

**A Study Commentary
on
Ecclesiastes**

Richard P. Belcher, Jr



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Preface

Over the last several years there has been a lot of interest in the Book of Ecclesiastes, not only academically in terms of commentaries, but also practically in terms of its message for the church. This is particularly challenging for a book like Ecclesiastes. The meaning of a text like Ecclesiastes for the church depends so much on the original meaning of the text; and as will become apparent in the Introduction to this commentary, there are a variety of different approaches to the book and its meaning. Thus the usefulness of an emphasis on modern meaning for a work is dependent on how one understands the original meaning. The distinctive approach of this commentary is that it argues for Solomonic authorship combined with a negative, ‘under the sun’ approach to the message of the book. These two ideas are related to each other because the book reflects the struggles of Solomon during the period of his life when his heart was turned away from the Lord (1 Kings 11:9). The purpose of the book is to warn against speculative wisdom, which is a wisdom that no longer operates from the right foundation of the fear of the Lord. The struggles of Solomon are laid out as a warning to all that even someone as wise

as Solomon can operate on the wrong basis. Of course, the answer to the struggle comes at the end of the book. However, if most of the book is written from an ‘under the sun’ perspective, it becomes imperative for the preacher or teacher of the book to point people to the right perspective along the way. So, for major sections of the commentary there are Homiletical Implications that seek to move from the ‘under the sun’ view to an ‘above the sun’ perspective.

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Charlotte, North Carolina

Introduction

Ecclésiastes is one of the most difficult books of the Bible. It has been called ‘a baffling book’, ‘alien among the other books of the Old Testament’, ‘the most problematic of the whole Hebrew Bible’, and ‘an embarrassment to the Old Testament’.¹ It has also provided solace for both pietists and sceptics.² Why are there so many different responses to the same book? One of the challenges in understanding the message of Ecclesiastes is to understand the relationship between the positive statements and the negative statements. How are the negative statements to be understood? Ecclesiastes 2:14–16 states that there is virtually no difference between the wise and the fool, Ecclesiastes 3:19–22 denies any advantage of humans over animals, and Ecclesiastes 9:1–3 denies any difference between the righteous and the wicked. However, there are also positive statements in Ecclesiastes, especially the passages known as the calls to enjoyment (2:24–26; 3:22; 5:18–20; 8:15; and 9:7–10). Any serious approach to understanding this book must address how these types of passages fit together.

The authorship of Ecclesiastes

Before examining the various approaches to Ecclesiastes and the keys for understanding its message, certain introductory questions must be covered. Although there is very little consensus on the major introductory questions related to Ecclesiastes, there is almost a consensus that Solomon is not the author of the book. Only a small number of modern scholars argue that Solomon wrote the book (Gleason Archer, Duane Garrett, and Walter Kaiser).³ Many within the Reformed and evangelical camps have denied Solomonic authorship (F. Delitzsch, E. W. Hengstenberg, H. C. Leupold, E. J. Young, R. K. Harrison, Derek Kidner, Graham Ogden, Tremper Longman, III, and Ian Provan).⁴

The major argument for Solomonic authorship is the description of the author in the book as ‘the son of David, king in Jerusalem’ (1:1) and ‘I ... have been king over Israel in Jerusalem’ (1:12).⁵ Kaiser notes that Solomon was the only immediate son of David who was king over Israel, reigning in Jerusalem.⁶ In fact, the phrase ‘son of David’ only refers to a biological son of David whenever it is used in the OT.⁷ The way the author describes his search in chapter 2 sets forth opportunities and activities available to a king like Solomon: unrivalled wisdom (1:16), wealth in abundance (2:8), tremendous retinue of servants (2:7), opportunities for carnal pleasure (2:3), and extensive building activities (2:4–6).⁸

Although the text seems to point in the direction of Solomonic authorship, most have challenged this view for a variety of reasons, including the use of the perfect aspect of the verb in 1:12, the unusual statement in 1:16, and statements later in the book that do not seem to come from someone who is a king. The use of the perfect aspect of the verb ‘to be’ in 1:12 has been termed unusual.⁹ It seems to refer to a period in the past when Qohelet (translated ‘the Preacher’ by many translations) was king, with the implication

that he is now no longer king (which would be translated 'I was king').¹⁰ This verb has been understood as a textual signal that the author is not Solomon but someone who is adopting a literary convention as if he was Solomon.¹¹ The statement in 1:16 reads, 'I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me'. The problem with this statement is that there were very few before Solomon who reigned in Jerusalem to whom he could compare his surpassing wisdom. Thus the statement seems rather hollow. It is understood to be a literary device, which is meant to provide a loose association with Solomon, but not a strict identification.¹² Finally, most do not believe that the author continues to speak as a king throughout the whole book. In fact, statements are made which seem to distance the author from Solomon as king. For example, in Ecclesiastes 4:1–3 the author laments all the oppression in the world and that there is no one to comfort the oppressed. Certainly, a powerful king like Solomon could have done something to help the oppressed. Also, Ecclesiastes 5:8–9 protests against the king and policies connected with officials; and Ecclesiastes 10:20 assumes that the king is a suspicious bully. These statements seem to come from someone who is not a king. They could be made about Solomon but not by Solomon.¹³ Thus the author presents himself as Solomon at the beginning of the book for the sake of the argument, but it is also clear that the author is not Solomon himself.

The foregoing reasons to reject Solomonic authorship have not gone uncontested, many times by those who themselves do not favour Solomonic authorship. R. N. Whybray calls the use of the perfect aspect of the verb in 1:12 an imaginary problem. The perfect aspect can denote an action or state that began in the past and continues into the present (which would be translated 'I have been king').¹⁴ Also, in the self-introduction formulae of the

West Semitic royal inscriptions, the perfect aspect is used to refer to the present reign of the king.¹⁵ Thus 1:12 could easily have been spoken by Solomon. The statement in 1:16 may be a way to express unsurpassed wisdom. The phrase ‘all who were before’ is used to refer to someone who excels in something (1 Kings 14:9; 16:25, 30). In fact, it is used of Jeroboam in a negative way in 1 Kings 14:9, where it states, ‘you have done evil above all who were before you’. There were not very many kings before Jeroboam with whom to compare him, so the emphasis may be on his unsurpassed wickedness in setting up the false system of worship in the northern kingdom when the kingdom divided.¹⁶ The emphasis in Ecclesiastes 1:16, 2:7, and 2:9 is on the unsurpassed wisdom and wealth of Solomon. This fits the picture of Solomon in 1 Kings 3:12, where it states something similar to Ecclesiastes 1:16: ‘none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you’.¹⁷

An argument can be made that statements later in the book could have been spoken by a king, and thus they could have been spoken by Solomon.¹⁸ A king could certainly be aware of mismanagement and oppression within his kingdom. David was aware of the murderous actions of Joab (2 Samuel 3).¹⁹ A king could also critically reflect on his own role as king and appropriate behaviour in his presence.²⁰ The fact that no statement is made in 4:1–3 to rectify the situation of oppression could be because the focus is on observing what is taking place in the kingdom in order to draw conclusions concerning the futility of life. If the author himself is struggling with the futility of life, what difference would oppression make anyway? Plus, Solomon did mistreat his subjects as he grew older (1 Kings 12:14).²¹ The fact that attention is given to appropriate behaviour in the presence of a king (7:7; 8:2–9; 9:17; 10:4–7, 16–17, 20) fits the pre-exilic situation better than the post-

exilic situation. During the exile few Jewish people had any contact with the distant kings of the Babylonian and Persian empires.²²

Other reasons for the rejection of Solomonic authorship include the historical setting, the nature of the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes, and the use of the term ‘Qohelet’.

1. The historical setting

Concerning the historical setting, Delitzsch argues that the book of Ecclesiastes reflects a time when things were not going well for Israel, which explains the sombre mood of the book. He places the book in the Persian period of the fifth century BC.²³ C. L. Seow also argues for a Persian setting on the basis of economic realities reflected in the book. He argues that there is evidence in Ecclesiastes of a move away from the agrarian culture of pre-exilic Judah to a more democratic use of money and commerce. There were opportunities for financial success, but also for more risk, which may explain the problem of the uncertainty of inheritance in Ecclesiastes.²⁴ Others argue that Qohelet was a Palestinian Jew of the third century BC who was heavily influenced by Greek thought. This would explain the more personal tone of the book and the fact that the thinking is more abstract than other wisdom literature in Scripture.²⁵ During this time Palestine was ruled from Egypt by the Ptolemaic dynasty, an oppressive and well-organized despotism reflected in the statement about the king in Ecclesiastes 10:20. Also, Ecclesiastes 5:8, which mentions high officials in a province, could fit this period.²⁶ Some argue that the social conditions of the Greek period are reflected in the book, such as the preoccupation with wealth, the isolation of the individual due to the breakdown of the family unit, and the lack of an obligation to serve others.²⁷ Michael Fox argues that the mention of a race in Ecclesiastes 9:11 points to

a Hellenistic setting where footraces, which originated in Greek competitions, were prominent in public athletics.²⁸

None of the arguments relating Ecclesiastes to a certain historical time period are entirely conclusive. The sombre tone of the book may have more to do with the outlook of the author than the particular period in which he lived.²⁹ Delitzsch argues that the book reflects a period when things were not going well, but Crenshaw argues that the book reflects a period when the upper echelons of Jewish society were experiencing prosperity.³⁰ Ecclesiastes 5:8 and 10:20 are general enough to indicate any period in Israel's history. Although the word *medīnāh* in Ecclesiastes 5:8 is commonly used for the Persian provinces, it is also used earlier to refer to the districts of Israel in the time of Ahab (1 Kings 20:14–19). The statement in Ecclesiastes 9:11, 'the race is not to the swift', need not have originated in a competitive Greek setting. It can be understood as a general proverbial expression not tied to any time period (as is generally true for the other expressions in the verse).³¹ Furthermore, the terms that Seow uses to try to establish a Persian economic setting are terms that are widespread throughout Scripture and are not limited to a Persian setting. He does recognize that silver (*keseḇ*) was used in earlier times as a medium of exchange. However, the fact that *ḥešbôn* is found in commercial documents of the Persian period does not support his argument because the word is not used in Ecclesiastes in an economic way (see Eccles. 7:25, 27, 29; 9:10).³² The parallels between Ecclesiastes 5:18–6:2 and Persian royal grants, with the uncertainty of the grants reflecting the uncertainty of a person enjoying certain benefits in life (Eccles. 6:2), lose their force without a Persian setting.³³ None of the arguments for a Persian or Greek setting are conclusive. Thus, there is no consensus on the setting of Ecclesiastes because

of the ambivalent nature of the arguments that attempt to prove literary or cultural dependence.³⁴

2. The Hebrew of Ecclesiastes

Many argue that Ecclesiastes must be late on the basis of the character of the Hebrew in the book. Delitzsch' statement has become quite famous: 'If the book of Koheleth were of old Solomonic origin, then there is no history of the Hebrew language'. He argues this on the basis of the use of rare words (*hapax legomena*) and words that are considered late, including Aramaisms (he lists over 90 such words). He also lists modern aspects of the Hebrew language, such as treating lamed-aleph verbs as lamed-he verbs, the use of the personal pronoun even though the person is contained in the verbal form, and the use of the demonstrative *zōh*.³⁵ A. Schoors argues that 24 linguistic features of Ecclesiastes give evidence that the language of Ecclesiastes fits best into the post-exilic period and that it shows traits of later Mishnaic Hebrew (MH).³⁶ Seow also argues that the language reflects the post-exilic period, but more specifically the Persian period. The high number of Aramaic expressions, including terms that appear in Official Aramaic but not in earlier inscriptions of Old Aramaic, points to a late date. Two widely recognized Persian loan words, *pardēs* ('garden' in Eccles. 2:5) and *pitgām* ('sentence' in Eccles. 8:11), plus a cluster of other economic terms occurring in fifth and fourth century documents, point to a Persian setting (no earlier than the second half of the fifth century).³⁷ Thus most argue that the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes does not fit the Hebrew of the pre-exilic period (usually designated Early Biblical Hebrew [EBH] or Standard Biblical Hebrew [SBH]) but is more characteristic of Hebrew after the exile (designated Late Biblical Hebrew [LBH]). The language

and style of the book represent the latest stage in the development of Hebrew to be found in the Bible.³⁸

The dominant view in scholarship of the development of the Hebrew language from SBH to LBH argues for a pre-exilic Hebrew that is standard or monolithic, which develops into the Hebrew after the exile.³⁹ Thus any Hebrew that is not in accord with standard language usage is either post-exilic or, if early, belongs to Northern Israel, so that the language of early Judah is identical with SBH.⁴⁰ Since *Ecclesiastes* does not match the characteristics of pre-exilic SBH, most scholars understand it to be post-exilic and representative of LBH.

