, or more specifically the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.⁹⁵ A technical expression would be more likely if חכמים were definite or proven to be a professional role.⁹⁶ In Eccl 9:17, דברי חכמים is contrasted to the shouts of a ruler, thus providing additional confirmation that its meaning is less than technical.⁹⁷

Two comparisons give further information about these words. The first comparison (כדרבנות) appears to be from the world of animal agriculture. Although it is a *hapax legomenon*, there is general agreement that it relates to

⁹⁵ Wilson, 'Words of the Wise', 175–192; Farmer, *Who Knows*, 3.

⁹⁶ Note the definite הנביאים דבר in 1 Kgs 22:13; Jer 23:16; 27:14, 16; cf. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 171.

⁹⁷ Lavoie, 'Un éloge', 135.

דַּרְבָּן in 1 Sam 13:21 and is an Aramaic loan word (from Arabic *dariba*) for a sharp object used for goading animals.⁹⁸ Few interpreters have difficulty in linking such a description with Qohelet's unorthodox and stimulating words, although there is disagreement in regards to whether the focus is on the pain inflicted by goads⁹⁹ or the right conduct they promote.¹⁰⁰

The second comparison (כַּמְשֻׁמְרוֹת נְטוּעִים) has a disputed reference. One common interpretation is that it describes nails firmly fixed into a wall,¹⁰¹ and so indicates something of the reliable stabilising quality of wisdom teaching.¹⁰² The farming imagery of the first and third cola (רֵעָה), however, makes it preferable to see this verse as a related description of a crudely made herding implement.¹⁰³ Thus the first two cola are to be considered a chiasmic synonymous parallelism, which makes its point through subtle advancement rather than contrast or introduction of a new image. The second image makes it clear that it is the unpleasant character of these words that is in the foreground.¹⁰⁴ Together these related images portray wisdom teaching,¹⁰⁵

⁹⁸ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 210; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 191.

⁹⁹ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 354–355.

¹⁰⁰ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 210.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Jer 10:4; 2 Chr 3:9 where the orthographically similar מַסְמְרוֹת is used for nails or pegs. Schoors notes that the interchange of *sin* for *samekh* is common for Ecclesiastes and other late biblical books. Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 19.

¹⁰² Galling, 'Prediger', 124; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 548; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 367; Melanie Kohlmoos, *Kohelet: Der Prediger Salomo*, ATD 16.5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 251.

¹⁰³ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 354–355; Lavoie, 'Ambiguités', 143.

¹⁰⁴ It is possible that the first colon 'the words of wise men are like goads' was a traditional saying, to which the father added an additional line, in order to subvert its interpretation with regards to Qohelet's teaching.

¹⁰⁵ The chiasmic structure of v. 11a indicates that the final element in the second colon (בְּעֵלִי) corresponds in some way to דְּבַרֵּי חֲכָמִים in the first colon. In the OT, בְּעֵלִי is

specifically that in the style of Qohelet,¹⁰⁶ as a painful instrument with the possibility of being put to a good use. The less than favourable tone of this metaphor emerges when we compare it to the possible alternatives, such as a shepherd's rod and staff (cf. Ps 23:4).¹⁰⁷

Finally, this verse concludes with what interpreters have traditionally taken as a description of the divine source of wisdom. The **רעה אחר** is taken as a reference to God since he is elsewhere described as a shepherd (Ps 23:1) and 'one' (Deut 6:4).¹⁰⁸ Yet as often noted, the description of God as shepherd and an assertion of monotheism seems out of place in this context.¹⁰⁹ The other descriptions of God as shepherd depict his role as protector and keeper; however, this is not on view here.¹¹⁰ There is no comparable description of God elsewhere in the book of Ecclesiastes, where he is otherwise only God (**האלהים**) and creator (Eccl 12:1, cf. 12:7).

The imagery of a shepherd is also used of kings and leaders (2 Sam 5:2, 7:7; Jer 3:15; 10:21; etc.).¹¹¹ The complete expression **ר(ו)עה אחר** also appears in

used, almost always, in a personal ('master', 'lord') rather than impersonal ('member') sense. Thus **בעלי אספות** means something like 'masters of collections', as a parallel expression to **חכמים**. The reader must supply 'words of' to complete the comparison. Lavoie, 'Ambiguïtés', 140. Contra Wilson, 'Words of the Wise', 176; Krüger, *Qobeleth*, 207.

¹⁰⁶ As we have noted above, 'words of wise men' is not a technical expression; thus this is not a criticism of 'wisdom literature'. Given that the father has identified Qohelet as 'wise' in 12:9, it is specifically wisdom like his that is on view. We will explore this wisdom more specifically in Chapters 7–9.

¹⁰⁷ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 280.

¹⁰⁸ For example, Ogden, *Qobeleth*, 210; Gordis, *Kobeleth*, 344.

¹⁰⁹ E.g. Galling, 'Prediger', 124; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 172; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 387–388; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 354–355.

¹¹⁰ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 354–355.

¹¹¹ Lavoie, for example, claims that this is a reference to the royal fiction of earlier chapters.

Ezek 34:23; 37:24, where it describes a future Davidic king. In a rather strained interpretation Nicholas Perrin takes this as evidence of an emerging Messianism in wisdom literature.¹¹² A more straightforward reading is suggested by the immediate context—the shepherd is the one who uses the goads and nails of the previous two cola. In other words, a single metaphor encompasses the whole verse.

The main obstacle to the reading proposed here is **אִי־אֶחָד**. Longman suggests this is merely functioning as a late form of the indefinite article,¹¹³ which finds support in Exod 16:33; Judg 9:53; 13:2; 1 Sam 1:1; 7:9, 12; 1 Kgs 13:11; 19:4; 20:13; 22:9; 2 Kings 4:1; 8:6; 12:10; Ezek 8:8; Dan 8:3; 10:5.¹¹⁴ While it is difficult to see the relevance of ‘any shepherd’¹¹⁵ or ‘a lone shepherd’¹¹⁶ in the present context, a translation of ‘a certain shepherd’¹¹⁷ could be understood as the implied author making a subtle self-reference, presenting himself as the one using Qohelet’s words in a goad-like manner.

Qohelet’s own ambivalent attitude towards wisdom, and the father’s characterisation of the search for wisdom as an excessive endeavour (v. 9) has left the reader in an uncertain position with respect to Qohelet’s teaching and wisdom teaching generally. This verse clarifies the father’s position. The

Lavoie, ‘Ambiguïtés’, 149.

¹¹² In a rather strained interpretation, Perrin takes this as evidence of an emerging Messianism in wisdom literature, used in this instance to legitimate the teaching of the book. Nicholas Perrin, ‘Messianism in the Narrative Frame of Ecclesiastes’, *RB* 108.1 (2001), 54.

¹¹³ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 279.

¹¹⁴ GKC §125b.

¹¹⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 388.

¹¹⁶ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 79–81.

¹¹⁷ As in the use of **אִי־אֶחָד** to introduce an individual in Judg 13:2; 1 Sam 1:1; cf. ‘certain’ in NRSV; ESV; NIV.

father stresses that although the words of Qohelet are painful—and even dangerous—they are not without benefit. This verse also suggests that the value of Qohelet’s words is not intrinsic to the words themselves or to Qohelet’s intentions. Rather, the shepherd who wields them, whom we take as a reference to the father. It is not so much the source of the wisdom that matters, or even its own intent, but how it is used.¹¹⁸

12:12

Moreover, my son, take warning from them. The excessive production of books is without end and too much reflection is wearying to the flesh.

As argued above, the second half of the epilogue also begins with a conjunction that advances the discourse (וַיִּתֵּן). Despite the Masoretic accents, however, it is best to consider מְדַמָּה connected to הַזִּדְדָּה as its indirect object. The confusion over the accentuation is easy to understand in light of יִתֵּן being commonly followed by מִן and the later idiom that appears in the Mishnah (יִוְתֵר מִכֵּן).

So far, the father has given his evaluation of Qohelet, admitting he is a wise man but characterising what this entails as an endless and excessive exercise (v. 9). Despite failing to find what he was looking for, he discovered some important truths and had the integrity to record them (v. 10). The father describes Qohelet’s words in less than flattering terms, but nevertheless implies they can be used for instruction (v. 11). In this context, ‘moreover’, indicates not a change in direction or supplementary material, but rather an advancement from his evaluation of Qohelet to his own words of exhortation for the reader.

¹¹⁸ This observation may also be relevant to the inclusion of non-Israelite wisdom (e.g. The Instruction of Amenemope) in the book of Proverbs.

The placement of **מהמה** before **בני** places emphasis on the (in)direct object of the warning, which has its antecedent in v. 11 (**דברי חכמים**). With the *hiphil* stem, **מן** can be used to indicate the indirect object (the source of the warning, cf. Ezek 3:17),¹¹⁹ or the direct object (that which someone is counselled to avoid, cf. Ezek 3:18).¹²⁰ Already the father has characterised Qohelet's wisdom as excessive, fruitless with respect to its aims, and brutally honest about his failing. These aspects of his teaching provide thus appear to provide the warning (source), as the son learns from Qohelet himself about the limitations of his wisdom.

The exhortation continues with an address that is characteristic of Proverbs and other ancient Near Eastern wisdom texts: **בני**. Numerous interpreters assume this is the typical way for a wisdom teacher or sage to address his student, and reflects the school setting of the epilogist.¹²¹ In chapter 2, we argued that this address characterises a discourse setting of a father instructing his son, rather than that of the royal or scribal school.¹²² This address calls the reader to attention, and also draws upon the closeness of their relationship to supply the force of the exhortation.

The imperative **הזהר** is immediately followed by an infinitive construct (**עשות**),

¹¹⁹ Fox also rejects the possibility that **מן** indicates sources because whenever **מן** is used with the *niphal* stem (in Rabbinic sources only), it refers to the object. Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 356–357. However, there is no reason to exclude the uses of **מן** with the *hiphil* as relevant to the *niphal* stem, particularly since there is no material change in the semantic range of the verb.

¹²⁰ Lohfink, 'Satzöffnungen', 139.

¹²¹ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 222; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 550; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 69, 86; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 843.

¹²² Seow likewise affirms that the 'narrative situation' of the epilogue is that of parent-child instruction. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 388–389. Longman expresses uncertainty whether **בני** is a biological or vocational designation. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 280–281.

which Shields construes as the object of הִזְהָר. In support of this he points to the LXX translation and claims that it is natural to connect an infinitive construct to an imperative in biblical Hebrew.¹²³ Despite this claim, there are very few examples of such a connection. The vast majority of biblical occurrences of an imperative followed by an infinitive construct use a ל (e.g. לִקְרֹאת in Exod 4:27).¹²⁴ Most tellingly, the semantically related verb שָׁמַר shows that, like זָהָר, it requires מִן in such a construction: הִשְׁמַר מֵעֵבֶר (2 Kgs 6:9). Similarly, Eccl 12:12 would need to read הִזְהָר מֵעֲשֵׂת for the making of books to be the object of the warning.

If we were to connect הִזְהָר with עֲשֵׂת without מִן the meaning would be positive: ‘be careful to make many books’, as is understood by Tg. Qoh. Despite assertions to the contrary,¹²⁵ this also appears to be way the text was understood by the LXX. Like הִזְהָר, φυλάσσω requires a preposition (ἀπό) in order indicate a warning away from something. Otherwise the command is positive, for example, φυλάξασθε ποιεῖν occurs 12 times in the LXX, and means ‘be careful to obey’ (e.g. Deut 6:3). The common mistranslation of the LXX arises from the difficulty presented by the negative characterisation of the activities that follow in the rest of the verse, which the Targum avoids with significant paraphrase: ‘Be careful to make many books *of wisdom* without end and *to occupy yourself much with words of Torah* and to contemplate the weariness of the flesh.’¹²⁶

¹²³ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 87.

¹²⁴ The only instance that resembles Shield’s claim is Isa 1:16 (הִדְלִי הָרַע).

¹²⁵ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 87; Lavoie, ‘L’autocritique ironique’, 397–398.

¹²⁶ Peter S. Knobel, *The Targum of Qobelet: Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes*, The Aramaic Bible: The Targums 15 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 54. The use of italics to indicate targumic expansion is original.

The interpretation of **הזהר** with the least problems is to read it with **מזהמה**, as in the translation ‘take warning from them’. The implication of the ‘moreover’, is that the source of this warning is in what the father has already stated about Qohelet and his teaching. The content of the warning has already been implied by the characterisation of Qohelet’s search as excessive-yet-fruitless. It is now further clarified with a supporting statement that recapitulates the father’s assessment of Qohelet more explicitly.

The first such excess is described as **עשות ספרים הרבה**. Fredericks argues that the meaning of **עשות** is best understood in the very general sense of ‘to use’, hence translates this phrase as ‘excessive bookwork’. He also supports this with reference to the parallel phrase ‘much studying’.¹²⁷ Although his view reflects the Rabbinic expression **עשה תורה** ‘to study Torah’ (m. Ps. 119:42), there is no comparable usage in earlier texts. A more relevant comparison is the Aramaic phrase **עבד ספרא**, which Fox understands as referring to composing or compiling.¹²⁸ A closer inspection of the fifth century BC Aramaic letter Fox cites, reveals a distinction between the action of the issuer of the deed (**עבד**) and the action of the scribe in writing it (**כתב**).¹²⁹ From this we might expect that if the father were trying to deter his son from scribal work itself, he would use **כתב**. The more general **עשה** suggests that the father has in mind the whole process of the literary production that goes on in the search for **יתרון**. The force of this warning, therefore, is not to avoid writing wisdom books himself but the more general point that searching for such a

¹²⁷ Fredericks, ‘Ecclesiastes’, 244.

¹²⁸ E.g. Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 358.

¹²⁹ Emil G. Kraeling, *The Brooklyn Museum Aramaic Papyri: New Documents of the Fifth Century B.C. from the Jewish Colony at Elephantine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 9:22.

gain in life is a dead end—even for Israel’s scribes and teachers.

Contrary to Seow’s assertion that the warning in this verse is simply formulaic, akin to ‘do not go beyond what has been set down’ in the Instructions of Kagemni,¹³⁰ there is a close relationship between this clause (v. 12b) and the description of Qohelet’s own literary activities in v. 9; both matters are characterised as excessive (הרבה).¹³¹ This is further emphasised in v. 12 by the redundant אֵין קִין, which is used elsewhere by Qohelet to characterise a futile activity.¹³² The implication is thus that, despite the large number of writings produced in the search for a better life for humankind, these authors never find what they (or their readers) are looking for (cf. 12:10a).

A second clause that adds further content to the father’s warning hinges upon the debated meaning of לַהֲג, which interpreters often associate with the Arabic word for ‘study’ (*lahija*).¹³³ This may again place scribal activity on view, from which the implied audience is deterred. However, such a root is unattested in Hebrew and the etymology is a distant one.¹³⁴ Another common proposal is that the text originally read לַהֲגַת, but lost its final ת due to haplography before הַרְבֵּה.¹³⁵ This is attractive in light of the frequent usage of הַגָּה for reflection or mediation in wisdom contexts (e.g. Ps 1:2; 37:30; Prov 15:28; 24:2; Sir 6:37; 14:20) and the fact that most infinitive constructs in Ecclesiastes are prefixed

¹³⁰ AEL 1:60; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 394.

¹³¹ While הַרְבֵּה itself is not pejorative, the father has chosen a term that Qohelet uses to describe excess (e.g. 6:11; 7:16, 17).

¹³² Lavoie, ‘L’autocritique ironique’, 400–401.

¹³³ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 90.

¹³⁴ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 358.

¹³⁵ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 192.

by ל.¹³⁶

Reflection or meditation could aptly describe Qohelet's inner monologue, which has been disclosed to the reader. It is not primarily a literary activity, but the restless yearning of the human heart—an activity that often takes place for the duration of the day and/or night (Ps 1:2; 38:13[12]; 63:7[6]). The father's characterisation of this kind of meditation as 'wearying to the flesh' (יגעַת בשר) is similar to what Qohelet admits at the very start of his search (1:8). What Qohelet means by יגעִים in 1:8 is explained in that verse as the inability of human eyes and ears to find what they are looking for. Thus it seems that what the father is describing for his son is not the physical exhaustion of study, but the unsatisfying search for יתרֹון.

Verse 12 can, therefore, be understood as a warning that draws upon the father's assessment of Qohelet's wisdom endeavours. The father warns, not of writings specifically (like Qohelet's discourse), but of the type of wisdom they represent.¹³⁷ The father is in fact confident that the juxtaposition of Qohelet's excessive endeavours and the fruitlessness of his searching makes his words the best source of warning.

12:13

The end of the matter. Everything has been heard. Fear God and keep his commands, for this is [for] every man.

After v. 12 draws upon Qohelet's search to give a warning about all the energy that has been wasted in the fruitless search for wisdom, v. 13 provides a positive instruction of where the son should direct his youthful zeal. This is—as indicated by the emphatic expression that begins the verse (סוף דבר)—of the

¹³⁶ Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 183–184.

¹³⁷ Contra Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 284.

greatest significance in the epilogue and is rightly considered the primary point the father wishes his son to grasp. This emphasis is indicated by its terse expression¹³⁸ and the redundancy of **הכל נשמע**.¹³⁹ There is also a clear and direct relationship between this emphatic expression and the preceding statements. There is already too much (failed) writing and meditation upon human existence (v. 12), the time for speaking (**דבר**) and listening to (**שמע**) such matters has concluded. Qohelet's words are not wrong—they have even been affirmed as true (v. 10)—but the father needs no more of them to prove his point (cf. 1:9).

Two parallel imperatival clauses form the centre of this verse and state the father's key concern for his son. The first (**את־האלהים ירא**) is related to instructions that Qohelet has already given himself (3:14; 5:6[7]; 7:18; 8:12–13). Yet the epilogist seems to have something different in mind to Qohelet. Qohelet, after all, has not reached the fear of God as his ultimate conclusion, but rather affirms it as a way to mitigate the vanity he has found. People fear God as a result of his unpredictable rule of this world (3:14), or to avoid his wrath (5:6[7]; 7:18), or by creedal conviction despite being contradicted by experience (8:12–13).¹⁴⁰

The divergence between Qohelet's comments about the fear of God and the epilogist's is made clear by the second imperative (**את־מצותיו שמור**), which shows that the kind of fear that the father has in mind is chiefly expressed in

¹³⁸ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 282. Shields considers the lack of definite article on **דבר** to be the sign of an idiomatic expression, although he concedes that it is not known elsewhere. Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 92.

¹³⁹ This caused some difficulty for the versions, which avoid the redundancy by taking **נשמע** as an imperative (LXX, Syr.) or an imperfect (Vulg.). Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 390.

¹⁴⁰ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 282; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 97.

covenant obedience, just as it is defined in Deut 5:29; 6:2; 8:6; 10:12–13; 13:4; 17:19; 28:58; 31:12; 2 Kgs 17:34–37.¹⁴¹ The epilogist’s command is not alien to Israelite wisdom literature: the fear of God and wisdom are related concepts in Proverbs, although without explicit reference to *divine* commands. The only other known explicit linkage is found in Sirach (e.g. 1:26–30). By contrast, covenant obedience finds almost no place in Qohelet’s teaching. One possible exception is in Eccl 5:3–5[4–6], which closely resembles Deut 23:22–24[21–23].¹⁴² As we shall see in chapter 9, Qohelet’s motivation is different.¹⁴³ Qohelet advises one to be circumspect before God in order to avoid unnecessary loss. The instruction in Deuteronomy comes in the context of Yahweh’s covenant with Israel, and lays out the means by which they can live as his people and enjoy his blessing in the land (e.g. Deut 23:21[20]; 24:4).¹⁴⁴

The difference between the epilogist’s command for covenant obedience and Qohelet’s teaching is most obvious in the case of Eccl 11:9, which contains very strong echoes of Num 15:39.

| | |
|---|---|
| Eccl 11:9 | Num 15:39 |
| והלך בדרכי לבך ובמראי עיניך | ולא־תתרו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם |
| <i>Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes.</i> | <i>Do not follow after your hearts and after your eyes.</i> |

¹⁴¹ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 849.

¹⁴² Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 371.

¹⁴³ Stuart Weeks, “Fear God and Keep His Commandments”: Could Qohelet Have Said This?, in *Wisdom and Torah: The Reception of “Torah” in the Wisdom Literature of the Second Temple Period*. eds. Bernd U. Schipper and D. Andrew Teeter, JSJSup 163 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 102.

¹⁴⁴ Contra Bartholomew, who stresses that both are about avoiding divine wrath, without noticing the two different conceptions of wrath at play. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 206.

This apparent conflict with the Torah was so troubling to early interpreters that it led to debate regarding the canonical status of the book,¹⁴⁵ and was given an opposite meaning in most of the ancient witnesses.¹⁴⁶ The tension between this verse and the epilogist's remarks is one of the most significant arguments for those who read the epilogue (especially vv. 12–14) as the work of a later pious editor.¹⁴⁷ Qohelet's teaching in 11:9 will be examined in further detail in chapter 8.

A final distinction between the father's and Qohelet's exhortations to fear God is the prominence each assigns to it.¹⁴⁸ Even readings that seek to find an essential agreement between Qohelet and the epilogist usually concede as much: 'the epilogue simply makes explicit what Qohelet himself has taught by implication'.¹⁴⁹ For Qohelet, it falls into the category of miscellaneous advice for living in an unpredictable and uncontrollable world. For Qohelet, the only thing that approaches universal (כל־הָאָדָם) validity and benefit is the enjoyment of life's pleasures (cf. 3:13; 5:18[19]) and the reflection upon death (7:2). The father picks up the same expression and emphatically states ('for this is [for] every man') that this is far truer of the law than anything that Qohelet had found.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 3–4.

¹⁴⁶ For example, the LXX reads ἐν ὁδοῖς καρδίας σου ἄμωμος καὶ μὴ ἐν ὁράσει. See Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 260–261.

¹⁴⁷ E.g. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 48–49.

¹⁴⁸ Wilson, 'Words of the Wise', 178.

¹⁴⁹ Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 10 (Leicester: Apollos, 2000), 101. cf. Kamano, *Cosmology*, 251–253.

¹⁵⁰ Although 'the whole of man' avoids the need to supply an additional element in this verse (i.e., 'for'), 'every man' is consistent with Qohelet's earlier use and the rest of the OT. Eccl

After deterring the son from pursuing his own Qohelet-like search for finding profit in his earthly existence, the father explains where Qohelet's words ought to (positively) goad the reader: Israel's covenant faith.

12:14

For God will bring every work into judgment, concerning every hidden thing, whether good or evil.

This verse provides the motivation (כִּי) for the father's commands in v. 13 and accounts for the divergence between Qohelet's central exhortations and his own—God's judgment of humanity.¹⁵¹ Though the father and Qohelet share a common vocabulary of divine judgment, a brief survey is necessary to compare how the implied author and his character use this concept.

Similarly to the father, Qohelet speaks of God's judgment of persons (אֶת-עַל-הַצִּדִּיק וְאֶת-הָרָשָׁע יִשְׁפֹּט הָאֱלֹהִים; cf. 3:17) on account of their deeds (עַל-כֵּן יִבְיָאֵךְ הָאֱלֹהִים בְּמִשְׁפָּט; cf. 11:9). Qohelet clearly conceives of such judgment taking place as earthly reward or punishment (2:26; 5[6]; 7:26). This is apparent from his confession that he does not know what happens to a person's spirit after death (3:20–21) and that the fate that one awaits is the

3:13; 5:18[19]; 7:2; cf. Gen 7:21; Exod 9:19; Num 12:3; 16:29, 32; Josh 11:14; Judg 16:17; 1 Kgs 5:11[4:31]; 8:38; Jer 31:30; Ezek 38:20; Zech 8:10; Ps 116:11; 2 Chr 6:29. cf. Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 850. For similar elliptical syntax to this clause, see Pss 109:4; 120:7; Job 8:9; cf. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 212.

¹⁵¹ Perry attempts to make the case that it is God's actions that are brought into judgment by כִּלְ-הָאָדָם (v. 13) by repointing מַעֲשֵׂה to a construct form. This is certainly incorrect since it relies upon the claim that מַעֲשֵׂה is always used in Qohelet for God's actions, which is clearly not the case in 2:4, 11; 3:22; 4:4; 5:5[6]; 8:11, 14; 9:7. Moreover, Perry's resulting translation is hardly intelligible in this context: 'For [otherwise] he [i.e. man] will bring all of God's works to judgment, whether it be good or whether it be evil.' T. A. Perry, *The Book of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) and the Path to Joyous Living* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 141–147.

shadowy non-existence of Sheol (9:10).

Qohelet also views divine judgment as unknowable. His affirmation of divine judgment in 3:17 is in the context of the sovereign yet inscrutable works of God (3:1–15). He maintains that there is a time for such reward and punishment, having already affirmed that God’s timing is not revealed to humankind (3:11). In 9:1 Qohelet says that the outcome of God’s judgment is also unknowable—even the righteous and the wise do not know if God’s disposition towards them is favourable (אֶהְיֶה) or not (שֶׁנֶּאֱדָרָה).¹⁵²

More than mysterious, the unknowable judgment of God is highly problematic for Qohelet. This is clearest in 8:10–14, where his belief in God’s justice (8:12–13) is contradicted by what he sees (8:10–11, 14). Moreover, in 9:2–6 he questions the justice of a common fate for all people, regardless of their morality or religiosity. Given the little observable benefit, it is understandable that Qohelet cautions against excessive righteousness (7:16–18).

In many of the passages where Qohelet raises the issue of divine judgment, it results in his carpe diem advice (3:22; 8:15; 9:7–10). The unknowable or problematic operation of divine judgment means that one should take whatever opportunities for enjoyment present themselves. The key exception to this is 11:9b, where divine judgment is raised as a qualification or complication (וְדָעַ) within a carpe diem passage, rather than the motivation for it.¹⁵³

This brief survey of Qohelet’s understanding of divine judgment permits a comparison with that of the father. Though the brevity of the father’s comments prevents a conclusive interpretation, two key differences are evident. First, the father emphasises the completeness of divine judgment. This can be

¹⁵² This explains Qohelet’s אֶהְיֶה evaluation in 2:26.

¹⁵³ See further pp. 298–303.

seen in his affirmation that it encompasses all deeds, both known and unknown, good and evil.¹⁵⁴ Though Qohelet had observed the failure of divine judgment (3:16, 8:10–11, 14), the father’s words would suggest that this is only apparent. The father does not explain how he expects God’s justice to play out so completely and extensively; however, if Ecclesiastes is among the latest books in the Old Testament, then his view of judgment may possibly reflect a nascent belief in the afterlife. Qohelet’s earth-bound perspective (תחת השמש) and uncertainty surrounding death (3:21) would thus be a problem inviting an eschatological and post-mortem judgment as the solution.¹⁵⁵

Secondly, the father employs the concept of divine judgment for a very different purpose from Qohelet. As we have seen, Qohelet finds God’s operation of justice both unknowable and problematic, which gives rise to and complicates his exhortation to enjoyment (ורע; 11:9b). For the father, divine judgment is the prime motivating factor (כי) for his ethic of covenantal obedience in 12:14 and explains why it is important for ‘every man’.¹⁵⁶

The final verse of the epilogue, therefore, is far from a formulaic statement by a pious editor; rather, it explains the father’s rationale for his son to pursue covenant obedience and why this ‘wisdom’ is of universal validity and

¹⁵⁴ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 283.

¹⁵⁵ Ogden argues that Qohelet himself believes that some form of יתרון may be found beyond the grave. Though his empirical observation cannot prove as much, the earthly failure of divine justice causes him to insist in some extension of God’s goodness Ogden, *Qobeleth*, 22–26. By contrast, Murphy denies that there is a concept of the afterlife in Israelite wisdom literature prior to the Gk. edition of Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. Roland E. Murphy, ‘Death and Afterlife in the Wisdom Literature’, in *Death, Life-After-Death, Resurrection and The World-to-Come in the Judaisms of Antiquity*. eds. Alan J. Avery-Peck and Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in Late Antiquity* 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 101–116.

¹⁵⁶ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 361–362.

significance: the judgment of God that reaches all deeds.¹⁵⁷

6.3 The Rhetorical Goals and Strategies of the Father

The above verse-by-verse analysis has sought to deal with the difficulties of the epilogue and provide an interpretation of the passage, from which we can identify the father's rhetorical goals. The clearest indication of the father's rhetorical goals can be found in his imperatives, which reveal his aims in speaking to his son and in presenting Qohelet. In short, it appears that the father has two complementary rhetorical goals: deterring his son from Qohelet's mode of wisdom and leading him towards covenantal obedience.¹⁵⁸ Inseparable from these goals are the didactic strategies the father uses to achieve them. They are implicit in the epilogue and will be examined more thoroughly in chapters 7–9, which deal with Qohelet's words themselves.

6.3.1 To Deter His Son from Qohelet's Mode of Wisdom

The first rhetorical goal is found in v. 12, where the father instructs his son to 'take warning from them' (מהמה ... הזהר). The content of this imperative is commonly misunderstood because of the tendency to: 1) consider מהמה to be governed by וייתר; 2) identify the subsequent infinitive constructs as the objects of הזהר; 3) and/or misjudge the function of מן. As argued above, מהמה should be read as the indirect object of the warning, which specifies its source. The

¹⁵⁷ The epilogist's use of כל-האדם need not be universal in the fuller sense, since כל- can easily refer to every Israelite as it does throughout the Torah. This is probably the most fitting use of this word here, given the epilogist's commendation of obedience to the law of Moses.

¹⁵⁸ In classical terms, these goals most resemble deliberative rhetoric as the father wishes his son to avoid a set of future actions and instead pursue a different course. As is the case with most wisdom literature, the primary concern is conduct, rather than assessment of events or persons. Qohelet's rhetoric has been assessed in similar terms, cf. Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric*, 22; Sneed, *Politics of Pessimism*, 170–174.

father warns his son ‘from these things’ rather than ‘of/away from these things’. The antecedent of **מִדְּבָרָם** is ‘the words of wise men’, which chiefly refers to Qohelet’s mode of wisdom.

It is a mistake, therefore, to maintain that the son is simply warned away from Qohelet or his discourse. On the contrary, it is in Qohelet’s person and words that the son can hear the warning that the father intends. The father’s primary didactic strategy is thus the use of a character to instruct his son, much like the use of Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly in Proverbs 1–9. However, unlike these monochrome portraits of wisdom and folly, Qohelet is a far more complex character.

Positively, the father builds up Qohelet’s ethos in a number of ways. In the well-recognised Solomonic fiction of chs. 1–2, Qohelet is invested with the means and the intellect to follow his wisdom to its ultimate conclusion. His richness in experience gives weight to his observations and reflections. In the epilogue, the father draws attention to Qohelet’s prolific teaching and writing (v. 9). The words of Qohelet constitute a thoroughly explored and carefully considered life lived in accordance with his wisdom.

Negatively, however, Qohelet’s life and discourse is characterised by excess. His royal exploits in 2:1–11 involve embracing both wisdom and folly (2:3) and pursuing his every desire (2:10). Qohelet’s excessive first person speech, earthly perspective, and reliance on his eyes and heart present him as an embodiment of human wisdom. Focusing upon his literary endeavours, the father draws attention in 12:9 to his constant (**עוֹרֵד**) teaching and great many proverbs (**הַרְבֵּה**), and condemns such efforts as endless (**אֵין קֵץ**) and wearying (**יִגְעַת**) in 12:12. Despite these great efforts, Qohelet could not find the existential good that his ‘wisdom’ promised him (cf. 12:10a).

The reference in these words and vv. 9–12 to the literary activity of wise men

has been taken as proof that the son is located in the wisdom school.¹⁵⁹ Yet as we have already noted, the warning for the son is not specifically related to scholarly activities. As with the royal fiction of 1:12–2:26, these statements point to those whose prominence or resources exceed that of the son in order to bolster the message. We can deduce, therefore, something of an *a fortiori* approach to the father's rhetorical strategy: if Qohelet's wisdom fails a great king and wise man, then it would similarly fail the son. The characterisation of Qohelet as industrious and highly resourced is a means for the father to prove to the son that *it is Qohelet's wisdom itself that is deficient*.

A second didactic strategy that builds upon this characterisation of Qohelet is his own admission of failure. We can observe this in the reading of v. 10b defended above. Although Qohelet did not find the satisfying existence he was looking for, his findings are indeed valid (אמת) and he recorded them honestly (ישר). Indeed, the father could easily have attacked Qohelet's wisdom more directly; however, the strategy he chose to employ was to get his protagonist to admit his own failings.

The father's first goal, namely to deter his son from Qohelet's mode of wisdom, is served by the use of a character (Qohelet) who employs such wisdom with great resources and intensity. Qohelet thus provides a thorough demonstration of the limitations of this wisdom and honestly confesses its failure to achieve earthly benefit.

6.3.2 To Lead His Son towards Covenantal Obedience

The second rhetorical goal is closely related to the first, such that they are not two separate goals but together comprise the father's one purpose for his son.

¹⁵⁹ Shields claims that the epilogue is the best biblical evidence for a class of sages. Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 46.

After deterring his son from a Qohelet-like search for earthly gain (יתרון), he now points his son towards the revealed covenant faith of Israel (תחת השמש), the significance of this command is emphasised by the father's announcement that these are his very final words (סוף דבר) and that enough has been heard (הכל נשמע) for him to make his point. This expression does not so much indicate that Qohelet's words lead directly to the conclusion that is about to be offered, but rather than Qohelet's words have gone on long enough to prove that they cannot deliver what was promised (1:3), thus paving the way for something else.

The father points to an alternative mode of wisdom with an exhortation delivered as two related commands. The first command (את־האלהים ירא) is a typical expression for covenant faith. Fear connotes the response of Moses and the Israelites to his theophanies (Exod 3:6; 20:20; Deut 5:5) and is prescribed as Israel's response to God as covenant partner (e.g. Deut 4:10; 6:2, 13, 24; 8:6). A similar expression (יראת יהוה) is found twenty times in the book of Proverbs, where the covenant connection is indicated by the use of the divine name.

Qohelet himself advocates the fear of God in Eccl 3:14; 5:6[7]; 7:18; 8:12–13. As such, some interpreters propose that the epilogist is in agreement with Qohelet, or selectively emphasises his teaching.¹⁶⁰ However, as we shall see in chapter 9, for Qohelet, the fear of God is a part of his avoidance of risk, rather than indicating covenantal faith (as in Prov 1:8).

In contrast to Qohelet, the covenantal overtones of the father's command are made clear by the parallel statement ואת־מצותיו שמור, which recalls the

¹⁶⁰ E.g. Sheppard, 'Epilogue', 185–186; Webb, *Festal Garments*, 104–105; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 213–215; Duncan, *Ecclesiastes*, 186–187.

Sinai covenant (e.g. Exod 20:6; Deut 4:2; 4:40; 5:10, 29; 6:2, 17, 25; etc.). This is arguably more explicit here than in Proverbs, where the commands are usually the father's (Prov 2:1; 3:1; 4:4; 6:20, 23; 7:1, 2).¹⁶¹ That the father's advice is meant to be heard in contrast to that of Qohelet is apparent from his use of the expression כִּי־זֶה כָּל־הָאָדָם, '*for this is [for] every man*' (cf. 3:13; 5:18[19]; 7:2).

The epilogist provides a second motivation (כִּי) for his exhortations with a statement about divine judgment (v. 14). This is the most direct challenge to Qohelet's thought yet, with Crenshaw going so far as to say that this 'summary [in vv. 13b–14] is alien to anything Qohelet has said thus far'.¹⁶² Qohelet's priority was to discover what was good for man during his life on earth (1:3), and as such his quest subordinated theology to anthropology and cosmology—hence Qohelet's penchant for the expression 'under the sun'. While Qohelet speaks about judgment, for him it is an uncertain reality (3:17, 20–21), which he finds contradicted by experience (8:10–14). The place of divine judgment in Qohelet's thought is as an obstacle to the anthropology he promotes (11:9).

The father, however, asserts the opposite and places theology above anthropology: it is not humanity's assessment of God but God's assessment of humanity which matters above all else. It is clear from this that the father's perspective differs markedly from Qohelet's 'under the sun' perspective. Indeed, the father's description of divine judgment here may even be post-mortem and eschatological. In contrast to the 'broken' exercise of divine judgment, and the apparently peaceful deaths of the wicked (8:10), the father affirms the completeness and perfectness of divine judgment three times: all deeds, all

¹⁶¹ Sheppard, 'Epilogue', 184–185.

¹⁶² Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 92.

hidden things, whether good or evil. Given the great problem and uncertainty surrounding death for Qohelet (2:14–16; 3:18–21; 6:12; 9:1–6), it may be that the father answers Qohelet’s ‘under the sun’ perspective with one of eschatological judgment.

In view of the father’s exhortation to his son regarding covenantal obedience, we can assume that the son is familiar with the law.¹⁶³ This familiarity permits a further strategy in service of the father’s aims, namely that of a contrast between Qohelet’s words and that of the law or conventional wisdom. As a character, Qohelet himself may not be aware of the significance of his words, thus allowing for the possibility of irony as he serves as an unwitting tool in service of the father’s aims.

6.4 Summary and Conclusions

The epilogue of Ecclesiastes (12:9–14) is best understood as the conclusion to the book. The shift to a voice who speaks about Qohelet in the third person indicates that we hear in it the voice the implied author, who progresses the discourse to matters of great importance (וִיתֵר). The close connection between the epilogue and body of the book is seen in the linguistic similarities and the often ironic use of Qohelet’s terminology. Similarly, the epilogue bears little resemblance to a typical colophon, but appears more like the exhortatory conclusion of an ancient Near Eastern didactic text. The epilogue consists of two closely related halves, reflected by the use of וִיתֵר (vv. 9, 12) and a corresponding shift from description to exhortation.