The question is not whether there is a standard pre-exilic Hebrew (SBH) which can be compared with a later post-exilic Biblical Hebrew (LBH). These do exist so that one can demonstrate linguistic and grammatical developments between the two.⁴¹ Rather, the question is whether SBH represents all that is going on in the Hebrew language before the exile. Is there evidence of more diversity within the Hebrew language before the exile? Are there other factors that may explain the language of *Ecclesiastes*? Bo Isaksson argues that the Hebrew of *Ecclesiastes* is influenced by a popular Hebrew dialect in northern Palestine and that the distinctive nature of the verb system is due to the literary genre of autobiography. He also comments that the spoken language of Biblical times probably approximated to MH and that northern dialects displayed numerous features common to Aramaic, which were not common to the classical language of Jerusalem. Thus the Hebrew of *Ecclesiastes* seems to represent a popular Hebrew dialect.⁴² Isaksson recognizes that SBH is the classical language of Jerusalem and that there are other things going on outside the official language. Although he argues that our knowledge of Hebrew, both spoken and written, is not sufficient to allow it to

be used for dating the book, his analysis of the language does not affect his dating of Ecclesiastes. He believes that an origin in the fourth century is not improbable.⁴³ Daniel Fredericks compares the language of Ecclesiastes with LBH and MH and concludes that Ecclesiastes is more closely aligned with EBH/SBH. The higher number of Aramaisms is explained by the close association of wisdom literature with the surrounding culture and the historical connections between Israel and Aram, which go back to 1000 BC. Fredericks thus concludes that the language of Ecclesiastes is pre-exilic and that the vocabulary limits the range from the eighth to the seventh century.⁴⁴ It is interesting that Isaksson recognizes that the language of Ecclesiastes is influenced by factors *outside* SBH (dialect and geography), but still dates the book late, whereas Fredericks tries to fit the language of the book *within* the parameters of SBH and argues for a pre-exilic dating. As opposed to the late-date argument based on LBH, both Isaksson and Fredericks recognize that genre and dialect may provide an explanation for the nature of the language of Ecclesiastes.

Isaksson's analysis of the language of Ecclesiastes frees it from having to be compared with and fitted into SBH. This means that the typical analysis of the language of Ecclesiastes, which compares it with SBH and LBH, should no longer be the controlling factor in dating the book of Ecclesiastes. What if SBH, which represents Hebrew before the exile, is not a widespread monolithic phenomenon, but originated in the United Monarchy when a central administration was needed? Ian Young argues for a diverse linguistic situation in the development of Hebrew in the land of Canaan. A diverse group of people lived in the area and there is evidence of different languages and dialects being spoken among the people (Judg. 12:1–6). There is also evidence for the development of Akkadian as a diplomatic language for communication between the

diverse groups (the Amarna letters). Young argues that Hebrew was a Canaanite dialect that began to be used as a diplomatic language and was later adopted by the Israelites. SBH, on the other hand, originated in the monarchy when the need for an administration arose; thus, it is not to be identified with any particular dialect of the area. The standard prose that developed in SBH sought to avoid Aramaic influence in order to emphasize the nationhood of Israel over against other nations who used Aramaic. However, since there was contact between Israel and Aram as early as 1100 BC, one should expect to find Aramaic influence before the exile, which is evidenced in certain ancient forms of Biblical Hebrew and in the wisdom literature. Thus Aramaic influence alone cannot be used to argue that a text is late.⁴⁵ In light of the fact that the Philistines were from the Aegean area and that the Assyrians had settled Iranians in Judah in the middle of the 8th century, Greek and Persian loan-words cannot be used to date a text late on that basis alone. The language of Ecclesiastes represents a local, literary dialect, exhibiting a simplified syntax which is not to be compared to the more official SBH. Thus the language of Ecclesiastes fits into the diverse language situation of the pre-exilic period.⁴⁶ If Young's analysis of diversity in pre-exilic Hebrew is correct, then the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes cannot be used to date the book late.

3. The term *Qohelet*

An examination of the term *Qohelet* also raises issues related to the authorship of Ecclesiastes. Major questions arise concerning the use of this term. Does it designate a name, an office, or a function? What does it mean and how should it be translated? Why is it used if Solomon is the author of the book? The term *Qohelet* (*qōhelet*) occurs in 1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8, 9, 10. Sometimes it occurs with the article (12:8 and perhaps 7:27). Most identify it as a feminine

participle from the verb *qāhal*, which means ‘to assemble’. However, it could designate an occupation, which would make it a noun derived from the noun *qāhal*, which means ‘assembly’ (as *bōqēr*, ‘cowherd’, is derived from *bāqār*, ‘cattle’).⁴⁷ Charles Bridges argues that Qohelet is a new name given to Solomon later in his life after his repentance.⁴⁸ There is no clear Scriptural evidence that Solomon repented later in life and Ecclesiastes is not a confession of sin. The use of the article with the term seems to support the view that *qōhelet* is a name, much like the names based on the participle in Ezra 2:55 (*hassōperet*, with the article) and Nehemiah 7:57 (*sōperet*, without the article).⁴⁹ It is possible that Qohelet was a title associated with an office that has become a name.⁵⁰ Several suggestions have been offered as to how to translate Qohelet based on the meaning ‘to assemble’. Seow suggests ‘Gatherer’ or ‘Collector’ as a reference to someone who gathers wisdom, wealth, or people;⁵¹ but the word is only used in the Old Testament to refer to people.⁵² The most common translation is ‘Preacher’, which designates someone who gathers people into an assembly to speak to them. Others suggest ‘Teacher’, which is more in line with the statement in 12:9 that Qohelet taught the people. An even better option is to leave the term untranslated as Qohelet, which will be the practice in this commentary.⁵³

But why is the name Qohelet used? An examination of that question will lead to a discussion of several issues that are important for understanding Ecclesiastes, which will bring the focus back to the issue of authorship. Although it is not clear whether the term Qohelet is an artificial name,⁵⁴ or a title, or a nickname of some sort,⁵⁵ some argue that the term Qohelet is a way for the author to distance himself from Solomon. In other words, the author adopts a Solomonic persona to demonstrate in his search for meaning that not even someone like a king Solomon would have fared any

better, but he makes it clear that he is really not Solomon by the use of the term Qohelet.⁵⁶ If the author wanted us to believe it was really Solomon, he would have used the name Solomon instead of Qohelet.⁵⁷ The proponents of this view argue that this is not an attempt to deceive anyone because the original readers would have understood what the author was doing.⁵⁸

Different terminology is used to discuss the use of an assumed identity in Ecclesiastes. Recent narrative approaches to Ecclesiastes use the concept of 'literary persona', which describes the storyteller of a literary work, who is the voice through whom the author speaks.⁵⁹ Qohelet is the voice through whom the author of the book speaks and, according to Fox, may not even be a real historical person.⁶⁰ Some use the term 'pseudonymous', which refers to using a fictitious name and to present oneself as someone else. In other words, Qohelet presents himself as Solomon when he is not really Solomon, at least for the first several chapters. Longman uses the term 'pseudonymous' and identifies Ecclesiastes as fictional autobiography.⁶¹ Very few scholars see this as a problem because it is assumed that the readers understand the phenomenon; so there is no intent to deceive the readers. Another significant term is 'pseudepigraphy', but it is not often used to refer to Ecclesiastes. R. H. Charles defines this term as an author adopting another persona as an assumed identity in order for his words to be accepted.⁶² It is commonly applied to works written from about 200 BC to AD 200.⁶³ A common assumption concerning Ecclesiastes is that it was accepted into the canon because of its association with Solomon.⁶⁴ Waltke sees the difficulty of this view when he comments that if the author claims to be the legendary Solomon but the internal evidence of the book falsifies that claim, then the book is pseudepigraphic. Such a claim would make the book fraudulent and not reliable or authoritative for the faith and practice

of God's people. However, he goes on to argue that Ecclesiastes is not pseudepigraphic because the name Solomon is not used in the book.⁶⁵ Also, he does not believe it was accepted into the canon because of any associations with Solomon. He argues that Qohelet, who is portrayed as a Solomon-like figure of wisdom, is a fictitious representation of the anonymous narrator himself.⁶⁶ These questions concerning author and narrator raise issues related to the structure and genre of the book, which must be addressed before definite conclusions can be drawn.

The Genre of Ecclesiastes

In a discussion of the genre of Ecclesiastes it is important to recognize that there are two different types of writing in the book. The first-person account of Qohelet (1:12–12:7) is framed by a third-person prologue (1:1–11) and a third-person epilogue (12:8–14), which is called a frame-narrative. The author introduces himself as Qohelet in 1:12, which begins the first-person discourse: 'I, Qohelet, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem'. The first-person continues until 12:7, so that 1:12–12:7 encompasses the first-person narration of Qohelet. The term Qohelet also occurs in third-person sections of the book, notably 1:1–2 and 12:8, 9, 10. Thus the first-person discourse (1:12–12:7) is framed by third-person narration (1:1–11 and 12:8–14). There is even a third-person 'intrusion' in 7:27 ('says Qohelet'). One would normally expect the book to begin with the self-introduction in 1:12, but someone else presents the words of Qohelet (1:1) and then comments on Qohelet's words in 12:9–14. Thus the terminology one uses to refer to the book becomes very important in order to avoid misunderstanding. In this commentary, when the term Ecclesiastes is used, both the third-person and the first-person sections are included, and when the

term Qohelet is used, the first-person discourse is primarily in view (1:12–12:7).

It is important to have some idea of the type of literature one is studying in order to better understand a work. Genre discussions are based on comparisons between literature, which take into account both the similarities and the differences between texts.⁶⁷ The words of Qohelet have been compared to many texts of the ancient Near East, which demonstrates that the concepts and forms of the book reflect the ancient Near Eastern environment. A brief comparison of Ecclesiastes with other ancient Near Eastern texts will show that although there are many similarities between these texts, there is no genre category of the ancient Near East into which Ecclesiastes neatly fits.⁶⁸

There are conceptual connections between Ecclesiastes and the Gilgamesh Epic, which goes back to the early second millennium.⁶⁹ William Brown uses such connections to lay the groundwork for understanding Ecclesiastes because both Gilgamesh and Qohelet search for some sense of meaning before death's inescapable presence. In Gilgamesh, lessons emerge in the midst of the search for immortality. Thus the two deal with the universal themes of the dread of death, the futility of human existence, the bond of fellowship, the importance of joy, and the inscrutable will of the divine. Parallels between the two works include the proverbial advice, 'A three-ply rope cannot be cut', a statement that all that mankind achieves is the wind, and the advice given to Gilgamesh which resembles Ecclesiastes 9:7–10:

Let thy garments be sparkling fresh,
 Thy head be washed; bathe thou in water.
 Pay heed to the little one that holds thy hand,

Let thy spouse delight in thy bosom!
For this is the task of [mankind]!⁷⁰

Yet there is a clear difference in literary form as Gilgamesh is third-person epic narrative and Ecclesiastes is primarily first-person.⁷¹

Ecclesiastes has also been compared to Egyptian literature, especially the Instructions and the pessimistic, reflective discourses. In some of the Instructions the king speaks from the dead with advice for his successor. In this literature the figure of the king gives a broad sense of unity to an assorted collection of sayings. Sometimes these are called Royal Testaments and they have political objectives in mind.⁷² Some compare the Royal Testaments to Qohelet, especially 1:12–2:26.⁷³ Qohelet, however, does not seem to have political objectives in view.⁷⁴ There do appear to be several literary similarities with Qohelet. The superscription identifies the author in third person and uses the word ‘instruction’. Although the Egyptian superscriptions are more informative, there seems to be a parallel with Ecclesiastes 1:1. They appear to be pseudepigraphic and fictitious in order to gain acceptance for a work that is not official. Some would say the same thing about Ecclesiastes. There is also a prologue and an epilogue that frame a main body of work, but the prologue exhorts the reader to heed the advice, unlike Ecclesiastes, and the epilogue does not seek to guide the interpretation of the main body, which is the case in Ecclesiastes. Several themes are common to both the Egyptian Instructions and to Ecclesiastes, such as a call to enjoy life given against the background of distress, a reversal of fortune, and divine determinism and the hidden ways of God. However, the reflective style of narration is not shared by the Instructions. Egyptian works which do possess the reflective style and are pessimistic in that they express

grievance over the evil condition into which Egypt has fallen, include laments, such as the Prophecies of Neferti, The Complaint of Ipuwer, and The Complaints of Khakheperresonb. Some of these have a frame-narrative which introduces and concludes the words presented,⁷⁵ but they do not contain collections of proverbial sayings (as does Ecclesiastes). Koh notes that the Egyptian Instructions demonstrate literary creativity and fluidity, as the authors are masters of their craft. Perhaps Qohelet operates with the same creativity,⁷⁶ which makes it difficult to nail down a clear genre connection.

Qohelet has also been compared to West Semitic Royal Inscriptions, a group of eleven texts that are monumental inscriptions set up by kings as a public display and as an enduring record. Most of them date from the ninth century. Similarities to Qohelet include royal boasting of accomplishments superior to the accomplishment of predecessors and a focus on building activities. The strongest parallel is seen in their formulaic self-introduction, such as 'I am RN (royal name), king of ..., son of ...', which uses the perfect aspect to describe the present reign of the king.⁷⁷ There are also Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, especially those of Sargon II, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Assurbanipal, which display some of the same similarities, such as self-introduction, royal boasting, emphasis on treasures of kings and achievement over predecessors, and a royal wisdom theme.⁷⁸ Seow argues that Qohelet adapts this genre for rhetorical purposes and uses royal language in an ironic way to show that not even the accomplishments of a king amount to anything significant.⁷⁹ Although these inscriptions use royal self-introductory formulae and stereotypical language of boasting, they are historical narrative, which does not fit Ecclesiastes.⁸⁰ The general description of political trouble that Qohelet describes is

not parallel with the large-scale military campaigns and ongoing imperial conquests of the Inscriptions.

Longman compares Qohelet with Akkadian fictional autobiographies that have a didactic ending, especially the Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin, which circulated early in the second millennium. It is clearly autobiographical, covering a four year period of Naram-Sin's life assessed from a later perspective. There is an 'I' that reflects upon itself and there is development and change in the personality of the narrator/subject. It is fiction: the description of the invading army and its conquest is beyond the realm of reality. It has a didactic ending with a series of admonitions or lessons drawn from the experience of the speaker. It also has a three-fold structure of first-person introduction (1-3), first-person narration (4-146), and first-person instruction (147-175).⁸¹ According to Longman, Qohelet is also autobiographical and fictional. Fictional autobiography is defined as 'a composition where the life of an individual, real or imagined, is written by a second individual under the name of the first individual at a later period of time'. Fictional autobiography is pseudonymous.⁸² Qohelet also shows a similar three-fold structure in the first-person discourse. There is a first-person introduction (1:12-18), an extended first-person narrative where Qohelet describes his quest for meaning in life (2:1-6:9), and a first-person instruction where advice is given out of personal experience (6:10-12:7).⁸³ However, the comparison between the tripartite structure of Qohelet and the Cuthean Legend is problematic because the comparisons are not very comparable. It has been pointed out that the endings used to separate the Akkadian texts sometimes make up 80% of the inscription and many times state the main purpose of the text. The autobiographical part looks like an introduction and may comprise only a few lines.⁸⁴

Koh argues that although there are shortcomings to Longman's analysis, he has pointed us in the right direction for comparisons to Qohelet with the subgenre 'pseudo-autobiography'. There is a group of Akkadian inscriptions that describe the legendary heroic deeds of the Akkadian kings of the dynasty of Akkad in the third millennium. They are written in first-person narrative by a king describing his deeds and experiences. They are fictional literary compositions that are not afraid to describe the weaknesses of the king as a reason for the misfortune described in the text. They are meant to provide lessons for future rulers. Texts included in this category include the Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin, the text of a King of Isin, and two Sargon texts (a Sargon Autobiography and a Sargon Legend). The similarities with Qohelet include a great king recording experiences during his rule, the pseudepigraphic nature of the texts even though they purport to be genuine royal inscriptions, the first-person style of autobiography, and the didactic nature of the texts.⁸⁵

The similarities between the words of Qohelet and other ancient Near Eastern literature demonstrate that Qohelet reflects the ancient Near Eastern environment. However, it is hard to point to a body of literature and confidently say that Qohelet fits a particular genre because of the many differences between Ecclesiastes and the other texts. The Akkadian literature, which some argue has the most similarities, is very early in light of the fact that most date Qohelet late. The Akkadian literature comes from the third millennium, and most date Qohelet to the fourth or third centuries of the first millennium. Although many works share themes similar to Qohelet's, the differences are compelling. The Gilgamesh Epic is a third-person mythological account and the Western Semitic Royal Inscriptions are historical in nature. Some of the Egyptian literature is too political in nature (the Royal Testaments) or does not exhibit

the reflective nature of Qohelet (the Instructions). In the end, there is no consensus concerning the genre of Ecclesiastes.⁸⁶ Thus it is hard to avoid the conclusion that there is no clear genre category of the ancient Near East to which the book of Ecclesiastes is analogous.⁸⁷

One term that is prominent in discussing the words of Qohelet is the term 'autobiography'. Although some doubt whether 'autobiography' is an apt description,⁸⁸ many have recognized the appropriate nature of that term to describe the words of Qohelet. Longman defines autobiography as 'an account of the life (or part thereof) of an individual written by the individual himself'. It must be written in the first person and include reminiscences of the past life of the individual.⁸⁹ Isaksson examines what he calls the 'autobiographical thread' of Qohelet, which includes every first common singular perfect (suffixing conjugation, abbreviated SC) verbs. He demonstrates that this thread runs through the whole first-person discourse. The dominance of SC forms in the thread may suggest a 'looser' kind of narration that relates points of interest in the life of an author rather than telling a story of connected events.⁹⁰ Koh argues for royal autobiography by arguing that the royal voice is dominant throughout the book. This voice is a coherent personality which gives unity to the work. The fact that the book contains two sections which are a collection of proverbs does not challenge the autobiographical nature of the work because the proverbs are used by Qohelet to investigate wisdom.⁹¹ Ecclesiastes as a whole can be identified as autobiography cast in a narrative frame, that is, a framed autobiography.⁹²

The fact that the words of Qohelet, which are first-person, are framed by third-person with a third person intrusion in 7:27, raises significant questions that affect the interpretation of the book. How many hands are involved in the book itself? What is the relationship

between the first-person autobiography (1:12–12:7) and the third-person frame (1:1–11; 12:8–14)? Some have argued that there are several hands involved in the book, which reflect several different viewpoints expressed in the book (see below for a brief discussion of this view). A few have argued that the author of the epilogue (12:8–14) is also responsible for the first-person discourse, so that one person is responsible for the whole work. Delitzsch argues that the epilogue is a postscript added by the author of the book, because the spirit of the book and the epilogue are the same. In the book itself the author puts on the mask of Qohelet-Solomon and then in the epilogue he speaks only of Qohelet.⁹³ Garrett argues that there are three levels of discourse in the book: the first level is the level of the frame narrator, the second level is the level of wisdom (the authoritative teaching of proverbial wisdom), and the third level is the first-person meditations of Qohelet. These levels flow together and are part of the single perspective of one author.⁹⁴ In this view Qohelet in the epilogue is commenting on his own words in the first-person discourse.

It is better to understand the third-person frame to be from a different hand. This view is supported by the shift from first-person to third-person in the epilogue and by the fact that the epilogue comments on the words of Qohelet. Although it is possible that someone could comment on his own work and speak about himself in the third person, it is not likely that one would do so in the middle of a first-person sentence, as in 7:27.⁹⁵ Thus it seems that someone is responsible for setting forth the words of Qohelet and then offering an appraisal of his words. Fox argues that this editor is an active editor because he is involved in sentence composition, as he has joined two halves of a sentence in 7:27. Thus he becomes the transmitter of Qohelet's words.⁹⁶

Different approaches to Ecclesiastes

The fact that an editor is presenting the words of Qohelet raises the question of the purpose behind such a presentation. No doubt there is a didactic purpose, for the epilogue is addressed to ‘my son’, which reminds one of the instructions in the book of Proverbs (Proverbs 1:8; 2:1; 3:1; 5:1; 6:1; 7:1). But there is debate concerning whether the editor is agreeing with the words of Qohelet or warning his son about the words of Qohelet. The best way to answer this question is through an exegesis of the epilogue, but it is helpful to lay out the different approaches to the book of Ecclesiastes to get an idea of some of the questions involved. One of the difficulties of understanding the words of Qohelet is how to relate the positive and the negative statements of the book, or, more specifically, how to handle what seem to be contradictions in the book. For example, in 8:10–15 Qohelet goes back and forth over whether the righteous and the wicked get their just rewards.⁹⁷ In 8:10 there is an observation concerning the burial of the wicked, which is followed in 8:11 by the conclusion that evil increases when the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily. In 8:12a Qohelet recognizes that sinners do evil and live long lives, but then he states the opposite in 8:12b–13: it will not be well with the wicked and his days will not be prolonged. Then in 8:14 Qohelet notes that the righteous are not rewarded for their righteousness and the wicked are not rewarded for their wickedness, but the exact opposite occurs. The righteous get what the wicked deserve and the wicked get what the righteous deserve. This is followed by a call to enjoyment in 8:15. The way in which commentators handle the tension in these verses is a window into how they understand Qohelet and his relationship to the epilogue.

1. The Heterodox Qohelet

Some argue that Qohelet deviated from orthodox wisdom teaching and rejected the claim that wisdom could secure one's existence.⁹⁸ The positive statements in the book are dogmatic corrections made by another hand in order to try to bring the message of Qohelet more in line with traditional wisdom thinking. Thus there are several editors and viewpoints represented in the book. The first editor, or redactor (R1), admired the thinking of Qohelet and so did not change anything. He was responsible for 1:1, 1:2, 7:27, 12:8, and 12:9–12. The second redactor (R2) was disturbed by the thinking of Qohelet because it did not support traditional wisdom thinking. He set out to make dogmatic corrections to the work. Barton identifies R2 as someone whose philosophy was Pharisaic. Concerning 8:11–14, 8:12b–13 are a dogmatic correction stating the validity of the deed-consequence relationship, which is denied by verses 11 and 14. Thus 8:12b–13 states a viewpoint that is the opposite of Qohelet's view, as does 12:13–14 in the epilogue, which is also from the hand of R2.⁹⁹ In arguing that Qohelet has denied the views of traditional wisdom, Qohelet's relationship with God is also called into question.¹⁰⁰

The view that there are redactors at work in Ecclesiastes who insert glosses to the text to correct Qohelet's thinking is not as prominent today as it was in the past. Part of the reason is that source criticism is not as dominant in Old Testament studies because the emphasis has moved toward understanding the final form of the text.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, the corrective glosses do not really fulfil their intended purpose, because the pessimistic statements still dominate the passages. For example, in 8:11–14, the corrective gloss (8:12b–13) is surrounded by the opposite viewpoint so that a denial of retribution (the deed-consequence relationship) is the last word in these verses. One wonders why the

glossators copied the book to begin with instead of suppressing it altogether.¹⁰²

Others argue for some kind of dialogue in the book between Qohelet and traditional wisdom. Qohelet denies the principle of the deed-consequence relationship in 8:11 and 14 over against traditional wisdom thinking represented in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes 8:12b–13. Robert Gordis explains the dialogue between the tensions in the book by means of quotations. He defines a quotation as words which do not reflect the present sentiments of the author of the literary composition in which they are found, but have been introduced to convey the standpoint of another person or situation. Thus 8:12b–13 are a quotation of traditional wisdom from which Qohelet dissents in 8:14–15. He is an unconventional sage, parting company with Proverbs on the issue of reward and punishment; thus, he can be called heterodox.¹⁰³ Although Murphy does not see 8:12b–13 as a quotation, he does affirm that Gordis' analysis is basically correct and stresses the importance of dialogue in understanding the book of Ecclesiastes. In his view 8:12b–13 introduces Qohelet's awareness of the orthodox claim concerning divine retribution, which he then denies.¹⁰⁴ Both Murphy and Gordis see some tension between the epilogue and the views of Qohelet. Gordis argues that since the epilogue is from another hand the contradiction between 12:13–14 and the rest of the book does not have to be reconciled.¹⁰⁵ Murphy comments that the epilogue is an oversimplification of the book's message because the statements in 12:13–14 go beyond what Qohelet has said.¹⁰⁶

One problem with the quotation view is that clear criteria for identifying quotations have not been developed. It is hard to identify a quotation unless there is some introductory statement, such as, 'the sages say'.¹⁰⁷ Whybray develops formal criteria to identify quotations which emphasize forms and themes that are

consistent with proverbs.¹⁰⁸ But Fox wonders how one distinguishes a quotation from a statement that Qohelet himself might have composed because, according to the epilogue (12:9), he composed proverbs. Quotes which express the author's viewpoint do not need to be marked, but those that are contrary to the viewpoint of the author need to be marked in some way. Ecclesiastes 8:12b–13 is not listed in Whybray's clear examples of quotations in Ecclesiastes¹⁰⁹ and Gordis' definition that a quotation does not express the sentiments of the author is too general to be useful.¹¹⁰ These views allow one side of the equation (the denial of retribution in 8:11 and 14) to dominate over the other side (the working of retribution in 8:12b–13) so that they conclude that Qohelet is heterodox in that he has abandoned the principle of retribution.