¹⁶³ Longman is overly ambitious in claiming a reference to the *Tanakh* in vv. 13–14 (‘fear God’ as Writings, ‘keep his commands’ as Torah, and ‘God will bring every deed into judgment’ as Prophets). Admittedly, ‘keep his commands’ has a strong connection to the Torah; however, none of these themes are exclusive to a canonical division. Longman, *Fear of the Lord*, 41.

In vv. 9–11, the father gives an evaluation of Qohelet, describing his many wisdom endeavours. Although it sounds like literary achievement, the father draws particular attention to their excesses and implies that in his efforts, Qohelet did not find what he was looking for. His kind of teaching is best understood as a crude tool, although one that can be put to good use. In vv. 12–14 the father does just that as he expresses his rhetorical goals and the purpose of his presentation of Qohelet: to warn his son from Qohelet’s self-reliant wisdom and urge him to covenantal obedience as true wisdom.

In the service of these rhetorical goals, the epilogue intimates at least three didactic strategies employed by the father. First, and most fundamentally, is the father’s use of an ambiguous character (Qohelet) to instruct his son (cf. 12:11). Ecclesiastes 12:9 describes him as a wise man with literary skill, yet his best endeavours are defined by frustration (הרבה, עוד; cf. אין קץ, יגעת בשר, 12:12) and failure (בקש קהלת למצא in 12:10). This effectively demonstrates that Qohelet’s mode of wisdom is fundamentally flawed.

Secondly, Qohelet himself gives his own warnings and admissions (וכתוב ישר (דברי אמת), which deter the son from a similar search and prepare the way for covenantal obedience. Qohelet speaks of the futility (הבל) of so many of his endeavours, confesses his inability to grasp true wisdom (7:23), and acknowledges the limitations of his advice (2:26; 6:1–2; 9:10; 11:7–12:7). Here it is clear that Qohelet’s words cannot be described as a mere foil, but rather contain the hard won truths of a misguided search.

Finally, we can expect an interaction between Qohelet’s words and those of the law and covenantal approach to wisdom (Prov 1:8). The father’s commands suggest a contrast between Qohelet’s wisdom and the law (vv. 12–13), which we may also expect to be implied in Qohelet’s words themselves. The difference between the son’s knowledge of the law and Qohelet’s wisdom allows the

possibility of irony for the father to exploit.

Having identified the rhetorical unit (1:1–12:14), the implied author, and his goals for the implied reader, we are now well placed to analyse the words of Qohelet. As a character and pedagogical tool of the father, our purpose in this analysis is to understand the way in which his discourse is ultimately subservient to the father's. To permit a deeper analysis we will focus upon three key texts, which impart Qohelet's findings (7:23–29), core advice (11:7–12:7), and supplementary advice (4:17–5:6[5:1–7]).¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ This characterisation of these texts is not assumed, but argued within their respective chapters.

CHAPTER 7

QOHELET'S FINDINGS: ANALYSIS OF ECCLESIASTES 7:23–29

Our rhetorical-critical study of Ecclesiastes has delimited 1:1–12:14 as the unit of study, established the epilogist as the implied author who instructs his son, and identified his rhetorical goals as deterring his son from self-reliant wisdom and urging him to pursue covenantal obedience.

The final step of reading Ecclesiastes as parental discourse involves an analysis of the words of Qohelet. Given the discourse setting of the book, we will treat Qohelet's teaching as a pedagogical tool employed by the father as the means of instructing his son. The goal of this analysis, therefore, is not to determine simply what Qohelet says, but also how his words achieve the father's rhetorical goals.

Two general principles underlie the selection of texts for analysis (Eccl 7:23–29; 11:7–12:7; 4:17–5:6[5:1–7]). First, they have been chosen because they are representative of Qohelet's teaching and allow us to trial our thesis across the breadth of Qohelet's discourse, and to do so at significant depth. Secondly, each of these texts contains 'problems' that have stumped and divided interpreters. We can thus test whether reading Ecclesiastes as parental discourse can withstand, or even explain, these difficulties.

In this chapter, the selected text is Eccl 7:23–29. This text commends itself for further study for three reasons. First, the voice of the implied author rises to the surface in 7:27, where he says **אמר הקהלת**.¹ As the only occurrence of

¹ The Masoretic Text actually records **אמרה קהלת**; however, there is general agreement that this is the result of an incorrect division. Theories of a Canaanite perfect *qatala* or the intentional feminisation of Qohelet's name have nothing to commend them. Schoors,

this within the body of the text, the author marks this passage as a significant moment in Qohelet's discourse. Secondly, it features Qohelet's inner monologue,² which is characteristic of so much of the book. Finally, there is the 'problem' of Qohelet's apparent misogyny, which has been the dominant scholarly preoccupation with this text in recent decades.³

Pleasing Words Part I, 79–80; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 580–581. Contra Dahood, 'Phoenician Background', 277; Perry, *Dialogues*, 132.

² The text shifts from second person to first person speech in 7:23 and contains his favourite terms of introspection, namely **אמרתי**, **לבי**, and **נפשי**. On Qohelet's first person autobiography, see Christianson, *Time to Tell*, 33–42.

³ Klaus Baltzer, 'Women and War in Qohelet 7:23–8:1a', *HTR* 80.1 (1987): 127–132; Norbert Lohfink, 'War Kohelet ein Frauenfeind? Ein Versuch, die Logik und den Gegenstand von Koh, 7:23–8,1a herauszufinden', in *La sagesse de l'Ancien Testament*. ed. Maurice Gilbert, BETL 51, 2nd ed. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990), 259–287; Thomas Krüger, "'Frau Weisheit" in Koh 7:26', *Bib* 73.3 (1992): 394–403; Ingrid Riesener, 'Frauenfeindschaft im Alten Testament: Zum Verständnis von Qoh 7,25–29', in *Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit.: Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Weisheit. Diethelm Michel zum 65. Geburtstag*. eds. Anja A. Diesel et al., BZAW 241 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), 193–207; Dominic Rudman, 'Woman as Divine Agent in Ecclesiastes', *JBL* 116.3 (1997): 411–427; Choon-Leong Seow, 'Dangerous Seductress or Elusive Lover? The Woman of Ecclesiastes 7', in *Women, Gender, and Christian Community*. eds. Jane D. Douglass and James F. Kay (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 23–33; Eric S. Christianson, 'Qoheleth the "Old Boy" and Qoheleth the "New Man": Misogynism, the Womb and a Paradox in Ecclesiastes', in *Wisdom and Psalms: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*. eds. Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine, FCB (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 109–136; Carole R. Fontaine, "'Many Devices" (Qoheleth 7:23–8:1): Qoheleth, Misogyny and the *Malleus Maleficarum*', in *Wisdom and Psalms: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* FCB (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 137–168; Johan Y. S. Pakk, 'The Significance of **אִשָּׁה** in Qoh 7,26: "More Bitter than Death is the Woman, If She Is a Snare"', in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*. ed. Antoon Schoors, BETL 136 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 373–383; Johan Y. S. Pakk, 'Women as Snares: A Metaphor of Warning in Qoh 7,26 and Sir 9,3', in *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Ben Sira and the Book of Wisdom. Festschrift M. Gilbert*. eds. N. Calduch-Benages and J. Vermeylen, BETL 143 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999), 397–404; Aron Pinker, 'Qohelet's Views on Women—Misogyny or Standard Perceptions? An Analysis of Qohelet 7,23–29 and 9,9', *SJOT* 26.2 (2012): 157–191; Vittoria D'Alario, 'Between Misogyny and

This rhetorical analysis will proceed in the following steps. We will begin with a survey of the significant readings of this text in order to identify the key issues in interpretation. Then, we will examine the context and structure of the unit, in order to assess its significance within Qohelet's discourse. Next, we will exegete each verse, with a focus upon what the text 'does'—in other words, how it moves the reader towards the father's goals. Lastly, we will summarise the effect of our approach on the reading of Qohelet's words and evaluate how it deals with the problems that have been identified.

7.1 Survey of Readings

The major interpretive issue for this passage is the identity of the woman whom Qohelet finds in 7:26, and how she relates to what he says in v. 28 about women. The discussion on this topic reflects both the obscurity of the passage and the growing influence of feminist criticism.

The historical-critical understanding of this passage is that Qohelet is reflecting a traditional sentiment about women, such as being the cause of man's sin (cf. Gen 3:12).⁴ Gordis is a good representative of this view:

This famous passage in which Koheleth expresses his distrust of women testifies to the attraction they hold over him. Their physical charms ('her hands,' v. 26) and their emotional appeal ('her heart,' v. 26) are alike dangerous to man, because honor, rare among men, is non-existent

Valorization: Perspectives on Women in Qoheleth', in *The Writings and Later Wisdom Books*. eds. Christl M. Maier and Nuria Calduch-Benages, *Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 93–107.

⁴ Christian D. Ginsburg, *Cokeleth, Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes: Translated from the Original Hebrew, with a Commentary, Historical and Critical* (London: Longman, 1861), 387–390; Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 147; Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste*, 388.

among women.⁵

Nevertheless, Gordis does not believe Qohelet is entirely negative about women, since Eccl 9:9 shows that he has not given up on the ideal.⁶ Lauha's understanding is far more negative—not only does Qohelet claim that every woman is a femme fatale, but also his praise of the enjoyment of woman is part of the tragic vanity of life.⁷ Gordis and Lauha find support from Longman who maintains that 'Qohelet appears on the surface to make an uncomplimentary remark about humanity in general, and women in particular.' Longman has no problem calling Qohelet a misogynist, since as a foil for the epilogist, he is to be understood as a confused wise man rather than a representative of Israelite wisdom.⁸

Many interpreters find such a misogynistic reading unlikely for a great wisdom teacher and problematic for a biblical book. The evasion of this misogynistic reading has resulted in a multitude of interpretations.

The reading that requires the subtlest adjustment holds Qohelet to be talking about a particular type of woman. In other words, אִשָּׁה is restrictive: 'the woman, whose...' (v. 26).⁹ Though variations on this view exist, its greatest difficulty is with v. 28, which seems to speak very broadly about women.¹⁰

An influential reading by Lohfink claims that v. 26 is a quotation. He argues

⁵ Gordis, *Kobelet*, 272.

⁶ Gordis, *Kobelet*, 272.

⁷ Lauha, *Kobelet*, 141. Fox similarly suggests that Qohelet may be applying Prov 22:14; 23:27 to all women. Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 268–269.

⁸ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 204–206.

⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 76; Riesener, 'Frauenfeindschaft', 196–197; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 187.

¹⁰ Longman even claims that v. 28 makes this view impossible. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 204.

that the use of the participle **וּמוֹצֵא** (cf. **יורֵעַ** in 8:12b) points to the citation of tradition. Qohelet first provides an indirect citation (**מֵרַמּוֹת אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה**), before directly quoting the tradition, which he introduces with **אֲשֶׁר**.¹¹ Lohfink claims that Qohelet intentionally misreads the indirect citation as ‘woman is stronger than death’, which he then goes on to disprove inductively: he cannot find one woman who has lived past a certain time (v. 28).¹²

Several modifications of Lohfink’s view have since been proposed. Yohan Y. S. Pakk, Antoon Schoors, and Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger all interpret v. 28 as another quotation, which Qohelet has not found verified by his experience.¹³ Instead, Qohelet maintains the goodness and deviance of men and women alike (v. 29).¹⁴ Klaus Baltzer says that Qohelet takes issue with the war language of the quotation in v. 26. The crux of Baltzer’s view is his contention that **אֶלֶף** of v. 28 should be translated as ‘brigade’. In other words, the saying about women being deadly (v. 26) is blatantly untrue. It is not women, but men who bring death through their involvement in the enterprise of war.¹⁵

Lohfink and his followers thus ‘solve’ the problem of misogyny in the words of Qohelet by placing it in quotations, making it a citation which Qohelet subsequently refutes. It is difficult to take these views seriously, not least because they essentially invert the meaning of Qohelet’s words with little

¹¹ Lohfink, ‘War Kohelet ein Frauenfeind’, 272–273. cf. Diethelm Michel, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), 226–227; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 572.

¹² Lohfink, ‘War Kohelet ein Frauenfeind’, 281, 283; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 102–103.

¹³ Pakk, ‘Significance of **אֲשֶׁר**’, 379, 383–83; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 404–405; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 585.

¹⁴ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 589.

¹⁵ Baltzer, ‘Women and War’, 127–132.

warrant. Thomas Krüger's assessment is appropriately severe: 'Alles, was Lohfink in Klammern ergänzt, ist für sein Verständnis von v.28b entscheidend—und im Text gerade nicht gesagt!'¹⁶

More moderate forms of the quotation theory maintain that Qohelet uses conventional sayings to make his point.¹⁷ This means that Qohelet essentially agrees with these statements, although he is not responsible for their unfortunate wording.

A third line of interpretation, which maintains that these are Qohelet's own words, understands the women of vv. 26, 28 as metaphors. Seow forcefully argues that the woman of v. 26 is a metaphor for folly. This identification is suggested by the presence of the definite article on both *האשה* and *הסכלות* (v. 25). The woman is also described with the same seductive power as Lady Folly in Proverbs 1–9.¹⁸ Once again, this view struggles to make sense of v. 28. Seow circumvents this by proposing that v. 28b was inserted by a scribe who misunderstood v. 26 as a description of actual women and added his own supporting illustration.¹⁹ Although this would be very convenient for Seow's interpretation, it is a gratuitous emendation of the text and impossible to prove.

Krüger presents a different metaphorical interpretation of the woman found by Qohelet: she is Lady Wisdom.²⁰ He claims that the centrality of Lady Wisdom in the wisdom tradition means that it is to be expected that she appears after

¹⁶ Krüger, 'Frau Weisheit', 400.

¹⁷ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 127; Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 83–84.

¹⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 262–263. cf. Annette Schellenberg, *Qohelet*, ZBK (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2013), 120.

¹⁹ Seow, 'Dangerous Seductress', 27–28.

²⁰ Krüger, 'Frau Weisheit', 394–403; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 145–147.

Qohelet's announcement of his search in v. 25. Krüger also points to similarities between v. 26 and the description of Lady Wisdom in Sir 6:23–31, where the gaining of wisdom is described in erotic terms, with students invited to submit to her restraints. In contrast to the traditional understanding of Lady Wisdom, Qohelet's experience of her is grossly disillusioning—she is 'more bitter than death'. She is as seductive and dangerous as the illicit woman of Prov 1–9, and escaping her is considered a mark of divine favour! Moreover, in Eccl 7:28 Qohelet finds that she lacks any basis in reality. In looking for wisdom, Qohelet finds only a small elite group of men, but no women.²¹

Krüger considers this to be a highly ironic text. It can be read literally, with two misogynistic statements (vv. 26, 28) that get in the way of each other, or metaphorically, as a deconstruction of the concept of Lady Wisdom.²² It is difficult to believe that this level of complexity and ambiguity would be reliably understood by the reader or that such indeterminacy would achieve the rhetorical goals of the father. Much of Krüger's identification of the woman of v. 26 as Lady Wisdom also depends upon Sirach, which almost all scholars consider to postdate Ecclesiastes.²³

Another issue that is critical to the interpretation of this passage is the question of what role Qohelet's words play within his overall discourse. For some, especially those who consider Qohelet to be talking about an actual woman (or women) or evaluating received traditions, this passage is peripheral to Qohelet's message—it is one area of observation among many, regarding women in

²¹ Krüger, 'Frau Weisheit', 402–403.

²² Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 147–149.

²³ The main exception is Whitley, who argues on the basis of language that Ecclesiastes was written later. His use of linguistic dating to distinguish between two books he considers to be written within fifty years of each other is deeply flawed. Whitley, *Koheleth*, 122–131.

particular or humanity in general.²⁴ By contrast, those who believe Qohelet is speaking about wisdom and folly in symbolic terms favour a more central role.²⁵

Aside from content, another evaluation of this passage derives from an assessment of the narrator's intrusion in v. 27. Historical-critical interpretations typically view this as the contribution of a conservative redactor, who emphasises that Qohelet's negative assessment of women is his private opinion,²⁶ or a clue to the reader that Qohelet's comments here are not to be taken very seriously.²⁷ Unsurprisingly, readings that emphasise the role of the epilogue in the book of Ecclesiastes take this passage to be highly significant in Qohelet's discourse.²⁸ Many more interpreters grant the narrator's comments little significance.²⁹

7.2 Context and Structure of Ecclesiastes 7:23–29

Having highlighted the key issues in the interpretation of Eccl 7:23–29, we will now proceed with our own analysis. The context and structure of the unit points to the significance of this passage within Qohelet's discourse and provides objective criteria to understand the relationships between its constituent parts.

²⁴ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 75; Garrett, *Proverbs*, 324–325; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 272; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 402; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 566–567.

²⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 279; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 143. Fox is a notable exception, who claims that ironically, Qohelet's grand finding is that women are dangerous. Fox and Porten, 'Unsought Discoveries', 26–38.

²⁶ Galling, 'Prediger', 109; Lauha, *Kohelet*, 142.

²⁷ Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 148.

²⁸ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 205; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 189; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 265.

²⁹ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 122; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 126; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 76; Garrett, *Proverbs*, 324–325; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 274; Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 82–85.

7.2.1 Context

The structure of Ecclesiastes is generally considered haphazard or non-existent. Qohelet often shifts from one topic to the next without a clear logical connection and repeatedly circles back to previously treated topics. Nevertheless, we can identify some broad outlines to Qohelet's thought.

There are a few signals that suggest Eccl 7:23–29 belongs to the larger section 6:10–8:17. Most significantly, Wright notes that 6:9 contains the final use of the '(all is vanity and) a chase after the wind' refrain, and so considers 6:10 to begin the second half of the book, which he calls 'conclusions'.³⁰ As something of a transitional passage, 6:10–12 returns to Qohelet's original question of what is profitable (מה־יִתֵּר in 6:11; cf. 1:3),³¹ before turning to the related question of 'who knows what is good for man?' (מִי־יֹרֵעַ מִה־טוֹב לָאָדָם). Wright claims the theme of this section is reflected in the refrain 'not find out/who can find out', which finds its conclusion in 8:17.³² Whereas 1:12–6:9 dwells upon the cosmic unproductivity of toil, 6:10–8:17 deals with the limits of human knowledge of the world or of living successfully within it.

Within this unit, which loosely orbits the question of who can find out such effective knowledge, 7:23–29 is almost certainly the conceptual centre. It contains eight occurrences of the lexeme מִצָּא, which elsewhere in this section only appears at 7:14 and three times in the conclusion (8:17). It is also distinguished by an intense first person discourse, as opposed to the advice and

³⁰ Seow also considers the book to consist of two halves, each containing a reflection (1:2–4:16; 6:10–8:17) followed by ethics (4:17–6:9[5:1–6:9]; 9:1–12:8). Wright, 'Riddle of the Sphinx', 245–66; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 43–47.

³¹ Qohelet sometimes uses יִתְרוֹן and יֵתֵר interchangeably. Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part II*, 215–216, 426.

³² Wright, 'Riddle of the Sphinx', 245–66.

more objective observations that constitute the rest of this section. This formal shift indicates a return to the internal reflection that began Qohelet's search, which is seen in the close relationship between 7:25 and 1:17; 2:3.

I gave my heart to know wisdom (חכמה) and to know madness (הוללות) and folly (שכלות). (Eccl 1:17)

I searched with my heart to cheer my flesh with wine—my heart guiding with wisdom (חכמה)—and to grasp folly (שכלות). (Eccl 2:3)

I turned—I and my heart—to know and to seek out and search for wisdom (חכמה) and an account, and to know whether wickedness is foolishness (כסל) and folly (השכלות) is madness (הוללות). (Eccl 7:25)

In each of these verses, Qohelet describes his search in similar terms. It is a quest led by his heart (לב) for knowledge (ידע), and unusually involves both wisdom (חכמה) and folly (הוללות, שכלות/שכלות, כסל). It should be noticed that 7:25 is the most emphatic of these passages, containing the most verbs of searching, nouns of wisdom, types of folly, and the addition of חשבון and רשע.³³ This points to a growing intensity in Qohelet's search for wisdom and may suggest a development of its object.

In summary, we should consider 7:23–29 to be the conceptual centre of the section that reflects upon the knowledge of the wise man (6:10–8:17). Its intense first person mode of discourse provides us valuable insight into the thoughts of the wise man as he circles back to the key question of knowledge with greater intensity than before.

³³ Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 101.

7.2.2 Structure

7:23–24

Many commentators view this as a conclusion to the previous section (taking כל־זה as anaphoric) because of the focus of the preceding material on wisdom and the use of סבב in v. 25 to indicate the turning to a new topic.³⁴ However, the return of first person speech in v. 23 suggests that this is where the unit begins,³⁵ and the connection of vv. 23–24 with what precedes is debatable.³⁶ Moreover, the Masoretic vowel points (כֶּל־זֶה) create gender agreement with חכמה היא later in the verse. The only feminine noun in sight is חכמה, which is present in the instrumental בחכמה and also implied by אחכמה.³⁷ If the Masoretic tradition is reliable, then the testing of כל־זה should be taken as a general reference to Qohelet's quest for wisdom, rather than the preceding section specifically.

The connection between v. 23 and v. 24 is undisputed. The close relationship between these verses is clear from the repetition of רחוק(ה),³⁸ although the shift in gender should be noted and will be discussed during the exegesis of this verse below.

The significance of this section as meta-discourse is indicated by the use of כל־זה, which is intended as a broad reference to all Qohelet's searchings so far.³⁹ This passage also stands out as Qohelet's most frank admission of failure.

³⁴ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 202; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 184; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 560.

³⁵ Schellenberg, *Kohelet*, 119.

³⁶ Fox and Porten, 'Unsought Discoveries', 26.

³⁷ It is unlikely that the feminine demonstrative is incidental. The masculine demonstrative is Qohelet's default. Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 52, 54.

³⁸ Fox and Porten, 'Unsought Discoveries', 26.

³⁹ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 50; Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', 180.

Faced with his inability to find any profit in life, he now confesses he is ignorant of both wisdom (חכם) and the things that happen (מה־שהיה cf. 1:9; 3:15) on earth.

7:25–29

Verses 25–29 can be considered as a separate subsection to vv. 23–24—סבב is used in 2:20 to turn to a new activity. Nevertheless, the use of key words shows that they are still to be read together. Although Qohelet is not doing something completely new, the introduction of additional terms (רשע, חשכון) suggests that he is revising the goals or scope of his search. Likewise, the proliferation of searching verbs point to an increase in intensity.

The concept of searching (בקש; v. 25, v. 28, v. 29) and finding (מצא; v. 26, v. 27 (x2), v. 28 (x3), v. 29) holds this section together as a unit and also structures it.⁴⁰

1. Introduction and question: who can find it (מי ימצאנו)? (vv. 23–24)
2. Qohelet turns to seek (בקש) (v. 25)
 - a. An unwanted finding (ומוצא) (v. 26)
 - b. Announcement of a real finding (זה מצאתי)... (v. 27)
 - i. ...Qohelet has not found (לא מצאתי) what he sought (בקש) (v. 28)
 - ii. ...what Qohelet has found (מצאתי): that people have sought (בקשו) great schemes.

8:1

It is common to find all or part of 8:1 included in this pericope.⁴¹ Both 7:23

⁴⁰ Krüger, *Qobeleth*, 143. חשכון also holds this unit together, occurring in vv. 25, 27, 29. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 201.

⁴¹ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 128; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 266; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 190.

and 8:1 contain the key word חכם and 7:24 and 8:1a form an inclusio of rhetorical questions.⁴²

מי מצאנו 7:24

מי כהחכם ומי יודע פשר דבר 8:1a

This parallel is strengthened by a commonly proposed re-division of כהחכם to כה חכם, which removes the unassimilated article.⁴³ This changes the question from ‘who is like the wise man?’ to the more negative ‘who is so wise?’ This re-division, however, does not have the morphological support that many assume, since Qohelet does not always assimilate his articles (cf. 1:7; 6:10; 10:3).⁴⁴

Aside from the common reference to wisdom, 8:1 has more in common with the verses that follow. The shining face likely refers to the favourable disposition of the king who is mentioned in 8:2.⁴⁵ The changing of hardness (8:1b) could similarly refer to the courtier moderating his boldness before the king.⁴⁶ The interpretation of a matter by the wise man (8:1a) corresponds to the wise man (חכם) knowing the right time and just way in 8:5b. The question of 8:1 is also more obviously related to 8:5–8, than it is to 7:23.

⁴² Fox and Porten, ‘Unsought Discoveries’, 26.

⁴³ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 272–273; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 190.

⁴⁴ Fredericks says that this is a sign of the vernacular; however, Schoors points out that most non-assimilation is found in later biblical Hebrew (Ezek 40:15; 47:22; Neh 9:19; 12:38; 2 Chr 10:7; 25:10; 29:2, 7). The exceptions to this are 1 Sam 13:21; 2 Sam 21:20; it is also absent from Qumranic literature. Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 43–44; Fredericks, ‘Ecclesiastes’, 181.

⁴⁵ See the related expressions in Num 6:25; Pss 31:17; 67:2; 119:135; Dan 9:17. Garrett, *Proverbs*, 325–326; Gordis, *Kohleth*, 276.

⁴⁶ עז פנים is used in the Mishnah for imprudent/bold (m. Avot 5:20) cf. Gordis, *Kohleth*, 277.

It is difficult to know the significance of the opening to 8:2 (אני).⁴⁷ It is possible that an element of the text has been omitted, such that Qohelet is beginning a new section (e.g. אמרתי אני), in which case 8:1 should indeed be read with 7:23–29. Alternatively, the text may have originally read אנפי מלך 'be careful before the king'. This Aramaism (cf. פשר in 8:1) has been subsequently misinterpreted by a copyist.⁴⁸ The uncertainty of the text cautions us against basing a division of the text upon 8:2.

In summary, the text 7:23–29 can be read as a unit containing two parts: 7:23–24, wherein Qohelet confesses his inability to become wise, and 7:25–29 in which Qohelet announces a renewed search and describes what he has (not) found. Qohelet's searching is reminiscent of his earlier statements (1:17, 2:3), although this time it is described with greater intensity and he gives a decisive evaluation of his findings.

7.3 Interpretation of Ecclesiastes 7:23–29

7:23

All this I tested with wisdom. I said, 'I want to be wise!' but it was far from me.

In our previous section on structure, we have already argued that כל-זה agrees in gender with היא רחוקה and is to be taken as a general reference to wisdom. This, however, has the rather odd result of making wisdom both the object

⁴⁷ Gordis points to Hos 14:9[8] and Jer 50:7–8 as similar occurrences; however, these can scarcely be taken in support of his view. In Hos 14:9[8], 'Ephraim' is most naturally read as the vocative rather than 'Ephraim [says]'. Similarly, it is unnecessary to disregard the Masoretic punctuation of Jer 50:7 and transpose ידורה to the following line, nor is there textual warrant to do so. Robert Gordis, 'Quotations as Literary Usage in Biblical, Oriental and Rabbinic Literature', *HUCA* 22 (1949), 174–175; Gordis, *Kobelet*, 277–278

⁴⁸ Whitley points to the phrases אל אנפי מלך in the Words of Ahiqar and מן אנפי 'in the face of Tema' in a fifth century BC Aramaic inscription. Whitley, *Kobelet*, 72.

and the means (בַּחֲכָמָה) of Qohelet's search, which must be explored further.⁴⁹ Bartholomew claims that Qohelet's failed use of חֲכָמָה is an encouragement for the reader to reflect upon his epistemology.⁵⁰ Indeed, Qohelet's method and thought, which are visible throughout his discourse, are foregrounded in this section.

Pinker proposes the translation 'I will become wiser' because he believes that context demands it: Qohelet's use of wisdom shows that he is already wise (cf. Eccl 1:16). He claims further support from a similar use of חֲכָמָה in Prov 9:9 and 19:20.⁵¹ Pinker's view is unconvincing, since the comparative sense of Prov 9:9 comes from the adverb עוֹד and it is far from certain that 'you will become wiser' is the correct translation of Prov 19:20. Qohelet's confession וְהָיָא מִמֶּנִּי רַחוּקָה would also be unnecessarily categorical if he intended only to state his inability to increase in wisdom.

The standard resolution to the apparent contradiction between Qohelet using wisdom and being unable to attain wisdom is to distinguish between two types of wisdom. Commentators frequently distinguish between practical or conventional wisdom (which Qohelet had) and fundamental wisdom or what Gordis calls '*bokmah par excellence*' (which Qohelet did not have).⁵² Similarly, Lohfink theorises that Qohelet is rejecting traditional wisdom's inability to

⁴⁹ Gordis proposes 'all this I tested concerning wisdom' since Hebrew can employ בַּ as a marker of the direct object. Similarly, Lauha points to this as an instance of the object of a mental act (GKC §119l). Lauha, *Kobelet*, 138; Gordis, *Kobelet*, 270. Schoors challenges such an interpretation on the basis of Ecclesiastes 1:13, where בַּחֲכָמָה cannot be the direct object, which is עַל כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נִעְשָׂה. Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 198–199.

⁵⁰ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 264–265.

⁵¹ Pinker, 'Views on Women', 178.

⁵² Fox and Porten, 'Unsought Discoveries', 28; Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 118; Gordis, *Kobelet*, 270; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 260; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 264; Schellenberg, *Kobelet*, 119.

handle life in a changing world.⁵³ Despite the prevalence of such distinctions, all of these interpreters assume—without justification—that Qohelet’s starting point is a type of wisdom basically equivalent to that of the book of Proverbs. As we will see, this could not be further from the truth.

As the means of Qohelet’s search, wisdom is the skill of observation and reflection.⁵⁴ This emerges from the beginning of Qohelet’s search (1:12–2:11), where knowledge relies upon seeing (ראיתי; cf. 1:14)⁵⁵ and internalizing (אמרתי בלבי; cf. 2:1).⁵⁶ As a mental faculty, Qohelet’s instrumental wisdom is *not* inimical to folly—indeed, folly can be tested with wisdom (1:17; 2:3; cf. 7:25). Although such language pervades Qohelet’s discourse, it is entirely absent from Proverbs. There, the means to gaining wisdom is not through one’s own experience and intellect, but by hearing (e.g. Prov 1:5, 8).⁵⁷

As to the object of his search, Qohelet speaks of wisdom as the knowledge of what is done on earth (1:13–14).⁵⁸ An effective knowledge of how the world works is required to answer Qohelet’s narrower goal of finding what is profitable for humankind (1:3; 2:3). Qohelet is in agreement with Proverbs in

⁵³ Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 100.

⁵⁴ On 1:13 Bartholomew says ‘As we will see, Qohelet’s use of “wisdom” here is ironic, because Qohelet’s epistemology ... turns out to be very different from the wisdom of Proverbs... The center of Qohelet’s quest will be his own consciousness, as manifest in observation, reason, and experience.’ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 123.

⁵⁵ Cf. 2:13, 24; 3:10, 16, 22; 4:4, 15; 5:12[13], 17[18]; 6:1; 7:15; 8:9, 10, 17; 9:13; 10:5, 7; לבי ראה in 1:16.

⁵⁶ Cf. 2:15; 3:17, 18; דברתי אני עם-לבי in 1:16; נתתי את-לבי ל in 1:13, 17; 8:9, 16; 9:1

⁵⁷ For Proverbs, wisdom is received through listening (שמע, 30 occurrences), while for Qohelet it is through sight (ראה, 47 occurrences); cf. Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 71–86; Shupak, ‘Learning’, 416–26.

⁵⁸ We have already noticed a link between 1:13–14 and 7:23–24.

viewing wisdom as a possession (e.g. Prov 4:5, 7), although he is far more pessimistic about the possibility of its acquisition.

In light of this, Qohelet's testing of wisdom by wisdom in 7:23 refers to his use of the means of observation and reflection to gain an insight into the happenings of the world, in order to find the best outcome for humanity in their work. His earnest desire for this goal is expressed vividly with the use of a cohortative (אֶחְכְּמָה) 'I want to be wise!'

Despite Qohelet's zealous use of his faculties of perception and reflection, he cannot claim to have even approached an effective knowledge of God's world—it is completely out of reach.⁵⁹ Seow highlights a lexical connection between the remoteness (רְחוּקָה) of wisdom from Qohelet and the worth of the excellent wife of Proverbs being beyond (רָחֵק) that of pearls (Prov 31:10).⁶⁰ In light of our characterisation of the implied reader—the son being instructed by his father, and one familiar with the teaching of Proverbs and the Torah—this is a tantalising connection that will come into play later in this passage.

7:24

Everything that happens is far [from me]; it is unfathomably deep. Who can find it?

In v. 24 Qohelet continues his reflection upon the remoteness of wisdom. Now, however, the subject shifts from wisdom to מִדֵּ-שֶׁדִּיהָ,⁶¹ which is also reflected

⁵⁹ Some of the versions (LXX, Vulg., and also Jerome and the Tg.) have a verbal form here and as such Goldman prefers רָחֵקָהּ. The versions probably reflect the difficulty of the feminine form of the adjective without an obvious feminine antecedent. Goldman, 'Commentaries', 94.

⁶⁰ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 260; Seow, 'Dangerous Seductress', 24.

⁶¹ Again, the versions (LXX, Syr., Vulg.) read the text differently here (מִשְׁדֵּיהָ), resulting in an adverbial phrase 'farther than any reality'. The struggle with the text reflects the obscurity

in the shift from feminine adjectives to masculine. Despite the shift in grammatical subject, the topic appears unchanged. Qohelet's understanding of wisdom is thus illuminated by his use of **מִדָּה־שִׂדִּיה**, which is already a familiar term to Qohelet's audience (1:9; 3:15; 6:10).

The translation of this term is problematic. Normally, Qohelet uses *qatal* verb forms to refer to the past.⁶² Hence some believe that Qohelet draws a link between wisdom and the past, namely a theology of creation or a reliance upon tradition, which Qohelet here critiques.⁶³ Yet this would unjustifiably elevate concepts that do not play a significant role in Qohelet's discourse. Despite a past tense translation working with most occurrences of **הָיָה**,⁶⁴ the stative value of **הָיָה** makes a present tense translation possible.⁶⁵ If this is the case, then Qohelet uses it as equivalent to 'all that is done under the sun' (e.g. 1:9, 14).⁶⁶

It is unclear in 1:9, whether what happens (**שִׂדִּיה**) and what is done (**שֶׁנַּעֲשֶׂה**) is to be understood as the actions of God, who is presumably responsible for the cycles of nature in 1:4–7, or the people who busily inhabit this world with their speaking (**דִּבֶּר**), seeing (**רָאָה**), and hearing (**שָׁמַע**) in 1:8. It is indeed the case that throughout Qohelet's discourse the passive **נַעֲשֶׂה** is ambiguous with regards to its agent. In some instances, this agent is best understood as

of Qohelet's thought. Additionally, Seow suggests confusion with the common idiom **רָחוּק מִן** (cf. 23). Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 259.

⁶² Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 173. cf. Bo Isaksson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth: With Special Emphasis on the Verbal System*, Studia Semitica Upsaliensia 10 (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1987), 50–56.

⁶³ Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 100–101; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 144; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 398.

⁶⁴ Pinker, 'Views on Women', 179.

⁶⁵ Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 173.

⁶⁶ Loader, *Polar Structures*, 51; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 261, 265.

humanity (4:3; 8:9, 16). At other times, God is clearly the agent of נַעֲשֶׂה (8:14, 17; 9:3). Qohelet's ambivalence regarding the agency of what is done on earth thus reflects his inability to plumb its depths.

The depth of this wisdom is described in emphatic terms, with the repetition (עַמֶּכְךָ עַמֶּכְךָ) increasing the intensity of Qohelet's claim.⁶⁷ Fredericks maintains that Qohelet is not claiming such knowledge is inaccessible, only very far away.⁶⁸ However, the fact that such a construction is followed by the rhetorical question (with the implied answer 'no one') makes this difficult to maintain.⁶⁹ If there were any doubt about the inaccessibility of wisdom to Qohelet, the following verses (vv. 25–29) will make this clear.

The remoteness of wisdom—a true knowledge of the world's happenings that is requisite for profitable living—is described in terms that are conceptually related to Job 28.⁷⁰ In contrast to Eccl 7:23–24, this poem concludes with wisdom's residence with God, and the commendation of the fear of Yahweh (Job 28:28). This point of contrast may aid a reading of Qohelet; however, there is no lexical link between Job 28:28 and Eccl 7:23–24.⁷¹ Qohelet's words similarly contrast with Lady Wisdom's accessibility in Prov 8:17,⁷² yet again it is difficult to demonstrate anything more than a conceptual link.

A passage with a strong lexical *and* conceptual link to vv. 23–24 is Deut 30:11, which describes the requirements of the covenant as לֹא רַחֲקָה הִיא. Strikingly,

⁶⁷ GKC §113k.

⁶⁸ Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', 180, 183.

⁶⁹ The rhetorical question is used frequently by Qohelet and expresses 'in a lively way the sceptical tone of his musings.' Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 206–207.

⁷⁰ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 201.

⁷¹ Contra Galling, 'Prediger', 109.

⁷² Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 124.