2. The Orthodox Qohelet

This approach argues that the views of Qohelet are in full agreement with views expressed in the book of Proverbs and that the statement in the epilogue, 'fear God and keep his commandments' (12:13), is the message of Qohelet himself. In this approach the positive statements take precedence over the negative statements. Early commentators on Ecclesiastes, both patristic and Jewish, took this view. The Targum of Qohelet teaches the importance of Torah study, repentance, and prayer through a periphrastic translation of the text. In Ecclesiastes 8:11–15 the perspective of 'the world to come' is added, introducing a concept that is not in the original.¹¹¹ Gregory Thaumaturgos, who lived in the second century AD, offers the earliest full treatment of Ecclesiastes among Christian interpreters. The statement in 8:14, which denies the principle of retribution (the deed-consequence relationship), is introduced as 'a false opinion among human beings'.¹¹² Thus Qohelet is made orthodox by introducing other

concepts or by rejecting as error certain statements that Qohelet makes.

R. N. Whybray has called Qohelet a preacher of joy.¹¹³ He sees the crucial question to be whether the negative statements of the book dominate Qohelet's world-view or whether they are a foil for some other positive assessment of the human situation. He tries to steer a course between pessimism and optimism by calling Qohelet a realist. Qohelet affirms the traditional view of divine retribution because what he argues has a long Old Testament tradition, which includes a denial of a fixed relationship between cause and effect, a frustration with the prosperity of the wicked, and an affirmation of the freedom and sovereignty of God.¹¹⁴ In Ecclesiastes 8:11–15 there are two opposing viewpoints which stand side-by-side. In an article published in 1982, Whybray argues that 8:12b–13 is the answer to the problem stated in 8:11,¹¹⁵ but in his later commentary he is more cautious. He argues that it is uncertain whether Qohelet totally disagrees with 8:12b–13, or whether he regards the traditional view as generally valid, but recognizes that there are lamentable exceptions. In the final analysis, Whybray understands that Qohelet does not entirely abandon the traditional belief that justice will prevail.¹¹⁶ The epilogist builds on views that Qohelet frequently advocates and states them in ways that make it clear that Qohelet is an orthodox wisdom teacher.¹¹⁷

Graham Ogden also understands the message of Ecclesiastes to be positive. The key to the meaning of the book is *hebel* (1:2). Since most commentators take it as representing the conclusion or thesis which Qohelet is arguing, they have concluded that the meaning of the book is negative. However, *hebel* does not signify 'meaningless', but identifies the enigmatic in life. It suggests that life is not fully comprehensible. The term *hebel* does function as an answer to the question of 1:3, but it is not his main conclusion or advice, which

is found in the calls to enjoyment (such as 2:24–26, 3:12, 3:22, 5:18–20, 8:15, and 9:7–10). These positive statements represent the theological affirmations of faith in a just and loving God, despite many signs to the contrary. The person of faith is aware of the mysteries of life (*hebel*), but the person of faith moves forward to positively enjoy life.¹¹⁸ In Ecclesiastes 8:11–15 Ogden sees Qohelet as supporting the traditional view of the deed-consequence relationship, but he also raises serious questions that need to be faced. By putting the anomaly (8:14) alongside the tradition (8:12b–13), he demands that his readers come to terms with how things are in the real, but less than ideal, world. The purpose of the epilogue is not to correct Qohelet's views but to commend them to others.¹¹⁹

Michael Eaton calls Ecclesiastes an essay in apologetics, which 'defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternatives'. God is left out of the picture for much of the argument, which leads to a very pessimistic view of life. A major part of the book is an exploration of the barrenness of life without a practical faith in God. However, suddenly God is introduced and the pessimism gives way to joy and purpose. Instead of beginning with the premise of the fear of the Lord, Qohelet argues as a humanist or secularist in order to show that such a starting point leads one to the meaninglessness of life. The audience is then in a position to hear the good news revealed at the end of the book. The contradictions in the book draw our attention to the viewpoint of faith, and so Qohelet is revealed as a man of faith.¹²⁰ The statement of Ecclesiastes 8:12b–13 is the answer of faith. Having shown the bankruptcy of the secularist approach, Qohelet allows the heavenly perspective to shine through in 8:12b–13. These verses are a declaration of Qohelet's faith that the vindication of the righteous is only a matter of time. The epilogue summarizes the

message of Qohelet and points out the implications of the life of faith.¹²¹

Bruce Waltke does not see Ecclesiastes as an intentional apologetic against secularism leading to a positive assessment of faith, but as a debate by Qohelet between scepticism and faith, with the latter winning out. It is an agonizing struggle of an honest man wrestling with his absurd existence. Although Waltke acknowledges that Qohelet does not fall back on faith to save the day, he does agree that the orthodox statements are the key to the book. Ecclesiastes 8:11–13 is a confession of faith against the contrary evidence. 8:12b–13 states what his heart knows over against a world that seems to go against such affirmations. The epilogue confirms what Qohelet knows in his heart, for the narrator understands Qohelet's sayings as upright, true, and reliable.¹²²

The main problem with the view that the message of Qohelet is positive is that the positive statements in the book are given precedence over the negative statements even when the text seems to indicate otherwise. Although the calls to enjoyment are positive exhortations which increase in their urgency as one reads through the book, it is debatable whether they should be seen as theological affirmations of faith. The target of Qohelet is not secularism, as in the apologetic view, but the failure of wisdom itself to produce what is promised. Qohelet is not starting on a secular basis to show where such a basis will lead, but is in a real struggle trying to understand what he observes in life. There is a tendency for commentators to give the final word to the positive statements when, in reality, the text moves in the other direction. For example, in discussing 8:11–15, it is hard to understand 8:12b–13 as winning the day when they are followed by 8:14. The negative statements that the righteous are not rewarded occur in 8:11 and 14, while the positive statement of the reward of the righteous occurs in 8:12b–13.

Qohelet could have written the text differently, but he gave the negative statements the final word. It is hard to see how 8:12b–13 could be the answer of faith for Qohelet.¹²³

3. The Struggling Qohelet

The positions set forth above believe that Qohelet takes a definite position concerning the subject of the reward of the righteous and the wicked, either rejecting it or affirming it. The views considered here allow the tensions in the thought of Qohelet to stand without trying to resolve them. The tensions are evidence of the honest struggle that Qohelet is experiencing. A major question is whether one side of the tension ultimately wins out in 1:12–12:7.

Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg employs a ‘yes-but’ principle to explain the tensions. Qohelet will often set forth the opposite of what he has discovered in his investigations (the ‘yes fact’), and then he will set forth the other side (the ‘but fact’). The ‘but fact’ qualifies the ‘yes fact’ and represents his own viewpoint. In Ecclesiastes 8:11–15, 8:12b–13 represents the ‘yes fact’, which is followed in 8:14 by the ‘but fact’. Although Qohelet does not completely deny 8:12b–13, they do not stand up to the reality of life as he has observed it. They are certainly not a solution to the problems of life. The ‘yes fact’ is thus pushed to the periphery and the ‘but fact’ is emphasized and highlighted.¹²⁴ Hertzberg argues that there are three hands involved in the epilogue. The first hand (12:9–11) praises Qohelet, the second hand (12:12) is a warning and correction of 12:9–11, and the third hand adds a concluding word by giving direction for the practical use of the book with an edifying ending.¹²⁵

Craig Bartholomew examines Ecclesiastes from a narrative standpoint. He argues that the juxtaposition of *hebel* and joy (the calls to enjoyment), which are contradictory answers given by Qohelet in his search, creates a gap that needs to be filled.¹²⁶ He

notes that the two sides of this tension make it difficult to assess the true meaning of the book, for usually one side of the tension is made dominant. Qohelet is seen as either a sceptic or as a person of faith, with the latter view understanding the calls to enjoyment as the answer to the problem. Allowing the tension to remain creates a gap that needs to be filled. Ecclesiastes 8:11–14 juxtaposes the positive statements of 8:12b–13, that sinners will be punished and not live long lives, with the negative statements of 8:11–12a and 14, that sinners will not be punished and will live long lives, creating a gap that needs to be filled. The gap is ultimately filled with 12:13–14, which makes the epilogue an integral part of the book itself and necessary for understanding the book. Bartholomew argues that the narrator reads Qohelet positively and at least arrives at a point of agreement with Qohelet in the statement ‘fear God and keep his commands’. He also believes that 12:1 (‘Remember your Creator in the days of your youth’) is a bridge to the filling of the gap in 12:13–14. In 11:7–12:7 the more positive element comes before the enigmatic, dark element, which shapes the last section toward the possibility of integration and resolution. Thus in 11:7–12:7 life under the sun is assessed positively.¹²⁷

Tremper Longman III understands Qohelet to be a wisdom teacher who struggles with the normative traditions of his people represented in Proverbs. Pessimism permeates the book because Qohelet takes an ‘under the sun’ approach, a limited perspective which does not take into account heavenly realities. In Ecclesiastes 8:11–14 Qohelet contradicts in 8:13 what he stated in 8:12a. In 8:12b–13 the traditional view of divine retribution is stated, which Qohelet does not affirm, for he clearly questions that view in 8:14. Qohelet displays a quandary of doubt concerning the issue. He is a confused wise man whose thoughts are filled with tensions and contradictions as he struggles with traditional wisdom

thinking. The epilogue sets forth a view contrary to Qohelet as the epilogist evaluates the teaching of Qohelet, shows the dangers of speculative wisdom, and reinforces the normative teaching of the Old Testament.¹²⁸

Finally, Michael Fox argues that one must recognize the contradictions in the thought of Qohelet in order to bring into focus the book's central concern: the problem of the meaning of life. The contradictions which Qohelet observes in the world must be allowed to stand because they state the problems encountered in life, which once recognized can pave the way for a more constructive approach to life. Thus one should not try to eliminate or harmonize the contradictory statements but must let them have their place. In Ecclesiastes 8:11–14 Qohelet states both sides without resolving them. He knows the principle of retribution (8:12b–13) and does not deny it, but he also knows there are situations which violate the principle (8:11, 14). Qohelet does not subordinate the violations of the principle to his belief that God is judge. He could have abandoned belief in God's justice or he could have subordinated injustice to a larger theological perspective, but he does neither, allowing both to stand. He calls Qohelet a man of faith who trusts in God and his justice, but he also calls him a man of doubt who knows the realities that violate his belief.¹²⁹ The frame narrator keeps a respectful distance from Qohelet. The advice to 'fear God and keep his commandments' echoes certain elements of Qohelet's teaching and states standard religious teaching with a dogmatic certainty that is in contrast with the uncertainty of all knowledge in Qohelet. This conclusion is a call to tolerate the expression of unorthodox opinion, which allows everything to be heard as long as one reaches a proper conclusion. Objections to the book are blunted by the implication that the frame narrator is just reporting what Qohelet said without rejecting the latter's ideas. A

reader can align himself with the editor so as not to reject the book, even if he rejects the views of Qohelet.¹³⁰