Qohelet makes the opposite statement about wisdom. The father, it would seem,⁷³ is deliberately contrasting Qohelet's fruitless search for that which cannot be found, with the revealed and accessible (cf. קרוב and בלבבך in Deut 30:14) will of God in Israel's Torah.⁷⁴

This verse ends with the question מי ימצאנו. The masculine suffix agrees in gender with all of the adjectives of this verse, which qualify מדה־שהיה rather than continuing the feminine subject that is implied in v. 23 (הכמה).⁷⁵ This introduces one of the key words of vv. 25–29 (מצא).⁷⁶

Shields thus summarises the rhetorical effect of vv. 23–24:

Qoheleth's words here function to diminish further any merit the epilogist's audience may have assigned to the wisdom movement by reinforcing the limitations of wisdom and its incompatibility with the religion of the Hebrew Bible.⁷⁷

Here Shields rightly identifies the self-defeating nature of Qohelet's words and that they ultimately serve the rhetorical goals of the epilogist. While we would

⁷³ The allusion can scarcely be intended by Qohelet himself; his discussion in this section (and in the rest of his discourse) is not about the requirements of the covenant. This is in contrast to the father, for whom it is an explicit concern (12:13).

⁷⁴ Gordis also sees a contrast to Deut 30:11–14 here; however, Gordis considers Qohelet's wisdom to be 'practical wisdom', which is not in competition with the law. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 270.

⁷⁵ Contra Pinker, who says that the נר should be emended to ׀, so that 'who can find them?' agrees with the distance and depth of wisdom. Pinker, 'Views on Women', 179–180.

⁷⁶ Longman rightly rejects Ceresko's fourfold translation of מצא as totally unnecessary. The translation 'find' is sufficiently broad to work throughout this passage. Anthony R. Ceresko, 'The Function of Antanaclosis (mš' "to find"//mš' "to reach, overtake, grasp") in Hebrew Poetry, Especially in the Book of Qoheleth', *CBQ* 44.4 (1982): 551–569; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 201.

⁷⁷ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 184.

largely agree with Shield's assessment, our understanding of the discourse setting and the father's rhetorical goals also points us to a more constructive function. The allusion to and negation of Deut 30:11 (לא רחקה הוא) introduces a contrast that holds up the law of Israel as the eminently accessible alternative to Qohelet's limited and inaccessible wisdom.

7:25

I turned—I and my heart—to know and to seek out and search for wisdom and an account, and to know whether wickedness is foolishness and folly is madness.

Verse 25 begins a new subsection, with סבב indicating a change in the nature of Qohelet's search.⁷⁸ An analysis of this verse shows that the search increases in intensity and contains further development of its object.

Translations of this verse struggle with ולבי, hence F. Horst (BHS) proposes ונתון לבי. Longman accepts this, noting that 'this phrase is awkward without emendation'.⁷⁹ Goldman, however, rightly follows the MT as the *lectio difficilior*.⁸⁰ The translation 'I turned—I and my heart' is admittedly awkward,⁸¹ but this could be a deliberate way to place emphasis upon the role of Qohelet's heart in his endeavours, which is reflected elsewhere.

The prominence of Qohelet's heart (לבי) throughout his discourse warrants

⁷⁸ Contra Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 202; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 184.

⁷⁹ Longman also points to the construction in 1:17. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 202.

⁸⁰ Goldman, 'Commentaries', 95.

⁸¹ The lack of verbal agreement with the subject shows that the subject of the verb is expanded in the apposite phrase cf. Pss 3:5[4]; 44:3[2]; Isa 26:9. Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 154; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 568; Robert D. Holmstedt, John A. Cook and Phillip S. Marshall, *Qoheleth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*, Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Bible (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 219. Alternatively, an explicative *waw* gives a similar result: 'I, that is my heart'. Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 235; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 260; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 263.

further investigation. Qohelet devotes his heart to study and explore (1:13, 17; 2:3; 7:25; 8:9, 16; 9:1), his heart guides him (2:3), he sees (i.e. experiences) with his heart (1:16), and speaks in or with his heart (1:16; 2:1, 15; 3:17, 18).

For Salyer, the emphasis upon Qohelet's heart is part of his 'vain rhetoric'—the excessive use of first person discourse, which highlights the tension between private insight and public knowledge.⁸² Robert D. Holmstedt unconvincingly proposes that Qohelet and his heart are presented as distinct partners in the search, thus allowing him to experience some of the debauched sides of life without discrediting himself with the audience.⁸³ It is hardly likely that a reader would distinguish so strongly between Qohelet and his heart. It is more probable that the involvement and even the personification of Qohelet's heart communicates something of his method.

In light of the implied authorship of the book, the question to ask is not 'why does Qohelet refer to his heart so often?', but 'why does the father portray him in this way?' As we have already seen, the father leads his son to notice certain aspects of Qohelet's thought through the repetition of key words and phrases.⁸⁴

Given that the implied reader is a student of the law and Israel's covenantal wisdom, the role of the heart in Deuteronomy and Proverbs forms important background. The law says that Yahweh is to be sought with one's heart (Deut 6:5; 10:12; 11:13; 11:18; 26:16; 30:2, 6, 10; 32:46) and his commands are to be upon it (Deut 6:6; 11:18). The centrality of the heart for covenantal obedience is shown in the need for the heart to be circumcised (10:16), which

⁸² Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 272–273.

⁸³ Robert D. Holmstedt, 'וְלִבִּי אֲנִי: The Syntactic Encoding of the Collaborative Nature of Qohelet's Experiment', *JHebS* 9 (2009), 20.

⁸⁴ See above, pp. 149–151.

must ultimately be done by Yahweh (30:6). All of this is absent from Qohelet's mention of his heart.

The closest connection between Qohelet and Deuteronomy is in the expression of speaking in one's heart. Qohelet's uses the phrase 'I said in my heart' (אמרתי אני בלי) as he plans his endeavours (2:1), reflects upon the fate of humankind (2:15), and considers the works of God (3:17, 18).⁸⁵ Moses uses the same expression for the misguided thoughts of Israelites:

If you say in your heart (כי תאמר בלבבך), 'These nations are greater than me. How can I drive them out?' you shall not fear them but you shall surely remember what Yahweh your God did to Pharaoh and to all of Egypt.' (Deut 7:17–18)

If you say in your heart (ואמרת בלבבך), 'My strength and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' (Deut 8:17)

Do not say in your heart (אל-תאמר בלבבך), when Yahweh your God thrusts them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that Yahweh has brought me in to take possession of this land.' Rather, it is because of the wickedness of these nations that Yahweh is driving them out before you. (Deut 9:4).

This expression employed throughout the Old Testament for the internal monologue of people when they doubt or question the word of God (Gen 17:17), scheme (Gen 27:41; 1 Kgs 12:26), speak in ignorance (Jer 13:22; Deut 18:21), or boast over God or his people (Isa 14:13; 47:8, 10; Obad 3; Zeph 1:12; 2:15; Ps 10:6, 11, 13; 14:1 [=53:2]; 35:25; 74:8; Esth 6:6).⁸⁶

⁸⁵ There is also the slightly different form אני עם-לבי in Eccl 1:16.

⁸⁶ Note, however, the minority of occurrences where this expression is neutral or positive: Jer 5:24; Zech 12:5; Ps 4:5[4]; 15:2.

The reason for the negative connotations of speaking in one's heart may be related to the biblical view that the human heart is a corrupted instrument (Gen 6:5; 8:21; Num 15:39). In Deuteronomy, Moses speaks of the heart as liable to pride or being turned away to other gods (Deut 11:16; 17:17, 20; 29:18; 30:17). In light of these negative aspects of the human heart, Qohelet's method for acquiring wisdom is shown to be lacking and even a precipitous route.

In Eccl 7:25, Qohelet describes his heart-led search with **ידע, תור, בקש**. For Qohelet, knowing (**ידע**) is a cognitive act, and a prerequisite for action (3:12; 6:12). Seeking out (**תור**) is more vivid; it is also the same term used for the reconnoitre of the promised land (e.g. Num 13:2, 16, 21). While it has been suggested that this term may be the result of the influence of Greek philosophy,⁸⁷ the use of **תור** for mental exploration is a natural development of its literal meaning and already present in Num 15:39: **לֹא־תִתְּרוּ אַחֲרֵי לִבְבְּכֶם וְאַחֲרֵי עֵינֵיכֶם**.⁸⁸ This verse (cf. Eccl 11:9) also casts Qohelet's words here into a suspect light, since his heart is now involved in a searching out of its own.

The absence of **ל** on the final infinitive (**בִּקֵּשׁ**) suggests that **לְתוֹר וּבִקֵּשׁ** functions as a compound predicate, as the two are near synonyms.⁸⁹ Searching (**בִּקֵּשׁ**) is also the counterpart to finding (**מֵצֵא**) and is something of a key word in this passage (v. 28, 29). The amassing of these infinitives expresses that, in

⁸⁷ E.g. Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 46.

⁸⁸ Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language*, 248; Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part II*, 251–254.

⁸⁹ Holmstedt et al., *Qoheleth*, 219. It is also possible that the omission of **ל** is mere variation, which is not uncommon in Ecclesiastes. Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 183–184. It is syntactically possible for **וּבִקֵּשׁ** to function explicatively here, although it is difficult to see how this gives any further information about what Qohelet is doing. Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 225, 235; Riesener, 'Frauenfeindschaft', 206.

light of his failure to become wise (vv. 23–24), Qohelet is increasing the intensity of the search (cf. 1:17; 2:3).⁹⁰

As well as a change in intensity, Qohelet also modifies the object of his search. Verse 25 lists a number of objects, which appear related. As in 1:17, the repetition of דעת divides these objects into two categories. Qohelet's search is still for חכמה; however, now it is qualified by חשבון, which is a new term for Qohelet and also becomes significant in this section (v. 27; cf. חשבנות in v. 29). Apart from one final occurrence in 9:10, it is otherwise unknown in the Hebrew Bible and is translated variously:

1. A small number of interpreters define חשבון as wisdom on a grand scale: 'the explanation that stands behind the world'.⁹¹ There is little to commend such an interpretation, other than the (uncertain) inference that this is what context requires.
2. It may also refer to the practical results of wisdom, namely the ability to avoid folly.⁹² This definition is also purely inferred from context.
3. By emphasising the meaning of its root (חשב; reckon, plan, devise), it is supposed that in a wisdom context it means something like 'reasoning' or its results.⁹³ The use of חשבון in the wisdom context of Sir 9:15; 27:5, 6 also supports this.
4. A related, but more specific definition of such reasoning, is induction. This focuses upon its use with words like seeking and searching, and builds upon Lohfink's theory that Qohelet is reacting to the rote

⁹⁰ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 202; D'Alario, 'Misogyny and Valorization', 97.

⁹¹ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 203. cf. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 124.

⁹² Galling, 'Prediger', 109; Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 235–236; Schellenberg, *Kohelet*, 120.

⁹³ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 268.

memorisation of proverbs that the wisdom movement had become.⁹⁴

5. Pinker notes the use of חשבנות in 2 Chr 26:15 ('war machine'), and thus emphasises one particular gloss of חשב ('devise'). Hence he proposes 'original thought'.⁹⁵
6. Seow claims that חשבון is at home in the commercial world of the ancient Near East, being used in Aramaic, Ugaritic, Syriac, and Arabic for 'accounting'. Similarly, it has the force of 'calculation' in Mishnaic Hebrew.⁹⁶ This view has the advantage of consistency with Qohelet's use of economic terminology elsewhere (יתרון).⁹⁷

If we are right in accepting Seow's proposal for the meaning of חשבון as 'account', what is its significance here in the text? Seow claims that the sense of this passage is Qohelet trying (unsuccessfully) to put wisdom and folly on their respective sides of the ledger.⁹⁸ This may be developed further by considering the way in which this differs from Qohelet's previous search for מה־שהיה, which is a more fundamental understanding of what happens in the world (vv. 23–24). It is possible then, that in seeking an account, Qohelet is lowering his expectations.⁹⁹ Qohelet no longer requires an understanding of what happens, but simply an account of what works and what does not.

⁹⁴ Lohfink, 'War Kohelet ein Frauenfeind', 276; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 401–403.

⁹⁵ Pinker, 'Views on Women', 180.

⁹⁶ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 260–261. cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 271.

⁹⁷ On יתרון as an economic term, see Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 8–12; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 103–104; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 112; Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part II*, 215–218; Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 34–36.

⁹⁸ Seow, 'Dangerous Seductress', 25.

⁹⁹ This may be supported by Eccl 9:10, which would then list sapiential categories in ascending order of significance.

Although this explanation remains somewhat speculative, it makes sense of the available data.

The second category of knowledge that Qohelet seeks is רשע כסל והסכלות הוללות. This object is also problematic, with some interpreters confessing they do not understand it, especially the anomalous article on הסכלות.¹⁰⁰ It has been interpreted as:

1. A list of synonyms or related terms, which express the pitiful results of Qohelet's search: 'wickedness, foolishness, folly, and madness'.¹⁰¹ The main obstacle with this understanding is the lack of conjunctions. Fox suggests that the LXX and Syriac point to an extra *waw* on הוללות.¹⁰² This still does not solve the problem entirely.
2. Two objects consisting of construct chains: 'the wickedness of foolishness and the folly of madness'.¹⁰³ The LXX reads the first two nouns as a construct chain, and the Vulgate translates the text as two construct chains. Here the article on הסכלות is highly problematic, since the *nomen regens* derives its definiteness from the *nomen rectum*,¹⁰⁴ and never takes the article itself.¹⁰⁵
3. Two sets of double accusatives after a verb of cognition: 'wickedness as foolishness, folly as madness'.¹⁰⁶ The variation in the ancient versions is

¹⁰⁰ Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 225–226.

¹⁰¹ Lauha, *Kobelet*, 141.

¹⁰² Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 267–268.

¹⁰³ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 203; Pinker, 'Views on Women', 181.

¹⁰⁴ Longman treats these as abstract nouns, rather than classes of people (so Luther), which would require articles. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 203.

¹⁰⁵ GKC §125a.

¹⁰⁶ GKC §117ii; Gordis, *Kobelet*, 271; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 261; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kobelet*, 403; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 184–185.

a result of their difficulty to recognise this construction. Schoors suggests that since this is describing Qohelet's research it is better phrased as 'whether wickedness is folly and folly is madness'.¹⁰⁷ Fox objects that this interpretation results in a tautology ('folly is madness'), assuming סכלות and הוללות to be synonyms. This indeed appears to be the case in 1:17 and 2:3, which lists them together. But it may be precisely this assumption that Qohelet is testing in 7:25, namely whether madness is a fair appellation for folly.¹⁰⁸ Despite the strength of this view, it still leaves the presence of the definite article unexplained, the irregularity of which may simply be a feature of Qohelet's Hebrew.¹⁰⁹

It is peculiar that the object of Qohelet's search is not just wisdom, or an account of what works. Nevertheless, Qohelet's testing of wickedness and folly (cf. 1:17; 2:3) is a natural development of his search. He has observed that neither wickedness nor folly has a good outcome in extreme doses (7:15–18), but whether wickedness and folly live up to their reputation—as foolishness and madness respectively—he must find out for himself.¹¹⁰ In addition to Weeks' observation of Qohelet's lack of invocation of teaching or tradition,¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 570–571.

¹⁰⁸ In the hithpolel stem, הָלַל describes the madness feigned by David, replete with spittle running down his beard (1 Sam 21:14[13]), and the stupor of drunkenness (Jer 25:16; 51:7). Ecclesiastes 10:13 may also show that הוֹלָלוֹת is comparatively worse than סִכְלוֹת, although it is uncertain how much of this is due to the addition of the adjective רָעָה.

¹⁰⁹ Although inconsistent use of the article can be found throughout the OT, it becomes more erratic under Aramaic influence and in Mishnaic Hebrew. Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 164–169.

¹¹⁰ D'Alario, 'Misogyny and Valorization', 97.

¹¹¹ Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 129–130.

Qohelet also shows his distrust of received wisdom regarding what is good for humanity. In Qohelet's epistemology, only seeing is believing.

Bartholomew raises the possibility of an allusion in v. 27 to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:17). He believes Qohelet to be making the same mistake of Adam and Eve: raising epistemology above ontology.¹¹² Indeed, the twofold object of Qohelet's search could be described as the knowledge of good and evil, and there are further allusions to the Primeval Narrative later in this passage (v. 29). But despite טוב and רע being some of Qohelet's favourite terms, they are not employed here. Furthermore, Qohelet's problem is not that he has transgressed divinely set limits of wisdom. Rather, he has not accepted the wisdom that is available to him and instead seeks to find his own account.

7:26

And I keep finding something more bitter than death—the woman, whose heart is snares and nets and whose hands are fetters. The man who is pleasing to God escapes from her, but the sinner is caught by her.

As a result of Qohelet's searching (בִּקֵּשׁ), he makes a finding (וּמוֹצֵא). Uncharacteristically for Qohelet, he uses a participle for the main verb in this sentence.¹¹³ A number of scholars claim that the participle introduces a direct or indirect quotation;¹¹⁴ however, this is not an otherwise known function of the participle. There are certainly far clearer ways that Qohelet could introduce a quotation, particularly if it is one that he disagrees with (cf. 1:10). The

¹¹² Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 273–275.

¹¹³ This form is pointed like a III-*He* verb, and is given a *plene* spelling, which is common for Qumran texts. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 261.

¹¹⁴ Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 226–227; Lohfink, 'War Kohelet ein Frauenfeind', 272–273; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 403; D'Alario, 'Misogyny and Valorization', 98.

participle has also been read as indicating a casual finding;¹¹⁵ but as we have already seen, the intensity of Qohelet's search is anything but casual (v. 25). Instead the participle stresses the frequentative aspect of his finding ('I keep finding'),¹¹⁶ which in turn suggests this is not what he was looking for.

The unintended and unwelcome nature of his discovery is also evident in the description of it as more bitter than death. Lohfink's suggestion that **מר ממורת** means 'stronger than death' is unlikely.¹¹⁷ While 'strong' is an attested meaning of the root *mrr* in Aramaic, Ugaritic, and Arabic, there are no certain instances of such usage in the Old Testament.¹¹⁸ By contrast, bitterness (**מר**) and death (**מות**) are used to describe the illicit woman in the related wisdom context of Prov 5:3–6.

The grammatical object of Qohelet's finding is also unclear. One can scarcely construe **מצא** as a *verbum sentiendi*, so it is doubtful that **מצא** can take a double accusative.¹¹⁹ Thus the entire proposition may be the complement of **מצא**.¹²⁰ This, however, does not explain the lack of gender agreement between **מר ממורת** and **האשה**, or the presence of **את** on **האשה**, which would be the subject of that clause.¹²¹ The solution to both is indicated by the Masoretic accents,

¹¹⁵ Galling, 'Prediger', 109. Lauha proposes the exact opposite of this; however, it is difficult to see how a participle would stress the permanence of Qohelet's discovery over the *qatal* form, contra Lauha, *Kohelet*, 141.

¹¹⁶ Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 184–186; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 203. cf. Joüon §121d

¹¹⁷ Lohfink, 'War Kohelet ein Frauenfeind', 259–287.

¹¹⁸ Although 'stronger than death' works as a translation of **מר ממורת** in 1 Sam 15:32, there is no reason to translate it this way, particularly given the association of bitterness and death in Prov 5:3–6; Sir 41:1; Job 21:25. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 261–262.

¹¹⁹ GKC §117h; Joüon §157d.

¹²⁰ Holmstedt et al., *Qoheleth*, 220–221.

¹²¹ Holmstedt, in defending this view, accounts for the former as a suspense tactic and the latter as exception case marking (GKC §117i–m). Holmstedt et al., *Qoheleth*, 220–221.

that make **מֵרַם מָמוֹת** a substantive ('something more bitter than death') and place **אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה** in apposition. The woman is explicitly marked as an accusative to show that *she* is the bitter thing that Qohelet had found.

This is the only place that **אִשָּׁה** is found in Ecclesiastes with the definite article, and so is often taken as a reference to womankind generally.¹²² Indeed, **אָדָם** with the article generally means '(hu)mankind' (1:3, 13; 2:22; 3:10, 11; etc.), and without it means 'a man' or 'any man' (2:21; 7:20, 28; 8:1, 8; 9:15). Yet, it should be noted that **הָאָדָם** can refer to a specific man when it is followed by a relative pronoun (2:12, 18).

In Ecclesiastes, **אֲשֶׁר** and **שֶׁ** function as both relative pronouns and causal conjunctions. Either function is possible here in v. 26. Based on our reading of **אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה** as a delayed identification of the bitter thing that Qohelet had found, it is more natural to read **אֲשֶׁר** as a relative pronoun, making Qohelet's identification still more specific. This is also supported by the content of the subsequent clauses, which extend the death motif rather than explain it.¹²³

As we noted in our earlier survey, the identity of this woman is a stumbling block in the interpretation of Ecclesiastes. The use of the definite noun followed by a relative pronoun points to a specific woman (cf. 2:12, 18) rather than womankind in general. Within the parental discourse of Prov 1–9, the son is warned of two women: the illicit woman (**אִשָּׁה זָרָה**) and Lady Folly (**אִשָּׁה כְּסִילוֹת**). Although both are considered deadly, the verbal links are far stronger with the illicit woman. In Prov 5:4–5 she is as bitter (**מֵרַם**) as

Similarly, Shields says that a masculine adjective modifying a woman is not without precedent. Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 185.

¹²² Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 204.

¹²³ Kamano also notes that the two possibilities given in v. 26b suggests that there is a certain type of woman on view, rather than all women generally. Kamano, *Cosmology*, 174–175.

wormwood, and her feet lead down to death (מֹרֶת). Elsewhere, her house and her chambers go down to death (מֹרֶת) (2:18; 7:27). Proverbs does not use the language of traps and fetters, yet one can find a comparable image of the fool being caught by the illicit woman like an animal by a hunter (7:21–23). While Krüger notes similarities to the restraints of Lady Wisdom in Sir 6:24–31,¹²⁴ the imagery there is without the death motif. Further, we cannot be confident that the son was familiar with such teaching.

Ecclesiastes 7:26 ends with a statement regarding the escape of the one who is acceptable to God (טוֹב לְפָנֵי אֱלֹהִים) and her capture of the sinner (חֹטֵא) (cf. 2:26). To be sure, this is not simply a restatement of the teaching of Proverbs. In the book of Proverbs, the son is commanded to keep far from the illicit woman (Prov 5:8) and to drink from his own cistern (5:15). The ways of the son are watched and weighed by Yahweh (5:21), and the folly of adultery (typically) leads to its own punishment (5:22–23). Qohelet's teaching is effectively the reverse—rather than exhorting the reader to flee the illicit woman, he states merely that whether or not one escapes the illicit woman depends upon God's favour.¹²⁵ Moreover, Qohelet is troublingly vague about what it means to be acceptable to God.

Qohelet's attempts to account for wisdom and folly lead him repeatedly to the illicit woman. Here the father shows that Qohelet's self-reliant wisdom leads him into great danger and cannot provide a way out. Compared to the sage advice of Proverbs, Qohelet's wisdom is ineffective and even a failure.

¹²⁴ Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 145–147.

¹²⁵ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 204–205; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 269; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 187.

7:27

Look, this is what I have found,' says Qohelet, 'by adding one to another to find an account.

In contrast to v. 26, here Qohelet announces a more conclusive finding.¹²⁶ He calls the reader to take note (ראה), which shows he is not simply recounting a private experience, but now wishes to share an insight. Similarly, Qohelet returns to his default preference for the *qatal* verb form rather than the participle. To emphasise that he has a concrete finding, he also adds a demonstrative (זה) before the verb.¹²⁷

At the exact moment that the reader expects Qohelet to announce his finding, the narrator's voice reappears, again announcing Qohelet's quoted speech.¹²⁸ The suspense this creates can be seen by comparing v. 26 and v. 27.

v. 26 'I keep finding something more bitter than death: the woman,
who...'

v. 27 'Look, this is what I have found,' says Qohelet,

The MT reads **אמרה קהלת**, but this has surely been mis-divided, possibly as a result of a confusion of the grammatically feminine form of **קהלת** and the addition of the definite article, which is present only here and 12:8.¹²⁹ A single

¹²⁶ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 126. Contra Lauha and Schwienhorst-Schönberger, who claim that **זה** is retrospective and looks back to what Qohelet found, with **למצא חשבון** creating a frame with v. 25. Lauha, *Kohelet*, 142; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 404. This fails to maintain any distinction between the participle and the *qatal* form of **מצא**. Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 582.

¹²⁷ Qohelet frequently places objects before verbs, which Schoors suggests reflects his argumentative style, often adding emphasis and contrast. Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 159–160.

¹²⁸ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 205; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 189.

¹²⁹ Goldman notes that the LXX, normally a very literalistic version regarding articles, has

Canaanite *qatala* form in Ecclesiastes is unlikely and there is also nothing to suggest the father wishes to change Qohelet's gender.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, the inconsistent definiteness of קהלת is an unusual feature of the book and creates ambiguity concerning whether Qohelet is to be understood as an individual or a symbolic figure.¹³¹

It is correct to say that the effect of the narrator's intrusion is to create distance between Qohelet and the audience. However, it is not a later editor wishing to mitigate Qohelet's misogyny.¹³² Rather, it is the father pressing upon his son that these are Qohelet's findings, not his own. Once again, we are reminded that Qohelet is not the one doing the teaching; it is the father using Qohelet's 'insights' to serve a greater purpose.

After the narrator's input, the suspense continues. All of vv. 27b–28 is background information to the finding that is delayed until v. 29, where Qohelet again says ראה זה מצאתי.¹³³

The background Qohelet gives in v. 27b is a statement of his method and a restatement of his goal. The method of his search is described as אחת לאחת.¹³⁴

the article on each of the narrator's quotation markers (1:2; 7:27; 12:8), and suggests that the MT has assimilated 1:2 to 1:1. Goldman, 'Commentaries', 64–65.

¹³⁰ Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 79–80; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 580–581. cf. Dahood, 'Phoenician Background', 277; Perry, *Dialogues*, 132.

¹³¹ Curiously, it reflects the same ambiguity of אדם (ה) in the Primeval Narrative of Genesis 1–11. There we find האדם in Gen 2:7, 8, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20a, 21, 22, 23; 3:8, 9, 12, 20, 24; 4:1; and אדם in 4:25; 5:1, 3, 4, 5. Additionally, the Masoretic pointing indicates לאדם is indefinite in 2:20b, 3:17, 21, but this may just reflect scribal awareness of the use of אדם as a proper name in subsequent chapters; cf. Ingram, *Ambiguity*, 82–85.

¹³² As claimed by Galling, 'Prediger', 109; Lauha, *Kohelet*, 142.

¹³³ Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 229; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 269–270.

¹³⁴ As throughout his article, Pinker proposes an emendation (לא חתה 'one not afraid [of an original thought]') for an unproblematic text. Pinker, 'Views on Women', 183–184.

It is rightly understood as indicating the thoroughness of his search,¹³⁵ although calling this induction is too specific.¹³⁶ Rather, ‘the collector’ is amassing more experiences and observations to learn what he can about wisdom and folly.¹³⁷

Two further observations develop our understanding of Qohelet’s search. First, the feminine gender of **אִחָה** ‘suggests wryly that he surveyed the field of womanhood carefully and extensively’.¹³⁸ Secondly, the description of an almost mathematical process (‘one plus one’), confirms that we are right in understanding **חֲשִׁבֹן** as the borrowing of a commercial term (i.e. ‘an account’).¹³⁹

Reminding us that he is still engaging in the specific search he began in v. 25, Qohelet restates his purpose: to find an account or, borrowing Seow’s expansive description, a ledger that shows what will lead to a profitable human existence and what will not.¹⁴⁰ In v. 26, he has already made significant progress on the debit column of the ledger—the deadly peril of the illicit woman. Now he must find something to credit to his account.

Instead, we should understand **אִחָה לְאִחָה** as an accusative of manner, hence adverbial in value. Joüon §126d; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 264.

¹³⁵ Ogden, *Qobeleth*, 122.

¹³⁶ Contra Lohfink, ‘War Kohelet ein Frauenfeind’, 276.

¹³⁷ Perry, *Joyous Living*, 18–19. Fredericks also believes this is a play on Qohelet’s name (‘the assembler’), since he is assembling observations (as opposed to the **קָהַל**). Fredericks, ‘Ecclesiastes’, 181, 185.

¹³⁸ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 270.

¹³⁹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 264; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 270.

¹⁴⁰ Seow, ‘Dangerous Seductress’, 25.

7:28

I have not found what my soul has constantly sought. I have found one man in a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these.

This verse continues to provide further background to Qohelet's finding, which he began to announce in v. 27 and will resume in v. 29. It is an excursus that explains why his findings falls well short of his goal.

The first clause of v. 28 is read by Longman as a relative clause qualifying the חשבון of v. 27, namely that an explanation of the world was sought but not found by Qohelet.¹⁴¹ Fox does not believe this is the case because Qohelet does claim to find a חשבון (of sorts) in v. 29. He thus proposes emending אשר to אשה, so that this clause balances the last clause of the verse.¹⁴² Better still is understanding this relative clause as a substantive ('what my soul has constantly sought'), which the end of v. 28 tells us is a woman. Again this object precedes the governing verb for emphasis.¹⁴³

A new detail that Qohelet adds to this statement of searching vis-à-vis his earlier statements, is the mention of his soul (נפש). In Ecclesiastes, the soul is consistently the seat of pleasure and satisfaction (2:24; 4:8; 6:2, 3, 7, 9) and never associated with an intellectual search for wisdom.¹⁴⁴ This confirms that it is specifically a woman on view, rather than חשבון.

Several emendations to this verse have been proposed, all of which mitigate the perceived misogyny of the text. Shields suggests removing the second מצאתי as dittography, which then results in this verse being consistent with v. 29 (cf.

¹⁴¹ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 206. This is also how the LXX understands this clause.

¹⁴² Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 270.

¹⁴³ Holmstedt et al., *Qoheleth*, 223.

¹⁴⁴ Riesener, 'Frauenfeindschaft', 201.

v. 20) as a statement that Qohelet has not found an upright man or woman.¹⁴⁵

Seow suggests that all of v. 27b was added by a scribe who missed that Qohelet was talking about personified wisdom, since it is unlikely that Qohelet would say he *has* found just after claimed that he has *not* found¹⁴⁶—as though Qohelet is not prone to contradiction or confusion! It should be noted that neither of these emendations has textual support. Similarly, there is no warrant for supposing v. 28b to be a quotation.¹⁴⁷

The text can surely be understood as it stands. In light of his categorical denial of finding what he sought, the man (אָדָם) that Qohelet has found is evidently not what he was searching for.

Since אָדָם normally means human being, Fox takes this the same way here. The contrast then is that Qohelet found one real human as opposed to almost a thousand dumb animals (cf. 3:18–21).¹⁴⁸ But given that woman has just been mentioned, this almost certainly refers to man.¹⁴⁹ Gordis rightly points out that אָדָם can and does refer to man in contrast to woman (Gen 3:8, 12, etc.).¹⁵⁰

The text does not make clear what kind of man Qohelet found or what kind of woman he was looking for. So interpreters—and consequently translations—fill in the blanks from context. Some emphasise the preceding context of v. 25 and they take Qohelet to be searching for wisdom (חכמה).

¹⁴⁵ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 188.

¹⁴⁶ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 265.

¹⁴⁷ Contra Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 404.

¹⁴⁸ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 270.

¹⁴⁹ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 143.

¹⁵⁰ ‘When a general term is used in conjunction with a more specific one, the former is restricted in meaning to those elements not included in the latter.’ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 274. Gordis is also followed by Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 264–265.

Hence this man is wise and no wise woman can be found.¹⁵¹ Most, however, focus upon **ישר** in v. 29, and believe that Qohelet says he can find an upright man, but no upright woman.¹⁵²

The mention of his soul or desire (**נפש**), along with **מצא** and **בקש** create a link with Song 5:6 (cf. 3:1–2), which portray Solomon as unsuccessfully looking for love or companionship, something that Gen 2:18 deems necessary (cf. Prov 18:22; 19:14).¹⁵³ Indeed, **מצא אשה** means ‘find a wife’ in Prov 18:22, although Fox warns that it cannot be applied consistently in this verse to **מצא אדם**.¹⁵⁴ Similarly, **מצא אשה** is used in Prov 31:10 to refer to a woman who is very much the positive counterpart to the illicit woman of v. 26. In this sense, the above interpretations that emphasise wisdom or uprightness are not entirely wrong. While it is not wisdom or uprightness that he is looking for per se, these are the qualities that make for a good wife (Prov 31:10–31).

For Qohelet to have found a man, is presumably, to say he found a friend. Friendship, after all, is a particularly strong theme in wisdom literature. The companion or neighbour (**רע**), close friend (**אָלוף**), and intimate friend (**אָהב**) are the topic of instruction throughout the book of Proverbs. In a striking similarity to Eccl 7:28, Sir 6:6 speaks about the friend who gives counsel as ‘one in a thousand’ (**אֶחָד מֵאַלְפִי**). We should thus understand Qohelet to be stating that he has found a worthy male companion. Nevertheless, this is not what he was searching for and, therefore, does not balance the ledger.

The final clause of v. 28 introduces a contrast: he does *not* find a woman. The

¹⁵¹ Fredericks, ‘Ecclesiastes’, 185–186.

¹⁵² Lauha, *Kohelet*, 142–143; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 274–275; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 583–584.

¹⁵³ Riesener, ‘Frauenfeindschaft’, 201–202.

¹⁵⁴ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 271.

בכל־אלה refers to the אלה of the previous verse.¹⁵⁵ The significance of a thousand is simply that it is a very large number of people; this accords with the earlier statements regarding the earnestness (לדעת ולתור ובקש) in v. 25) and thoroughness of his search (אחת לאחת in v. 27).¹⁵⁶ There is possibly an allusion to the one thousand ‘companions’ of Solomon.¹⁵⁷ If this is the case, then Qohelet is certainly reflecting the worst of Solomon’s ‘wisdom’.

What Qohelet says in this verse does not mean that every person he encounters on his search—except for one man—was of the same quality as the illicit woman he found in v. 26. Rather, he could not find her counterpart, the woman of Prov 31:10–31. Qohelet’s answer to the question of Prov 31:10 (אשת־חיל מי ימצא) is ‘Not I!’

7:29

Look, I have found only this: that God made people upright, but they have sought great schemes.

In this verse we see the conclusion Qohelet draws from his inability to find a woman to balance his account. Having explained that he could not find what he was looking for, he repeats זה מצאתי ראה to indicate the resumption of the announcement he began in v. 27a.¹⁵⁸ Given his goal is to find an account

¹⁵⁵ The woman of v. 26 is too distant to be the antecedent, and is singular. Contra Fredericks, ‘Ecclesiastes’, 181.

¹⁵⁶ Baltzer is surely incorrect to maintain that אלה refers to brigade. His reading of v. 26 as ‘war imagery’ is far too narrow. Furthermore, the presence of אחד shows that we are dealing with numbers in v. 28. Baltzer, ‘Women and War’, 130–131. Similarly, Pinker’s proposal of מאלף finds no support from context. Baltzer, ‘Women and War’, 130–131.

¹⁵⁷ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 147–148.

¹⁵⁸ The MT includes a *maqgef* (ראה־זה), such that the text says ‘look at this’. However, if we are right to read v. 29 as resuming the statement of v. 27, then זה should be read as the object of מצא in both verses.

(חשבוֹן) of what does and does not lead to a profitable human existence, his brief excursus was necessary to explain that his finding here was not the one that he intended.

In addition to repeating his announcement of a finding, Qohelet also adds לְבַד. This is translated as a conjunctive adverb (πλήν) by the LXX, although in biblical Hebrew לְבַד is used only as an adverb that modifies the main verb, often with a suffix (e.g. לְבַדּוֹ ‘by himself’).¹⁵⁹ The majority of interpreters nevertheless propose a conjunctive use here, on the basis of the Aramaic equivalent לְחֹד, which is the ‘sort of conjunction with restrictive or attention-focusing force [that] may be rendered by English “but...”’.¹⁶⁰ Longman says it stresses the importance of the discovery, as it explains the reason for his findings in vv. 26, 28.

Despite the suitability of לְבַד as a conjunctive adverb in this context, it can also be understood to have its normal adverbial force. It may modify רָאָה, which is the closest verb; however, the instruction to ‘only see’ makes little sense. Another possibility is that it modifies זֶה: ‘I have found only this’. While some object to this on syntactical grounds, since it is too distant from זֶה or מִצֵּא,¹⁶¹ we have already seen that Qohelet diverges from default word order for the sake of emphasis, and in this case רָאָה is an interjection like הִנֵּה in 1:16.¹⁶² Given that v. 29 is the conclusion of his search, an emphatic word order is not unexpected. He has already suspended this conclusion over two verses, and now the ‘grand’ announcement begins with a word that alerts the

¹⁵⁹ HALOT, s. v. ‘בַּד’ I.

¹⁶⁰ Fox and Porten, ‘Unsought Discoveries’, 32. cf. Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 271–272.

¹⁶¹ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 207; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 264; Holmstedt et al., *Qoheleth*, 225.

¹⁶² Podechard, *L’Ecclésiaste*, 388.

reader that his finding is actually rather minimal.

As in v. 26, the finding that is announced is subsequently paraphrased (אשר).¹⁶³ This finding is explained over two clauses. The first concerns האדם, which we should understand in the sense of humanity. This is its normal sense when it is marked by the definite article. And unlike the previous verse, it is not used in contrast to woman.