These views attempt to allow the tensions in the thought of Qohelet to remain without resolving them. There is always a tendency to move toward one pole or the other to bring some resolution to the tension, which is why there are a variety of approaches to the book. Although allowing the tensions to remain in the thought of Qohelet is the best approach to the book, an analysis of the views that advocate this approach brings further clarification to the issues involved. Bartholomew's approach—that Qohelet juxtaposes two contradictory views, creating a gap that needs to be filled—allows both sides of the tension to be stated. It also gives a rationale for the epilogue to the book as the filler of the gap created by the tension. Although this may work on a broad scale for Ecclesiastes, it is not as clear how it works for individual passages.¹³¹ For example, in Ecclesiastes 8:11–15 the juxtaposition is between the view that sinners will be punished and not live long lives and the view that sinners will not be punished and will live long lives. One could argue that the gap between those two is filled with 8:15, the call to enjoyment (see below for an analysis of how the calls to enjoyment function in the book). Or when Qohelet juxtaposes wickedness in 3:16 with God's judgment in 3:17, the gap may be filled by the negative assertions that humans are no different from beasts in 3:18–21. In other words, why does one have to wait until 12:13–14, or 12:1, for the gap to be filled? Perhaps the gap is filled in individual passages with the negative conclusions of Qohelet. It seems in most passages that the negative assertions get the last word (as in 8:11–14). Also, his view that 11:7–12:7 is a positive assessment leading toward a resolution does not take into account the concluding *hebel* statement in 12:8, which does not just balance 11:7 and 12:1, but frames the whole work.¹³² In other

words the final word is *hebel*, not joy. Longman's pessimistic view of Qohelet, on the other hand, understands that the final word is *hebel* and that the calls to enjoyment are resigned conclusions in light of the meaninglessness of life. However, he does not believe that Qohelet affirms the positive side of the tension, at least in terms of the traditional doctrine of retribution in 8:12b–13. Fox allows both sides of the tension to stand and recognizes this as a key aspect of the thought of Qohelet. In the final analysis, the best approach is to understand that Qohelet does not subordinate the anomalies of life and the breakdown of the principle of retribution to a higher principle in order to bring a resolution to the problem. Although it is true that Qohelet does not use the traditional view to explain the anomalies of life, he does subordinate the traditional view to the anomalies of life. Although he may not completely deny the traditional view, he does not affirm it. The troubles of life dominate his thinking so that he calls into question the traditional understanding of the deed-consequence relationship. Reasons why Qohelet operates this way will be explored below. The epilogist, on the other hand, does allow one side of the tension to win the day when he brings in the commandments of God and the secret judgment of God (12:13–14). This raises the question as to why the epilogist would transmit the words of Qohelet in the first place. This question will be addressed below, which will raise again the issue of the identity of Qohelet, but first it is important to try to understand why Qohelet struggles with the tensions in life without being able to come to a resolution of those tensions.

Hermeneutical keys for understanding Ecclesiastes

1. Qohelet's epistemology

There are several important exegetical decisions with which an interpreter of Ecclesiastes is faced; these decisions determine how one understands the book. Several of the major problem areas will be covered here. The first deals with the methodology behind the search of Qohelet, which can be called his epistemology. In other words, on what basis does Qohelet draw conclusions about life? What role does experience play in drawing those conclusions? There is no doubt that in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes observation and reflection are presented as playing a role in drawing conclusions about life. In Proverbs 24:30–34 observations are made concerning a vineyard that was not kept, followed by reflection and then instruction (24:32; see also 7:6–23). However, as Fox points out, observation in Proverbs is not presented as the source of new knowledge, but is used as an occasion for reflection and the reinforcement of known principles. Observation is used to confirm knowledge already accepted. Many of the statements in Proverbs concerning justice are statements of faith based on divine revelation.¹³³ In other words, the sages do not observe creation from a neutral standpoint but rather stand on the foundation of divine revelation and the fear of Yahweh.¹³⁴ The question ‘how do you know?’ is answered ‘because I learned it’.¹³⁵ Observation, reflection, and conclusions conform to what the sages believe concerning God and his ways in the world.

Qohelet seems to have a different approach as he stresses more than Proverbs does the role of experience and the use of independent rational intelligence to draw his conclusions about life. The first common singular form of the Hebrew verb ‘to see’

(*rā'āh*) is used about 19 times in Ecclesiastes. Six times it is used with the word 'all' (1:14; 4:1; 4:4; 7:15; 8:9; 8:17), which emphasizes the comprehensive nature of the observations. Four times it is used with 'under the sun' (5:18; 6:1; 9:13; 10:5). It is also used in the context of the calls to enjoyment (2:24; 3:10; 3:22; 5:18; 8:17; only 9:7–10 is omitted). It occurs in contexts dealing with divine retribution (3:16; 6:1; 7:15; 8:10). The whole process of investigation used by Qohelet, including his conclusions, is based on observation. Experience is his primary source of knowledge as he observes, reflects, and draws conclusions.¹³⁶ Although there are statements in the book concerning God and justice that are not based on experience (3:17; 8:12b–13), these statements are not used by Qohelet to alter his conclusions based on experience. There is no body of truth, not even the teachings of the sages, to which Qohelet is willing to submit his empirical conclusions. The question 'how do you know' would be answered 'because I saw it'.¹³⁷ On this basis Bartholomew argues that Qohelet's epistemology is best described as autonomous and that Qohelet's use of wisdom to investigate the world means he will use his powers of reason in light of his experience and observations to understand the world. One cannot assume that wisdom, as used by Qohelet, means the same thing as in the book of Proverbs. Rather, Qohelet's use of wisdom is ironic because one expects wisdom to be rooted in the fear of Yahweh but it turns out that the wisdom in Qohelet refers to a quest for knowledge based on experience and observation.¹³⁸ If Qohelet's wisdom is not rooted in the fear of Yahweh, then one would expect that his use of 'fear God' would not necessarily follow the traditional view in Proverbs.

2. The meaning of hebel

Qohelet's 'empirical' epistemology is a limiting factor of Qohelet's

thinking that undermines confidence in knowledge (8:17). This is supported by his main conclusion about life: *hebel*. This word is used more than any other word in the book, occurring some 38 times.¹³⁹ It occurs in a superlative sense in the motto of the book that frames the book (1:2; 12:8). The superlative indicates something complete, absolute, and unqualified.¹⁴⁰ It is also the word that Qohelet keeps coming back to as he examines various aspects of life. But what does Qohelet mean by *hebel*?

The basic meaning of *hebel* is 'breath', as seen in its use in Isaiah 57:13, where it parallels 'wind' (*rûah*). Most of the time it is used metaphorically, either on the temporal level or the level of meaning. On the temporal level it stresses the idea that something is fleeting or transient. Fredericks argues for this view in Ecclesiastes because the emphasis on death reinforces the brevity of life.¹⁴¹

It is also possible to understand *hebel* in the realm of meaning rather than the temporal realm, which may have several different nuances. Some understand *hebel* to mean 'incomprehensible', which stresses that life is hard to understand. Life can be incomprehensible in the sense that humans are unable to fully grasp the meaning of God's ways in the world, which may lead to frustration at human limitations.¹⁴² In this sense *hebel* is translated as 'mystery' or 'enigma'.¹⁴³ Another nuance of *hebel* in the sense of 'incomprehensible' is not just that life is hard to understand, but that life is not able to be understood, even by the wise men who are supposed to understand life. Here the idea of *hebel* is 'vanity' (in the sense of futile or purposeless), or 'meaningless', or as Fox argues, 'absurd'. He does not think that *hebel* connotes 'incomprehensible', in the sense of enigmatic, because it does not necessarily refer to what is contrary to reason. Qohelet, however, uses *hebel* to refer to scenarios where there is a disparity between rational expectations

and the actual consequences. Thus *hebel* refers to what is contrary to reason, which is best designated in Fox's view as 'absurd'.¹⁴⁴

The view that *hebel* connotes 'futility' is an old view, which has the support of some ancient versions (the Septuagint and the Vulgate), as well as many English translations (KJV, NKJV, NASB, NIV, NRSV, ESV). Christianson closely examines the use of *hebel* outside Ecclesiastes, which occurs about 32 times. He lists eight different connotations: breath/vapour (Ps. 39:6, 11; 62:10; 94:11; 144:4; Prov. 21:6; Isa. 57:13), idols (Deut. 32:21; 1 Kings 16:13, 26; Ps. 31:6; Jer. 8:19; 10:8; 14:22; Jonah 2:9), worthless/false (Jer. 16:19; 23:16; 1 Kings 16:13; 2 Kings 17:15; Jer. 2:5), no purpose/useless (Job 27:12; Isa. 49:4; Jer. 10:3, 15; Lam. 4:17; Zech. 10:2), futile (Job 9:29; Ps. 62:10; 78:33; Isa. 30:7), nothing/empty (Job 21:34; 35:16; Prov. 13:11), fleeting (Job 7:16), and deceptive in appearance (Prov. 31:30). In all these occurrences something obviously false, futile, or empty is likened to or named *hebel*.¹⁴⁵ Longman also examines *hebel* outside Ecclesiastes and argues for the meaning 'uselessness' or 'meaninglessness', not that which is transitory, as evidenced by its use in parallel with 'false' (*šqr*) in Jeremiah 16:19 and 'worthless' (*šw*) in Zechariah 10:2. In some passages *hebel* may mean 'temporary' or 'fleeting' (Ps. 144:4; 39:4–5, 11; Job 7:16; Prov. 31:30), but even in these passages the connotation of 'meaningless' is not out of the question.¹⁴⁶

The primary way to understand *hebel* in Ecclesiastes is in the sense of futile or senseless.¹⁴⁷ Its use in the superlative sense in 1:2 and 12:8, and its fairly constant use throughout the book (it occurs 38 times in Ecclesiastes), shows that it is the major theme of the book (contra Ogden). It is the main concept to which Qoheleth keeps coming back. It is used as a negative judgment of evaluation in relationship to different situations in life. Its use with 'all' or 'everything' (*kōl*) implies that there is a meaning common to the

various occurrences of the term so that, for the most part, the term should be translated by the same word throughout the book.¹⁴⁸

The phrase *re'ût rūaḥ* (many times translated as 'chasing the wind') is used in conjunction with *hebel* and is thus important for understanding *hebel*. There are actually two phrases in the book (*re'ût rūaḥ* occurs in 1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9 and *ra'yôn rūaḥ* occurs in 1:17 and 4:16), which virtually mean the same thing.¹⁴⁹ The understanding of these phrases depends on the nuance of the root of the words *re'ût* and *ra'yôn* and the meaning of the word *rūaḥ* (spirit, wind, breath).¹⁵⁰ Usually one's understanding of *hebel* affects how one understands these two phrases. For example, Fredericks understands the phrase *re'ût rūaḥ* to support his view that *hebel* means temporary. The word *re'ût* means 'choosing' or 'desire', with the translation 'desiring the wind'. This meaning of the phrase connotes the brevity of life and its experiences, which are like the wind's desire that constantly changes direction, and so is fleeting.¹⁵¹ Hubbard, who takes *hebel* as enigmatic, translates the phrase as 'grasping for the wind', understood as puzzlement at the workings of life and our human strivings to make sense of them.¹⁵² Ogden follows the translation 'striving after the wind' and connects it with a shepherd attempting to herd the wind as he would herd sheep. He explains the phrase as referring to someone who is attempting something beyond his power to control, which means certain things are beyond our power to understand them as fully as we may wish. This view also fits his understanding of *hebel* as 'enigmatic'.¹⁵³ Longman, who understands *hebel* as 'meaningless', understands *re'ût rūaḥ* to be reinforcing the meaninglessness of life, which is seen in the translation 'chasing the wind'. He appeals to Hosea 12:1, where the phrase 'feeds on the wind' (*rō'eh rūaḥ*, which uses the root *r'h*) is used in parallel with 'pursues the east wind' (*rōdep qādīm*). This supports the translation 'chasing

the wind', which describes life on earth as futile and frustrating and reinforces the meaning of *hebel* as meaningless. Life is not mysterious or enigmatic, but is as futile as attempts to control the course of the wind.¹⁵⁴ Fox argues that most of the phenomena and experiences described by *re'ût rûah* are not pursuits and that some of the activities covered by the phrase do attain their immediate goal. Thus he argues that 'chasing the wind', in the sense of futility, is not the best rendering of the phrase. He connects *re'ût* with the root *r'* ('break'), or perhaps *rā'āh* ('bad'), which is etymologically from *r'*. The idea of 'breaking of the spirit' or 'badness of the spirit' refers to someone who is conflicted and unhappy, whose soul is afflicted by various thoughts. Thus the phrase could be translated 'affliction of the spirit' or 'vexation of the spirit'. Fox emphasizes that in Aramaic the root *r'y* (*r'h* in Hebrew) produces verbs for both thinking and wishing, and understands the meaning of *re'ût* as 'senseless thoughts'. The full phrase (*re'ût rûah*) means 'thoughts of wind' or 'windy thoughts', which implies chaotic, aimless thoughts. Thus *rûah* refers to a senselessness that comes from either an internal perspective (a person's senseless, irritating thoughts) or from an external perspective (a phenomenon that strikes the observer as senseless).¹⁵⁵ It is difficult to nail down the precise translation of these terms,¹⁵⁶ but the phrase *re'ût rûah* does support the view that *hebel* refers to what is futile, meaningless, or senseless. The translation followed in this commentary will be 'chasing the wind'.

3. The phrase 'under the sun'

The phrase 'under the sun' is an important phrase as it occurs 29 times in the book. Parallel expressions include 'under heaven' (1:13; 2:3; 3:1) and 'upon the earth' (8:14–16; 11:2), which occur less frequently.¹⁵⁷ A similar expression also occurs in ancient Near Eastern inscriptions in imprecations protecting the monuments of

kings. The earliest occurrence is in a twelfth-century inscription, but it also occurs twice in fifth-century Phoenician inscriptions. In the twelfth-century inscription there is an imprecation against anyone who would destroy the monument of the Elamite king Untashgal ('May his seed not prosper under the sun'). In the fifth century the imprecations are offered against anyone who would desecrate the tombs of King Tabnit and his son Eshmunazor, with the malediction that tomb robbers would have no progeny 'among the living under the sun'.¹⁵⁸ There is an emphasis on this world, the world of the living, over against the realm of the dead. This is also the meaning of the phrase in Ecclesiastes. The phrase 'under the sun' focuses attention on this world over against both the realm of the dead and the heavenly realm, which is God's domain.¹⁵⁹ It is commonly used with the Hebrew concepts 'āsāh (stressing what is done or human deeds) and 'āmāl ('work, toil'), along with the verb rā'āh ('to see'), indicating the world people experience while they are alive, the observable world of work and other human activity.¹⁶⁰

There is debate concerning whether 'under the sun' has a universal or a restrictive meaning. The universal meaning underscores the fact that Qohelet's observations include the entire world, not just a part of the world. The human condition and human experience described by Qohelet are universal.¹⁶¹ There seems to be little doubt that Qohelet would affirm that his observations about life are universal in relationship to this world. The restrictive meaning of the phrase 'under the sun' can be understood in two ways. Some restrict Qohelet's observations to 'under the sun' as a way of holding out for the possibility of a different scenario somewhere else. Kathleen A. Farmer argues that the phrase 'under the sun' opens up the possibility that there is a distinction between what happens on the earth and what happens elsewhere, particularly in the afterlife.¹⁶² Ogden notes that since

there is no lasting benefit on this earth, Qohelet may be suggesting that there is one beyond this life.¹⁶³ But understanding ‘under the sun’ in a restrictive sense does not have to point to a situation other than in this life. Fox comments that since most of the facts that Qohelet observes under the sun can hardly be imagined to exist in any other domain but human life, there is no need for him to exclude other domains of reality.¹⁶⁴ It will become clear that a resolution of the problem in another realm is not a part of Qohelet’s approach. Instead, ‘under the sun’ as a restrictive concept means that Qohelet’s thinking is limited to this earthly life and the horizons of an earthly perspective without recourse to divine revelation. God is never brought in as a solution to the problems that plague Qohelet, even when there is a clear opportunity to do so in 9:1–2.¹⁶⁵ Leupold comments that this is like drawing a horizontal line between the earthly and heavenly realities and leaving out of consideration everything above the line.¹⁶⁶ In the final analysis, the universal view and the second way of understanding the restrictive view of ‘under the sun’ virtually mean the same thing. Qohelet thus offers a realistic portrayal of a world that suffers under the curse apart from God.¹⁶⁷ This view of ‘under the sun’ reinforces the empirical epistemology of Qohelet.

4. The question of ‘gain’ and the calls to enjoyment

The key question of the book comes in 1:3: ‘What profit is there for a person in all his labour which he labours under the sun?’ The question is repeated in some form in 2:22, 3:9, and 5:16. The term for ‘profit’ (*yitrôn*) is a commercial term which refers to a surplus or gain, but it has a wider meaning in Ecclesiastes as it is used in reference to wisdom (2:13).¹⁶⁸ When two things are compared, it refers to an advantage one thing might have over another thing (2:13; 3:19; 5:9; 6:8, 11; 7:11, 12; 10:10, 11). When *yitrôn* is used

by itself it refers to any net gain that allows one to get ahead in life,¹⁶⁹ or to a desired result produced by effort or labour. The term for 'labour' (*āmāl*) also has a broad use, for it can refer specifically to labour or toil, to any activity that requires effort (8:17), or to the product of an activity (2:18).¹⁷⁰ The basic answer to the question of 1:3 comes in 2:11 where Qohelet considers all his activities and concludes that there is no profit (*yitrôn*) under the sun. This is not just a 'temperamental overreaction' or 'temporary disillusionment'¹⁷¹ but is the answer Qohelet gives to the question throughout the book. In other words, his answer does not change in the course of his argument. However, he will recognize that some things under the sun have a relative advantage over other things. For example, in 2:13–17 he argues that wisdom has an advantage (*yitrôn*) over folly, but in the long run it does not matter whether you are wise or a fool because there is no ultimate difference between them. Anything that may seem to provide a net gain or a desired result (labour, wisdom, wealth) always falls short. This includes the enjoyment that does come from labour expressed in the 'calls to enjoyment' (2:24–26; 3:12; 3:22; 5:18–20; 9:7–10). The calls to enjoyment are gifts from God (2:24; 3:13), but they are not the answer to the question of 1:3.¹⁷² Rather, they are a recognition that this is all one can expect in a world where there is no lasting benefit. Most of them end on a negative note, which emphasizes that they do not provide a net gain or a desired result. Instead of using the term *yitrôn*, some of the calls to enjoyment employ the term *hēleq*, which means 'portion or 'lot' (3:22; 5:19; 7:9). The difference between 'profit' (*yitrôn*) and 'portion' (*hēleq*) is not necessarily that the former refers to a lasting gain and the latter to a temporary gain. There are some passages where the concept 'temporary' does not work well (9:6), and in some passages the 'portion' may endure throughout life itself (9:9). As Fox notes, there

is no point in complaining that there is no enduring profit in life when man himself does not endure.¹⁷³ The ‘portion’ refers to all that one can expect in a world where human activity and effort do not achieve the desired results. Thus, even though there is no profit to labour, one should enjoy the portion that does come from labour.

5. The breakdown of the deed-consequence relationship

The reason that human activity and labour do not achieve a net gain or the desired result is that the connections between wisdom and the blessings that should result from it, and foolishness and the negative consequences that should result from it, do not work out in the world, at least not consistently enough so that one can count on it. This is a problem that Qohelet keeps coming back to in one way or another (2:15–16; 2:26; 3:16–21; 6:1–2; 7:15–18; 8:10–14; 9:1–6). There is no difference between the wise person and the fool because they suffer the same fate (2:15–16). Humans have no advantage over the animals because they also suffer the same fate (3:16–22). There is very little difference between the righteous and the wicked because being in the hand of God makes no difference to what people experience in life, for they too suffer the same fate (9:1–6).¹⁷⁴

The same fate that befalls both the righteous and the wicked in these verses is death itself, especially the manner of death, the timing of death, and the outcome of death. Although the subject of death in the Old Testament is a complex subject¹⁷⁵ and death is always considered an enemy, the Old Testament does distinguish between a good death and a bad death. In Numbers 23:10 Balaam exclaims, ‘Let me die the death of the righteous’. Such a death would be similar to the death of Abraham, who died in good old age, a man full of years (Gen. 25:8). Long life is seen as a great

blessing from God (Ps. 21:4; 61:6; 91:16) and a benefit of wisdom (Prov. 3:16). Thus death at the end of a long life does not raise questions. But there is also a bad death described in the Old Testament, which could include impending violent death, as in the case of Joab or Saul, or a sudden, premature death, as in the case of the wicked. It is premature death, or dying while one is still young, that raises questions.¹⁷⁶ The blessing of long life and the avoidance of premature death is represented in Proverbs as coming from wisdom (9:11) and from the fear of Yahweh (10:27; 14:27). Although life in Proverbs includes life beyond this earthly life,¹⁷⁷ death is discussed as a part of the deed-consequence relationship (Prov. 6:12–15; 8:34–36; 10:21, 27; 11:19; 21:16). The concept of premature death cannot be ruled out of the discussion in the book of Proverbs. For Qohelet there is little difference between the death of the wise and the fool, the righteous and the wicked, the human and the animal. As he states in 2:16: ‘How the wise dies just like the fool’. What is more, one cannot even be sure that humans and animals end up in different places after they die (3:19–21). In sum, the fact that the righteous do not receive the promised blessings in life and the wicked do not receive the expected negative consequences in life is a major reason Qohelet concludes that there is no net gain or desired result from human activity under the sun.

The identity of Qohelet and the danger of speculative wisdom

If the first-person discourse (1:12–12:7) is written from an ‘under the sun’ perspective and the third-person epilogue (12:8–14) provides the answer to Qohelet’s quest (12:13–14), why would someone present the words of Qohelet for others to read since his perspective seems so different? Waltke asks whether it is plausible that the narrator would create a fictitious figure (Qohelet) to

mouth sayings with which he disagrees.¹⁷⁸ Eaton observes that there is no other example of a wisdom document that exists in two recensions with opposite theologies.¹⁷⁹ The relationship of the epilogue to the rest of the book raises a host of issues, partly centred on how one understands 12:11–12,¹⁸⁰ but the focus here is on how 12:13–14 relates to 1:12–12:7. Although Qohelet may make statements that affirm God’s judgment (3:17) and the deed-consequence relationship (8:12b–13), he does not allow those statements to solve the problems with which he is wrestling. Such statements stand side-by-side with the problems he observes in life. Instead of allowing the theological affirmations to explain the anomalies in life, the problems Qohelet observes take centre stage without a resolution to those problems. In fact, one could argue that the problems get the last word since many times the problems frame the theological statements (8:11–14). Plus, the full *hebel* statement frames much of the book (1:2; 12:8). The epilogue, however, affirms the theological affirmations made by Qohelet and makes them the foundation of the answer to Qohelet’s search.¹⁸¹ The epilogue does not allow the problems observed by Qohelet to trump the theological affirmations. However, the epilogue goes beyond the words of Qohelet once the commandments and the fear of God are mentioned (12:13–14). The commandments of God are never mentioned by Qohelet, but the commandments mentioned in the epilogue make clear that the fear of God speaks of a reverence for God that is willing to submit to God’s ways no matter what problems one encounters in life. Also, the judgment mentioned in 12:14 includes secret elements which clearly push the judgment beyond this earthly life.¹⁸²