Qohelet explains that God has made humankind ישר. Fox attempts to define this as intellectual directness or simplicity on the basis of its contrast to חשבנות.¹⁶⁴ However, ישר is typically a moral or religious category (e.g. Deut 6:18; 12:8, 25, 28; 13:19; 21:9; 32:4; Job 1:1, 8; 2:3), which should thus be considered to influence the more difficult term חשבנות.¹⁶⁵ There is also a conceptual link in this passage to Gen 1–11, with some lexical similarities that suggest that either Qohelet or the father has this passage in mind. עשה appears throughout both creation accounts and is used in relation to God's creation of humanity (אדם) in Gen 1:26.¹⁶⁶ It is most similar to Gen 6:6, where Yahweh regrets that he עשה את־האדם.

The second clause of Qohelet's finding introduces a contrast: 'but they' (והמה).¹⁶⁷ The antecedent to this can only be humankind (האדם).¹⁶⁸ If Qohelet were to speak here specifically about women (as in v. 28), then he

¹⁶³ Riesener, 'Frauenfeindschaft', 201.

¹⁶⁴ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 272.

¹⁶⁵ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 189.

¹⁶⁶ Longman calls this a reflection on Genesis 1 with different vocabulary; he also notes that the link is even more direct with the Targum. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 207.

¹⁶⁷ A co-ordinating conjunction would typically be prefixed to the main verb. Contra Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 124–125; Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', 186.

¹⁶⁸ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 275.

would need a feminine demonstrative, especially given the distance to this antecedent.¹⁶⁹ The shift from grammatical singular (הָאִישׁ) to plural (הָמָה) (cf. 3:11–12) further clarifies his subject. He is not speaking about the (exceptional) man he found in v. 28, but all of humanity.

Given that the subject remains the same in both halves of Qohelet's conclusion, the contrast can be only between the nature that God made for humans, and what Qohelet has observed: they have sought חֲשִׁבֹנוֹת רַבִּים. Fredericks attempts to maintain that Qohelet is speaking positively about humanity here, and sees no reason to take this word any differently from vv. 25, 27. But the Masoretic text does not point this as the plural of חֲשִׁבֹן (v. 25, 27), but חֲשִׁבֹנוֹן, which is used in 2 Chr 26:15 for 'war machines' (something devised).¹⁷⁰ The implied contrast between the two halves of this verse suggests that, unlike vv. 25, 27, the word here carries a negative connotation, such as 'devices' or 'schemes'.¹⁷¹

The words that Qohelet employs in describing the moral depravity of humankind (בְּקֶשׁ חֲשִׁבֹנוֹת רַבִּים) are almost the same words that he used to describe his own search for wisdom (בְּקֶשׁ חֲכָמָה וְחֲשִׁבֹן in v. 25).¹⁷² It is unclear if Qohelet intends this critique of his wisdom himself, but in any case, the result is that his self-reliant search for wisdom is associated with the sinfulness of humanity.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 232. Contra Pinker, 'Views on Women', 185.

¹⁷⁰ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 588.

¹⁷¹ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 207.

¹⁷² Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 268. In classical terms this is called *antanaclasis*. Kamano, *Cosmology*, 177.

¹⁷³ Fox and Porten, 'Unsought Discoveries', 32; Elizabeth Huwiler, 'Ecclesiastes', in *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*. eds. Elizabeth Huwiler and Roland E. Murphy, UBCS (Grand

In Qohelet's negative use of the root **חשב**, we can again detect an allusion to the Primeval Narrative.¹⁷⁴ In Gen 6:5 we read, 'Yahweh saw that the evil of man was great, and every purpose of the schemes of his heart (**מחשבת לבו**) was only evil all the time.' Given that Qohelet otherwise conceives of God as a distant and unpredictable deity, and never speaks directly of his covenant or salvation history, it is remarkable that Qohelet's words have so many similarities to Gen 6:5–6. If Qohelet were the implied author of this work, then one would have to conclude that he has been testing the received traditions—and found this one confirmed. Yet with the father as the implied author, Qohelet is able to speak words with a significance beyond his understanding. Just as in v. 26, Qohelet's committed and persistent searching, and all his disappointing dealings with men and women, have led him to discover what the son already knows from tradition: the perversity of the human heart. Ominously, such 'wisdom' is associated with the scheming of the human heart that led to the judgment of the flood.

It is worth considering the way in which Qohelet's finding in v. 29 answers the search he began in verse 25. There he lowered his aims from having an understanding of the world (**מה־היה**, v. 24), to an account of what works and what does not (**חשבון**). But despite the intensity of his search, he only manages to fill out one side of the ledger. He discovers something that is not good (the illicit woman), but he cannot find her counterpart, who brings blessing. Thus all that Qohelet has learnt from this latest endeavour is the depravity of humanity—of women and men (himself included) (v. 26b).

Rapids: Baker, 2012), 204.

¹⁷⁴ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 207.

7.4 Summary and Conclusions

In Eccl 7:23–29 Qohelet announces the findings of his search for wisdom. In something of an anti-climax, Qohelet’s grand discovery is the inaccessibility of wisdom (vv. 23–24). Even after lowering his expectations (v. 25), he is unable to find a basic account of what works and what does not. Relying on the guidance of his heart (לב), Qohelet’s wisdom leads him to be entangled by the illicit woman of Proverbs (v. 26) and unable to find a woman like that of Prov 31:10–31 (vv. 27–28). Thus all he finds in his search is the ubiquity of sin, in which—along with the illicit woman and those who fall into her traps—he himself is implicated.

Each of the three didactic strategies suggested by our study of the epilogue emerge in this passage. First, the characterisation of Qohelet in 7:23–29 clearly serves the father’s first goal of deterring his son from self-reliant wisdom. It achieves this through a negative portrayal of Qohelet’s epistemology and his involvement with the illicit woman. As noted by Bartholomew, this passage draws significant attention to Qohelet’s epistemology.¹⁷⁵ The means of Qohelet’s search, namely reliance upon his heart (v. 25; cf. 2:1, 15; 3:17, 18), highlights the deep flaw of his wisdom (cf. Deut 7:17; 8:17; 9:4). Even more troublingly, the object of Qohelet’s search includes wickedness and folly, showing his unwillingness to rely upon the traditional Israelite wisdom.

Qohelet’s discussion of women, involving his repeated encounters with the illicit woman (v. 26; cf. Prov 2:18; 5:4–5; 7:27) and inability to find a woman/wife who is righteous or wise (v. 27–28; cf. Prov 31:10–31), also serves his negative portrayal. Rather than being a misogynistic slur against women in general, Qohelet’s failed relationships with women are an indictment against

¹⁷⁵ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 264–265.

his character and his wisdom. The outcome of Qohelet's self-reliant wisdom aligns him with the sinner (v. 26b) and the fool (Prov 7:21–23).

Secondly and relatedly, Qohelet's words serve the father's goals through his truthful admission of his inability to grasp the object of his searching (vv. 23–24) and his honest reportage of his failed dealings with women (vv. 26–29). The son ought to learn from the words of Qohelet, trusting his first person account of the failure of self-reliance and heart-led searching to lead to blessing or to even the more meagre ambition of knowing what works and what does not.

Thirdly, Qohelet's words contain a number of allusions that would appear to be used unknowingly by Qohelet. In contrast to Qohelet's disinterest in tradition and need to see for himself (רֹאֶה), the father's address in the epilogue suggests the son is familiar with the likes of Deuteronomy and Proverbs. In addition to the noted allusions to the illicit woman and excellent wife of Proverbs, Qohelet's words also have strong connections to Deut 30:11 and Gen 6:5–6.

In v. 23, Qohelet gives his initial summary of his search for wisdom: 'it was far from me' (וְהָיָה רְחוֹקָה מִמֶּנִּי). This appears to be an unsubtle negation of Deut 30:11, which says of Yahweh's commandment (הַמִּצְוָה), 'it is not far off' (וְלֹא רְחוֹקָה הִוא). It is difficult to believe that Qohelet himself would intend this allusion, and then fail to commend the law as the answer to the inaccessibility of wisdom. Given the father's exhortation to keep divine commands (מִצְוֹתָיו in 12:13), this allusion should be understood as his 'ironic wink' to the son.¹⁷⁶ The limits of Qohelet's self-reliant wisdom are contrasted

¹⁷⁶ Unlike Crenshaw's reading of Ecclesiastes, we consider it to be the epilogist, rather than Qohelet, who is winking. Crenshaw, *Ironic Wink*, 7.

with the nature of the law as God's revealed and eminently accessible wisdom, ultimately serving the father's second rhetorical goal.

Another ironic allusion can be found in v. 29, which appears to loosely cite Gen 6:5–6. Both texts speak of God making man (עֲשֵׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם) and use the root חשב to speak of wicked thoughts. While Qohelet's words describe what he has learned from experience rather than tradition, the evaluation of humanity is similar. Qohelet's description of humanity's sin is בִּקְשׁוֹ חֲשֹׁבוֹת, which closely reflects his description of his own search in v. 25 (בִּקְשׁ ... חֲשֹׁבוֹן). While it is difficult to determine whether this criticism of his wisdom is Qohelet's intention, the linking of such 'wisdom' with deluge-inducing judgment is surely not. The father again skewers Qohelet's wisdom with his own words.

This analysis also has some implications for the discussion of Qohelet's 'misogyny' that dominates the secondary literature. Given that Qohelet is a character used by the father to warn his son from self-reliant wisdom, a misogynistic portrayal could theoretically serve such goals.¹⁷⁷ Yet historically speaking, the son is far less likely to be sensitive to such a portrayal than the modern reader. Rather it would seem that Qohelet's misogyny is largely incidental. His negative comments about the female sex reflect his negative experiences, namely his frequent encounter with illicit women and inability to find a woman like the wife of Prov 31:10–31. The father's purpose in attributing these experiences to Qohelet is not to make a comment about women per se but to show the profound limitations of Qohelet's wisdom vis-à-vis the wisdom of Proverbs.

With our analysis confirming that Qohelet's (negative) findings indeed serve

¹⁷⁷ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 204–206; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 187.

the father's instruction of his son, we will next consider whether the same also holds true of Qohelet's core advice as found in the *carpe diem* passages. For our thesis to have any merit, it must be able to account for the full spectrum of Qohelet's teaching.

CHAPTER 8

QOHELET'S CORE ADVICE: ANALYSIS OF ECCLESIASTES 11:7–12:7

In the previous chapter, we began our analysis of the composition of the text. The place we began was Eccl 7:23–29, which contains Qohelet's findings, namely his inability to become wise. Qohelet has failed to grasp hold of wisdom, both in the sense of understanding what goes on in the world (vv. 23–24), and in the less ambitious sense of finding an account of what works and what does not (vv. 25–29). As such, Qohelet's words can be seen to further the father's rhetorical goals of warning his son away from Qohelet's self-reliant style of wisdom. Additionally, through the use of allusions to the Primeval Narrative and Deuteronomy, the inefficacy of Qohelet's wisdom is contrasted with the clear and available guidance of the law and its expression in Israel's wisdom tradition (יראת יהוה).

As a teacher of wisdom, Qohelet not only imparts his philosophical reflections on life, but he also gives exhortation in practical matters. This is to be expected for an Israelite wisdom teacher, given the fundamentally 'practical' nature of wisdom in Israel and the ancient Near East.¹ In this chapter we shall concern ourselves with one particular category of Qohelet's instruction, as found in the so-called 'carpe diem' passages (2:24–26; 3:12–13, 3:22; 5:17–19[18–20]; 8:15;

¹ Traditionally, most definitions of wisdom have focused upon this aspect of wisdom. For example, 'Wsht ist die Kunst, das leben in jeder Beziehung und in allen Lagen wie ein Meister zu führen' (Fichtner), 'cleverness and skill for the purpose of practical action' (Fohrer), and 'practical knowledge' (von Rad). Johannes Fichtner, *Die altorientalische Weisheit in ihrer israelitisch-jüdischen Ausprägung: eine Studie zur Nationalisierung der Weisheit in Israel*, BZAW 62 (Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1933), 12; von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 418; Georg Fohrer, 'Sophia', in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*. ed. James L. Crenshaw (New York: Ktav, 1976), 63–64.

9:7–10; 11:7–12:7).²

This chapter analyses the composition of Qohelet's final call to *carpe diem* (11:7–12:7). The significance of this text within Qohelet's discourse is easy to defend. As a whole, the *carpe diem* texts feature prominently due to their repetition and thematic integrity. Ecclesiastes 11:7–12:7 is the final passage in this series and also the final passage of Qohelet's discourse. The emphatic nature of this advice is reflected in the density of imperatives, and the fact that this is the only place in the book where Qohelet uses a vocative to address his audience (בַּחֹרֶר in 11:9).

A study of this text is important for defending our reading of Ecclesiastes as parental discourse, since this text—along with the other *carpe diem* passages—are often taken as central to the message of the book as a whole. In light of the father's implied authorship of the book (chapter 5), we must explore how he intends his son to hear and respond to Qohelet's central exhortation. Qohelet's advice to the young man is not necessarily the same as the father's advice, and so we must consider how it ultimately serves the father's rhetorical goals instead of his own.

This chapter will begin with an extended examination of the *carpe diem* passages as a whole, as these constitute the thematic context of 11:7–12:7. Then we will consider the literary context and structure of 11:7–12:7. Finally, we will proceed with a verse-by-verse analysis of 11:7–12:7 with particular attention to its role within the father's rhetoric to his son.

² Admittedly, it is prejudicial to label Qohelet's advice as *carpe diem*; however, this is a conventional designation of these passages and, as we will see, an accurate one.

8.1 Qohelet's Carpe Diem Passages

8.1.1 Survey of Readings

The earliest Christian and Jewish readings of the carpe diem passages were decidedly non-literal.³ Though the Mishnah does not directly mention these passages, it shows that Qohelet's words were generally used to exhort torah observance.⁴ This hermeneutic is clearly applied to the carpe diem passages in the Targum, which speaks of food and drink as the providence of God for the righteous man, from which he should do charity in order to secure a reward in the afterlife.⁵

Jerome read Ecclesiastes allegorically and understood it to advocate *contemptus mundi* and an ascetic life in service of God. As such, the carpe diem passages are descriptions of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper rather than advocating material pleasure.⁶ This interpretation dominated Christian exegesis until the time of the Protestant Reformation. Luther's translation and exegesis of Ecclesiastes, as well as the writings of Brenz and Melancthon were

³ Bartholomew suggests that the rabbinic debate concerning whether or not Ecclesiastes 'defiles the hands' testifies to an early literal interpretation that created problems for its inspired status. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 22–23. However, the phrase 'defiles the hands' is not self-evidently a question of inspiration. Mishnah Yadayim 3:5 implies that all of these texts were considered holy Scripture, and that the debate addressed a more specific question, i.e. 'do all holy texts defile the hands or are there some exceptions?' Broyde suggests the debated status of Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs shows that the question concerns the ceremonial treatment of texts that do not contain an unambiguous use of the divine name. Michael J Broyde, 'Defilement of the Hands, Canonization of the Bible, and the Special Status of Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs', *Judaism* 44.1 (1995): 65–79.

⁴ m. Yad. 1:10 cf. Eccl 4:12; m. Sukkah 2:6; m. Hag. 1:6; cf. Eccl 1:15.

⁵ Cf. especially Tg. Qoh. 9:7–10.

⁶ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 26–27.

significant.⁷ In complete rejection of Jerome's interpretation, Luther affirmed the goodness of creation and enjoyment of ordinary life. What Qohelet considers vain is not the world, but the human condition.⁸

Despite the tendency of historical-critical scholarship to identify various layers of redaction in the book of Ecclesiastes, the *carpe diem* passages have been largely spared this treatment or were considered one of the earliest layers.⁹ The hand of a glossator is identified only in the more orthodox comments within these texts, such as 'God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy to the man who is good before him' (2:26a).¹⁰

While recent interpretation has tended to restore the unity of Ecclesiastes, it remains divided over the reading of Qohelet's calls to *carpe diem*. A stream of positive interpretation is represented most famously by Whybray. He considers the *carpe diem* passages to be a wholehearted commendation of joy. Moreover, this call to joy is a leitmotif that punctuates the book.¹¹ He claims that in each case, the negatives observed by Qohelet are taken to provide support for his exhortations.¹² This interpretation has been enthusiastically followed by Ogden, who considers these passages to be his response to the programmatic question posed at 1:3 (cf. 3:9).¹³ He understands Qohelet to be responding to

⁷ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 32–33.

⁸ Martin Luther, 'Notes on Ecclesiastes (1532)', in *Luther's Works*. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman (St Louis: Concordia, 1972), 15:4, 7–11.

⁹ Siegfried, for example, attributes the bulk of the *carpe diem* passages to Q2, who was an Epicurean Sadducee who commended the enjoyment of life as the answer to the philosophy offered by the original pessimistic Jewish author (Q1). Siegfried, *Prediger*, 10–22.

¹⁰ McNeile, *Ecclesiastes*, 24. However, cf. Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 84.

¹¹ Whybray, 'Preacher of Joy', 87–88.

¹² Whybray, 'Preacher of Joy', 92.

¹³ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 47–49, 56.

the darkest problems of life with ‘boundless optimism’.¹⁴ For Fredericks, these passages are part of the *shalom* theme of covenant fulfilment (1 Kgs 4:20), which are preserved for the righteous.¹⁵

A more qualified version of the positive interpretation also finds many proponents. Lee provides the most thoroughly articulated form of this position. She follows Whybray, but distinguishes her interpretation at a few points, most significantly in linking the themes of joy and fear of God. Rather than harmonising the more problematic passages like Whybray and Ogden, Lee considers Qohelet’s message one of ‘faithful realism’, which she defines as ‘[confronting] the reality of human existence, with both its tragic and the [*sic*] joyous dimensions’.¹⁶ Other interpreters who read the carpe diem passages as mostly positive include Brown and Weeks, who describe them as calling for life’s simple pleasures to be received with gratitude.¹⁷

Bartholomew’s interpretation of the carpe diem passages is especially notable. It must be described as positive; however, it is an entirely different approach from those described so far. Bartholomew particularly emphasises the juxtaposition of the carpe diem advice and the enigmatic passages that precede them. Rather than answering the programmatic question of 1:3 or providing a hedonistic solace from life’s ephemerality, the enjoyment passages are confessional statements that reflect Qohelet’s Israelite materialist heritage. The tension between Qohelet’s empirical observations and his joyful confessions

¹⁴ Ogden, *Qobeleth*, 86.

¹⁵ Fredericks, ‘Ecclesiastes’, 38–39, 102–03. Relatedly, Meeks describes the carpe diem passages as a call to the pre-fall enjoyment of creation. Russell L. Meek, ‘Fear God and Enjoy His Gifts: Qohelet’s Edenic Vision of Life’, *CTR* 14.1 (2016): 23–34.

¹⁶ Lee, *Vitality*, 8.

¹⁷ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 37–39; Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 79–84.

creates gaps that remain open until 12:1 and the epilogue.¹⁸

A more pessimistic interpretation of the *carpe diem* passages is advocated by Fox. These passages commend pleasure as a portion (חֶלֶק) rather than the profit (יִתְרוֹן) Qohelet was looking for (1:3).¹⁹ While he does have positive things to say about pleasure as a ‘good’ product of toil, and a gift from God, it cannot be described as profit because it achieves nothing beyond itself and does not provide an adequate return for the effort invested.²⁰ Contrary to Whybray’s ‘preacher of joy’ thesis:

Qohelet is a ‘preacher of pleasure’—not because he is a hedonist who relishes sensual delights, but because, *faute de mieux*, pleasure remains *ṭob*, ‘good,’ whatever its inadequacies.²¹

Sneed also attributes Qohelet with a comparable pragmatism, describing him as a preacher of ‘limited joy’. His work is more socio-historical in interest, and so locates Qohelet within the Ptolemaic era as one who writes to help his audience come to grips with the harsh realities of life by lowering their expectations.²²

Gordis, Crenshaw, Longman, and Anderson are even more negative.²³ For them the call to enjoyment is to enjoy yourself if you are able, so that you can forget the disappointments of life. There is nothing enthusiastic about these

¹⁸ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 81, 355–56.

¹⁹ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 109–113.

²⁰ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 126, 113.

²¹ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 115.

²² Sneed, ‘הַבֵּל as “Worthless” in Qoheleth’, 893–844.

²³ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 27–28; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 114, 218; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 34–35; William H. U. Anderson, ‘A Critique of the Standard Interpretations of the Joy Statements in Qoheleth’, *JNSL* 27.2 (2001): 57–75.

calls; they are merely a resignation to the only option available.²⁴ Anderson is convinced that this is the only view that does justice to Qohelet's scepticism:

It seems ironic, when scholars are so prone to hold that there is scepticism throughout the book of Qoheleth, that they are not sceptical of the joy statements themselves. This seems to represent a contradiction, perhaps even an irony within that view, i.e., why does scepticism in the book lead to a *carpe diem* interpretation of the joy statements instead of an ironic or sceptical interpretation of them?²⁵

8.1.2 Assessment

Interpreters are virtually unanimous that the *carpe diem* passages are of central importance to Qohelet's discourse; however, the interpretations of these passages could scarcely be more diverse. This brings us to the heart of the question of whether Qohelet's message is ultimately positive or negative. In this section, we will study four features of these passages in order to assess the aforementioned views and establish our expectations for reading 11:7–12:7.

i. Function within Qohelet's Discourse

The central role of the *carpe diem* passages is evident from their repetition. Moreover, they are present across the span of the book and include Qohelet's final pericope (11:7–12:7). Their basic function of these passages is that of advice. While this is not obvious from their initial phrasing as observations (חֲזַק in 2:24; 3:22; 5:17[18]), in 8:15 Qohelet commends enjoyment, and in 9:7–10 and 11:7–12:7 he employs imperatives. This inconsistency of form is usually overlooked, as the common vocabulary and themes clearly group these passages together. Whybray identifies the gradual shift of form as a crescendo

²⁴ Anderson, 'Critique', 72.

²⁵ Anderson, 'Critique', 71.

of emphasis and solemnity, although he does not explore the reasons for this development.²⁶

The origin of Qohelet's advice can be found in his initial question, where he asks: 'what profit (יתרון) is there for man in all his labour (עמלו) under the sun?' (1:3). His search properly begins with the royal quest, which he narrates in 1:12–2:26. In 2:10 Qohelet reports on his experiences with vocabulary that has a clear link to the carpe diem passages:

I did not withhold anything my eyes asked for, I did not deny my heart (לבי) any pleasure (שמחה), for my heart (לבי) took pleasure (שמח) in my labour (עמלי). This was my portion (חלקי) from all my labour (עמלי).²⁷

In the very next verse (2:11), Qohelet goes on to negate his original question and confesses the failure of his search:

I turned to all my works which my hands had done and to my toil which I had expended (בעמל שעמלתי) to do it. Behold all was vanity (הבל) and a desire of the wind. There was no profit (אין יתרון) under the sun.

Qohelet's carpe diem advice would thus appear to arise from his own experiences of pleasure (2:10), which he later returns to and commends to others. Yet, the juxtaposition of 2:10 with 2:11 shows that there is a clear distinction between this enjoyment that he finds and the good he was looking for. The former he describes as a portion (חלק) and the latter as a profit

²⁶ Whybray, 'Preacher of Joy', 87–88.

²⁷ Schoors notes the close connection of 2:10 to the carpe diem passages, although formally classifies it as a report of enjoyment rather than a commendation of enjoyment. Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 169.

(יתרון).²⁸

As Qohelet moves from his own report (2:10), to further observation (2:24–26; 3:12–13; 3:22; 5:17–19[18–20]), to commendation (8:15), and finally to exhortation (9:7–9; 11:7–12:7), the limitations of his advice also become more pronounced (e.g. 9:10b; 11:8b, 9b, 10b; 12:1b–7). Qohelet's increasing emphasis, then, does not come from his growing confidence in the advice itself, but from his strengthening conviction that there is no alternative to be found.

Another important consideration for determining the function of the carpe diem passages is their relationship to his findings of vanity (הבל).²⁹ Ogden understands the carpe diem passages as solutions to the problems that Qohelet finds.³⁰ However, upon closer examination, the relationship between Qohelet's finding of vanity and his carpe diem advice does not appear to be so straightforward. While the carpe diem passages are a response of sorts to vanity, they do not solve it or answer it in kind. This can be seen in Qohelet's own experience of pleasure (2:10), which he finds insufficient to prevent his exclamation of despair and vanity in the very next verse (2:11).

Similarly, after Qohelet speaks of the good of enjoyment in 2:24–25b α , he concludes with גַּם־זֶה הַבֶּל וְרַעוּת רוּחַ (2:26b β). Whybray claims that this is an evaluation of the sinner's experience of gathering only to give to others.³¹

²⁸ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 113; Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 79. Weeks proposes an economic distinction between the two terms, with יֵתְרוֹן referring to the profit remaining at the end of the year, and חֶלֶק as more of a salary or dividend. Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 34–36.

²⁹ See the excursus on pp. 165–170 for further discussion of הַבֶּל and a defence of the translations 'vanity' and 'futility'.

³⁰ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 47–49, 56.

³¹ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 65.

However, it is unclear why Qohelet would characterise this as **הבל**. The frustration of the sinner's works would seem to be the normal operation of retributive justice rather than a futile reality of our world.³² Rather, this is Qohelet's assessment of the fact that whether or not one receives wisdom and enjoyment is up to divine discretion rather than the quality of one's labour.

Finally, with regards to macro-context, Anderson points to the refrain of the book, which affirms **הכל הבל** (1:2; 12:8). Far from secondary, this is the implied author's summary of Qohelet's teaching, including his *carpe diem* passages.³³ The fact that Qohelet's search begins and ends in exactly the same place belies the view that the crescendo of *carpe diem* passages represents Qohelet's movement towards a solution.

In summary, Qohelet's *carpe diem* passages function as advice. Yet it is not the ultimate good that he sought (**יתרון**), but a limited one (**חלק**). The development of form—from report, to observation, to commendation, and finally to exhortation—reflects his growing awareness that there is no other advice for him give. While it is something of a response to the **הבל** that he finds, it is not a solution to it. Indeed, Qohelet continues to maintain the vanity of life before, during, and after the advice that he gives, and the implied author considers 'vanity', not 'joy', to be a fitting summary of his message.

ii. Qohelet's Appraisal of His Advice

Closely related to what we have already seen of the provisional nature (**חלק**) of the *carpe diem* advice is Qohelet's own appraisal of it. Undeniably, Qohelet considers his advice to be 'good' (**טוב**; cf. 2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:17[18]; 8:15). His evaluation appears to be most positive in 5:17[18] (**טוב אשר-יפה**) and 8:15

³² Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 110; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 221–222.

³³ Anderson, 'Critique', 64–65.

(ושבַחתי אֲנִי אֶת־הַשְׂמֵחָה). Precisely what Qohelet means by these terms requires closer inspection.

Ogden claims that the **אֵין טוֹב** statements are Qohelet's own modified version of a 'better than' saying (*Tobspruch*) in response to the question **מִה יִתְרוֹן**.³⁴ Whybray does not go this far; he maintains that although the **אֵין טוֹב** statements do not claim any ultimate advantage for man from his toil, a person is able to enjoy life as God has given it.³⁵ By contrast, Longman claims that the **אֵין טוֹב** is a purposeful avoidance of a more direct statement like 'this is good', in order to communicate his reluctance and lack of enthusiasm.³⁶ It is otherwise difficult to explain why Qohelet would use a statement that is grammatically negative.³⁷ Admittedly, 3:22 is ambiguous: 'there is nothing better *than...*' (**אֵין טוֹב מִ**).³⁸ This could mean either that something is the best of many good options, or the best by lack of alternative. The comparable construction of 3:12 and 8:15 is strongly indicative of the latter: 'there is nothing good *except...*' (**אֵין טוֹב ... כִּי אֵם**). Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the construction **אֵין ... כִּי אֵם** frequently describes something of meagre value.³⁹ Moreover, the word **טוֹב** itself can be used in a muted sense: Qohelet

³⁴ Graham S. Ogden, 'Qoheleth's Use of the "Nothing is Better"-Form', *JBL* 98.3 (1979): 339–350. Fredericks likewise understands this as a superlative. Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', 101.

³⁵ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 47–49, 152.

³⁶ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 107.

³⁷ Note also the association of **אֵין טוֹב** with divine judgment in Jer 8:15; 14:19.

³⁸ Eccl 2:24 should probably read the same, as witnessed by the LXX and Vulg. The **מִן** was likely omitted due to haplography of the awkward **מִשְׂאֵכֶל**. Goldman, 'Commentaries', 74–75; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 206–207.

³⁹ 'He had nothing except a small little lamb' (2 Sam 12:3); 'Your servant has nothing in the house except a small jar of oil.' (2 Kgs 4:2); 'There was no-one there...only tied horses and donkeys and tent just as they were [left].' (2 Kgs 7:10); 'There was no water, only mud.' (Jer 38:6). In a more positive sense, although still emphasising the lack of alternative, we find:

applies it to the person who was never born (4:3), the stillborn (6:3), and visiting the house of mourning (7:2). It would appear, therefore, that ‘good’ is a relative term for Qohelet and that his *carpe diem* advice is a resignation to the only ‘good’ he can find.

The expression **טוב אשר יפה** in 5:17[18] is similarly less exuberant than some would claim. Lohfink is certainly incorrect to associate it with the Greek idiom ‘the supreme good’.⁴⁰ Elsewhere, Qohelet uses **טוב אשר** to introduce the evaluation ‘it is better/good that...’ (5:4[5]; 7:18), which is also natural in this context. For the same reason, the translation the ‘good and/even beautiful’ is unlikely.⁴¹ Additionally, it is questionable whether ‘beautiful’ is the correct gloss in this context. In the rest of the Old Testament, **יפה** is used to describe people or their attributes, animals, and nature as ‘beautiful’. Qohelet is alone in using **יפה** for abstract concepts, although it is used this way in the Mishnah in the sense of ‘worth’ or ‘value’,⁴² and in the Talmud for ‘appropriate’.⁴³ Such a gloss also suits the context of 3:11, which discusses the times allotted by God

‘This is none other than the house of God.’ (Gen 28:17); ‘I do not have any profane bread, there is only holy bread.’ (1 Sam 21:5); ‘There is no God in all the world, except in Israel.’ (2 Kgs 5:15); ‘Your servant will no longer (**לוא ... עוד**) make an offering or sacrifice to other (**אֱלֹהִים**) gods—only (**כי אם**) to Yahweh’ (2 Kgs 5:17).

⁴⁰ Norbert Lohfink, ‘Qoheleth 5:17-19: Revelation by Joy’, *CBQ* 52.4 (1990): 625–635. In his rebuttal, Lauha points out that *καλὸς ἀγαθός* uses a different construction (not comparable to **אשר**) and is used to describe aesthetic-ethical characteristic of people, rather than concrete things. Lauha, *Kohelet*, 112.

⁴¹ Contra Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 86; Fredericks, ‘Ecclesiastes’, 145.

⁴² M. Ker. 5:3.

⁴³ B. B. Qam 4:6; 5:6; 8:1. These uses of **יפה** to describe compensation raise the tantalising possibility that it may be another of Qohelet’s financial terms, related to **חלק**. Indeed, for Qohelet, material enjoyment functions as compensation for the lack of profit; cf. Jastrow, s. v. ‘יפה’.

(3:1–10).⁴⁴ Hence, we adopt the translation: ‘I have seen something good (טוב): that it is fitting to eat and to drink...’.⁴⁵

Finally, we should also be careful to not misunderstand the intended tone of שבחתי in 8:15. As with טוב, Qohelet may be making a relative statement (‘commend’) rather than an absolute one (‘praise’). This would certainly appear to be the case in 4:1–2, where Qohelet’s observation of unchecked oppression leads him to commend (שבח) death more highly than life.

While Qohelet commends his carpe diem advice to the reader as something good, it is only good in a relative sense (cf. 4:1–2, 3; 6:3; 7:2). Given the frustration of his search and the vanity of life, he is unable to find anything better.

iii. Content of the Advice

Qohelet’s advice contains a number of repeated and overlapping elements, which is best represented in tabular form.

| | אכל | שתה | שמחה/שמח | ראה טוב | בעמל |
|---------|-----|-----|----------|--------------|------|
| 2:10 | | | X | | X |
| 2:24–26 | X | X | X חוש | X | X |
| 3:12–13 | X | X | X | עשה טוב X | X |

⁴⁴ ‘Beautiful’ can scarcely be Qohelet’s intended description of God’s imposition of toil (עמל) and business (ענין) upon humankind (3:9–10). Toil (עמל) is a negative, rather than neutral description of work; cf. HALOT, s.v. עָמַל I. Qohelet elsewhere only uses ענין for business that is harmful, frustrating, or unfortunate in outcome (1:13; 2:23, 26; 4:8; 5:2[3]; 5:13[14]; 8:16). Qohelet’s point in 3:11 would thus appear to be that while God fittingly orders the happenings of the world, they remain mysterious and often injurious to humanity.

⁴⁵ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 112; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 208; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 162.

| | | | | | |
|--------------------|---|---|---|-------|-----------|
| 3:22 | | | X | | במעשה |
| 5:17–19 [18–19] | X | X | X | X | X |
| 8:15 | X | X | X | | X |
| 9:7–10 | X | X | | | מעשה X |
| 11:7–12:7 | | | X | יטיבך | |

The significant repetition that Qohelet employs raises the question of what is so special about these activities. Bartholomew argues these terms express the Israelite theology of the goodness of creation (Gen 1–11), and points to the motif of eating (אכל), drinking (שתה), and rejoicing (שמח) in the yearly festivals (Deut 16).⁴⁶ However, despite these common lexemes, these passages have very different concerns. The feasting of the Israelites is part of their covenant participation, and as such it centres upon Yahweh's acts of salvation (Deut 16:3, 12) and blessing (Deut 16:15, 17). Moreover, it requires adherence to Yahweh's stipulations regarding time, manner, and place—and *not* as seems right in their eyes (Deut 12:8; cf. Eccl 2:10; 11:9). Similarly, the purpose of the eating of the tithe of grain, wine, and oil in Deut 14:23 is 'that you may learn to fear Yahweh your God (יראה את־יהוה אלהיך) always'.⁴⁷

Qohelet's carpe diem passages express no concern for covenant obedience or blessing.⁴⁸ While Qohelet acknowledges that enjoyment is given by God (2:25; 3:13; 5:18[19]), the acceptance of such enjoyment is motivated by the fact that

⁴⁶ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 151–53, 228–29, 303–05.

⁴⁷ We read of such joyful feasting occurring in 1 Sam 1:9; 1 Kgs 4:20; Neh 8:10, 12; 1 Chr 29:22.

⁴⁸ Contra Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', 38–39, 102–03.

there is no other good available (2:24; 3:12, 22; 8:15) and the growing spectre of death and old age (3:12; 9:10). Rather than covenant remembrance, Qohelet's calls to enjoyment are so that one does not remember too much (**לֹא** **הִרְבֵּה יִזְכֹּר**) the difficulties of life (5:19[20]).⁴⁹ The most probable translation of **עָנָה** in the same verse is 'occupy' (*pace* Lohfink), which similarly speaks of enjoyment as a distraction from a person's miserable existence.⁵⁰

Without an explicit connection in Qohelet's advice to covenantal themes, it would be hasty to assume that **אָכַל**, **שָׂתָה**, and **שָׂמַח** are to be interpreted positively. After all, these terms are also used to describe idolatrous worship (Exod 32:6; Judg 9:27). More relevant to Ecclesiastes are the warnings about the (mis)use of material goods in the book of Proverbs. For example, Prov 21:17 says that enjoyment (**שִׂמְחָה**) of wine (**יַיִן**) and oil (**שֶׁמֶן**) may lead to poverty. Similarly, in Prov 31:4–7 King Lemuel's mother warns him that kings who drink wine (**שִׁתּוּ יַיִן**) are liable to neglect their ruling responsibilities; wine is better for the perishing so that they do not remember their labour (**עֲמַל**). This would also appear to be Qohelet's intention (5:19[20]).

Another strong biblical connection to the *carpe diem* passages can be found in Isa 22:13. Although Yahweh had called the people of Jerusalem to respond to

⁴⁹ See analysis below on the remembrance (**זָכַר**) of the days of darkness (11:7) and 'your creator' (12:1).

⁵⁰ Lohfink (followed by Gianto) claims that **עָנָה** is the first root listed by BDB as 'answer', which he understands here as 'reveal'. He says this is a play on words with 1:13 which asks whether '[as certain teachers say], everything is an unfortunate business transaction'. Here Qohelet answers this in the negative, claiming that God inspires inner joy so that one does not have to dwell on death. Anderson rightly objects to this reading on linguistic and grammatical grounds: 'reveals what?' Lohfink, 'Revelation by Joy', 625–35; Agustinus Gianto, 'The Theme of Enjoyment in Qohelet', *Bib* 73.4 (1992), 531; Anderson, 'Critique', 66. cf. BDB, s.v. **עָנָה** I', **עָנָה** II'.

judgment with lamentation, they respond with feasting:

But behold: rejoicing and enjoyment (שמחה), killing cattle and slaughtering sheep, eating (אכל) meat and drinking wine (שתה יין).
'Let us eat (אכרל) and drink (שתה) *for tomorrow we die.*'

Not only are there clear lexical connections to Qohelet's calls to *carpe diem*, but there is a significant overlap of motivation: the approach of death. The content of both passages is thus the same in both vocabulary *and* theme: the hopeless enjoyment of pleasure.