The reason someone would present the struggles of Qohelet and then offer a simple explanation to that struggle is that the struggle of Qohelet is a common struggle in the Old Testament. The problem

of the prosperity of the wicked or the suffering of the righteous is not an isolated problem. The prophets Jeremiah and Habakkuk wrestled with it, the whole discussion of Job with his friends centres around it, and certain psalms explore it (37; 49; 73). The warning in Ecclesiastes 12:12 may be against a speculative wisdom that allows the problems of life to dominate. It is possible that someone can lose the very foundation of wisdom itself in trying to explain those problems. The book of Proverbs lays out the foundation of wisdom as the fear of Yahweh (1:7). The short proverbial sayings in Proverbs can easily be misunderstood if one assumes a mechanical connection between deed and consequence.¹⁸³ For example, Proverbs 12:21 states, 'No ill befalls the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble'. One misunderstands this proverb if he uses it to mean that no harm ever comes to the righteous and that if someone is experiencing harm, then he must not be righteous.¹⁸⁴ This was the problem of Job's friends, who saw his suffering and concluded that he must have committed some sin for this suffering to come into his life. Psalm 73 also struggles with trying to explain the problems of life. The struggle in this psalm is a microcosm of Qohelet's struggle. Psalm 73 begins with a theological affirmation that God is good to Israel and to the pure in heart; but then the psalmist acknowledges that he almost stumbled because of the prosperity of the wicked (vv. 2–3). He goes on to describe the security and prosperity of the wicked (vv. 3–12). He then lays out some of the implications of his struggle. In many ways, these struggles parallel Qohelet's struggle. He wonders whether it has been useless to live a life of purity before God (v. 13). He talks about the anguish and the wearisome task of trying to understand this problem (v. 16). He specifically states that if he had continued down this path and had taught such things he would have betrayed God's people (v. 15). Here is the danger of speculative, doubting wisdom where

the experiences and problems of life can so dominate a person's thinking that they move away from the foundation of wisdom itself. We see a glimpse in Psalm 73 of the struggle that Qohelet is going through in Ecclesiastes. In Psalm 73 the change comes when the psalmist goes into the temple and from that renewed perspective sees the true end of the wicked. In Ecclesiastes we are pointed back to the true foundation of wisdom in 12:13–14. Such a problem was not just an OT problem; it is a human problem (see also John 9:2). For example, Rabbi Harold Kushner lost his son to leukemia and through that struggle came to the conclusion that God cannot be both all-powerful and good because if he were both all-powerful and good then such tragedies in life would not happen. He concluded that we must choose either a God who is all-powerful and not good, or a God who is good, but not all-powerful. Kushner chose to believe that God is good but not all-powerful.¹⁸⁵ The book of Ecclesiastes sets forth Qohelet's 'under the sun' struggle to show the danger of speculative, doubting wisdom and to remind God's people of the true foundation of wisdom: a reverent trust in God and his revelation.

After all this discussion the question still remains: 'Who is Qohelet?' The use of the term 'Qohelet' does seem to distance him from Solomon, unless there is an historical connection with Solomon in the use of Qohelet that has been lost. Such distance from Solomon has been explained as a literary persona or a Solomonic guise in order to present Qohelet as Solomon, although he is not really Solomon. However, the phrase 'son of David, king of Jerusalem' in the superscription of the book (1:1) and Qohelet's own identification of himself as 'king over Israel in Jerusalem' (1:12) have more in view than just a literary persona or a Solomonic guise.¹⁸⁶ The fact that such an identification occurs in the superscription of the book calls into question limiting

the Solomonic guise as king to the first couple of chapters. If the author is a king who is responsible for all of the first-person discourse,¹⁸⁷ then the Solomonic guise has actually given way to Solomon himself. One must also accept that the language situation before the exile is diverse and that Ecclesiastes is not a part of SBH, but represents one of the local dialects.¹⁸⁸ If the author really is Solomon, what better example is there of the danger of speculative wisdom, of a wisdom that loses the proper foundation? Solomon had more wisdom than anyone and he was tremendously blessed by God (1 Kings 3:10–14), but his heart was turned away from God to the worship of foreign gods by wives who did not believe in Yahweh (1 Kings 11:4–8). How does one explain what happened to Solomon? He moved away from the true foundation of wisdom and was distracted by other things. If the words of Qohelet are part of Solomon's struggle in moving away from the true foundation of wisdom, then one understands why this struggle was preserved and presented to God's people. If Solomon, who had more wisdom than anyone, fell prey to this problem, it could happen to anyone. Perhaps the name Qohelet is used to preserve the name 'Solomon' from being only identified with an embarrassing fall after such a promising rise.

Preaching and teaching Ecclesiastes

In order to preach or teach from Ecclesiastes, certain exegetical decisions have to be made on a number of issues, many of which have been covered in this Introduction. If one comes to accept the premise that Qohelet is operating from an 'under the sun' perspective throughout the first-person discourse (1:12–12:7), then preaching from the book becomes more difficult. In preaching on specific passages week-by-week, the solution is not given in those particular passages; rather, one is left with the dark, under the sun

view. Thus it becomes important that the major concepts developed in a passage are connected with an ‘above the sun’ perspective. This can be done by relating such concepts to the epilogue of the book, to other Old Testament passages, or to New Testament passages. Thus each week God’s people are not left with just an analysis of the problems of life but are pointed to the solution from other parts of Scripture. This is basically a redemptive–historical approach that regularly makes connections from the Old Testament to other parts of Scripture, especially to the New Testament. Such connections will be explored in the commentary in sections entitled Homiletical Implications.

Several factors come into play when considering how to preach through a book of the Bible, including how many weeks there are to cover the book. If there are no time constraints, there is more freedom to divide the text into preaching passages. If a preacher has only a few weeks, perhaps only key passages can be preached. In dividing a book into preaching passages it is important that complete passages are chosen. Of course, with Ecclesiastes, there are a variety of opinions as to its structure.¹⁸⁹ G. A. Wright argues that the book is well-organized, based on key phrases used throughout the book and numerical patterns he thinks he finds in the book.¹⁹⁰ On the other hand, Delitzsch despairs of finding any overall plan in the book and does not find any progress of thought in the book.¹⁹¹ Others, like Fox, recognize that the book does not progress in an orderly fashion but that it does establish one basic proposition—‘everything is *hebel*’—which gives the book its organization.¹⁹² Some argue that Ecclesiastes 6:10–12 acts as a transition between the first part (1:12–6:9) and the second part (6:13–12:7) of the first-person discourse. The first part is seen as an evaluation of Qohelet’s search and the second part is seen as Qohelet’s advice based on what he found in the first part.¹⁹³ Although there are

more imperatives in the second part of the first-person discourse, there also continues to occur the evaluative declaration of *hebel* in the second part; so a hard and fast division between evaluation and advice is not absolute.¹⁹⁴ It is better to see Qohelet offering advice throughout the first-person discourse in the calls to enjoyment and in the imperatives he uses. Wright may be correct that the first part of the book deals primarily with the vanity of human activity and the second part with the inability to understand the work of God in the world, but even this is not a hard-and-fast division, for the inability to understand what God is doing is mentioned already in 3:11. Appropriate text divisions occur wherever Qohelet makes an evaluative *hebel* judgment or issues a call to enjoyment. However, as Fox points out, many times Qohelet maintains continuity from one topic to the next, so that sometimes divisions are a matter of exegetical preference. For example, Ecclesiastes 2:1–26 could be considered a single unit or it could be divided into three units (2:1–11, 12–17, 18–26).¹⁹⁵ Although such decisions are exegetically based, there is some flexibility in determining preaching texts. To access the different ways that Ecclesiastes may be divided one need only examine the commentaries. The outline of Ecclesiastes followed in this commentary is given in the Contents section. The following division is based on the author's actual sermon series on Ecclesiastes and is given only as a possibility, and with the understanding that there are many ways one can preach through a book of the Bible, especially a book like Ecclesiastes:

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| Ecclesiastes 1:1–11 | When life does not make sense |
| Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:11 | Having it all: the search for meaning |
| Ecclesiastes 2:12–26 | The uncertainty of the future |
| Ecclesiastes 3:1–22 | God's incomprehensible world: are we no different from the animals? |
| Ecclesiastes 4:1–16 | Loneliness: it is all about me! |

- Ecclesiastes 5:1–7 Disappointment with God: unfulfilled expectations
- Ecclesiastes 5:10–6:9 Wealth: at least enjoy what you have
- Ecclesiastes 6:10–7:14 Who knows what is good?
- Ecclesiastes 7:15–29 When life is all messed up
- Ecclesiastes 8:1–17 No solutions: when the foundations of knowledge evaporate
- Ecclesiastes 9:1–12 Living under the cloud of death
- Ecclesiastes 9:13–10:20 It only takes one
- Ecclesiastes 11:1–12:8 Make use of every opportunity
- Ecclesiastes 12:8–14 When all is said and done: can it be that simple?

I

The prologue: an exploration of the nature of the world

(Ecclesiastes 1:1–11)

Before Qohelet introduces himself (1:12) in his first-person discourse (1:12–12:7) he is presented to us in a prologue which is part of the third-person frame (1:1–11; 12:8–14). The prologue consists of the superscription of the book (1:1), the motto of the book (1:2), the key question of the book (1:3), and an introductory poem (1:4–11) which reinforces the motto of the book. The purpose of the prologue is not only to introduce Qohelet but also to prepare the reader for Qohelet's message.

The superscription (Ecclesiastes 1:1)

1:1 *The words of Qohelet, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*

The superscription introduces the one who will be speaking in

1:12–12:7. It parallels other superscriptions, such as Proverbs 30:1 ('The words of Agur'), Proverbs 31:1 ('the words of Lemuel'), Jeremiah 1:1 ('The words of Jeremiah') and Amos 1:1 ('The words of Amos'), and is similar to Proverbs 1:1 ('The Proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, king of Israel'). The identity of 'Qohelet' was discussed in the Introduction. The majority of commentators argue for an association between Qohelet and Solomon but not an identification between the two,¹ but the superscription makes the connection more concrete. The parallels between the superscription of Ecclesiastes 1:1 and the other superscriptions demonstrate that more than just an association is in view. Although the term 'son' can refer to a distant descendant,² the phrase '*son of David*' always refers to a biological descendant of David when it is used in the OT.³ The phrase '*king in Jerusalem*' refers to Qohelet as the king, and not to David as the king, based on the statement of Ecclesiastes 1:12.⁴ If the royal identity is only for the sake of the argument in Ecclesiastes 2 and is not pertinent for the whole book, it is strange to identify Qohelet as the king in the superscription.⁵ Thus the superscription is identifying Qohelet with Solomon and not just making an association with Solomon.

The motto (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

1:2 'Utterly Senseless!' says Qohelet, 'Utterly Senseless! Everything is senseless.'

Several questions arise from the motto of the book. One major issue is the meaning of *hebel* and how it should be translated. In the Introduction it was argued that the best understanding of *hebel* is not on the level of time (fleeting, transience) but on the level of meaning. Within the context of meaning, *hebel* could describe

situations that are difficult to understand (enigmatic, mysterious) or situations that cannot be understood because life does not make sense. Various translations are possible within this understanding of *hebel*, including vanity (NKJV; NASB; NRSV; ESV; Delitzsch), futility (NJPS; Crenshaw), meaningless (NIV, Longman), and absurd (Fox). Each term has its limitations. The meaning of the term ‘vanity’ has shifted from that which is empty, futile, or without effect to self-pride, an excessive regard for one’s self, beauty, or possessions (as in the phrase ‘you’re so vain’).⁶ Fox argues that the terms ‘futile’ and ‘meaningless’ are not broad enough to encompass everything that *hebel* covers. In Ecclesiastes 8:14 *hebel* includes the fate of the wicked and that they receive what the righteous deserve, which does not imply any futility in their actions. Rather, *hebel* describes a situation where an action does not yield the expected result. He prefers the term ‘absurd’, which describes what is an affront to reason, which includes the disjunction between effort and result.⁷ The term ‘absurd’ is a modern term used in existentialism, but it has also changed meaning from that which is irrational, or an affront to reason, to that which is laughable or ludicrous.⁸ Fox suggests that for a popular translation the concept ‘senseless’ might work best.⁹ For the most part *hebel* is applied to situations where an action does not yield the expected results, so that these situations are not just incomprehensible or mysterious, but they do not make sense. Thus ‘*senseless*’ would be a good translation, but so would ‘futile’ or ‘meaningless’ if one keeps in mind that although some efforts may achieve some benefit in life, ultimately those efforts fail to achieve the desired results (see the discussion of wisdom in 2:12–17). Even though there may be some things in life that can be enjoyed, ultimately life does not make sense because the order of life has broken down, leaving only disconnected occurrences, which are meaningless from a human perspective.¹⁰

The motto is a summary statement of Qohelet's thought stated in an emphatic way and meant to be taken as comprehensive.¹¹ The translation 'utterly senseless' is a superlative (*hābēl hābālim*), which stresses that this statement is complete, absolute, and unqualified.¹² It represents the ultimate conclusion of Qohelet concerning life.¹³ An almost identical statement also occurs in 12:8, which forms an inclusio between 1:2 and 12:8. Everything in between these two verses takes on the character of *hebel*, which is demonstrated by how many times *hebel* is used in the body of the book to pass judgment on an activity within human experience.¹⁴

The comprehensive nature of the summary is brought out in the statement 'everything is senseless'. There is some debate on how comprehensive the term 'everything' (*kōl*) is. Lohfink, followed by Seow, wants to limit 'everything' to the question raised in 1:3, the realm of humans and their labour.¹⁵ Others want to give 'everything' a universal meaning, encompassing all that exists 'under the sun' (1:3), with only the world of the dead and heaven excluded.¹⁶ Fox notes that there are some things 'under the sun' which in themselves are not *hebel* (he lists 3:17; 7:11; 9:13–15), so that 'everything' must refer to events in their totality or to what happens in life taken as a whole.¹⁷ This view fits in with the fact that there may be some things in this life that have limited value (wisdom in 2:12–17), and there may be some things in life that can be recommended (the calls to enjoyment), but ultimately even these things fall short so that Qohelet concludes that 'everything is senseless'.