The relationship of Qohelet's *carpe diem* advice to ancient Near Eastern texts is equally illuminating. Notable parallels can be found in the Harper's Song,⁵¹ the Instruction of Ptahhotep,⁵² and Siduri's speech in the Epic of Gilgamesh.⁵³ In general, the pervasive *carpe diem* motif in the ancient Near East reflects humanity's wrestling with mortality and the inevitability of death.⁵⁴ Samet claims that unlike other parallels between Ecclesiastes and ancient Near Eastern texts, there is likely a direct literary allusion to Siduri's speech in the Epic of Gilgamesh.⁵⁵ She points to the same order of six common elements and a strong thematic connection:⁵⁶

⁵¹ COS 1.30

⁵² AEL 1:69

⁵³ ANET, 90

⁵⁴ Sneed, 'הבל as "Worthless" in Qoheleth', 888.

⁵⁵ Nili Samet, 'The Gilgamesh Epic and the Book of Qohelet: A New Look', *Bib* 96.3 (2015): 375–390.

⁵⁶ The following table is reproduced from Samet, 'Gilgamesh', 378.

| Alewife's Counsel | Qohelet | Common Theme or Phrase |
|---|--|------------------------------------|
| You, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full; | Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, For God has already approved what you do. | Dining |
| Keep enjoying yourself day and night. Every day make merry, Dance and play day and night! | Always | Temporal Indicator |
| Let your cloth be clean, | Let your garments be white. | Clean Clothes |
| Let your head be washed, may you be bathed in water! | Let not oil be lacking on your head. | Washed Head |
| Gaze on the little one who holds your hand! Let a wife enjoy your repeated embrace! | Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, | Family Life |
| Such is the destiny [of mortal men]. | Because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. | Conclusion: This is Human Destiny. |

The availability of the Epic of Gilgamesh in the ancient Near East⁵⁷ makes it probable that this allusion was intended for the implied reader. The similarity of Qohelet's carpe diem advice to the warnings of Proverbs (Prov 21:17; 31:4–7), the hopeless experience of pleasure in Isa 22:13, and Siduri's advice to Gilgamesh all suggest that we understand these passages not as confessions of Israelite piety (*pace* Bartholomew), but as calls to grasp whatever pleasure is available—hence carpe diem remains an apt designation. Similarly, Qohelet's use of שמח and שמחה should be translated 'enjoy' and 'pleasure', rather than the loftier 'rejoice' or 'joy'. Qohelet's concern in these passages is to forget the difficulties of life through material means rather than to remember the blessings of the covenant.

⁵⁷ As suggested by the Megiddo fragment and Hurrian and Hittite versions; cf. ANET, 503.

iv. Means and Limitations of Carpe Diem

As already noted, Qohelet acknowledges that the source of enjoyment is God himself—he features in all except the shortest (3:22) of the carpe diem passages. In 5:17[18]; 8:15; and presumably also 9:9, God is the one who grants people their days on earth. The enjoyment of food, drink, and material goods is also described as **מִיד הָאֱלֹהִים** (2:24) and **מֵתַת אֱלֹהִים** (3:13, 5:18[19]). Nevertheless, 2:26 says that the divine dispensation of this gift is not universal:

For to the man who is pleasing to him (**טוֹב לְפָנָיו**) he gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy, but to the sinner (**חֹטֵא**) he gives the job of gathering and collecting to give to the one who is pleasing to God (**טוֹב** (לְפָנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים)).

As already seen, Qohelet finds this whole arrangement **הַבֵּל** (2:26bβ). This suggests that what he has observed is not simply retributive justice playing out. A number of interpreters question whether Qohelet is speaking in ethical categories at all, especially in the context of his denial of the *Tun-Ergeben Zusammenhang* in 2:21.⁵⁸ In response, Fredericks argues that the consistent use of **חֹטֵא** throughout the Bible means that a very strong case would need to be made for an exception.⁵⁹ The rare non-ethical uses of **חֹטֵא** have the related meaning of miss or fail (Prov 8:36; Isa 65:20; Job 5:24), which in the context of 2:26 (parallel to **טוֹב לְפָנָיו**) would still be making an ethical statement. Moreover, **חֹטֵא** appears to have an ethical sense in 5:5[6]; 7:20; 8:12; 9:2; 9:18. The problem for Qohelet is rather that, apart from a few glaring transgressions (e.g. Eccl 5:4[5]), he appears uncertain about the divine ethical standard (9:1).⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 109–110; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 189.

⁵⁹ Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', 102–103.

⁶⁰ Though he knows that humanity fails to meet it, whatever it is (7:20).

Ecclesiastes 9:7b (כְּבֹר רֵצָה הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיךָ) would appear to contradict the view that the divine will is unknown or unknowable, although it is an odd statement regardless of how one interprets it. Those who see Qohelet affirming the retributive principle in 2:26 must infer some unspoken limits on this statement.⁶¹ Yet it is difficult to see how that would serve as a motivation for the exhortation of 9:7a. A closer logical connection between the two halves of this verse is maintained if Qohelet is stating that the occasion and ability to have enjoyment is proof itself of divine favour.⁶² Even if he does not know how to secure God's blessing, he can see it when it happens.⁶³

Most damaging for the positive interpretations of the *carpe diem* passages is 5:17–19[18–20].⁶⁴ After observing the sudden loss of wealth (5:12–16[13–17]), Qohelet commends the enjoyment of one's toil with the pleasures of food and drink. He also exhorts the enjoyment of one's wealth and possessions. This, however, is followed immediately by another observation: that it is possible to have wealth and possessions and yet God may not permit one to enjoy them (6:1–3). Whybray says that this is just a particular case.⁶⁵ Bartholomew claims this is an example of the juxtaposition of Qohelet's autonomous epistemology and his Jewish materialist faith.⁶⁶ Both fail to recognise Qohelet's admission of such a possibility within the *carpe diem* itself, which speaks of one 'whom God has given riches and wealth *and* the power to consume them' (5:18[19]). While

⁶¹ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 151–152.

⁶² Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 162; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 294. cf. Shields, who suggests that כִּי is best translated 'if' or 'when'. Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 203–204.

⁶³ This is similar to the understanding we already advanced regarding 7:26b on p. 250.

⁶⁴ Anderson, 'Critique', 64–65.

⁶⁵ Whybray, 'Preacher of Joy', 93.

⁶⁶ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 225–227.

Qohelet recognises God as the means of enjoyment, this is not sufficient to make it an answer to the problems of life. He appears to restrict its availability, or worse still, give it arbitrarily.

God himself is both the means of enjoyment as well as a complicating factor. Qohelet attributes the ability to enjoy life's material pleasures to God. Yet in light of humanity's ignorance of the divine will (9:1–2), he remains largely powerless to seek such enjoyment. All he can do is recognise when or if the opportunity is afforded by God (9:7b).

8.1.3 Summary

The preceding assessment permits us to evaluate the dominant interpretations of Qohelet's carpe diem passages. The prominence of these texts within Qohelet's discourse is undisputed; it is their tone and relationship to his observations of vanity (הבל) that are contentious.

Our examination shows that the carpe diem passages ought to be read pessimistically. Their function is to recommend a provisional good, rather than to solve the vanity of life. The reason for the gradual shift in form from report to exhortation is that this advice is not what he was looking for. Qohelet gradually realises that he has nothing better to offer and that the possibilities for enjoyment are limited; hence, the increasing intensity of the carpe diem passages parallels the growing spectre of death. Qohelet's own appraisal is that this advice is 'good' in a relative sense; it is the best advice he can offer in a futile existence. The content of the exhortations reflects the hazardous pleasure seeking warned against in the book of Proverbs, and even the hopeless enjoyment that Siduri commends to Gilgamesh (cf. Isa 22:13). Finally, Qohelet recognises that God is the means to enjoyment; however, this is also a limitation as he appears to restrict its availability. For the implied reader, Qohelet's advice is thus unsatisfactory by its limitations and dubious with

regards to its content.

8.2 The Context and Structure of Ecclesiastes 11:7–12:7

7.3.1 Context

As we have seen above, Eccl 11:7–12:7 belongs to a particular subcategory of Qohelet's discourse, known appropriately as calls to *carpe diem*. In addition to this thematic context, this passage must also be understood in light of its location within the book.

Despite the lack of consensus regarding the overall structure of Ecclesiastes, a good case can be made for identifying the final section of Qohelet's discourse as 9:11–12:7⁶⁷ or 9:1–12:7.⁶⁸ The former division recognises the *carpe diem* passages as structural markers that conclude each section. But despite the significance of the *carpe diem* passages for Qohelet's discourse, the location of 5:17–19[18–20]—surrounded by two closely related observations—shows they are not reliable indicators of structure. The latter division makes use of Wright's identification of the shift in refrain from 'who can find out' (6:10–8:17) to 'do not know' (9:1–11:7).

Bartholomew notes that, unlike other *carpe diem* passages, 11:7–12:7 begins in the context of joy rather than an observation of vanity. This divergence from Qohelet's usual pattern is like 'a beacon alerting us to a major shift in Qohelet's perspective and struggle'.⁶⁹ He thus understands this passage as a great moment

⁶⁷ Étienne Glasser, *Le procès du bonheur par Qohelet* (Paris: Cerf, 1970), 179–184; François Rousseau, 'Structure de Qohelet I 4–11 et plan du livre', *VT* 31.2 (1981): 200–217.

⁶⁸ Wright, 'Riddle of the Sphinx', 245–66; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xxxv–xli; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 43–46; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 5–8; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 48–53; Kohlmoos, *Kohelet*, 28–30.

⁶⁹ Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 354.

of resolution, in which Qohelet arrives at a ‘remember your creator’ position. Yet Bartholomew’s view hardly accounts for the overriding image of old age and death in the poem of 12:1–7.⁷⁰ If anything, the ‘positive’ start to the final *carpe diem* passage makes this decline into negativity all the more dramatic.

The final section of Qohelet’s discourse (9:1–12:7) focuses upon dealing with uncertainty. In this context, 11:7–12:7 is an emphatically negative conclusion, as the final words are given to that which *is* certain—death. While it does not begin in the context of a הבל statement like most other *carpe diem* passages, it quickly descends into life’s grim realities (11:8b, 10) and its concluding poem (12:1b–7) has a sobriety that leads naturally to the repetition of the refrain of the book (12:8; cf. 1:2).

7.3.2 Structure

Up to this point, the delimitation of the unit 11:7–12:7 has been assumed. Yet this is not self-evident to all interpreters. A. J. O. Van der Wal amasses nine different views on the unit,⁷¹ although many of these can be quickly dismissed. As we have noted above, 11:1–6 gives advice for coping with the uncertainties of life, rather than the certainty of death, and so does not belong to this section. Similarly, 12:8 is the refrain of the book rather than belonging to this section.⁷²

Some interpreters emphasise the shift from indicative/jussive in 11:7–8 to

⁷⁰ We will consider the significance of Qohelet’s call to ‘remember your creator’ below.

⁷¹ A. J. O. van der Wal, ‘Qohelet 12,1a: A Relatively Unique Statement in Israel’s Wisdom Tradition’, in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* BETL 136 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 415.

⁷² The הבל refrain in 12:8 would create an attractive parallel to 11:7–8, 9–10, which both end with a הבל statement. However, the desire for uniformity should not override the larger structure of the book, or disregard the voice of the narrator (‘says Qohelet’).

imperatives in 11:9–10, and on this basis consider it a separate section.⁷³ The use of key words, however, binds together the entire section. Ecclesiastes 11:7–8 introduces the twin call to enjoy (שמח) and remember (זכר), which Ogden says correspond to 11:9–10 and 12:1–8 respectively.⁷⁴ Yet in fact the link is far stronger than this, with almost every lexeme in vv. 7–8 appearing again in 11:9–12:7 (חשך, ימים, זכר, שמח, אדם, שנים, שמש, ראה, עינים, טוב, אור) (הבל).⁷⁵

Longman says that 12:1–7 is a subunit with its own integrity, even if it is closely related to the preceding exhortations in 11:7–10.⁷⁶ As such, his commentary examines 12:1–7 independently. Structurally, however, 12:1–7 is tied to 11:9–10, since 12:1a continues the series of imperatives with the syndetic imperative וזכר following the initial asyndetic שמח (11:9).⁷⁷ Ecclesiastes 12:1 is also connected to 11:8 by the use of יזכר and the mention of days and years.⁷⁸ This is obscured by an unhelpful chapter division and the headings that some English translations insert before 12:1.⁷⁹

It is appealing to consider 12:1a a hinge verse that connects two subunits,

⁷³ E.g. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 161; Hans-Joachim Fries, “Freue dich, doch bedenke ...” – letzte Worte eines Weisen : Überlegungen zu Koh 11,9–12,7, in *Vom Ausdruck zum Inhalt: Beiträge zur Exegese und Wirkungsgeschichte alttestamentlicher Texte*. eds. Maria Häusl and David Volgger, Festschrift der Schülerinnen und Schüler für Theodor Seidl zum 60 Geburtstag ATAT 75 (St Ottilien: EOS, 2005), 104–106.

⁷⁴ Ogden, *Qobeleth*, 193. However, note the use of ודע in 11:9b, which appears related to the idea of remembrance.

⁷⁵ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kobelet*, 517.

⁷⁶ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 262.

⁷⁷ Fries, ‘Freue dich’, 108.

⁷⁸ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 185.

⁷⁹ NASB; ESV; CSB.

perhaps to incorporate an existing poem into Qohelet's discourse.⁸⁰ However, the entire span of 12:1b–7 is a series of temporal clauses qualifying this imperative. Thus it is functionally identical to the imperatives of 11:9–10, which are also qualified by temporal expressions (בִּילְדוּתֶיךָ and בִּימֵי בְהוֹרֹתֶיךָ). The difference of 12:1 from these earlier exhortations is that its temporal expression (בְּחֹרְרֶיךָ) is expanded to a thirteen line description.⁸¹

In light of the preceding discussion, we can consider the unit as follows:

11:7–8

These verses do not contain any imperatives, but introduce the key lexemes (שִׂמְחָה and זִכָּר) that become the two themes of exhortation in what follows. There is a tension, or even contradiction, between these themes.⁸² This is most apparent when one compares 11:8 with 5:19[20], where joy is given so that a person does *not* overly remember his days.⁸³ It is unexplained how one can enjoy all one's years and also dwell on the darkness that is to come, so the reader moves into the exhortation section with this tension in mind.

11:9–12:7

The backbone of this passage is expressed by the series of imperatives, which come in pairs.

⁸⁰ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 368.

⁸¹ Kohlmoos, *Kohélet*, 240–241.

⁸² Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 182.

⁸³ Bartholomew claims that 11:7–12:7 is the first time that 'remember' is exhorted in a carpe diem passage, where it functions as the bridging element between his הִבֵּל observations and carpe diem poles. Clearly, he has overlooked its use in Eccl 5:19[20] where remembering is a negative activity previously mitigated by enjoyment. The fact that יִזְכֹּר is indicative in 5:19[20] is a moot point, because all of Qohelet's carpe diem advice is indicative until the final two iterations. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 343.

| | Imperative | Theme | Tone |
|-------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| 11:9 $\alpha\alpha$ - β | שמח | Enjoyment | Optimism |
| | ויטיבך לבך | Enjoyment | |
| 11:9 $\alpha\gamma$ -b | והלך... | Enjoyment | Tension/Contradiction |
| | ודע... | Remembrance | |
| 11:10 | והסר... | (Privative) Enjoyment | Muted Optimism |
| | והעבר... | (Privative) Enjoyment | |
| 12:1-7 | וזכר... | Remembrance | Pessimism |
| | (incomplete) | (incomplete) | |

Bartholomew claims that 11:9–10 contains an ‘a developing affirmation of joy’;⁸⁴ however, the exhortation to enjoyment and remembrance in their various combinations suggests otherwise. Although his exhortations begin with optimism (11:9a), the remembrance of divine judgment is a significant qualification (11:9b). There is a momentary reprieve of muted optimism (11:10), but ultimately the growing spectre of death means his final advice is pessimistic. We might expect the final exhortation to remembrance to be followed by a call to enjoyment, as an inversion of 11:9 $\alpha\gamma$ -b to provide something of a resolution. But the final pair is never completed and is replaced by an overwhelming picture of old age and death. Lohfink similarly observes

⁸⁴ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 354.

the unfulfilled structural expectations of the reader.⁸⁵

In sum, Qohelet's final *carpe diem* breaks down as it cannot escape the grim realities that he has discovered:

Although the theme of the unit is *carpe diem*, far greater attention is given to the negative—the somber limits on this opportunity—than to the positive enjoyment itself.⁸⁶

8.3 Interpretation of Ecclesiastes 11:7–12:7

Now that we have considered the thematic and literary context of 11:7–12:7, delimited the unit, and outlined its structure, we are well situated to examine its details. We will focus our attention on the details most relevant for understanding how the words of Qohelet achieve the father's rhetorical goals. Due the constraints of this thesis, we will give only general treatment to 12:2–7. The philological and literary complexities of 12:2–7 would require their own study to receive the depth merited by such a passage.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Lohfink, *Qobeleth*, 137.

⁸⁶ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 316.

⁸⁷ Indeed, it has received several such studies. See M. Q. Leahy, 'The Meaning of Ecc. 12,1-5', *ITQ* 19 (1952): 297–300; Witzernath, *Süss is das Licht ... Eine literaturwissenschaftliche Untersuchung zu Koh 11,7–12,7*, ATAT 11 (St Ottilien: 1979); Michael V. Fox, 'Aging and Death in Qohelet 12', *JSOT* 42 (1988): 55–77; Jean-Jacques Lavoie, 'Etude de l'expression עוֹלָמוֹ בֵּיתָ dans Qo 12,5 à la lumière des textes du Proche-Orient ancien', in *Où demeure-tu? (Jn 1,38). La maison depuis le monde biblique, sous la direction de J.-C. Petit, en hommage au professeur G. Couturier* (Saint-Laurent, Québec: Fides, 1994), 213–226; T. Hiecke, 'Wie hast du's mit der Religion? Spruchhandlungen und Wirkintentionen in Kohelet 4,17-5:6', in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*. ed. Antoon Schoors, BETL 136 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 319–338; van der Wal, 'Qohelet 12,1a', 413–418; Choon-Leong Seow, 'Qohelet's Eschatological Poem', *JBL* 118 (1999): 209–234; Rachel Z. Dulin, "'How Sweet is the Light": Qoheleth's Age-Centered Teachings', *Int* 55.3 (2001): 260–270; Fries, 'Freue dich', 101–120; Hans Debel, 'When It All Falls Apart: A Survey of the Interpretative Maze concerning the "Final Poem" of the Book of Qoheleth (Qoh 12:1–7)', *OTE* 23 (2010):

11:7

Light is sweet and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.

Qohelet begins his final carpe diem exhortation with an unqualified affirmation of life. The details of this verse are generally straightforward.⁸⁸ Light and seeing the sun have already been used in 6:5 and 7:11 to describe life in this world.⁸⁹ Contrary to Ogden's claim that sweetness is an inappropriate description of life,⁹⁰ it is a vivid metaphor for describing that life is full of sensually pleasing possibilities and reminds us of all that Qohelet has previously described as good (e.g. eating, drinking, loved ones).⁹¹ In this context, טוב should be understood in the sense of pleasant or enjoyable.⁹²

Ecclesiastes 11:7 is a surprisingly positive statement for Qohelet. Elsewhere he has equivocated on whether life or death is a better proposition (4:2; 9:4–5), and frequently observed its frustration, brevity, or lack of enjoyment. Longman claims that the heightened positivity here is probably due to the difference in perspective between a young person and an older person.⁹³ Bartholomew instead considers this a highly significant moment in Qohelet's discourse and a sign that his Israelite materialist heritage is conquering his Greek

235–260; Hans Debel, 'Once More, with Feeling: Qoh 11,7–12,7 as the Ultimate Expression of Qohelet's Alternative to Life-Beyond-Death', in *Resurrection of the Dead: Biblical Traditions in Dialogue*. eds. Geert van Oyen and Tom Shepherd (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 73–84.

⁸⁸ Pinker's proposed emendations are completely unnecessary and speculative. Aron Pinker, 'On Sweetness and Light in Qohelet 11:7', *RB* 117.2 (2010): 248–261.

⁸⁹ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 194; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 183.

⁹⁰ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 194. So also Pinker, 'Sweetness', 249.

⁹¹ Kohlmoos, *Kohelet*, 234.

⁹² Contra Pinker, 'Sweetness', 255.

⁹³ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 259.

autonomous epistemology.⁹⁴

Another observation helps us to understand the place of this verse within Qohelet's discourse: it is proverbial in style.⁹⁵ It is self-contained and succinct, with memorable imagery and assonance.⁹⁶ There is the well-known parallel to Euripides' Iphigenia at Aulis,⁹⁷ and similarities to the Iliad⁹⁸ and to the Epic of Gilgamesh.⁹⁹ Upon closer inspection, the correspondences are not all that great and most likely coincidence.¹⁰⁰ However, they do illustrate that what Qohelet states here is common sentiment and thus the likely substance for a proverbial saying. As such, they cannot be assumed to reflect the entirety of Qohelet's views.

11:8

Indeed, if a man lives many years, let him enjoy himself throughout them all. But let him [also] remember the days of darkness, for they will be many—everything to come is vanity.

This verse begins with some connection (כי) to what precedes. A causal¹⁰¹ or evidentiary connection¹⁰² is unlikely because the first half of this verse adds no new information to v. 7 and the second half is contradictory to it. Thus a better

⁹⁴ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 354.

⁹⁵ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 788–789.

⁹⁶ Especially the first three words: ומתוך האור וטוב. Kohlmoos, *Kobelet*, 233–234.

⁹⁷ 'Sweet it is to see the light' (Eur. IA 1218–19); cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 347–348.

⁹⁸ 'And if our fate be death, give us light and let us die' (Hom. XVII. 1.647); cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 183.

⁹⁹ 'Let mine eyes behold the sun that I may have my fill of the light!' (ANET, 89; 'The Epic of Gilgamesh', X. 1.13); cf. Gordis, *Kobelet*, 324.

¹⁰⁰ Gordis, *Kobelet*, 324.

¹⁰¹ Ogden, *Kobelet*, 194.

¹⁰² Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 317.

solution is to consider כִּי an asseverative particle.¹⁰³ Its function is that of showing Qohelet's basic agreement with the aphorism of v. 7.

Since Qohelet is not explaining or defending the previous statement, the majority of commentators are correct to read יִשְׂמַח as jussive.¹⁰⁴ As elsewhere, the activity that Qohelet commends is best translated as 'enjoy' rather than 'rejoice', because the 'sweetness' of life (v. 7) draws our attention to its material goods, such as the eating and drinking of the earlier carpe diem passages.¹⁰⁵

A second jussive is introduced by וַיִּזְכֹּר. Longman suggests that this must be translated as an indicative, otherwise Qohelet would 'be giving contradictory advice that his reader should both enjoy life but also remember that he is going to die.'¹⁰⁶ Yet this would hardly be an impossibility, given what we already know of Qohelet. And given the co-ordination of יִשְׂמַח and וַיִּזְכֹּר, it is likely that both verbs have the same modality. A number of interpreters find no contradiction here and claim that remembering is a motivation for enjoyment.¹⁰⁷ Brown explains this in poetic fashion:

Knowing that the prime of one's life, along with its accompanying blessings of health and prosperity, is fleeting only underscores the value of joy. There are those who eat in darkness full of resentment, for they have toiled endlessly, denying themselves, with nothing to show for it

¹⁰³ Joüon §164b; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 348; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 339. Longman claims that כִּי אִם is asseverative (cf. Joüon §164c), although his translation of 11:8a as a condition suggests this is an error. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 258.

¹⁰⁴ E.g. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 195; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 348; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 786. contra Lauha, *Kohelet*, 208.

¹⁰⁵ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 115. cf. pp. 278-283 above.

¹⁰⁶ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 260.

¹⁰⁷ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 161; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 325; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 370; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 317; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 787.

(4:7–8; 5:17 [Heb. v. 16]). They have sacrificed the opportunity for joy upon the altar of elusive gain.¹⁰⁸

However, Qohelet has already set enjoyment of life and remembrance in contrast to each other in Eccl 5:19[20], where enjoyment relieves a person from the burden of remembering. The contrast between enjoyment and remembrance means that the *waw* in 11:8 should be translated adversatively.¹⁰⁹ Rightly understood, Qohelet is providing a qualification.

The dark days (ימי דחשך) are commonly thought to refer to death in contrast to the light which is identified as life (v. 7).¹¹⁰ Darkness is associated with death in 6:4 and elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g. 1 Sam 2:9; Job 10:21).¹¹¹ However, it would be unusual to measure the time someone is dead in days in contrast to the years they are alive.¹¹² Instead it may be speaking about old age, which is on view in Eccl 12:1–7.¹¹³ Yet there is no guarantee that the days of old age will be many or that one will experience them at all (cf. 9:12).¹¹⁴ Seow gives a likely solution: it refers to times of gloom and misery in general (cf. Eccl 5:16[17]; Job 3:4–5; 15:23; Amos 5:18), rather than death or old age specifically. Ecclesiastes 12:1a shows that it includes old age, but it may refer to any difficult time of the future.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁸ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 104.

¹⁰⁹ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 208.

¹¹⁰ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 208; Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 194.

¹¹¹ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 324.

¹¹² Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 196.

¹¹³ Schellenberg, *Kohelet*, 155.

¹¹⁴ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 324.

¹¹⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 348. cf. Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 228–229; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 344.

Most interpreters read **כִּי־הָרְבָה יְהִיוּ** as an appositional clausal complement, explaining what is to be remembered about the dark days.¹¹⁶ Yet nowhere else does Qohelet use such a complement with **זָכַר** (5:19[20]; 9:15; 12:1). The most instructive parallel is 5:19[20], where the subsequent **כִּי** clause is clearly causal. Thus the abundance of the dark days is the reason to dwell upon them. If our interpretation of this verse is so far correct, then **כָּל־שָׂבָא הַבֶּל** is essentially a restatement, albeit in stronger terms, of the unpleasantness that lies ahead. **הַבֶּל** is not a comment upon the mysteriousness¹¹⁷ or transience¹¹⁸ of what is to come, but upon its frustrating and painful character—it is best translated ‘vanity’ or ‘futility’.¹¹⁹ Thus this final statement provides further a reason to reflect upon the days of darkness rather than a motivation for enjoyment.

Unlike Qohelet’s other *carpe diem* advice, 11:7–12:7 begins optimistically. Previously, he observed some of life’s vanities and attempted to build up the prospect of a good but limited way of life. Here he begins with the general wisdom of life’s goodness, commends man’s enjoyment of it, but introduces a qualification. Qohelet agrees that life is—or at least can be—good, but he also adds a caveat: the future is full of problems that cannot be ignored. Thus the complications and limitations that Qohelet has previously mentioned remain

¹¹⁶ Holmstedt et al., *Qobeleth*, 291.

¹¹⁷ Ogden, *Qobeleth*, 195.

¹¹⁸ Garrett, *Proverbs*, 340; Fredericks, ‘Ecclesiastes’, 236; Kohlmoos, *Kohelet*, 234. Seow argues that Qohelet is talking about the transience of future generations to come, on the basis that Qohelet uses **בָּא** to talk about people and **הָיָה** to refer to events. While this is normally the case, he overlooks the close parallel in 12:1, which specifically talks about the coming of evil days (**יָבֹאוּ יְמֵי הָרָעָה**). Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 349.

¹¹⁹ See the excursus on pp. 165–170.

in full force.

11:9aa-β

Enjoy yourself, young man, while you are young. Let your heart make you glad in the days of your youth.

After a gloomy call to remember the great many days of unpleasantness that await the reader, Qohelet returns to a more positive outlook. He is also more direct with his audience, shifting from jussive to imperative (שמח).¹²⁰ Again, what he exhorts here is best translated ‘enjoyment’, given the objects of enjoyment he has previously mentioned, like food and drink, remain in view.¹²¹

Curiously, this is the only time in the book when Qohelet addresses the implied reader with a vocative. He identifies him as a young man (בחור), which is specifically a man of military age, hence the prime of life.¹²² While narrative readings of Ecclesiastes tend to identify this addressee as different from that of the epilogue, distinguishing between narratee(s) and implied reader,¹²³ it should not be assumed that the rules of modern narratives can be strictly applied to an ancient text like Ecclesiastes. As far as we can tell, both בחור and בני belong to the same life stage and are distinguished only by their

¹²⁰ The second exhortation in this first pair (ויטיבך) is a *hiphil weyiqtol*, which here continues the force of the imperative. Holmstedt et al., *Qoheleth*, 292. This requires no emendation of the consonants and is supported by the LXX. Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 96.

¹²¹ Contra Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 196; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 344.

¹²² Literally ‘chosen one’; cf. *HALOT*, s.v. ‘בָּחֹר’ I, ‘בָּחֹר’ II; Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 195. Kohlmoos places too much emphasis on the etymology of the word and considers it an indication of elite status, thus one with more opportunity for enjoyment. However, the frequent parallelism of בחור with בתולה (Deut 32:25; Is 23:4; 62:5; Jer 51:22; etc.) shows that the focus of the word is upon age rather than social standing. Kohlmoos, *Kohelet*, 239.

¹²³ Christianson, *Time to Tell*, 56–60, 245; Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 74–82, 376–78.

relationship to the speaker.¹²⁴ The effect of such an address is that the advice is the most emphatic it has been thus far. The son is forcefully confronted with Qohelet's call to *carpe diem*, in fact he is directly addressed by the character within his father's instruction.¹²⁵

The expression בילדותיך should be read as temporal rather than the object of enjoyment.¹²⁶ It is parallel to בימי בחורותך, which must be read as a temporal expression, since יטיבך לך cannot take any further object. This latter temporal expression also appears in 12:1, where the significance of the time of youth is seen in the fact that the ills of old age, which limit the ability for enjoyment, have not yet arrived. In 11:9 α - β , then, Qohelet has positive advice that he commends forcefully, although with the acknowledgement that it is temporally restricted.

11:9 α - β

Walk in the ways of your heart and in the sights of your eyes. But know that concerning these things God may bring you into judgment.

The twin exhortations to enjoyment in 11:9 α - β are followed by a mismatched pair in the remainder of the verse, hence an adversative translation of the coordinating *waw*. There is one exhortation to enjoyment (הלך בדרכי) (לבך...) and one exhortation to remember divine judgment (ודע כי...). More than adversative, the members of this pair appear to be contradictory.

Earlier historical-critical interpreters explained the contradiction in this verse by identifying the words of 11:9 β as an addition by the orthodox redactor, who

¹²⁴ See further pp. 161-163.

¹²⁵ This is not an unprecedented rhetorical device. It is analogous to the address of Lady Wisdom to the father's sons in Prov 8:32.

¹²⁶ Contra Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 790.

sought to ‘correct’ Qohelet’s Epicurean commendation of pleasure and ensure a more acceptable interpretation.¹²⁷ This position is still popular due to the common expression **יביא במשפט** in 11:9b and 12:14. The biggest problem with this view is that the putative redactor cannot be said to have improved the text or solved its problems. Moreover, there is no textual evidence for the earlier text. Instead, this similarity is best explained by common authorship—the author of the epilogue is also the author of Qohelet.

Another way to deal with the apparent contradiction within 11:9 is harmonisation. One such attempt involves reading Qohelet’s reference to heart and eyes along very different lines. In this view, the ways of heart and eyes describe reason and observation—in other words, wisdom.¹²⁸ Although these are possible connotations of the heart and eyes, there is nothing to indicate this is the case here. In fact, the opposite is the case. Qohelet associates the eyes with desire in 2:10, a text we have noted is strongly connected to the *carpe diem* passages.¹²⁹ As we have seen in our survey above, the content of each of these passages is the enjoyment of material pleasures, not rejoicing in a higher sense. This context colours the interpretation of the final call to *carpe diem*, and, as Schoors notes, the following verse (11:10) confirms the concern here is with emotions, not intellect.¹³⁰ It is difficult, therefore, to avoid the conclusion that Qohelet means heart and eyes in the sense of desire. As Gordis avers: ‘[the] heart and the eyes are the organs of desire against which the

¹²⁷ So Galling and Lauha who consider 11:9b, 10b; 12:1a as added restrictions by R2, who also added the second epilogue (12:12–14). Galling, ‘Prediger’, 121; Lauha, *Kohelet*, 205, 208–09.

¹²⁸ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 196; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 196.

¹²⁹ Moreover, the plural form **במראי**, rather than needing to be emended, may indicate the multiplicity of pleasures. Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 317.

¹³⁰ Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part II*, 91.

conventional moralists warned'.¹³¹

Another attempt to harmonise the two halves of 11:9 is to redefine Qohelet's understanding of divine judgment in a uniquely Qoheletian sense, namely that God will hold people to account for all the goods which he has given them but they did not enjoy.¹³² This view emphasises the 'gift of God' (מתת אלהים) language from the earlier carpe diem advice (3:12; 5:18[19]) and turns it into a divine imperative. This is an ingenious solution, although difficult to reconcile with Qohelet's other affirmations of divine judgment which speak of punishment of the wicked and reward of the righteous (3:17; 8:12–13). Ecclesiastes 2:26 also speaks of enjoyment as the divine reward, not the means to gain reward.¹³³

Given the lack of a viable alternative, it is unavoidable to recognise that a tension exists between the two halves of 11:9. After Qohelet exhorts the pursuit of pleasure, he qualifies it with an awareness of divine judgment. While this may be understood as recommending the enjoyment of life within the limits of divine commands,¹³⁴ Qohelet has elsewhere shown little concern with covenantal obedience (cf. 7:16–18; 9:1–2).¹³⁵ Instead, Qohelet eschews the guidance of the law and traditional wisdom and relies on his own immediate

¹³¹ Gordis, *Kobeleth*, 325.

¹³² Gordis, *Kobeleth*, 326; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 371; Kamano, *Cosmology*, 224–225; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 791. cf. 'A person will give a judgment and an accounting over everything that his eye saw and what he did not eat' (y. Qidd. 4:12, 48b).

¹³³ This criticism also applies to another possible interpretation tentatively proposed by Schoors, who claims that it could be understood as 'God puts you in that condition' (cf. משפט in Judg 13:12). Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 792.

¹³⁴ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 162.

¹³⁵ On the most obvious exception to this (4:17–5:6[5:1–7]), see our interpretation in chapter 9.

experience to discover what happens on earth (מה־היה and שנעשה) and, in light of that, how to live most profitably (יתרון). He maintains a conviction in God's sovereign rule of creation and in divine judgment, but has already confessed an uncertainty regarding the nature of that judgment (3:16–21), vagueness surrounding the criteria that determines whether one is pleasing to him or a sinner (2:26; 7:26), and observed its apparent failure (8:10–14).¹³⁶ In light of Qohelet's uncertainty surrounding divine judgment, a sudden profession of orthodoxy in 11:9b would be a remarkable contradiction, even for Qohelet.

The interpretation of 11:9 most consistent with Qohelet's earlier teaching is that he is exhorting the pursuit of pleasure and admitting its limitations—namely, the prospect of judgment. Given Qohelet's uncertainty about the timing and nature of this judgment, the *yiqtol* יביא could have a modal sense ('may bring').¹³⁷ Once again, Qohelet shows himself an honest guide, recommending the portion he has found, but admitting its shortcomings.

Early interpreters of Ecclesiastes had a great deal of difficulty with this verse due its apparent repudiation of Num 15:39, which explains the purpose of tassels on garments as 'so that you remember all the commands of Yahweh and do them and do not follow after your hearts and after your eyes, after which you are whoring yourself.' The antithesis to Qohelet's exhortation is blatant:

¹³⁶ See pp. 208 above; cf. Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 76; Shields, *End of Wisdom*.

¹³⁷ A further uncertainty could be present if Qohelet means כל־אלה in a qualitative sense ('any of these things'); cf. *HALOT*, s.v. 'כל'.

| | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------|--|
| ולא־תתרו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם | Num 15:39bα | Do not follow after your heart and after your eyes. |
| והלך בדרכי לבך ובמראי עיניך | Eccl 11:9ay | Walk in the ways of your heart and in the sights of your eyes. |

This repudiation of the Torah led to variant readings in the ancient witnesses, which bring all of Eccl 11:9 into line with orthodox theology. The LXX gives extra qualification, ‘your heart blameless (*ἀμωμος*)’ and adds a negation ‘and not (*μὴ*) in the sight of your eyes’. Similarly, the Targum adds ‘in humility’ and ‘be careful’.¹³⁸ Rabbinical texts recount the concerns with the apparent heresy of this verse, with some sages suggesting it be put in storage (גניז) because of Qohelet’s endorsement of unrestrained lusting (e.g. Lev. Rab. 28:1; Qoh. Rab. 11:9).

Our approach to reading Ecclesiastes resolves these issues identified by ancient and modern interpreters alike. By recognising Qohelet as a character and a teaching tool, we need not force him to lie in the Procrustean bed of orthodoxy. He is able to have his own voice, independent from canonical teaching, yet can still be understood within the context of the canon.¹³⁹

The characterisation we have developed of Qohelet as Torah-agnostic and the implied reader as Torah-cognisant suggests that the allusion to Num 15:39 is not known to Qohelet. And while Qohelet is aware of limitations to his carpe diem advice, his overall appraisal of it is that it is a relative good (טוב). Such an appraisal is difficult to reconcile with a direct opposition to the Torah. Rather, it would seem that this allusion has been planted by the father as part of his ironic strategy, such as we have already seen in 7:23–29. The effect of

¹³⁸ Goldman, ‘Commentaries’, 109.

¹³⁹ Cf. Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 1–6.

this is that while Qohelet admits the limitations of his advice, the father subtly hints that the situation is far worse than he realises. His advice is approaching dangerous limits and is in desperate need of the guidance of the Torah.

Shields makes a comment that captures the overall effect of these words in goading the son towards the father's rhetorical goals: 'for Qoheleth there is no knowledge of what can be done to please God; in the Torah God has revealed his requirements.'¹⁴⁰ The tension in Qohelet's words, more apparent to the reader than Qohelet himself, again highlights the limits of his epistemology. Moreover, the allusion to Num 15:39 positively directs the reader to seek the will of God in his Torah lest he unwittingly walks into divine judgment along with Qohelet.

11:10

Remove frustration from your heart and take away pain from your body, for youth and black hair are vanity.

Qohelet's final complete pair of exhortations returns to enjoyment; however, this time Qohelet describes enjoyment in a privative sense—the avoidance of displeasure. The two commands correspond to the removal of mental (כעס מלבך cf. 1:18; 2:23) and physical displeasure (רעה מבשרך) respectively.¹⁴¹ The latter of these is disputed by Bartholomew, who translates רעה as evil, thus supporting his contention that the carpe diem passages are calls to righteous joy rather than hedonism.¹⁴² Against this, the removal of (ethical) evil from one's body is an unusual expression; elsewhere Qohelet speaks of *hearts* that are set on evil (8:11). Additionally, Lauha points to the use of רעה

¹⁴⁰ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 230.

¹⁴¹ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 529; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 793.

¹⁴² Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 345.

in the very next verse, where it is related to poor bodily condition.¹⁴³

Most interpreters assume these exhortations are just the negative form of the previous exhortations for enjoyment and thus equivalent in meaning.¹⁴⁴ But, despite six previous calls to *carpe diem*, this is the first time Qohelet has exhorted enjoyment in this way. Also, pain avoidance is not the same as pleasure, nor does it necessarily imply pleasure. Thus Qohelet appears to acknowledge a further limitation of his advice—sometimes the best that one can experience is the mitigation of life’s ills.¹⁴⁵

Schwienhorst-Schönberger points to the typical use of סור in Deuteronomistic literature, where it is used for the removal of idols.¹⁴⁶ It is tempting to see the father create a subtle contrast between the limited exhortation of Qohelet and the religious purity of the law; however, סור is not limited to these contexts and there is nothing else to indicate such an allusion.

Verse 10b provides the motivation for the imperatives of the verse and contains Qohelet’s final הבל statement. It contains an obscure noun (השחרות), which may be translated ‘dawn’ or ‘black hair’.¹⁴⁷ While the former option has stronger connections to the light and dark imagery of this passage, ‘dawn’ is not an obvious description for early adulthood.¹⁴⁸ Instead, ‘black hair’ can easily be understood as a contrast to the grey hair of the elderly. Furthermore, a

¹⁴³ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 209.

¹⁴⁴ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 197; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 184.

¹⁴⁵ This is what we call Qohelet’s ‘supplementary advice’ (cf. chapter 9), which constitutes the majority of Qohelet’s practical wisdom.

¹⁴⁶ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 530; Kohlmoos, *Kohelet*, 240.

¹⁴⁷ Most of the ancient versions (LXX, Vulg., Syr.) attempt to translate the root שחר as ‘search’ (cf. Prov 1:28; 8:17), which bears no relevance to this context. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 350–351.

¹⁴⁸ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 319.

comparable term (שחורי הראש) is used this way in rabbinic literature.¹⁴⁹

This final clause is usually understood as yet another reference to the limited time that is available for enjoyment: ‘youth is fleeting’. However, transience is rarely a possible translation of הבל elsewhere in Ecclesiastes.¹⁵⁰ As such, this is seen as something of an exception.¹⁵¹ But since Qohelet is not just repeating his call to enjoyment in this verse, there is another way that this motivation clause may be understood. The reason the young man is exhorted to avoid pain is that youth—not just old age—is characterised by vanity.¹⁵² And in youth, these pains and frustrations may be (somewhat) avoidable. For example, one can avoid the frustration of overwork (2:23), hasty anger (7:9), the vanity of the love of money (5:9–11[10–12]), the wrath of God (4:17–5:6[5:1–7]), the anger of the king (10:4), and the wearying speech of the fool (10:12–15). By contrast, 12:1–7 describes the vanities of old age and death that cannot be avoided.

As we approach the culmination of Qohelet’s wisdom, instead of a movement towards profundity of wisdom or exuberant joy, we discover that his advice is self-consciously limited. The world of possibilities offered by Qohelet’s mode of wisdom is becoming increasingly small, even by his own assessment.

¹⁴⁹ As such, it may be another example of an Aramaism (or Mishnaism) in the book of Qohelet; m. Ned. 3:8; Gen. Rab. 59:1; cf. Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 794.

¹⁵⁰ See the excursus on pp. 165–170.

¹⁵¹ E.g. Galling, ‘Prediger’, 121; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 327; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 794; Kohlmoos, *Kohelet*, 238. Similarly, both Fox and Shields explain that this הבל describes the transience of youth, even if it has secondary meaning of absurd or senseless as a result of its transience. Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 318; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 230.

¹⁵² Indeed, all of the activities that Qohelet evaluates as vanities in 2:3–11 are possible exploits of youth. Note also the association of כעס and הבל in 2:22–23.

12:1

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of evil come and the years arrive, of which you will say ‘I have no pleasure in them.’

The movement from exhortation of privative enjoyment to remembrance is a weaker contrast than the shift within v. 10. This is not only because the optimism of 11:10 is muted, but also because it concluded with a **הבל** statement which dwelt upon the frustrating realities of youth. This verse begins the final exhortation for the young man to consider yet another unfortunate reality.

The most contentious aspect of this verse is the meaning and significance of **בוראִיךָ**. The problems with this expression include:

1. The plural form, indicated by the *yod*, is unique in the Old Testament.
2. The mention of God as creator is unexpected in this context.
3. This is the first time Qohelet has used the root **ברא** or given any title to God other than **אלהים** (ה).

Interpreters have responded to these difficulties in a number of ways. The easiest way to make sense of this clause is to attribute it to a contributor who added 12:1a to ensure an orthodox interpretation.¹⁵³ If such a contributor did exist, the commentaries show he was not overly successful. Furthermore, there is no textual support for excising this clause.

Another possibility is that this text is a result of scribal confusion over one of at least three orthographically similar words. The text may have originally read ‘your pit’ (**בּוֹרְךָ**) as a reference to death and thus is a plain introduction to the following verses.¹⁵⁴ Alternatively it may have read ‘your well’ (**בְּאֵרְךָ**) as a

¹⁵³ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 209; Whitley, *Kobelet*, 95.

¹⁵⁴ A number of recent interpreters have suggested there is a deliberate play on words that

reference to one's wife (cf. Prov 5:15, 18), thus it repeats the call of Eccl 9:9 but with a greater urgency before old age makes this impossible.¹⁵⁵ Finally, there is the possibility it is related to the homonym בִּרְא 'to be fat' (cf. 1 Sam 2:29) thus referring to 'your health', which Schoors suggests would be a way of saying 'enjoy it' (cf. Sir 26:19).¹⁵⁶

The first proposal is most suited to the context, since the topic of death is clearly on view and pit (בֹּר) is used in 12:6 as a symbol of death. The latter two proposals would not seem to accord with the solemnity of the activity of remembrance.¹⁵⁷ Aside from considering past events and expressing God's commitment to his covenant, זָכַר is used to refer to religious observance (e.g. Exod 13:3; 20:8; Num 15:39, 40) and to reflect upon sober truths (e.g. Isa 46:9; 47:7; Ps 89:48[47]; Job 7:7; 10:9). It is always a solemn activity¹⁵⁸ and is used in contrast to joy in Eccl 5:19[20].

Despite the suitability of remembering death in this context, however, there is no support from the ancient witnesses for an alternate translation of בּוֹרְאֵיךְ. All of them translate it as 'your creator'. This suggests that we should attempt to resolve the problems with the text in another way.

The plural form (problem 1) has at least three possible explanations. First, this may be a morphological anomaly, reflecting the Mishnaic assimilation of III-

exploits the reader's expectation of hearing a word related to death and only later realises that בּוֹרְאֵיךְ is a reference to God. Lohfink, *Qobeleth*, 139; Krüger, *Qobeleth*, 197; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kobelet*, 532.

¹⁵⁵ This view thus takes 12:5 to refer to loss of sexual appetite. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 185.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. MH בּוֹרִי for 'strength', or 'health'. Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 796.

¹⁵⁷ Gordis, *Kobeleth*, 330.

¹⁵⁸ The only clear exceptions to this are in the *hiphil* stem (e.g. Song 1:4; 1 Chr 16:4).

Aleph verbs to III-*He* verbs (cf. 7:26; 9:18).¹⁵⁹ Secondly, it may be the plural of majesty in agreement with אֱלֹהִים, similar to the forms in Isa 54:5; Ps 149:2; and Job 35:10.¹⁶⁰ Thirdly, it may be scribal error, although this is less likely as בּוֹרְאֵיךְ is the harder reading. It is more plausible this anomalous form is original and was left uncorrected.

The mention of God is hardly out of character for Qohelet (problem 2). Despite the absence of covenantal faith in his epistemological system, his worldview is far from secular. He has a high view of the divine ordering of the cosmos, even if he confesses that he cannot understand it (3:1–11, 14–15; 7:13–14; 8:17; 11:5). Moreover, he specifically refers to God’s creation (עֲשָׂה) of humanity in 7:29.¹⁶¹ The issue, then, is not whether it is probable for Qohelet to speak of God as creator, but whether or not it is explicable *in this context*.

The third problem (Qohelet’s only use of בֹּרֵא) is really just an observation, and has no real force by itself. It only adds cumulative weight to the other arguments. Though a very different context, the singular form בּוֹרְאֵךְ appears in Isa 43:1 and shows it is a known appellation for the God of Israel. However, there may be an additional reason for Qohelet’s unique mention of ‘creator’. The suitability of ‘pit’ (בּוֹר) (cf. 12:6) in this context suggests that Qohelet is making a word play, hinting at the significance of remembering one’s creator, namely that soon he will take away the life he has given.¹⁶² That this is indeed

¹⁵⁹ Gordis, *Kohleth*, 330. cf. GKC §93ss for an explanation of this form of the ending.

¹⁶⁰ GKC §124k; Galling, ‘Prediger’, 122.

¹⁶¹ See p. 259.

¹⁶² Rabbi Aqiba’s homiletic synthesis is well known: ‘know whence you came [*b’rk*, your source], whither you are going [*burk*, your grave], and before whom you are destined to give an accounting [*bur’yk*, your Creator].’ This is overdone, although it draws attention to a possible play on words. Quoted by Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 351–352.

Qohelet's purpose in mentioning God as creator can be seen in his description of God undoing his creative activity in 12:7, as he withdraws a person's spirit.¹⁶³

Qohelet's exhortation to dwell upon God is, therefore, his most sombre yet. The solemn activity of remembrance, the subtle allusion to the coming grave, and the extended poem upon old age and death (12:2–7) all make it highly unlikely that the remembrance of God can be understood as an exhortation to joy.¹⁶⁴ Neither is it probable that Qohelet is here equating obedience to God with joy.¹⁶⁵ He has already set enjoyment in tension with the divine will (11:9b), and his call to remembrance in 12:1–7 is anything but joyful. For Qohelet, to remember that God is creator is to dwell upon one's subjection to his unpredictable will and one's own mortality (cf. 3:2, 11).¹⁶⁶ This is the best advice that Qohelet can offer with his self-reliant mode of wisdom.

Like the call to enjoyment, Qohelet says that the time for sombre remembrance of one's mortality is during youth (בְּחֹרֶתֶיךָ cf. 11:9). This time is subsequently qualified by a series of temporal clauses (... עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא) in 12:1b, 2, 6, which holds this entire section together. This literally means 'while [X] has not happened',¹⁶⁷ which is a pleonastic expression meaning 'before'. The first of these temporal clauses speaks of the arrival of the evil days (cf. יְמֵי

¹⁶³ There is a probable allusion here to Gen 2:7; 3:19, although unlike elsewhere the father does not appear to make any ironic use of this allusion. In other words, Qohelet's meaning and the alluded meaning are congruent. Qohelet's use of רֹחַ rather than נִשְׁמָה is of no great significance, other than to make this a less direct allusion; however, note רֹחַ חַיִּים in Gen 6:17; 7:15, 22.

¹⁶⁴ Contra Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 795.

¹⁶⁵ Contra Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 163.

¹⁶⁶ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 163.

¹⁶⁷ Holmstedt et al., *Qoheleth*, 294. It is sometimes compared to the Mishnaic idiom עַד שֶׁלֹא. Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 145.

החשך in 11:8). That this refers to a time of physical or mental unpleasantness is clarified by the next clause, which describes it as a period of no pleasure. Verse 2–7 show that this unpleasant time of life is represented chiefly by old age and eventually death.¹⁶⁸ The extended focus on the approach of death further confirms that Qohelet intends it to be the object of reflection in this section of his discourse.

Interpreters who insist that Qohelet arrives or approaches orthodoxy at 12:1 may not be entirely wrong. As we have just argued, in context Qohelet himself can only mean זכר את־בוראִיך as a call to ponder death. But when read in isolation from its context, this expression could be heard very differently. While not a Deuteronomic title for God, ‘creator’ (ברא) becomes a favoured appellation for Yahweh as he demonstrates his sovereignty over the gods of Babylon (Isa 43:1; 43:15). It is also close to the more common title ‘maker’ (עשה), which notably appears in Israel’s wisdom literature (e.g. Prov 14:31; 17:5; 22:2; Job 4:17; 31:15; 32:22; 40:19). In addition to this, זכר very often serves a religious function in the Old Testament.¹⁶⁹ This is particularly true of Deuteronomy, where the lexeme appears fifteen times, usually to describe Israel’s covenant obligation to remember the saving acts of God (e.g. Deut 5:15; 7:18; 8:2). The combination of these two terms is thus suggestive of a call to faith in the covenant God of Israel. While context forces us to hear Qohelet use זכר את־בוראִיך as a call to think upon death, the father may intend to arouse a covenantal connection in his son’s mind.

This juxtaposition between these two senses of ‘remember your creator’ is thus

¹⁶⁸ Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 201.

¹⁶⁹ Gordis emphasises the solemnity and religiosity of this expression (cf. Exod 20:8). Gordis, *Koheleth*, 330.

another instance of ironic allusion. As elsewhere, the father—not Qohelet—is employing allusion to Israel’s religious traditions. The implied reader hears Qohelet’s confession of the shortcomings of his self-reliant wisdom, sees its inability to deliver anything that can truly be called ‘good’, and learns the limits of human knowledge. Despite Qohelet’s mental acuity and virtually unlimited resources, his epistemology—self-reliant and not built upon the revelation of the Israelite scriptures¹⁷⁰—literally reaches a dead end. At the same time the father gives hints of the solution through the use of double entendre, prompting his son to consider the difference a covenantal perspective would make.

12:2–7

Although it is not the focus of this chapter, some brief comment upon the meaning of vv. 2–7 is warranted to support the preceding interpretation.

The most significant issue for understanding these verses is the nature of its imagery. The traditional interpretation was to read these verses as an allegory of old age.¹⁷¹ There are similar descriptions of old age in Ps 71:9, 18; Sir 41:1–3; the Instruction of Ptahhotep; the Story of Sinuhe; the Instruction of Papyrus Insinger.¹⁷² Most recognise that the allegory is limited to vv. 3–5a, with vv. 1–2 giving general images of a threatening future, and vv. 5b–7 describing death.¹⁷³ One reason to reject an allegorical interpretation is because this would require a coherent series of images forming a whole.¹⁷⁴ As a result,

¹⁷⁰ See Weeks’ comments on Qohelet’s lack of invocation of teaching or tradition, which would have been unusual in the ancient world. Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 129–130.

¹⁷¹ E.g. Tg. Qoh. 12:2–6; Qoh. Rab. 12:2–6; b. Šabb. 152a

¹⁷² Galling, ‘Prediger’, 121. cf. *AEL* 1:63, 229; 3:199.

¹⁷³ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 209–215.

¹⁷⁴ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 163.

recent interpreters have been more tentative in identifying allegorical descriptions. Longman finds some images compelling, such as the obvious connection between grinders and teeth, while other images far more ambiguous.¹⁷⁵

A second interpretation rejects the allegorical interpretation completely and instead identifies an image of a storm approaching a wealthy estate. This has been understood as a metaphor for the dying body,¹⁷⁶ or an eschatological image of all human life coming to an end. The latter interpretation is built upon the similarity between Eccl 12:2 and Day of the Lord imagery (Isa 5:30; 13:10; Ezek 32:7–8; Amos 8:9; Joel 2:2, 10; 3:4[2:31]; 4:15[3:15]),¹⁷⁷ although there is disagreement among its proponents as to whether this is a re-envisioning of an image of old age into an apocalyptic vision,¹⁷⁸ or a demythologising of an apocalyptic vision to the level of the individual.¹⁷⁹

A third interpretation reads 12:3–5a as a description of a funeral, prior to a clear description of death (12:5b–7). Schoors prefers this approach, even if not every detail is clear.¹⁸⁰ Fox believes that a description of a funeral is the most likely literal sense of the passage, since Qohelet does not elsewhere reflect on old age, and death is the more important topic for him.¹⁸¹ The vividness of the funeral process is because Qohelet wants the readers to look upon their own

¹⁷⁵ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 263–264. cf. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 122.

¹⁷⁶ Fredericks, ‘Ecclesiastes’, 233.

¹⁷⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 353.

¹⁷⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 368; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 353.

¹⁷⁹ Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 204.

¹⁸⁰ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 783.

¹⁸¹ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 336.

funeral from the outside.¹⁸² Fox ambitiously reads this passage at all three levels in the following order: literal, symbolic, and allegorical.¹⁸³

Regarding the above approaches to 12:2–7, the apocalyptic interpretation would appear to be the least likely. While storm imagery is commonly employed by the prophets to depict the Day of the Lord, it cannot be assumed that every storm image has this significance. It is a suitable representation of any calamity, terror, or undoing. Moreover, Qohelet has nowhere shown interest in apocalyptic or prophetic eschatology.

A funeral procession is more appropriate to Qohelet's thought; however, it would be peculiar for such an image to appear before the arrival of death (12:5b–7).¹⁸⁴ Thus it is most likely that 12:2–5a represents the problems of old age leading up to death (vv. 5b–7). Nevertheless, the criticisms of the allegorical interpretation hold true and Qohelet was unlikely to be familiar with allegory in the sense that later readers have defined it.¹⁸⁵ Gordis' position is thus most helpful: he considers this passage to be the picturing of old age without one sustained metaphor.¹⁸⁶ The passage is a combination of allegorical depiction, general images, as well as literal descriptions. Ecclesiastes 12:2–7 can be understood, therefore, as a poetic elaboration of the days of evil and years of unpleasantness (v. 1b), which focuses on old age (vv. 2–5a) and eventually death

¹⁸² Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 338.

¹⁸³ Fox, 'Aging', 55–77.

¹⁸⁴ This criticism also applies to other readings that claim this is a description of death, such as Ogden, *Qobeleth*, 206–207.

¹⁸⁵ Gordis, *Kobeleth*, 328–329. Similarly, see Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 182–183. After examining its irregular syntactical structure Krüger concludes that it is more of a collage than a regular poem. Krüger, *Qobeleth*, 200–201.

¹⁸⁶ Gordis, *Kobeleth*, 328–329.

(vv. 5b–7).

It is also critical for our thesis to consider the function of this poem within Qohelet's discourse and the rhetoric of the father. For most scholars, this poem motivates the exhortation to joy. The transience of youth—soon to be engulfed by the unpleasantness of old age and finality of death—makes the seeking of enjoyment all the more urgent.¹⁸⁷ Consequently, Fries maintains that this passage is not pessimistic because the whole is syntactically subordinate to the exhortation to joy in 11:8.¹⁸⁸ While his syntactical observation is correct, his conclusion is not. Other interpreters also notice the unbalanced structure of the text,¹⁸⁹ which is formally a call to joy, but in terms of content is a description of old age, sickness, and death.¹⁹⁰ Lohfink is particularly sensitive to the effect of the poem:

Syntactically the command to joy is maintained until the end. But death pushes in and grows so strong and overpowering that it covers everything and progressively crowds out the word of joy.¹⁹¹

8.4 Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter we have surveyed Qohelet's core advice to *carpe diem*. We have concluded that this is a central feature of Qohelet's discourse, constituting his core advice to his reader. Furthermore, our examination has led us to understand these texts as exhortations to the only good that Qohelet has been able to find. Qohelet considers them a limited portion (חלק), rather than the

¹⁸⁷ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 333; Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 114; Debel, 'Once More', 79–80; Schellenberg, *Kohelet*, 159.

¹⁸⁸ Fries, 'Freue dich', 116.

¹⁸⁹ Kohlmoos, *Kohelet*, 240–241.

¹⁹⁰ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 519.

¹⁹¹ Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 137. cf. Fox's quotation on p. 291 above. Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 315.

ultimate profit (יתרון) he was looking for. This is indicated by the relationship of the carpe diem passages to Qohelet's הבל statements, the use of the אין expression, and the complications Qohelet freely acknowledges within the carpe diem passages themselves. These complications include the (seemingly) arbitrary will of God, divine judgment, and death.

Qohelet's core advice to enjoy life finds its culminating expression in 11:7–12:7. This passage is unlike the preceding calls to carpe diem in two ways. First, the advice in 11:7–12:7 is far more conflicted than Qohelet's earlier carpe diem passages, and is structured around the alternation of call to enjoyment and qualification. Secondly, Qohelet's final carpe diem ends in a spectacularly gloomy fashion. Though starting in a more optimistic context, Qohelet's advice steadily descends into pessimism. Eventually qualification overtakes advice.

For Qohelet, the crystallisation of his very best advice is: enjoy life *if* God allows it, and remember that God will *certainly* take that life away again. This focus on death and enjoyment reveals more about the mode of wisdom that Qohelet embodies. The language of feasting in Qohelet's previous calls to carpe diem identify it with the hopeless pleasure-seeking of Isa 22:13, and even Siduri's advice in the Epic of Gilgamesh. While such advice might appear to be untenable as biblical wisdom, our recognition of Qohelet as a character permits him to have his own independent voice. Yet Qohelet's advice is not to be taken as the advice of the book as a whole. Unlike the teaching of the implied author, Qohelet's words are to be questioned by the reader.

Despite this negative characterisation of Qohelet, there are nevertheless important truths for the son to learn from him. Once again, Qohelet is not a *mere* foil, but proves himself to be perceptive and honest with regards to the limitations of his wisdom. Qohelet recognises—partially, although not fully—the tension between seeking enjoyment and divine judgment (11:9). He also

admits that sometimes the best one can achieve is the avoidance of pain. Finally, he acknowledges that death limits the opportunity of enjoyment and eventually takes over (12:2–7). Qohelet thus provides a sagacious assessment of the pursuit of enjoyment, truthfully laying out all of its limitations for the reader. These admissions bring clear support to the father’s aim of warning his son from self-reliant wisdom.

Once again, we have seen ironic biblical allusions in Qohelet’s words in 11:7–12:7. These do not reflect Qohelet’s own attempt to digest Israel’s covenant faith, but are subtle echoes placed there by the implied author for the son to recognise and reflect upon. Qohelet’s most emphatic call to enjoyment in 11:9a appears to be a direct repudiation of Num 15:39. We concluded that this allusion is deliberate on the part of the father, but unknown to Qohelet himself in light of his stated ignorance about the divine will (9:1–2). Though Qohelet shows in the very next line that he is aware that enjoyment is complicated by divine judgment (11:9b), it is more hazardous than he realises.

The language of ‘remember your creator’ also alludes to Israel’s covenant faith. The term creator (**בורא**) is apparently chosen for its echo of ‘pit’ (**בור**), since for Qohelet that is all that thinking of the life-giver evokes—one day he will take life away again. But the reader of Israel’s Torah knows that remembrance (**זכר**) of one’s maker (normally **עשה**) is a profoundly covenantal expression. For the reader of the Torah, Qohelet’s words are a convincing proof that one cannot truly thrive in the world apart from divine revelation. Such a double entendre goes a long way to explain a key example of Qohelet’s use of an orthodox expression that has long perplexed interpreters.

Aside from Qohelet’s advice to ‘seize the day’, his discourse also features an assortment of other advice. In order to further validate our thesis that Qohelet is the pedagogical tool used by a father to instruct his son about the dangers

of self-reliant wisdom and to point him to covenantal obedience, we will provide one final analysis of such ‘wisdom’ (4:17–5:6[5:1–7]).

CHAPTER 9

QOHELET'S SUPPLEMENTARY ADVICE: ANALYSIS OF ECCLESIASTES 4:17–5:6[5:1–7]

We have so far provided analyses of Qohelet's findings (7:23–29) and his core exhortation to *carpe diem* (especially 11:7–12:7). We now turn to consider what can be described as Qohelet's supplementary advice.

Upon first reading, Eccl 4:17–5:6[5:1–7] and its exhortation to fear God would appear to be an unlikely candidate for the category of supplementary advice.¹ However, this chapter will demonstrate that Qohelet's fear of God is rather different from the central wisdom principle of the book of Proverbs or the covenant faith of Deuteronomy. Like all of Qohelet's supplementary advice, his teaching in 4:17–5:6[5:1–7] is about minimising and mitigating life's dangers, which are obstacles to the enjoyment he commends.

Ecclesiastes 4:17–5:6[5:1–7] has been chosen for a number of reasons. First, it contains Qohelet's first direct exhortations to his audience. Secondly, it has been claimed by some to be central to Qohelet's message. Thirdly, Qohelet's instruction to fear God brings him into dialogue with the epilogist and is a key example of Qohelet's alleged orthodoxy.

Our understanding of this passage will be developed in a similar fashion to our analysis of previous texts. We will begin with a book-wide study of Qohelet's understanding of the fear of God. Then we will examine the context of the pericope and its role within Qohelet's discourse. Next we will turn to examine the structure of the text to give us further insight into the nature Qohelet's

¹ Indeed, Lohfink considers this passage to be the conceptual and structural centre of the book. Lohfink, 'Warum ist der Tor unfähig', 117.

illocutions. Lastly we will analyse the details of the text, with particular attention to how the father has crafted these words to impact his son.

9.1 Qohelet and the Fear of God

The ‘fear of God’ is a recurring expression in the book of Ecclesiastes, although it is not nearly as prominent as vanity (הבל), or the call to carpe diem. Qohelet mentions it explicitly six times (3:14; 5:6[7]; 7:18; twice in 8:12, 13) and the epilogist once (12:13).² It has been subject to various interpretations, all of which significantly impact how one interprets the present section and Qohelet’s relationship to the epilogist.

9.1.1 Survey of Readings

In the early twentieth century, the command to fear God in Eccl 5:6[7] was considered an interpolation by a pious Jew who sought to bring what Qohelet had to say into line with orthodox belief.³ This view assumes that the fear of God in 5:6[7] has an identical meaning to elsewhere in the Old Testament. A number of recent interpreters have agreed with this assumption, although have rejected the view that this exhortation is an addition.⁴ Whybray confidently maintains that:

there is no reason to suppose that for him the fear of God (האֱלֹהִים) differed from that which is found in such texts as Deuteronomy: obedience, love, service, worship (e.g. Deut 10,12), conformity to God’s moral commands (Lev 19,14), avoidance of sin (Job 1,9), honest conduct (Prov 14,2)—in short, the

² Ogden translates מִלְפָּנֵי שִׁירָאֵן in 3:14 as ‘so that they might *see* [what proceeds] from him’. However, this is clearly a strained interpretation that fails to recognise that this is one of Qohelet’s preferred expressions for the fear of God (cf. 8:12, 13). Ogden, *Qobeleth*, 57.

³ E.g. McNeile, *Ecclesiastes*, 24–26.

⁴ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 75; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 207–209; Fredericks, ‘Ecclesiastes’, 119–120.

reverence for, and the worship of God, characteristic of sincere Yahwists (so, e.g., Prov 31,30 and many of the Psalms).⁵

The dominant view of Qohelet's use of the fear of God is that it is broadly consistent with prior usage but has his own particular emphasis. In addition to pious reverence, Qohelet's usage draws attention to God's sovereign rule over human affairs and the uncertainty of human life. In other words, fearing God means recognising a person's proper place before God.⁶ Lohfink maintains that the fear of God is the acknowledgement that every situation comes from God; however, he considers this a new use of the term in the ancient Near East because it is not specifically religious.⁷ Krüger and Schwienhorst-Schönberger take this view further, and consider Qohelet to be recognising God as the absolute other and speaking of noumenal fear.⁸ Finally, Fox considers there to be an additional emphasis on the anger of God, namely a true fear that he may lash out.⁹

A third group of interpreters consider Qohelet to be saying something more radical: an 'actual fear, fear of an unknowable power who has the ability to destroy or to reward, to dispense joy or to withhold.'¹⁰ It is not reverence so

⁵ R. N. Whybray, 'Qoheleth as a Theologian', in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, ed. Antoon Schoors, BETL 134 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 264–265. Also cited by Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 207–208.

⁶ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 237. cf. Timothy Polk, 'The Wisdom of Irony: A Study of *Hebel* and Its Relation to Joy and the Fear of God in *Ecclesiastes*', *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 6 (1976), 13–15; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 268; Lee, *Vitality*, 84–109, 125.

⁷ Lohfink, 'Warum ist der Tor unfähig', 117–118. cf. Kamano, *Cosmology*, 134–135.

⁸ Krüger, *Koheleth*, 110–111; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 317.

⁹ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 233; Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 34.

¹⁰ Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult: A Critical Analysis of the Views of Cult in the Wisdom Literature of Israel and the Ancient Near East*, SBLDS 30 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1977), 180.

much as the necessary caution due to such a deity.¹¹ Longman explains it thus: 'Because humans cannot penetrate God's timing, they are frustrated and therefore should fear God, not in the sense of reverence, but in the sense of horror. Qohelet believes that God acts the way that he does to frighten people into submission, not to arouse a sense of respectful awe of his power and might.'¹²

We will evaluate these views by a comparison between the fear of God in the Old Testament and Qohelet's use of the concept.

9.1.2 The Fear of God in the Old Testament

The expression that most commonly denotes the fear of God in the Old Testament is the verb ירא and the direct object יהוה. Common variations include מאלהים ירא throughout Leviticus and the verbal adjective יִרָא with אלהים or יהוה (either as an accusative or genitive). In Proverbs, the usual construction is the nominal יראת יהוה.

In the Old Testament, the fear of God is a multivalent concept. It is first applied to the obedient faith of Abraham (Gen 22:12), although throughout Genesis to Leviticus it is more commonly an alternative to evil conduct or co-ordinate with righteous conduct (e.g. Gen 20:11; 42:18; Exod 18:21; Lev 19:14, 32; 25:17, 36, 43). The book of Exodus also uses it to describe the recognition of God's power as opposed to that of Pharaoh (Exod 1:17, 21; 9:20, 30; 14:31).

The fear of Yahweh is especially prominent in the book of Deuteronomy, where it is frequently equated with the observance of divine commandments

¹¹ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 101.

¹² Tremper Longman III, 'The "Fear of God" in the Book of Ecclesiastes', *BBR* 25.1 (2015), 16.

(Deut 6:2, 13, 24; 10:12). As we have seen, the epilogist explicitly defines his use of the fear of God in this way (Eccl 12:13).¹³ Throughout the Deuteronomistic History it is used for covenantal adherence generally, and often contrasted with fearing other gods (e.g. Josh 24:14; 1 Sam 12:14, 18, 24; 1 Kgs 18:3, 12). The Psalms reflect each of these categories, although also have additional nuances such as associations with rejoicing/worship (Pss 2:11; 22:23; 33:8; 40:3) and with taking refuge in Yahweh. The Chronicler speaks of the fear of God coming upon the nations in military defeat (1 Chr 14:17; 2 Chr 17:10; 20:29), in addition to expressions more typical of Deuteronomic texts (2 Chr 19:9; 2 Chr 26:5; Neh 5:9).

The fear of Yahweh also pervades the book of Proverbs, where it is described as the source of wisdom and knowledge (1:7, 29; 2:5–6; 9:10; 15:33), is manifested in turning from evil and pursuing uprightness (3:7; 8:13; 14:2; 16:6), and leads to security, prosperity, and blessing (10:27; 14:26, 27; 19:23; 22:4; 28:14; 29:25). Longman describes it as ‘the attitude that leads to obedience and to good consequences’ that comes from knowing one’s proper place of dependence in God’s universe.¹⁴

9.1.3 Qohelet’s Use of the Fear of God

Qohelet’s use of the fear of God can be compared and contrasted with the preceding examples with regards to its construction and its context. As Qohelet is a character in the text, much like Job’s friends, Qohelet’s reliability or consistency with the teachings of the Old Testament must be tested, rather than assumed.

All of Qohelet’s constructions use אלהים (ה). Indeed, he never mentions God

¹³ See pp. 204.

¹⁴ Longman, ‘Fear of God’, 14. cf. Longman, *Fear of the Lord*, 12–14.

by his personal name. Some scholars consider this an indication that Qohelet's God is a distant deity.¹⁵ While Qohelet's omission of God's covenant name is in contrast to the book of Proverbs and Deuteronomy, (ה)אלהים is nevertheless common in the Old Testament. Moreover, the epilogist also speaks of האלהים rather than יהוה. Given the epilogist's otherwise Deuteronomic concern for the keeping of commands, the reticence to speak of Yahweh may simply reflect common practice at the time of composition rather than a deliberate portrayal of God as distant.¹⁶ While Qohelet's view of God may indeed be distant, his use of האלהים cannot be used as proof of such a view.

The first and last two of Qohelet's references to the fear of God use a unique construction for doing so: ירא מלפני (3:14; 8:12, 13). Outside of Ecclesiastes this exact construction is used only once, describing Saul's fear of David in 1 Sam 18:12.¹⁷ In context, it describes Saul's growing terror as he finds himself on the wrong side of Yahweh's favour. A further description in 1 Sam 18:15 equates this fear with dread (גור). A closely related construction is ירא מפני, which Whybray uses to support his interpretation of Qohelet's 'fear before God' as awe.¹⁸ He cites only Exod 9:30 and Hag 1:12; however, these turn out to be exceptional cases. In the vast majority of instances (not cited by Whybray!) ירא מפני is used for fear of hostile nations, kings, and enemies (Deut 7:19; Josh 9:24; 11:6; 1 Sam 7:7; 1 Sam 18:29; 21:13[12]; 1 Kgs 1:50; 2 Kgs 1:15;

¹⁵ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 36–37, 153; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 160–161. cf. Antoon Schoors, '(Mis)use of Intertextuality in Qoheleth Exegesis', in *Congress Volume Oslo 1998*. eds. André Lemaire and Magne Sæbø, VTSup 80 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 49.

¹⁶ As in the 'Elohistic Psalter' (Pss 42–83).

¹⁷ However, some Hb. manuscripts appear to conform מלפני to the more common מפני.

¹⁸ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 75. Whybray confuses מפני with לפני when he cites these passages.

19:6 (=Isa 37:6); 25:26; Jer 1:8; Jer 41:18; 42:11; Neh 4:8[14]). Just as BDB observes a distinction between גֹּרֵר מִן ('awe'; cf. Pss 22:24[23]; 33:8) and גֹּרֵר מִפְּנֵי ('fear' in the sense of dread; cf. Num 22:3; Deut 1:17; 1 Sam 18:15),¹⁹ the same *mostly* holds true of יִרְאָה מִן and יִרְאָה מִלְּפָנֶי. ²⁰ Qohelet's use of יִרְאָה מִלְּפָנֶי is thus likely to refer to fearing God as a hostile power.

Not all of Qohelet's mentions of the fear of God use the יִרְאָה מִלְּפָנֶי construction. Ecclesiastes 5:6[7] uses a more common construction: יִרְאָה with an accusative object. Similarly, 7:18 and 8:12b β use the well-attested יִרְאָה (י). Contrary to Whybray, these unmarked constructions ought be read in light of Qohelet's more marked forms and not the other way around.²¹ This is most obviously the case in 8:12, which describes יִרְאֵי הָאֱלֹהִים as those who יִירְאוּ מִלְּפָנֶי.

A second point of comparison and contrast is the context in which the fear of God sayings appear in Qohelet's discourse. Ecclesiastes 3:14 occurs in the section 3:1–15, which catalogues the seasons determined by God. Yet Qohelet reflects that God makes these seasons unfathomable (3:11) and unchangeable (3:14). Here Qohelet understands the fear of God as the (intended) response to such works of God. There no hint of either covenantal or ethical associations. In this context, Qohelet could be describing either awe or terror; however, our study of the construction יִרְאָה מִלְּפָנֶי points us to the latter.

We will examine Eccl 5:6[7] in the interpretation section below; however, it is at least worth noting that the command to fear God occurs in the context of a statement of divine distance (5:1b[2b]) and anger (5:5[6]). Similarly, we find

¹⁹ BDB, s. v. 'גֹּרֵר III'.

²⁰ The only other exception to those listed by Whybray appears to be 1 Kgs 3:28.

²¹ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 75.

that the purpose of the fear of God in 7:18 is not motivated by the character of God, but instead the avoidance of self-destruction (7:16) and premature death (7:17). Even more distinct from the normal biblical senses, Qohelet says that the fear of God involves avoiding excessive righteousness and wisdom on the one hand, and wickedness and folly on the other.²²

The final occurrence in 8:12–13 also focuses upon outcomes rather than the character of God. It describes a positive outcome (יהיה־טוב) for the God-fearer (v. 12), in contrast to the wicked whose destruction is implied (v. 13). Qohelet again uses the construction ירא מלפני, which suggests he has terror in mind more than awe. While Qohelet might seem to be affirming a Deuteronomic or Proverbial connection between character/deed and consequences, in actual fact he is reporting a conviction—indicated by the participial expression גם־יודע אני—that is contradicted by experience (8:10–11, 14).²³ As Schoors paraphrases: ‘Although I know that according to traditional wisdom, it will be well with those who fear God and not with the wicked, nevertheless people continue doing wrong, because the sinner is not punished.’²⁴

Once again, Qohelet shows himself to be at odds with the biblical conception

²² The supposition that Qohelet uses a shortened form of the Mishnaic idiom יצא (מ)־ידי ‘does one’s duty’ is unlikely (contra Gordis and Schoors). It is too far removed from the actual wording of the text (יצא את־כלם) and the text makes sense as it stands: ‘escapes them both’ (so Fredericks). The Vulg. ‘*nihil negligit*’ more likely reflects the translator’s attempts to reconcile Qohelet’s words with biblical teaching elsewhere. Fredericks, *Qoheleth’s Language*, 184; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 267–268; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 549.

²³ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 287–288; Longman, ‘Fear of God’, 17.

²⁴ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 631. However, the fact that Qohelet uses the construction associated with terror (ירא מלפני) may suggest he has only a passing acquaintance with the traditional doctrine of the fear of God.

of the fear of God, both in its definition and its results. Moreover, the covenantal connotations of the epilogist's use of **את־האלהים ירא** (12:13) are particularly distant.

9.1.4 Summary

Qohelet's unique expression for the fear of God (**ירא מלפני**) suggests that he is viewed as a dangerous or hostile force. The contexts support this sense of danger, with each text showing a concern with outcomes rather than a worthy acknowledgement of the character of God. Additionally, both 7:18 and 8:10–14 show further incongruities with the normal biblical understanding of the fear of God, as they sever its connection with righteousness (in the case of 7:18) and with the experience of blessing (in the case of 8:10–14).

9.2 The Context and Structure of Ecclesiastes 4:17–5:6[5:1–7]

9.2.1 Context

The boundaries of the unit are reasonably clear. Ecclesiastes 4:17[5:1] shifts from the anecdote of the previous verse to exhortation.²⁵ The previous verse also ends with a vanity refrain, which typically ends a section.²⁶ Although exhortation continues into 5:7[8], the change of topic is so clear that few interpreters include these verses.²⁷ And while the imperative continues to be used in 5:7[8], it is deictic in function.

The place of 4:17–5:6[5:1–7] within the overall structure of the book is less

²⁵ Galling, 'Prediger', 100–101; Lauha, *Kobelet*, 97; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 197; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 74.

²⁶ Wright, 'Riddle of the Sphinx', 245–66.

²⁷ Loader sees 5:7–8[8–9] as an application of the tension of 4:17–5:6[5:1–7] to the sphere of social justice. Loader, *Polar Structures*, 76.

obvious. As already noted, there is no consensus regarding the structure of Ecclesiastes. Aside from noting the first shift to imperative, most interpreters find this passage to be of no great importance.²⁸ The leading exception to this is Lohfink. He claims that while the argument of the book is set out in the form of a Greek diatribe,²⁹ simultaneously there is a Semitic palistrophic structure, which has the religious critique of 4:17–5:6[5:1–7] in its centre:³⁰

1:2–3 Frame

1:4–11 Cosmology

1:12–3:15 Anthropology

3:16–4:16 Social critique I

4:17–5:6 Religious critique

5:7–6:10 Social critique II

6:11–9:6 Deconstruction

9:7–12:7 Ethic

12:8 Frame

Schwienhorst-Schönberger, following Lohfink, says that this is one of the three central theological passages of the book along with 3:10–15 and 5:17–19[18–20]. Importantly, this section mentions God six times and contains Qohelet's only command to fear God.³¹

²⁸ Murphy, for example, calls 4:17[5:1]–6:9 'Varia: Worship, Officials, Wealth and Its Uncertainties'. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 49.

²⁹ 1:2–11 Opening; 1:12–3:15 Narrative Introduction; 3:16–6:10 Deeping through social experience; 6:11–9:6 *Refutatio* of contrary positions; 9:7–12:8 *Applicatio* through concrete proposals. Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 7–8.

³⁰ Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 8, 72.

³¹ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*. Similarly, Kohlmoos makes this the start of the second

Aside from the opening and closing poems, Ecclesiastes has insufficient symmetry to support Lohfink's proposed palistrophe. The main structural features of Qohelet's discourse are the carpe diem passages which appear throughout with growing intensity,³² and the use of refrains, which divide the work into two halves, exploring the interrelated questions of 'what profit?' and 'who knows?'³³ The remaining argument for the centrality of this section rests upon the subjective claim that it contains themes that are central to the book.

The only objective feature of 4:17–5:6[5:1–7] that points to its significance within Qohelet's discourse is that it contains his first true imperatives. Of course, Qohelet has already given advice that commends particular action. This is most obvious in the carpe diem passages that employ adapted 'better than' sayings. That these sayings are exhortatory in intention is clear from 9:7–9 and 11:9–10. Qohelet has also used 'better than' sayings to commend quietness over striving (4:6) and to advise companionship (4:9).³⁴ Nevertheless, the use of imperatives in 4:17–5:6[5:1–7] is far more direct and emphatic.

Further clarification of the significance of Qohelet's shift to imperative can be gleaned from observing Qohelet's use of imperatives elsewhere in his discourse. Apart from the carpe diem passages already noted, the remaining imperatives/jussives in the book (excluding 5:7[8]; and **וְאַתָּה** used as a deictic imperative in 7:13, 14, 27, 29), include a warning about being too righteous or wicked (7:16–17), cautious conduct before the king (8:2; 10:4, 20), and a call to action in light of uncertainty (11:1–6). These topics of instruction are clearly

part of Qohelet's discourse, which consists of reflections and instructions. Kohlmoos, *Kohelet*, 142–143.

³² Whybray, 'Preacher of Joy', 87–98.

³³ Wright, 'Riddle of the Sphinx', 245–66.

³⁴ Eccl 4:3, 13 are also 'better than' sayings; however, they do not give actionable advice.

diverse and in no way support the contention that Qohelet reserves the use of imperatives for matters of central importance.

A common theme of Qohelet's imperatives and also much of Qohelet's indicative advice is minimising life's hazards, mitigating danger, and coping with one's lack of knowledge. It is this category of exhortation that can be called Qohelet's supplementary advice. In this context, the interpretation that follows will test the thesis that Qohelet's cultic exhortations are to be understood as supplementary advice, specifically for minimising the dangers that accompany religious activities.

9.2.2 Structure

The next consideration of our rhetorical analysis is the structure of 4:17–5:6[5:1–7]. This step is foundational to our interpretation of the details of the text, and provides insight into the logic and force of this section of Qohelet's discourse.

Commentators have noted a number of structural markers that divide the text into two parallel subsections: 4:17–5:2[5:1–3] and 5:3–6[5:4–7]. First, 4:17[5:1] and 5:3[4] each describe an instance of cultic activity with **כֹּאֶשֶׁר**.³⁵ Secondly, each subsection contains a theological statement of some kind, namely with regards to divine distance (5:1[2]) and anger (5:5[6]).³⁶ Thirdly, each subsection concludes with a verse (5:2[3], 6[7]) that mentions dreams (**חֲלוֹם**), words (**דְּבָרִים**), and abundance (**בָּרֵךְ**). These verses are usually understood as motivations (**כִּי**) for the instructions.³⁷ In addition to this

³⁵ Hiecke, 'Wie hast du's mit der Religion?', 325. These verses may also impart a 'better than' saying; however, this requires an emendation of 4:17. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 75.

³⁶ Douglas K. Fletcher, 'Ecclesiastes 5:1–7', *Int* 55.3 (2001), 296; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 158.

³⁷ Hiecke, 'Wie hast du's mit der Religion?', 325; Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', 138.

parallel structure, this section is framed by related imperatives: שמר רגליך (4:17[5:1]) and את־האלהים ירא (5:6[7]).³⁸

Commentators disagree on the number of topics addressed, whether two (listening, and vows), three (offerings, prayers, vows),³⁹ or four (sacrifices, prayer, vows, offerings for unintentional sins).⁴⁰ While some attempt to resolve this on structural grounds,⁴¹ it will depend largely on the details of the text, which we will examine below.

There are several implications of this structural analysis. It is clear that Qohelet is not merely dispensing piecemeal advice. On the contrary, this unit has a logical structure, unveiling his thought process.⁴² He grounds his advice upon his view of God's nature (5:1[2]) and actions (5:5[6]),⁴³ and his positive imperatives are subsequently expanded or qualified through his use of negated jussives. As a result, we can discern what Qohelet means by 'fear God' from his own words and need not rely on traditional definitions.

³⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 197.

³⁹ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 97; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 148; Krüger, *Qobeleth*, 107; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 158.

⁴⁰ Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult*, 186; Hiecke, 'Wie hast du's mit der Religion?', 325; Lohfink, *Qobeleth*, 76.

⁴¹ Lohfink, for example, claims that four topics are related chiastically, independently of the parallel structure indicated by key words. Lohfink, 'Warum ist der Tor unfähig', 119; Lohfink, *Qobeleth*, 76.

⁴² Hiecke goes further in his structural analysis and claims this text is an 'argumentativ' response to the behaviour of his contemporaries. Hiecke, 'Wie hast du's mit der Religion?', 319–338[330]. cf. Fletcher, 'Ecclesiastes 5:1–7', 296–298.

⁴³ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 158.

9.3 Interpretation of Ecclesiastes 4:17–5:6[5:1–7]

4:17[5:1]

Watch your step when you go to the house of God. Approach to listen unlike the fools who offer a sacrifice, for they have no knowledge of doing harm.

The initial exhortation uses the familiar wisdom image of feet (רגל)⁴⁴ to represent one's conduct (Prov 1:15, 16; 3:23, 26; 4:26, 27),⁴⁵ although the application of this wisdom metaphor to temple visits is unique. Crenshaw says that Qohelet is warning against thoughtless rushing to the temple, just as Prov 1:15 urges students to restrain from evil.⁴⁶ Schwienhorst-Schönberger rightly rejects this view—Qohelet assumes that his audience will go to the temple (באשר תלך). It is rather *how* they are to conduct themselves that is the focus.⁴⁷ Though the use of the covenantal term שמר may indicate that Qohelet exhorts cultic participation in accordance with the law,⁴⁸ this is difficult to reconcile with his aversion to sacrifice later in this verse. The use of שמר with רגל is most naturally read as a warning to be cautious, in order to avoid danger (Prov 3:26; cf. Prov 21:23).

The nature of Qohelet's first specific concern in 4:17[5:1] is obscured by three syntactical challenges: the function of the infinitive absolute קרוב, the word

⁴⁴ The meaning of שמר רגל remains unchanged whether it is singular or plural.

⁴⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 197–198; Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 55.

⁴⁶ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 115.

⁴⁷ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 312.

⁴⁸ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 312. Similarly, Bartholomew links Qohelet's warning with Jeremiah's condemnation of casual temple conduct in Jer 7:1–4. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 203. Kohlmoos' suggestion that Qohelet is concerned with cultic purity, as feet brought in dirt from the streets, is far from the concern of this section. Kohlmoos, *Kohelet*, 144.

order of the clause beginning with **נ**, and the translation of **ל ידע**.

The infinitive absolute may function as either the subject of the clause,⁴⁹ an adjective meaning ‘praiseworthy’⁵⁰ or ‘acceptable’ (cf. 1 Kgs 8:59),⁵¹ or an imperative (consecutive to **שמר**).⁵² If the infinitive is the subject, then the clause is missing a complement, and so some interpreters supply **טוב** to create a ‘better than’ saying, or else understand **טוב** to be implied.⁵³ The verses that Galling lists in support of this reading, however, suffer from the same ambiguity and do not prove the point he wishes to make.⁵⁴ Taking **קרוב** as the adjective (‘praiseworthy’ or ‘acceptable’) does not require any additional elements to be supplied. Nevertheless, it is an unacceptable solution because the support for such a translation is lacking.⁵⁵ By contrast, the use of the infinitive absolute with imperatival force is well attested in the Old Testament.⁵⁶ Hence it is to be read as a command that is subordinate to ‘watch your feet’.

⁴⁹ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 115.

⁵⁰ Gordis, *Kohleth*, 237.

⁵¹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 194; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 230; Holmstedt et al., *Qohleth*, 162.

⁵² Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 149 n. 5; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohleth*, 312.

⁵³ Galling, ‘Prediger’, 101; Lauha, *Kohleth*, 96; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 115.

⁵⁴ 1 Sam 15:22 and Eccl 9:17 are not comparable because **טוב** is implied from the previous colon/verse, and there is no need to supply **טוב** in Eccl 6:5.

⁵⁵ Fox points to examples where it is used of an intimate relationship: Ps 34:19; 85:10; 119:151; 148:14; Ezek 43:19; Lev 10:3. He notes that it is nowhere used of actions, although 1 Kgs 8:59 comes close. Nevertheless, there is no evidence of a development of meaning towards ‘acceptable’ rather than the literal sense of ‘near’. Moreover, whenever God is the proximate object, this is always explicit: e.g. **קרבים אליהוהוה** (1 Kgs 8:59). Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 230.

⁵⁶ An infinitive absolute is used as an imperative in Exod 20:8; Deut 5:12; Josh 1:13; Num 4:2; 25:17; 2 Kgs 3:16; 19:29; Jer 32:14; Zech 6:10; cf. Joüon §123v, x; Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 178–180.

Taking **לשמע וקרוב** as a command to ‘approach to listen’, leaves the **מן** unaccounted for. Without an attributive adjective, however, **מן** can indicate a statement of difference: ‘unlike’ or ‘rather’ (cf. Judg 6:27; cf. Eccl 6:5; Job 7:15; 32:2; 36:21; Prov 8:10; 16:16; 22:1). The most common translation ‘rather than offering a sacrifice of fools’ would require a transposition of **הכסילים** and **זבח**.⁵⁷ The present word order suggests that the infinitive **תת** has two complements: **הכסילים** as its subject and **זבח** as its object (cf. Gen 29:19; Judg 7:2; 1 Kgs 21:3).⁵⁸ Hence the comparison is: ‘Approach to listen unlike the fools who offer a sacrifice.’⁵⁹ Qohelet shows a clear preference for **שמע** over **נתן זבח**, which he considers a foolish activity.

Commentators are divided between a translation of **שמע** as ‘obey’⁶⁰ or ‘listen’.⁶¹ The former would create a strong parallel with 1 Sam 15:22, where sacrifices are contrasted to obedience. But nowhere else does Qohelet use **שמע** for obedience,⁶² and the contrast in the rest of the passage is between speaking and listening.⁶³ This contrast also implies that ‘listening’ refers to the silence of the worshipper rather than their receptivity. An implicit affirmation of revelation in the temple is certainly far from Qohelet’s point.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 149 n. 7.

⁵⁸ Holmstedt et al., *Qoheleth*, 162.

⁵⁹ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 157.

⁶⁰ E.g. Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult*, 182; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 150; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 230–231; Kohlmoos, *Kohelet*, 144–145.

⁶¹ E.g. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 92; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 194; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 158 n. 118.

⁶² Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 194.

⁶³ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 158 n. 118.

⁶⁴ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 158. It is equally unlikely that Qohelet uses **זבח** in a narrow sense, in contrast to Israel’s other offerings (e.g. **מנחה**, **עולה**) contra Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 107; Kohlmoos, *Kohelet*, 145.

The final clause is an interpretive crux. The ancient witnesses appear to have corrected the text (Tg., Syr.) and modern interpreters have proposed similar emendations: ‘knowing not otherwise than to do evil’, or ‘they only know how to do evil’.⁶⁵ Yet none of these solutions can satisfactorily explain the *lectio difficilior* of the MT. More creatively, Lohfink argues that the text is *intended* to puzzle the reader. The claim that fools do not know how to do evil only makes sense in light of 5:5[6], where there is an apparent misuse of the offering for unintentional sins (שגגה). Ecclesiastes 4:17[5:1] thus takes the fools at their word, when they claim to have no real knowledge or responsibility for what they do.⁶⁶ Lohfink’s reading is to be commended for seeking to understand the text as it stands; however, it is difficult to conceive that a reader would have picked up on a such a subtle irony,⁶⁷ and it is also far from certain that 5:5[6] speaks at all about the misuse of שגגה offerings (see below).

A number of scholars claim that there is no problem at all with this construction, since ל ידע can mean ‘to know of’ or ‘have an awareness of’.⁶⁸ While it is true that ל very occasionally indicates the object of knowledge, in every instance this object is nominal.⁶⁹ It is possible, however, that in this case

⁶⁵ Galling, ‘Prediger’, 101; Whitley, *Kobelet*, 47.

⁶⁶ Lohfink, ‘Warum ist der Tor unfähig’, 113–20. He has been followed by Hiecke, ‘Wie hast du’s mit der Religion?’, 323. Gordis claims this is a more straightforward case of sarcasm: ‘those who run to the temple to pay their pledges do not know how to do evil because they lack the brains to do it.’ Gordis, *Kobelet*, 237–238.

⁶⁷ For further criticism of Lohfink and Gordis, cf. Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 230–231.

⁶⁸ Seow points to an Akkadian expression la mudû arna (‘one knows/recognises no wrongdoing’. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 194–195. Bartholomew looks to Ps 69:6[5]; 2 Sam 7:20; Isa 59:12 to support his claim it means ‘to recognise, acknowledge, know of’. However, of these examples, only Psalm 69:6[5] uses a ל with ידע and none of these examples have an infinitive. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 201 n. 5.

⁶⁹ Ps 69:6[5]; m. Sanh. 6:1; m. Miqw. 2:3; m. Ter. 4:13.

the infinitive construct is to be understood as a verbal noun.⁷⁰ This would remain an unusual use of the construction לַ יַדַע and is different from Qohelet's use of this construction elsewhere (4:13; 6:8; 10:15), but this would explain the difficulty the ancient witnesses had with the text.⁷¹

Taken at face value, רַע may refer to harm/calamity or moral evil. The former is far more common for Qohelet (1:13; 2:17; 4:8; 5:13[14]; 8:9; 9:12), with moral evil likely only found in 8:12 (cf. 12:14).⁷² In 5:5[6], Qohelet shows that his concern in this section is with material loss. This final clause, therefore, can be understood as Qohelet's criticism of the fools who offer sacrifices, not aware of the harm their actions may bring about.

This verse contains at least two possible biblical allusions. Tita forcefully contends that an allusion to the Solomon narrative in 1 Kgs 3–11 is likely in light of earlier connections to Solomon (1:12–2:26). He points to links with the themes and lexemes of temple, listening, and dreams.⁷³ Most significantly for comparison with Eccl 4:17[5:1] is Solomon's request for a listening heart (לֵב שֹמֵעַ) in 1 Kgs 3:9, which in context is a request for wisdom.⁷⁴

Tita claims Qohelet clothes himself with Solomon in 4:17–5:6[5:1–7], in order to point to the grave errors made by Solomon in his later life, thus standing as

⁷⁰ cf. Joüon §124c. Whybray additionally points to the Mishnaic use of לַ with an infinitive meaning 'with regard to'. M. H. Segal, *A Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927), 347; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 93; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 378.

⁷¹ It is likely that the לַ יַדַע plus nominal infinitive is avoided by writers because it is more suitable for the 'how to' construction.

⁷² Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part II*, 145–152.

⁷³ Hubert Tita, 'Ist die thematische Einheit Koh 4,17-5,6 eine Anspielung auf die Salomoerzählung?: Aporien der religionskritischen Interpretation', *BN* 84 (1996): 87–102.

⁷⁴ Tita, 'Einheit', 93.

a warning against approaching God foolishly.⁷⁵ This is a peculiar assessment, since the allusions to the Solomon account are to the positive aspects of his life and not to his failures. Despite Qohelet and Solomon's common concern for wisdom, their practical expressions differ markedly. As Tita notes, the building and dedication of the temple takes up the majority of the Solomon account.⁷⁶ And this is precisely where the contrast with Qohelet is starkest. Solomon sacrificed 'so many sheep and cattle that they could not be counted or numbered' (1 Kgs 8:5). Similarly, his prayer at the temple dedication speaks of it as a place where God may be accessed:

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O LORD my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place. And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive. (1 Kgs 8:27–30 ESV)

For Qohelet, by contrast, sacrifices are to be avoided (4:17[5:1]) and God is inaccessible (5:1[2]) even at the temple.⁷⁷ Qohelet's attitude towards the cult,

⁷⁵ Tita, 'Einheit', 102. cf. Barbour, *Story of Israel*, 94–98.

⁷⁶ Tita, 'Einheit', 94.

⁷⁷ Seow and Fidler both notice a similar irony in this verse. Whereas temple worship was thought to be a place where God would watch one's feet (1 Sam 2:9; Prov 3:26), for Qohelet it is the visitor to the temple who must watch himself. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 198; Ruth Fidler, 'Qoheleth in "The House of God": Text and Intertext in Qoh 4:17–5:6 (Eng. 5:1–7)', *HS* 47.1 (2006), 12.

therefore, presents him as something of an anti-Solomon—not with regards to his relationships with women (cf. 7:26–28), but with regards to his covenant relationship with Yahweh. This development of Qohelet’s characterisation is particularly negative.

Many interpreters prefer to understand Qohelet’s teaching here as an allusion to 1 Sam 15:22 and its critique of sacrifices:⁷⁸

Does Yahweh delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as obeying the voice of Yahweh? Look, to obey is better than to sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.

The lexical links to this passage are strong: as in 4:17[5:1] there is a contrast between שמע and זבח. Furthermore, קול, חפץ, טוב create links with 5:2–4[3–5]. Yet there are also significant differences that require an explanation if there is indeed a literary allusion. In 1 Sam 15, שמע clearly refers to obedience to the word of God in carrying out the complete destruction of the Amalekites (vv. 11, 18–19), while in Eccl 4:17[5:1] listening is used in contrast to action and speaking, referring to a passive role within the temple.⁷⁹

More general criticisms of the sacrifices of Israel can be found in both prophetic⁸⁰ and sapiential texts.⁸¹ Prophetic texts, however, are not critical of the cult per se; rather, they condemn the hypocrisy of the nation for their failure to maintain justice or faithfulness to the covenant. Sapiential texts are similarly concerned with the character of the worshipper as more than the outward act of sacrifice. Qohelet’s concern, however, is not covenant

⁷⁸ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 76; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 50; Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 55; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 312–313; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 203–204.

⁷⁹ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 98; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 158 n. 118; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 376.

⁸⁰ Isa 1:12–17; Jer 7:22–23; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21–24; Mic 6:6–8.

⁸¹ Prov 15:8; 21:3, 27; Sir 34:21–31 cf. Ps 40:7[6]; 51:19.

faithfulness nor the character of the worshipper. Rather he questions the effectiveness of cultic participation (5:1[2]; cf. 9:2) and highlights the risk of harm (5:5[6]).⁸²

Given the lexical links to 1 Sam 15:22, it is likely that the implied author—and not Qohelet—has this text in mind. The purpose of this illusion is not to import concepts of the value of obedience or the danger of hypocrisy, but to bring the concerns and motivations of Qohelet (harm to the worshipper) into contrast with that of Israel's covenant texts. It is thus a subtle prompt to the implied reader that, above all, God values obedience (cf. Eccl 12:13).

While temple attendance is a given for Qohelet, or at least his audience, he exhorts his reader to be passive rather than to actively take part. The sovereignty of God and the inscrutability of his will (3:11) makes offering sacrifices a potentially harmful (רע cf. 5:5[6]) and hence foolish activity. Such a view is at odds with that of Israel's prophetic and sapiential traditions.

5:1[2]

Do not be hasty with your mouth. Do not let your heart be quick to utter a word before God. For God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.

Qohelet continues to instruct his audience in this verse regarding cultic conduct. Our structural analysis indicates a close connection between this and the preceding verse. The initial imperative (שמר רגליך) is further elucidated with three jussives. The first two clauses of this verse give parallel prohibitions. The third and fourth clauses provide the motivation and a positively phrased recapitulation. The amount of repetition in this verse (דברים, דבר, פה) and

⁸² Lauha, *Kohelet*, 98.

the presence of a motivation clause (כי) give Qohelet's words far greater clarity than the dissent among interpreters would suggest.

These instructions specifically address how one does—or does not—speak in the presence of God (לפני האלהים), which is typically understood as an instruction regarding prayer. Lauha says that the proper verbs for prayer (פלל, עתר) are uncommon in the Old Testament, and that הוציא דבר and לפני האלהים are the typical word combinations for prayer.⁸³ Fox specifically points to the latter as an Aramaism for speaking to God.⁸⁴ This Aramaism is rejected by Schoors, who thinks that prayer is a too narrow interpretation of the phrase.⁸⁵ Speech before God could also include vows (מוצא שפתיך ... אשר) (מוצא שפתיך ... אשר) in Deut 23:24[23]; cf. Eccl 5:3–5[4–6]), liturgical professions that accompany sacrifices (e.g. ואמרת לפני יהוה in Deut 26:5, 13), confessions of innocence regarding adultery (ואמרה האשה אמן אמן לפני יהוה in Num 5:16–22), and hymns (e.g. ימלא פי תהלתך in Ps 71:8, 15). Qohelet's concern may thus be broader than is often assumed. Indeed, his motivation would apply to all of these activities, not just to prayer.

The reason for Qohelet's instruction is explained by the motivation clause (causal כי), which is the most contentious part of this verse. It has been understood as a statement about divine majesty, transcendence, or distance.

In support of a claim about divine majesty, Murphy points to Ps 115:3 ('Our God is in heaven; he does whatever he desires').⁸⁶ In this view, humans should

⁸³ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 98.

⁸⁴ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 231.

⁸⁵ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 381.

⁸⁶ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 50.

reflect their earthly status by showing respect and humility.⁸⁷ We ought to speak to him with the reverence that one would give to a human superior (cf. Eccl 8:2–5).⁸⁸ A comparison of these two texts, however, suggests that Qohelet and the psalmist have very different concerns. While Qohelet contrasts the location of God with that of the reader, the psalmist is drawing a contrast between Yahweh—who is ‘our God’—and the idols of the nations.

A similar view, namely that God is transcendent, emphasises the uniqueness and otherness of God. Proponents of this view usually argue that transcendence does not deny the divine presence in the temple (4:17[5:1] cf. Deut 3:24; 4:39; 26:15; 33:26; 1 Kgs 8:27) or mean that he is oblivious to the words and actions of people (Eccl 5:5[6]).⁸⁹ Hence the language of transcendence is to be understood in tension with his immanence. As such, Qohelet is here seeking to correct an overly immanent view of God. As Brown explains, ‘God is not in one’s heart any more than God is lodged in a person’s mouth. For Qoheleth, divine immanence alone fosters only human contrivance.’⁹⁰ It is far from clear, however, that Qohelet wishes his readers to maintain a tension between transcendence and immanence. Unlike Deuteronomy, Qohelet refers only to the hazards that may result from wrongful interaction with God (implicit in 4:17[5:1], explicit in 5:5[6]) without any mention of potential blessing (cf. especially Deut 4:39–40; 26:15). And as in Ps 115, Deuteronomy’s affirmation of God’s heavenly status affirms that he alone is God (אֵין עֹד; cf. Deut 4:39) rather than being ‘wholly other’ from the vantage point of humanity.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 77.

⁸⁸ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 94.

⁸⁹ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 56; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 205.

⁹⁰ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 56. Similarly, Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 198–199.

⁹¹ Schoors claims that Qohelet is in fact alluding to Deut 4:39, but in a way that radically

The view that the motivation clause points to divine distance rests upon the explicit contrast between the location of God (בשמים) and humankind (על-הארץ).⁹² Gordis says that the view that God is distant is characteristic of unbelief (Ps 14:1; 22:12–15[11–14]).⁹³ Yet what Qohelet claims here is very far from the denial of God in Ps 14:1.⁹⁴ It is apparent that Qohelet, whatever his doubts about God's actions, remains a believer in the general sense. Not only does Qohelet recognise God as judge (3:17; 8:12–13; 11:9) and creator (12:1, 7), he maintains a very high view of God's sovereignty: both good and ill come from the hand of God (e.g. 2:24, 26; 3:13; 5:17–19[18–20]; 6:2; 7:14; 8:15; 9:1) and every season is determined by him (3:1–8). The actions of God, however, feel oppressive (1:13; 3:10); they cannot be changed (3:14–15; 7:13) nor fathomed (3:11; 7:14; 8:17; 11:5).⁹⁵ In this context, the distance of God is to be understood as his seeming indifference to the plight of humankind.⁹⁶

In view of the impassable distance between God and humanity, Qohelet's instruction is not to be understood as a mere 'think before you speak'; rather, it is to avoid speech as much as possible. The translation of דבר as not being

transforms its meaning. Schoors, '(Mis)use of Intertextuality', 52; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 381.

⁹² Lauha, *Kohelet*, 98–99; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 151; Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 159.

⁹³ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 238.

⁹⁴ Moreover, Ps 22 cannot be read as expressing unbelief since, as a lament, it is addressed to God.

⁹⁵ Kohlmoos thus says that 4:17–5:6[5:1–7] 'wird räumlich-kultisch umgesetzt, was in 3,1–15 zeitlich-geschichtlichen Dimensionen gedacht wurde.' Kohlmoos, *Kohelet*, 147.

⁹⁶ Lauha's description of God as 'ein ferner Despot' would seem to go beyond what is affirmed in this verse. Qohelet perceives the will of God as existentially frustrating, not malicious (at least in the absolute sense). Indeed, divine impenetrability prevents him *a priori* from such an assessment. Admittedly, Qohelet approaches such an accusation (רעה) against God in 6:1–2; however, his concern here is with the harm experienced by a person, rather than presenting a moral evaluation of God as such. Lauha, *Kohelet*, 98–99.

quick to utter ‘a word’ before God, rather than ‘a matter’ is further confirmed by the final clause, ‘let your words be few’. Since the divine will is both impenetrable and unchangeable, the effectiveness of cultic speech is entirely called into question (cf. 9:2). But even more seriously than this, cultic participation may endanger the worshipper (cf. 7:16). For this reason, God is to be treated with the same caution and circumspection as an unpredictable and fearsome monarch (cf. Eccl 8:2–5).

As in the previous verse, the Solomon narrative remains in the background as a counter-text. Solomon also notes the exalted status of God (1 Kgs 8:23, 27), yet he views the temple as a place where he is accessible and attentive to the prayers of his people (1 Kgs 8:28–29 cf. vv. 30, 32, 34, 36, 39, 43, 45, 49, 52).⁹⁷ Even in the case of a conservative interpretation of 5:1[2], Qohelet is very far from this view. Once again, Qohelet’s words negatively characterise him as something of an anti-Solomon, who, despite sharing Solomon’s faculties of wisdom, does not know Yahweh or experience his blessings.

In summary, Eccl 5:1[2] gives a further instruction that one should keep words to God at a minimum due to divine distance. As in 3:14–15, Qohelet views God’s will as both inscrutable and unchangeable. This renders cultic speech ineffective at best and hazardous at worst.

5:2[3]

Indeed, a dream comes with much business and the voice of a fool with many words.

The first subunit comes to a close with a proverbial saying.⁹⁸ While it is possible

⁹⁷ Kohlmoos, *Kohelet*, 146.

⁹⁸ Galling, ‘Prediger’, 101; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 231. The vocabulary (ברב ענין) suggests that this is an original proverb by the author, rather than quoted. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 199–200. Longman thinks that it is quoted because, in his interpretation, it does not perfectly fit Qohelet’s point. Seow, however, is probably right to argue for originality on the basis of the

to understand the initial כִּי as explanatory ('for'), it appears to be a proverbial affirmation of the implications of divine distance for the value of human words. As such, כִּי is best understood as asseverative.

As a poetic saying, the relationship between the two clauses is not clearly spelled out, although it is almost certain that the juxtaposition expresses an analogical relationship.⁹⁹ This is also supported by the normal construction of other biblical proverbs of analogy (Prov 25:23; 26:20; 27:17).¹⁰⁰ In each of these examples, it is the second element that is the subject of the analogy. The context of 5:1[2] would also suggest that this is the case.

An analogy, however, is of little value if one does not understand the object of comparison. Indeed, the meaning and significance of the dream (החלום) is highly debated.¹⁰¹ It has been understood as the visions of prophets and apocalypticists,¹⁰² dreams during sleep,¹⁰³ large aspirations,¹⁰⁴ and delusions of one's standing before God¹⁰⁵—all of which are criticised for leading to excessive

vocabulary (ברב ענין), which is a more objective criterion. In either case, the author uses it because it serves his purpose. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 199–200; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 152.

⁹⁹ This is especially clear from the repetition of ברב. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 77–78. Murphy says that the two halves of this verse are linked by *waw adaequationis* ('so'; cf. GKC §161a). This is a possible explanation of the relationship, but the terseness of Hebrew poetry often leaves it for the reader to determine the relationship. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 46. Kohlmoos uniquely claims that there is a contrast between these two clauses, although she relies upon tenuous associations to argue that both ענין and חלום are used positively. Kohlmoos, *Kohelet*, 147.

¹⁰⁰ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 94; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 383.

¹⁰¹ The article is generic Gordis, *Koheleth*, 238. Shields is mistaken to claim it is an interrogative, as this would be prefixed to the first element of the clause (i.e. בא). Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 159.

¹⁰² Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult*, 184–185; Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 57.

¹⁰³ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 231–232.

¹⁰⁴ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 77–78.

¹⁰⁵ Garrett, *Proverbs*, 311.

preoccupation.

Not all interpreters understand the causality in the same direction. If כ indicates accompaniment, then causality may be the reverse.¹⁰⁶ Hence, the first clause may claim that dream-affected sleep is the result of too much activity during the day.¹⁰⁷ Though Seow cites many ancient Near Eastern texts to show that anxiety and pressures during the day were understood to lead to dreams, he denies that this fits the context well here. Instead he claims that the word חלום is used similarly to הבל, and refers to something ephemeral and unreliable.¹⁰⁸ Finally, Fidler says that this clause is a subversion of temple theology (Gen 28:16–17), as dreams are the result of the subjective concerns of the dreamer.¹⁰⁹

These comparisons are far from certain and, as such, Qohelet himself is likely to be his best interpreter. While elsewhere he mentions dreams only in the equally difficult 5:6[7], ענין is one of his favourite words. It is explicitly qualified as negative (רע) in 1:13; 4:8; 5:13. In 2:23, 26; 8:16 it describes a task or occupation that is onerous in nature or dissatisfying in result.¹¹⁰ Especially close to the concerns of this verse are 2:23 and 8:16, which associate such occupation (ענין) with restless sleep or sleeplessness. A similar sense fits especially well in the present context. In other words, Qohelet likens the piling

¹⁰⁶ GKC §119n; cf. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 202 n. 9. Fox is adamant, however, that dreams are said to lead to preoccupation, otherwise the causality is the wrong way around in the second clause. But again, if כ indicates accompaniment then the notion of causality is only inferred from context rather than syntactically required. Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 231.

¹⁰⁷ Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult*, 184–185; Lauha, *Kohelet*, 99; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 116; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 152.

¹⁰⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 199–200.

¹⁰⁹ Fidler, ‘Qoheleth in “The House of God”’, 14–15.

¹¹⁰ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 314.

up of sacrifices and words before God with onerous labour. Both lead to that which is undesired and fruitless: dreams (the restless sleep of an overactive mind) and the voice of a fool (which the 'wise' person knows is not only ineffective, but possibly harmful).

The analogy employed by Qohelet here is not a metaphor; instead, it is a comparison of two areas of his research. His advice regarding the cult is akin to his advice regarding work in the physical world: in both realms, in his observation and subsequent reflection, effort brings little result and even delivers negative results, especially when pursued in excess.¹¹¹ Qohelet thus displays to the reader that the futility he finds 'under the sun' is not only limited to secular activities but also includes religious ones.

5:3–4[4–5]

When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it. For there is no delight in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you do not vow than that you vow and do not pay.

The second subunit of Qohelet's instructions for cultic conduct turns to the matter of vows. Virtually all commentators make mention of the extremely close relationship between these verses and Deut 23:22–23[21–22]. Yet the significance of this parallel is interpreted diversely. On the one hand, interpreters have claimed this near citation points to Qohelet's orthodoxy and knowledge of the Torah,¹¹² with the differences being considered minor or stylistic.¹¹³ Even Longman argues that Qohelet's views here are 'virtually the

¹¹¹ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 314.

¹¹² Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 206; Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', 140.

¹¹³ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 95; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 200.

same as the rest of the canon.¹¹⁴ On the other hand, the differences have been emphasised, with Qohelet remaining a sceptic, who endorses the *status quo* because ‘nur ein Dummkopf die von alters her eingeführten religiösen Formen sprengen kann.’¹¹⁵ In order to evaluate these claims we will compare these verses in full.

| Deut 23:22–23[21–22] | Eccl 5:3–4[4–5] |
|---|--|
| <p>כִּי־תִדְרַךְ נֹדֶר לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא תֵאָחֵר לְשַׁלְּמוֹ כִּי־דָרַשׁ יִדְרֹשְׁנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מֵעַמֶּךָ וְהָיָה בְּךָ חַטָּא וְכִי תִחְדַּל לְנֹדֶר לֹא־יִהְיֶה בְּךָ חַטָּא</p> | <p>כַּאֲשֶׁר תִּדְרַךְ לֵאלֹהִים אֶל־תֵּאָחֵר לְשַׁלְּמוֹ כּ אֵין חֲפִיץ בְּכַסִּילִים אֶת אֲשֶׁר־תִּדְרַךְ שָׁלֹם טוֹב אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִדְרַךְ מִשְׁתַּדּוֹר וְלֹא תִשְׁלֹם</p> |
| <p>When you make a vow to Yahweh your God, you shall not delay in paying it, for Yahweh your God will surely require it from you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin.</p> | <p>When you make a vow to God, do not delay in paying it, for there is no delight in fools. Pay what you have vowed. It better that you do not vow, than that you vow and do not pay.</p> |

Both passages concern the payment of vows (cf. Prov 20:25; Sir 18:22), and use nearly identical expressions (כִּי/כַאֲשֶׁר תִּדְרַךְ נֹדֶר ... לֹא/אֶל־תֵּאָחֵר לְשַׁלְּמוֹ) and logical structure (circumstantial clause, prohibition, motivation, recapitulation). Many of the differences can be explained as stylistic: the LBH

¹¹⁴ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 153.

¹¹⁵ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 99.

preference for **כֹּאשֶׁר**, the legal preference for volitive *yiqtol* over jussive, and Qohelet's preference for the impersonal appellation **אֱלֹהִים**.¹¹⁶

Two further differences between these two texts point to a more substantial divergence in perspective. First, the motivation clauses betray different conceptual frameworks. Deuteronomy explains that a vow is binding; even though it was voluntary, Yahweh indeed requires (**דָּרַשׁ**) its payment.¹¹⁷ Further, non-payment incurs the worshipper guilt (**חַטָּא**) before God (cf. Deut 15:9; 24:15), which is to be understood as a breach of the covenant, epitomised by the golden calf incident (Deut 9:16–21). By contrast, Qohelet's concern is self-interest (4:17b[5:1b]; 5:5b[6b])¹¹⁸ and the avoidance of foolish behaviour (5:3[4]).¹¹⁹ The shift in terminology from sin to folly is significant. More than just a recasting of Deuteronomy in wisdom language,¹²⁰ this is a shift from viewing an act as fundamentally against God to harmful to oneself.¹²¹ Diethelm Michel explains this as a replacement of the theological motivation with an

¹¹⁶ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 200; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 153. On the significance of Qohelet's use of **הָאֱלֹהִים**, see the comments above on p. 323.

¹¹⁷ The implication of requiring payment, is punishment for non-payment; cf. **דָּרַשׁ** in Deut 18:19.

¹¹⁸ Weeks, 'Fear God', 102.

¹¹⁹ Some read the expression **אֵין חַפֵּץ בְּכִסְיָיִם** as a circumlocution to avoid mention of divine emotion. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 116–117; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 200; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 232. However, such reticence is absent from v. 5[6]. In view of Qohelet's preference for nominal constructions negated with **אֵין**, it is likely that this impersonal construction has no particular significance. God has already been mentioned in the verse, and is inferred from context (cf. **לִיהוָה חַפֵּץ** in 1 Sam 15:22). Schoors, *Pleasing Words Part I*, 151; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 153.

¹²⁰ As argued by Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 206.

¹²¹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 50; Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 33.

anthropological one.¹²²

Neither text makes mention of what positive outcome can be expected from keeping a vow; instead, the focus is upon the consequences of broken vows. The concern of Deuteronomy is with being faithful to what one has pledged to his or her covenant God (cf. Deut 23:24[23]) and, in the context of the book, is with experiencing the full blessing of God in the land (cf. 23:21[20]; 24:4). Qohelet, on the other hand, wishes to avoid the unnecessary danger of divine displeasure:

While it may be impossible, according to Qoheleth, to discover how to win God's favour (certainly Qoheleth has observed that wisdom does not secure it), it would be foolish indeed to enrage God by making promises and failing to fulfil them.¹²³

Secondly, the conclusion of each text has a different emphasis. The nearly identical formulation of Deut 23:23a[22a] to 23:22aα[21aα], presents the two options in a similar light: one may vow (and keep the vow) or not vow. As vows are voluntary, there is no guilt incurred by not making them.¹²⁴ Qohelet, on the other hand, recapitulates with a comparative saying (5:4[5]) that states it is better to avoid vows altogether.

Qohelet is not an ancient secularist, nor does he approach the Greek apathy towards God. The topics Qohelet treats show that he is Jewish, but the subtle differences of his words to the Torah show that underlying his view of the cult is pragmatism rather than covenant. This will become more evident as his

¹²² Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 257; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 390.

¹²³ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 162.

¹²⁴ Lauha has overstated the differences between these verses by claiming that refraining from vows is the exception in Deuteronomy. The parallel structure of Deut 23:22–23[21–22] verse puts both options in an equal light. Lauha, *Kohelet*, 99–100.

words diverge even further in the next verse.

5:5[6]

Do not allow your mouth to bring guilt upon your body. Do not say before the messenger ‘it was a mistake’. Why should God become angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?

As with the transition from 4:17[5:1] to 5:1[2], we again have a movement from imperative to negated jussive. Lohfink argues that this verse introduces a new, although related, topic. In his chiasmic structure, this verse corresponds to 4:17[5:1] and the offerings made by fools. The declaration **שגגה היא** is understood to refer to the offering for unintentional sins, which a number of Qohelet’s contemporaries were presumably misusing as a cover for deliberate sin.¹²⁵ In this view, **המלאך** refers to the priest who would accept an offering for unintentional sin.¹²⁶

Contrary to Lohfink and his followers, there are multiple reasons to consider this verse a continuation of Qohelet’s treatment of vows rather than addressing the misuse of the offering for unintentional sins.¹²⁷ First, the use of **שגגה** is not necessarily a technical term for the offering for unintentional sin (Num 15:27–31). This is most evident in Eccl 10:5, where it describes the (political) mistake of a ruler.

Secondly, **המלאך** would be an unlikely term for a priest. Though a priest is called **מלאך יהוה** in Mal 2:7, Schoors is right to point out that ‘messenger’ is

¹²⁵ Lohfink, ‘Warum ist der Tor unfähig’, 119–120; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 50–51; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 109–110; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 316; Schellenberg, *Kohelet*, 92.

¹²⁶ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 96; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 196.

¹²⁷ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 154–155.

a qualification rather than a title of the priest.¹²⁸ In Lohfink's interpretation, it is not clear how the priest receiving the שגגה offering is acting in the capacity of a messenger. The identity of המלאך is further complicated at a textual level. The LXX and Syriac have 'God', which would accord with Lohfink's view.¹²⁹ Fox prefers 'God' because it also appears in 5:1[2],¹³⁰ but he does not explain why a scribe would change this verse but not 5:1[2]. The reverse scribal emendation can be understood as interpretive: making an excuse before a temple messenger is tantamount to making it before God.¹³¹ Most naturally, then, המלאך describes a human messenger who has been sent to collect a vow.¹³²

Thirdly, the argument that an additional verse on vows would be unnecessarily repetitive¹³³ seems at odds with the evidence. In addition to the repetition that characterises the book (especially in and between the carpe diem passages),

¹²⁸ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 394. Seow also points to a fifth century BC Lachish inscription on an altar, which reads 'the incense (altar) of 'Iyyōš son of Maḥlī, the messeng[er]'. This evidence, however, is extremely tenuous and Schoors' criticism may apply here also. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 196.

¹²⁹ Vulg. translates this as 'the angel', which is taken up in various forms by Rofé, Fidler, and Tita. However, it would be unlikely for a heavenly messenger to feature in Qohelet's discourse given the distance he has observed between God and humanity. Tita, 'Einheit', 90; Alexander Rofé, 'The Wisdom Formula "Do Not Say ..." and the Angel in Qohelet 5.5', in *Reading from Right to Left: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of David J. A. Clines*. eds. J. Cheryl Exum and H. G. M. Williamson, JSOTSup 373 (London: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 369–370; Fidler, 'Qoheleth in "The House of God"', 16–17.

¹³⁰ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 232.

¹³¹ Robert B. Salters, 'Notes on the History of the Interpretation of Koh 5:5', *ZAW* 90.1 (1978), 97–100; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 196.

¹³² Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 117; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 154; Fredericks, 'Ecclesiastes', 130, 140; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 394.

¹³³ Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult*, 186; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 95.

Qohelet often develops an observation or instruction over several verses (e.g. 4:7–12). Moreover, an uninterrupted reading of 5:3–5[4–6] means that **אל-תתן את-פִּיךָ לחטִּיא** has a clear antecedent, namely making a vow but not keeping it.¹³⁴

Fourthly, it appears that the allusion to Deut 23 continues into this verse.

| Deut 23:24[23] | Eccl 5:5[6] |
|--|---|
| מוצא שפתיך תשמר ועשית כאשר נדרת ליהוה אלהיך נדבה אשר דברת בפִּיךָ | אל-תתן את-פִּיךָ לחטִּיא את-בשרך ואל-תאמר לפני המלאך כי שגגה היא למה יקצף האלהים על-קול וחבל את-מעשה ידיך |
| You shall keep what comes from your <i>lips</i> and you shall do just as you have freely vowed to Yahweh your God, which you have vowed with your <i>mouth</i> . | Do not let your <i>mouth</i> bring guilt upon your body. Do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your <i>voice</i> and destroy the work of your hands? |

Unlike the previous two verses (Deut 23:22–23[21–22]; cf. Eccl 5:3–4[4–5]), there are few structural similarities here. Nevertheless, lexical and thematic affinities suggest Deut 23 remains on view.¹³⁵ Both verses give instructions regarding the words of the worshipper, and both do so using metonymic bodily descriptions (**שפתיים**, **פה** in Deut 23:24[23]; **פה**, **בשר**, **קול**, **ידיים** in Eccl

¹³⁴ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 154.

¹³⁵ Ogden points to the presence of **חטא** and **פה** in this verse and Deut 23:22–23[21–22]. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 79.

5:5[6]).

Another reason that the relationship between these two verses is usually disregarded is there are significant differences in perspective. Qohelet employs a characteristic rhetorical question for an undesirable alternative (cf. 7:16, 17).¹³⁶ His emphasis falls upon the material cost of cultic carelessness. For Qohelet, a person's work (מעשה ידיך) is their only potential source of joy (cf. מעשה and/or יד in 2:11; 3:22; 9:7, 10), so avoiding its destruction is of utmost concern.¹³⁷ On the other hand, Deut 23:24[23] gives a positive exhortation to keep (שמר) one's vows. The repetition of 'just as you vowed ... , which you vowed' places the focus upon integrity and faithfulness in speech. Even though Qohelet does express a concern with guilt (חטא; cf. Deut 24:22–23[21–22]), the final two clauses of the verse show that Qohelet's advice concerns the punishment that results from sin, rather than a violation of the covenant per se.¹³⁸

In this verse, therefore, Qohelet's words continue to parallel the teaching of Deut 23:22–24[21–23] and address the matter of vows. But while they began almost identically (5:3–4[4–5]) they have continued to diverge in their motivation and concern (5:5[6]), such that the father has now exposed Qohelet's different values. Qohelet is not concerned with integrity of speech or covenant fidelity. Rather he warns that that cultic participation comes with the risk that the reader might lose everything he has worked for—and with that, the small portion (חלק) he has to enjoy.

¹³⁶ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 196.

¹³⁷ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 155; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 396.

¹³⁸ Gordis, *Kobeleth*, 238; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 232; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 392.

5:6[7]

Indeed, when dreams and vanities increase and words are many, fear God!

Ecclesiastes 5:6[7] concludes Qohelet's discourse on cultic participation with one final imperative (אַת־הָאֱלֹהִים יִרָא). Aside from this simple observation, there is little that is straightforward. The issues that remain unresolved in the interpretation of this verse include: the force of each כִּי, the syntactical relationship between חֲלָמוֹת, הַבְּלִים, and דְּבָרִים, and the import of 'fear God'.¹³⁹

There is clearly a close relationship between 5:6[7] and the proverb in 5:2[3], as seen in the common vocabulary (בָּרַב, דְּבָרִים, חֲלָלֹם) and parallel location within the structure of 4:17–5:6[5:1–7].¹⁴⁰ As we suggested for v. 2[3], the initial כִּי is likely asseverative, as it affirms, rather than explains or motivates, what has already been said. In addition, the conclusion of this verse with an imperative also makes it unlikely to be a motivation clause.

Ecclesiastes 5:6[7] also shares a number of concerns with the previous verse, which exhorts the addressee not to bring (divine) guilt upon himself and, via a rhetorical question, not to make God angry with his voice. There is a logical continuity here with the mention of many words, and the command to fear God. This is also indicative of an asseverative כִּי, which indicates affirmation.

The first clause has been subject to numerous emendations. McNeile and Podechard believe that an earlier edition of the text read בָּרַב חֲלָמוֹת [עֲנִין] דְּבָרִים, possibly as a marginal variant of v. 2[3], which was inserted by mistake, thus interrupting the flow from v. 5[6] to v. 6b[7b].¹⁴¹ Galling

¹³⁹ We have already studied the thematic context of this exhortation on pp. 319–326.

¹⁴⁰ Galling, 'Prediger', 101; Lauha, *Kohelet*, 101.

¹⁴¹ McNeile, *Ecclesiastes*, 69; Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste*, 341. cf. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 51.

suggests that the plural **הבליים** is unusual and was introduced by R1 (the author of 1:2; 12:8).¹⁴² Lauha transposes **דבריים** to after **ברב**,¹⁴³ and multiple English versions place ‘vanity’ (or equivalent) at the end.¹⁴⁴ Fox proposes removing the *waw* from **דבריים**, in order to make it the subject of the sentence and emending **ברב** to **כרב**.¹⁴⁵ Schoors rightly notes that, if the text has been corrupted, it was at an early stage, since the LXX translates it literally.¹⁴⁶

Despite its challenges, it remains possible to read the text as it stands. Gordis takes the three nouns as a list and the **ב** as concessive: ‘In spite of all the dreams, follies and idle chatter ...’¹⁴⁷ Yet is not certain both *waws* have the same function. Whitley takes the second *waw* as asseverative: ‘For in a multitude of dreams and vanities there are *indeed* many words’.¹⁴⁸ Somewhat differently, Seow takes the first *waw* as creating a hendiadys, and the second as a co-ordinating *waw*: ‘For vacuous dreams are in abundance, and there are words aplenty’.¹⁴⁹ Finally, Longman takes the first as a *waw* of apodosis, the second as creating a hendiadys, hence: ‘For when dreams multiply, so do meaningless words’.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴² Galling, ‘Prediger’, 101.

¹⁴³ Lauha, *Kobelet*, 96–97.

¹⁴⁴ KJV; NASB; ESV; NIV.

¹⁴⁵ Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 233.

¹⁴⁶ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 399.

¹⁴⁷ Gordis, *Kobelet*, 239–240.

¹⁴⁸ Whitley, *Kobelet*, 50.

¹⁴⁹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 197, 201.

¹⁵⁰ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 156. There are still less certain possibilities like an ‘adjunctive’ *waw* meaning ‘also’, which is how Bartholomew reads the first *waw*. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 202 n. 15.

It is difficult to evaluate these options on purely syntactical grounds.¹⁵¹ Longman's reading of **ברב** as an infinitive construct with a temporal **ב** helpfully supplies a verb.¹⁵² However, it is unclear what point Qohelet would be trying to make by associating the increase of words with the increase of dreams. Shields proposes that dreams are related to prophecy, and that Qohelet is criticising yet another institution.¹⁵³ Since Qohelet nowhere else takes aim at prophecy, this is unlikely. Schwienhorst-Schönberger says that dreams are to be understood as wrong conceptions of God, which result in wrong conduct like excessive speech.¹⁵⁴ Yet as we have already seen in v. 2[3], dreams have an association with fruitless and burdensome activity. For Qohelet, they are an apt metaphor for cultic participation.

Each of the three nouns ('dreams', 'vanities', 'words'), therefore, appears to describe something that Qohelet considers to be of little value or a pointless activity. This commends the list proposed by Gordis, or two parallel descriptions as understood by Seow. A parallel structure is entirely characteristic for Qohelet, given his frequent use of poetry and proverb. It also accounts for the presence of both **ברב** and **הרבה** as corresponding elements of parallel cola. Hence, we can translate the first half of the verse as a temporal clause: 'when dreams and vanities increase, and words are many'.¹⁵⁵

The final **כי** is typically understood as adversative; that is, instead of the vain

¹⁵¹ Although Gordis' translation uses a marginal translation of **ב** and is thus open to question. The example he cites in support (Ps 94:19) can be translated with the more normal sense of 'in the midst'. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 118.

¹⁵² Cf. **לרב** in Gen 6:1 and **ברב** in Hos 10:1; Ps 94:19; Prov 10:19. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 156.

¹⁵³ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 163.

¹⁵⁴ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 316.

¹⁵⁵ This is also the line division indicated by the Masoretic accents.

dreaming and excessive speaking of the fool, the audience is exhorted to fear God. Yet recognising the previous clause as temporal, this כִּי may also be understood as asseverative.¹⁵⁶ Alternatively, the final כִּי may be resumptive, with the temporal clause acting parenthetically.

This final verse, therefore, does not present an alternative form of worship to the chatter and activity of the fool, but says that in the midst of such activity, ‘indeed... fear God’. In light of the close relationship between 5:5[6] and 5:6[7], the fear that Qohelet exhorts is not respect for a master, or awe before a transcendent other; rather, it is one that arises from the prospect of losing of one’s hard earned goods (מַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו).

One of the longstanding problems in the interpretation of Ecclesiastes is how to understand Qohelet’s use of orthodox statements. Once again it can be explained as an ironic allusion. While Qohelet himself mentions the fear of God to express his concern with the material loss that might result from cultic missteps, the implied author has a higher purpose. He wishes his son to contemplate obedience and covenant fidelity as the solution to Qohelet’s short-sighted epistemology.

9.4 Summary and Conclusions

Ecclesiastes 4:17–5:6[5:1–7] belongs to a category of Qohelet’s teaching that we have designated ‘supplementary advice’, which concerns the minimisation of risk. Though, like Prov 1:7, this passage exhorts the fear of God, it is far from being the theological centre of Qohelet’s thought. Qohelet has already stated his best advice (2:24–26; 3:12–13, 3:22) and will state it again (5:17–19[18–20]; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:7–12:7). Instead, from the perspective of

¹⁵⁶ For an asseverative כִּי that introduces an imperative, cf. Deut 4:32; 1 Sam 12:24; 2 Kgs 9:25; Jer 2:10; 7:12; 9:19; Job 8:8.

Qohelet's self-reliant wisdom, God is reduced to a possible obstacle to the enjoyment of one's labour.

Two of the father's rhetorical strategies are most prominent in this section of Qohelet's discourse. First, Qohelet's characterisation is again on view as he is presented as something of an anti-Solomon. In contrast to Solomon, who built the temple, offered prolific sacrifices, and dedicated it as place to encounter God, Qohelet sees the temple and its cult as a potential hazard. Whereas the Solomonic persona increased Qohelet's ethos in 1:12–2:26 in order to emphasise the well-resourced nature of his search, here his anti-Solomonic tendencies reveal the severe limits of his style of wisdom.

Secondly, the implied author's strategy of ironic allusion appears again in full force. Qohelet's words contain strong lexical links to 1 Sam 15:22 and Deut 23:22–24[21–23]. Yet in contrast to these passages, Qohelet's concern with cultic conduct are anthropocentric rather than covenantal. In other words, he is worried about outcomes rather than obedience.

The greatest irony in Eccl 4:17–5:6[5:1–7] is that Qohelet exhorts cultic reservation with the command 'fear God'—the exact expression that encapsulates the father's conception of covenantal faith. Whereas Qohelet exhorts a fear of God which is largely a 'fear of loss' that manifests itself as keeping oneself from anything more than the minimum cultic participation, the father's command to fear God is a call to covenant faith that enjoins a keeping of the divine commandments (12:13). As the son considers the failure of Qohelet's wisdom and the hazardous relationship with God it offers, he is prompted to consider the true meaning of 1 Sam 15:22 and Deut 23:22–24[21–23], and the blessing that is offered by covenantal obedience (cf. Deut 23:21[20]).

Unlike Eccl 7:23–29 and 11:7–12:7, Qohelet does not appear to make any

honest admissions about the failure of his wisdom in this passage. The most we can say is that—from the perspective of Qohelet’s wisdom—‘God is a problem’. It is unsurprising that for an epistemological system which allows little place for revelation or religious traditions, Qohelet’s wisdom reveals the least insight in regards to relating with God.

As we have now analysed three key texts from Qohelet’s discourse, demonstrated how they ultimately serve the father’s pedagogical goals, and elucidated his pedagogy, we are now in a position to reassess the ‘problems’ we initially identified in the interpretation of Ecclesiastes and consider the implications of our reading for wisdom literature more broadly.

CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

10.1 Summary

In this thesis we have defended and demonstrated a genre-appropriate method of reading Ecclesiastes, with a specific aim of describing its normative theological contribution and didactic strategies. We are now in a position to summarise our arguments and conclusions.

Our thesis is that the book of Ecclesiastes presents itself as parental instruction and that the recognition of this discourse setting brings formal and conceptual coherence, allowing us to determine its message and didactic strategies. This thesis has been argued in two stages: deductively with regards to the book of Proverbs and inductively as it is applied to the book of Ecclesiastes.

A parental discourse setting for the book of Proverbs commends itself from both the external and internal evidence (chapter 2). First, a paucity of support for the existence of a royal or scribal school in ancient Israel casts doubt upon the view that Proverbs is to be understood as a school book. By contrast, there is no difficulty in demonstrating the centrality of the home as a place of instruction (Exod 12:26–27; 13:8, 14–15; Deut 6:7–9; 32:7; Josh 4:6–7, 21–22). Secondly, Proverbs itself is replete with familial language, which is used for its narrators, narratees, and locus of instruction. By contrast the school is never mentioned. While Proverb's instructional material includes courtly conduct, this is only one topic among many and is given no special prominence. Its broad goals of prosperity and divine favour are those which every father could teach his son, yet would be insufficient for a professional education.

The use of the characteristic wisdom address 'my son' (בְּנִי) in Eccl 12:12 similarly invites a reading as parental discourse. A thorough testing of this

requires an interpretive method that treats the text as a communicative act with literary form—rhetorical criticism (chapter 3). When rigorously and methodologically applied to the book of Ecclesiastes, this reading results in several key discoveries. The present form of the book, including the epilogue, is justifiably read as a unit (chapter 4). The discourse setting is confirmed as parental instruction (chapter 5), with the implied author being a father (the epilogist), who is instructing his son. Contrary to most interpretations, this means that the theological contribution of the book is directly understood from the father rather than Qohelet. As a fictional character, Qohelet is the rhetorical tool of the implied author. The explicit goals of the father’s teaching (chapter 6) are to deter his son from self-reliant wisdom and instead point him towards the fear of God, which he understands as covenantal obedience. The way that Qohelet’s words achieve these goals is seen in the analysis of three texts: 7:23–29; 11:7–12:7; 4:17–5:6[5:1–7] (chapters 7–9), which will be discussed below.

10.2 Findings

10.2.1 Normative Theological Contribution

Our research indicates that the message of Ecclesiastes stands in relative conformity to that of Proverbs. The father’s ultimate aim in instructing his son, as indicated by his rhetorical goals, is covenantal obedience which he expresses as ‘fear God and keep his commands’ (12:13). Like the fatherly voice of Proverbs, the implied author of Ecclesiastes regards covenant commitment to be the foundation of all wise living. This is in contrast to the self-reliance represented by Qohelet—what Proverbs calls a ‘lean on your own understanding’ approach to wisdom (Prov 3:5).

Despite this basic agreement between these two books, they are not identical

in their message. First, where Ecclesiastes expressly links the fear of God with the obedience of divine commands, in Proverbs this is only suggested by allusions (e.g. Prov 3:3; 7:3). While Proverbs demonstrates that the fear of Yahweh goes beyond the narrow stipulations of the law into all spheres of life, Ecclesiastes teaches that covenant stipulations cannot be left behind.

Secondly, the implied author of Ecclesiastes is more emphatic about divine judgment, which he may even envisage as post-mortem and eschatological. In Proverbs, the focus is upon the immediate manifestation of divine justice in the earthly realm. Yet when Qohelet takes this view to the extreme, its limitations are magnified. The father's response to Qohelet is the existence of a judgment beyond the scope of the visible (12:14).¹

As we shall see, more of the implied author's theological commitments may be inferred from his shaping of Qohelet's words. Nevertheless, his principal kerygmatic aim is a modest one.

10.2.3 Didactic Strategies

The book of Ecclesiastes, uniquely dominated by the voice of a character, is more rhetorical than theological. Thus the most significant contribution of Ecclesiastes is to be found in its didactic strategies.

i. Quotation of a Fictional Character

The strategy of using a character is common to Proverbs 1–9 and Job; however, the implied author of Ecclesiastes employs this in a different form. Unlike Lady Wisdom or Lady Folly, Qohelet's characterisation is not wholly positive or

¹ This has broad implications for the dating of the book, providing some *possible* confirmation that Ecclesiastes is among the latest books of the Hebrew Bible. The interest in such eschatology likely intensified during the ongoing disillusionment of the Jews in the post-exilic era.

negative. Rather, like Job's friends, Qohelet is an ambiguous character, whose words cannot be immediately dismissed as a foil.

Within the body of the book, the characterisation of Qohelet is developed positively by his status, resources, and experience, and negatively through the repetition of key phrases, expressions, and vocabulary. As to his status, Qohelet is (initially) a Solomonic royal figure. Relatedly, he possesses the means and the skill to pursue whatever endeavours he desires. As a wise man he is rich in experience that he draws upon as the substance of his reflections. Qohelet is thus presented as a sincere figure, whose words have authority and deserve a hearing.

In contrast to this, however, is the exaggerated nature of Qohelet's discourse. First, his overall message is given a succinct summary as the negative 'vanity of vanities, everything is vanity!' (1:2; 12:8). That this is not an unfair representation of his teaching can be seen in the fact that Qohelet himself uses the term thirty times. Secondly, Qohelet's stated aim of finding *יתרון* (1:3; 3:9; 5:15[16]; cf. 2:11) or *יותר* (6:8, 11) is something of a contrast with the more balanced aims of Proverbs: prosperity and divine favour. The use of economic language (*חשבון*, *חסרון*, *חלק*, *יתרון*) may also be suggestive of viewing life as a business transaction.² Thirdly, Qohelet's methodology contrasts even more strikingly with that of Proverbs. Rather than proceeding from the fear of the Lord (Prov 1:7), Qohelet's search is conducted by his heart. His frequent use of 'I said in my heart' echoes the self-reliance of the fool, prone to misguidance (Deut 7:17; 8:17; 9:4). Furthermore, Qohelet employs an unparalleled density of first person verbs and pronouns, which only exacerbates his anthropocentric and self-reliant portrayal.

² Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 34–36, 44.

Our three key texts also develop the negative portrayal of Qohelet. First, Qohelet's inability to escape Lady Folly (7:26a) and inability to find a wife like that of Prov 31:10–31 (7:28) number him among fools and sinners (7:26b, 29). Secondly, Qohelet's carpe diem advice places him in the unfavourable company of the unrepentant Jerusalemites of Isa 22:13 and the pagan barmaid Siduri in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Thirdly, Qohelet's attitude towards the cult and his view of divine inaccessibility presents him as something of an anti-Solomon. Despite the positive aspects of Qohelet's portrayal noted above, in the final assessment Qohelet is a misguided figure.

Though Qohelet's words dominate the book, we are reminded that he is a character by the markers of direct discourse in 1:2; 7:27; 12:8. In case the above characterisation of Qohelet has been missed on the reader, the father gives an evaluation of Qohelet in the epilogue (12:9–14). He speaks of him as wise (12:9), and affirms his words as honest and (to some extent) true (12:10b). But the father also draws attention to the tiresome (עֹבֵד לִמְדָּה...וְחָקֵר תִּקֵּן) (עֹבֵד לִמְדָּה...וְחָקֵר תִּקֵּן) yet ineffective labours of Qohelet (בִּקְשׁ קְהֵלֶת לִמְצָא) (12:9) yet ineffective labours of Qohelet (בִּקְשׁ קְהֵלֶת לִמְצָא) (12:10a; cf. 7:23–29), which ultimately undermine his worldview and the teaching of similarly self-reliant wise men (סִפְרִים הַרְבֵּה אֵין קִץ וְלֹהֵג הַרְבֵּה) (סִפְרִים הַרְבֵּה אֵין קִץ וְלֹהֵג הַרְבֵּה) (12:12).

ii. Honest Admission of Failure

As already noted, Qohelet himself teaches wisdom to the son. This is most evidently true in his honest admission of failure. Despite the father investing Qohelet with royal resources, unparalleled experiences, and great intellect, Qohelet is unable to find the profit (יִתְרוֹן) he was seeking and so describes his negative result (הֶבֶל). In Eccl 7:23–29 Qohelet expounds his findings, namely that an effective knowledge of the world has not been forthcoming. However, this does not mean that his searching has been entirely unproductive. Rather

he has made ‘unsought discoveries’ in regards to the failure of his epistemology, which he recognises is at least in part due to the depravity of human nature.³ Similarly, in 11:7–12:7 Qohelet shares his very best advice with the reader, yet freely acknowledging that it is limited by death and complicated by divine judgment.

The reader is, therefore, to take note of what Qohelet fails to find and what he discovers. He is not merely a foil for the teaching of the implied author, since he has a reliable firsthand knowledge of the limitations and trajectory of self-reliant knowledge. The authority of these findings is supported by the positive aspects of his ethos and the thoroughness with which he applies his wisdom.

iii. Unintentional Allusions

In addition to Qohelet’s ‘unsought discoveries’, the father also steers his son away from Qohelet’s self-reliant wisdom and towards covenantal obedience through the use of Qohelet’s unintentional allusions. That these allusions are known to the implied author and reader, but not to Qohelet is a dramatic irony. This sophisticated strategy has at least two educative purposes. First, it further highlights the trajectory of Qohelet’s self-reliant wisdom. Qohelet’s discovery of human nature—including his own—ominously echoes the evaluation of humanity prior to the judgment of the flood (7:29 cf. Gen 6:5). But far more obviously than this, the allusion to Num 15:39 shows that Qohelet’s advice is even more imperilled by divine judgment than he realises.

Secondly, Qohelet’s unwitting allusions contrast his epistemology with that of normative law and wisdom. This simultaneously condemns Qohelet’s wisdom and commends that of the law. In 7:23, Qohelet’s claim that true wisdom is inaccessible to him is a direct repudiation of the nearness of the law stated in

³ Fox and Porten, ‘Unsought Discoveries’, 26–38.

Deut 30:11. Qohelet's anthropocentric motivations are exposed by allusion of his words to 1 Sam 15:22 in Eccl 4:17[5:1], and to Deut 23:22–24[21–23] in Eccl 5:3–5[4–6]. In contrast to Qohelet's concern for material loss (4:17b[5:1b]; 5:5[6]), these cited texts affirm the value that God places upon obedience and covenant fidelity.

The irony of Qohelet's discourse reaches its greatest heights in his exhortations to 'fear God' (5:6[7]) and 'remember your creator' (12:1). Though in context Qohelet uses these expressions to command terror before a distant God and the remembrance of death, the expressions themselves have a superficial orthodoxy and align with the father's rhetorical goals. They are thus to be recognised as the father's 'ironic wink' to his son.⁴

10.2.4 Solutions

The validity of this reading is not only to be seen in the positive results it yields, but also how it resolves longstanding problems in the book's interpretation. First, it confirms that Qohelet's message is *mostly* negative. Nevertheless, we have seen how Qohelet's words also have a positive contribution in their honest assessment of the results and limitations of self-reliant wisdom.

Secondly, the much debated relationship between the epilogist and Qohelet has been clarified as that of implied author and character. The common authorship accounts for the linguistic concordance between these texts, yet differences in perspective between the implied author and his character account for the different emphases. Our view also permits Qohelet to have a unique voice, while understanding the normative role of the book as a whole within

⁴ Contrary to Crenshaw who maintains that Qohelet does the winking. Crenshaw, *Ironic Wink*, 7.

the canon.

Thirdly, we have found an explanation for the tension between Qohelet's departure from orthodoxy and his use of orthodox expressions as part of the father's strategy of dramatic irony through allusions. This explains Qohelet's uncomfortable use of 'remember your creator' (12:1) and 'fear of God' (5:6[7]) as well as the contradiction of 11:9b with Num 15:39. Thus it is unnecessary to resort to emendation, harmonisation, or the embrace of ambiguity in order to explain the text. On the contrary, the father's ironic placement of these expressions serves his goal of pointing his son to covenantal obedience.

10.3 Further Implications

There are also further implications for the study of wisdom literature more broadly. First, the recognition of the parental discourse setting for both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes brings Israel's wisdom literature into a closer relationship with the Mosaic covenant. The law governs Israel's formal religious, political, and civic life. The wisdom literature seeks to apply the principles of the covenant to the everyday experience of Israelites, and pass these learned lessons to the next generation. That such a literature exists should be of no surprise in light of Deuteronomy's emphasis on the teaching of children. In common with the law, it envisages a life defined by a covenant relationship with Yahweh and lived within the bounds of the commandments, but it gives more attention to the individual than the corporate sphere, and practical matters more than cultic or legal concerns.

Secondly and relatedly, the parental discourse setting of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes suggests that the intended audience of wisdom literature is broad. Unlike a manual for scribal or courtly preparation, wisdom for a young man entering adulthood is relevant to all people. Indeed, the teaching given by one's

parents should linger and remain with one throughout one's years (Prov 1:8; 3:1, 18; 4:4–6, 13; 6:20) and in turn be taught to one's children (Prov 13:24; 22:6; 23:13; 29:15). Likewise, the concern of Ecclesiastes is not with deterring prospective sages from joining a misguided movement (12:12);⁵ rather, it seeks to warn against an epistemological self-reliance and urges obedience to the commands of God as the way to true blessing. Once again, this draws Ecclesiastes into closer relationship with the theology of Deuteronomy.

Thirdly, our study sheds further light upon the relationship of Proverbs to Ecclesiastes. While both affirm the fear of the God, the difference in strategy is palpable. The book of Proverbs lays the fear of Yahweh as its foundation (1:7). By contrast, Qohelet's wisdom has his own experience and intellect as its foundation. It is only through the failure of his self-reliance that the need for the fear of God becomes apparent, and eventually explicit (12:13). The respective approaches of these texts can be described as *a priori* versus *a posteriori* and confirms the truism that Ecclesiastes is more advanced than Proverbs.

10.4 Possibilities for Further Research

Three areas present themselves for further research. The first is regards to the most significant omission of this study: the historical setting of Ecclesiastes. Rather than being dictated by a tendentious historical or social reconstruction our attention has turned to a careful reading of the text and considered the purpose and method of the implied author's address. Our point of clarity is that Ecclesiastes presents itself as parental discourse and that the text demands to be heard as such in order understand its message. As a predominantly literary method, however, reading Ecclesiastes as parental discourse has not provided

⁵ Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 238–239.

answers to the questions of historical setting. No attempt has been made bridge the gap between the implied author and empirical author. Thus we can neither confirm nor deny that Ecclesiastes was studied in a scribal school—if such an institution even existed at that time. Similarly, we have remained silent on whether any historical exigencies gave rise to the composition of Ecclesiastes. Yet with our careful reading of the book as a starting point, one may cautiously explore these issues.

The second area for further research is the place of parental instruction in ancient Israel. The multitude of studies on Israel's wisdom school are demonstrably misguided, as there is scant evidence that this institution existed, at least in the form envisaged. The family was a far more important educational institution, the existence of which is not in doubt. Indeed, we have already noted that parents were given the responsibility of reminding their children of Israel's legal and historical traditions, and it can hardly be doubted that parents also taught their children about practical matters of food, relationships, work, and speech. Biblical wisdom literature reflects the intersection of these two responsibilities, showing that the two cannot be separated. Though Proverbs and Ecclesiastes reflect literary crafting, their imitation of parental discourse may well be indicative of what did take place in homes or is intended as a model.

The third area for further research is the relationship between the book of Job and the parental instruction of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. It is typically considered a member of the wisdom corpus, chiefly due to its use of wisdom language and overlapping theological concerns with the relationship between the fear of God and earthly outcomes. Additionally, we have noted that Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job share a common didactic strategy of employing characters to give voice to a particular mode of wisdom (or folly). Yet in

contrast to Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the book of Job has a narrative framework rather than a discourse setting of parental instruction. While we can account for this diversity among the biblical wisdom books by understanding genre in terms of ‘family resemblance’,⁶ such diversity nevertheless cautions us against conflating wisdom and parental instruction, even if there remains a close relationship between the two.

⁶ This is the contemporary understanding of genre as argued in Sneed’s recent volume. See especially, Katharine J. Dell, ‘Deciding the Boundaries of Wisdom: Applying the Concept of Family Resemblance’, in *Was There a Wisdom Tradition?: New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom Studies*. ed. Mark R. Sneed, AIL (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 145–160; Stuart Weeks, ‘Wisdom, Form and Genre’, in *Was There a Wisdom Tradition?: New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom Studies*. ed. Mark R. Sneed, AIL (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 161–177.

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