If 'everything' is limited to this world then it would seem to follow that God is exempted. Although God himself may not be in view in the expression 'everything is senseless', certainly his works are included because his works are manifested in this world (3:11).¹⁸ One of the later emphases of the book is the inability of

human beings to understand what God is doing (the works of God) ‘under the sun’ (6:12; 8:1, 17). Thus creation (1:4–8), history (1:9–11), and the order of the world, including the deed-consequence relationship, falls under the verdict ‘everything is senseless’.

The key question of the book (Ecclesiastes 1:3)

1:3 *What profit is there for a person¹⁹ in all his labour at which he labours under the sun?*

The question in 1:3 is the programmatic question of the book, which sets out the fundamental problem that Qohelet sets out to answer.²⁰ The question also occurs later in the book at 2:22, 3:9, and 5:11. There are several key concepts in the question which affect the meaning and tone of the question. The term for ‘profit’ (*yitrôn*) is a commercial term which refers to a surplus or gain, but it has a wider meaning in Ecclesiastes, as it is used in reference to wisdom (2:13).²¹ When two things are compared it refers to an advantage one thing might have over another thing (2:13; 3:19; 5:8; 6:8, 11; 7:11, 12; 10:10, 11). When *yitrôn* is used by itself it refers to any net gain that allows one to get ahead in life,²² or to a desired result produced by effort or labour. The term for ‘labour’ (*āmāl*) has strong negative connotations. It is used in the Old Testament with terms that are extremely negative, such as ‘trouble’ (Num. 23:21; Job 4:8; Prov. 24:2), ‘wrong’ (Hab. 1:13) and ‘toil’ (Jer. 20:18 in parallel with “sorrow”). Thus *āmāl* is not just work but it is hard labour.²³ It is also clear in Ecclesiastes that *āmāl* is not limited to work, but can refer to any activity that requires effort (8:17), or to the product of an activity (2:18).²⁴ Finally, the focus of the question concerns human activity ‘under the sun’. This phrase limits the search for ‘profit’ to the realm of human activity. It also functions as a limiting

concept keeping Qohelet's search for meaning within the horizons of this earthly life, which means he does not use the theological affirmations he makes concerning God to solve the problems with which he is wrestling (see the discussion of 'under the sun' in the Introduction). Human beings work hard in life and Qohelet wonders whether any human effort, as strenuous as it may be, leads to a desired result or a net gain that allows one to get ahead in life.

The question of Ecclesiastes 1:3 is not only a key question for the book of Ecclesiastes, but it is also an important question in the wisdom literature, especially the book of Proverbs (12:11; 14:23).²⁵ It is interesting to compare Ecclesiastes 1:3 with Proverbs 14:23. The first part of the proverb reads, 'In all labour (*'eṣeḥ*) there is profit (*môṭār*)'. Both passages use the concept of 'profit' with 'labour'. Concerning 'profit', there is a linguistic connection between *yitrôn* (1:3) and *môṭār* (Prov. 14:23) because both come from *ytr*. Also, the terms for labour are similar in meaning, for they both have in view the difficult aspect of labour. The term '*āmāl*' (1:3) refers to arduous and strained effort (Deut. 26:7; Ps. 107:12). The term '*eṣeḥ*' (Prov. 14:23) can refer to both physical pain (Gen. 3:16; 1 Chr. 4:9–10) and mental pain (Gen. 6:6; 1 Sam. 20:3; Isa. 63:10; Ps. 78:40), and it is used in Isaiah 14:3 in a series of words, including 'hard service' (*hā'ābōdāh haqqāsāh*). Thus, Proverbs 14:23 uses a word that stresses the difficult aspect of labour to say that even though work is difficult, there is profit to it. Qohelet also uses a word that stresses the difficult aspect of labour, but he questions whether such labour produces any profit. It will become clear that he does not answer this question the same way that Proverbs 14:23 answers the question, which supports the idea that Qohelet is wrestling with traditional wisdom teaching in light of his experience.

An introductory poem: the wonder of creation or the futility of effort? (Ecclesiastes 1:4–11)

Not everyone agrees that this section is poetry. Longman denies that it is poetry because it lacks the heightened presence of traits that define Hebrew poetry, such as parallelism, terseness, and word plays.²⁶ Krüger, on the other hand, calls these verses ‘poetically stylized’ because he sees parallelism at work.²⁷ Murphy divides this section into poetry (1:4–7) with a prose commentary (1:8–11).²⁸ Although not everyone will agree on the relationship between prose and poetry because the relationship between the two is fluid,²⁹ most designate this section as poetry.³⁰

There is also debate concerning the meaning of the description of the world in this section. Whybray calls 1:5–7 ‘the wonders of nature’ and Lohfink understands the poem as expressing praise to the cosmos as splendid and eternal.³¹ Whybray argues that the point of 1:5–7 is not the futility of the actions but the regularity of the actions.³² The point of 1:9 is that these cycles are self-contained.³³ Others argue that the point of the poem is to show the transitory nature of all things on the earth, which is usually contrasted with the permanence of the earth itself.³⁴

A negative view of Ecclesiastes 1:4–11 sees the description of nature in 1:5–7 as describing the futility of the endless actions of the natural phenomena: a constant movement with no discernible purpose.³⁵ The concept is not just repetition, because 1:8 describes the realm of human activity as not achieving its purpose. The mouth, eyes, and ears do not just repeat their actions, but fail in their actions.³⁶ History itself is going nowhere (1:9–11). The futility of events in this world fits with the view expressed in the motto (1:2) and the key question (1:3) of the book. Whybray’s positive assessment is partly based on his view that 1:4–8 is unconnected to 1:2–3, which he sees as an attempt by the editor to summarize

Qohelet's teaching. It is better to see a connection between these verses. The motto (1:2) is a summary statement of Qohelet's thought: everything is senseless or futile. The key question (1:3) raises the issue of whether or not there is any profit to human labour. The answer to the question becomes apparent in the opening poem which describes the futility of events under the sun, including the actions connected to creation, humans, and history. If the mighty efforts of nature can achieve nothing new, surely human labour is also futile. Fox states, 'After 1:2, 1:4–7 cannot be a celebration of the glorious stability of the natural order.'³⁷ Thus the opening poem reinforces the theme of the whole book.

The futility of the natural world (Ecclesiastes 1:4–7)

1:4 *A generation goes and a generation comes but³⁸ the earth remains forever.*

1:5 *The sun rises³⁹ and the sun sets and it pants toward its place. There it rises again.*

1:6 *Going to the south and circling to the north, round and round goes the wind; the wind continues its circling around.*

1:7 *All the streams flow to the sea but the sea is never full. To the place where the streams flow, they continue to flow.*

This section emphasizes the cyclical nature of events on the earth in order to demonstrate the futility of those cyclical processes. The word 'generation' (*dôr*) refers to human generations in other parts of Scripture (Gen. 9:12; 15:16; 17:7; Exod. 3:15). Although *dôr* can refer to periods of time without any reference to human

life,⁴⁰ in this passage the focus is on the going and coming of human generations, which are contrasted with the permanence of ‘the earth’.⁴¹ Although the fleeting nature of these generations in contrast with the permanence of the earth is part of the meaning of 1:4, the emphasis in the whole section is on the contrast between the cyclical movement of events on the earth and the permanence of the earth.⁴² The participles of 1:4 stress repeated activity. Thus 1:4 presents the cyclical, repeating pattern of generations going and coming in contrast to the permanence of the earth.

In 1:5–7 the focus shifts from human generations to natural phenomena (1:5 speaks of the sun, 1:6 of the wind, and 1:7 of the streams). Not only do participles dominate these verses, but the participles *hōtēk* and *bō*’ are common, stressing the continuous nature of the activities. Also, the futility of the repeating, cyclical processes becomes apparent in these verses. 1:5 describes the continual rising and setting of the sun. The meaning of the verb ‘pants’ (*šō’ēp*), which describes the sun’s movement, is debated. It can have the positive meaning of longing or desire (Ps. 119:131; Job 7:2), which would mean that the sun eagerly moves toward its next appearance.⁴³ However, this verb can also have the connotation of a weary panting (Isa. 42:14; Jer. 2:24). Then the idea would be that the sun has a monotonous, exhausting task to complete, which entails a strenuous panting to reach its destination.⁴⁴ One’s decision will be determined by how one understands this passage as a whole, but the negative idea is supported by the Septuagint (‘drags’, *helkō*) and the Targum (‘crawls’, *štyp*).⁴⁵

1:6 describes the blowing of the wind, as it goes round and round and round. Several things in this verse emphasize the monotonous nature of this activity. The use of participles stresses the continuous, round and round nature of the blowing of the wind. These participles use a long ‘o’ vowel, the repetition of which gives the

verse a howling or mournful effect.⁴⁶ Also, the subject of 1:6 is delayed. In 1:4 the subject stands first, in 1:5 it stands second, but in 1:6 it does not come until after five participles. The effect of withholding the subject and the use of the participles ((*sôbēb* occurs three times, twice in a row) makes the verse deliberately drawn-out and monotonous, which reinforces the impression of weariness.⁴⁷ The movement of the wind in circles also gives the impression of much action with little consequence.⁴⁸

1:7 describes the continual flowing of the streams into the sea. Whybray comments that the cyclical movement of the water is not futile: the constant flow and redistribution of the water over the earth is a wonderful and beneficial phenomenon.⁴⁹ However, nothing is said about what is accomplished by the flowing of the streams into the sea. 1:7 only mentions that the continual flowing of the streams into the sea does not have any effect because the sea is not full.⁵⁰ Thus the activity is futile because it does not produce anything. No advantage is gained.⁵¹

The futility of the activity of the natural world in 1:4–7 can be seen when it is compared with other passages of Scripture which speak of the purposeful nature of these activities. In Psalm 19:5 the sun goes forth as a strong man running a race, full of vigour, reflecting the glory of God. But in Ecclesiastes 1:5 the sun ‘*pants*’ along, tired and weary. In Psalm 104:3–4 God rides on the wings of the wind as he directs the wind as his messenger to accomplish his purposes. But in Ecclesiastes 1:6 the wind goes round and round and round in monotonous repetition with no purpose stated. In Psalm 104:10–11 the rivers are sent forth with the purpose of giving drink to the animals and causing the grass to grow for the cattle. But in Ecclesiastes 1:7 the rivers are on a futile run as they flow into the sea but the sea is not full. Thus Ecclesiastes 1:4–7 is a demonstration of the motto that everything is futile.

The futility of the human world (Ecclesiastes 1:8-11)

1:8 *All things are weary.*

No one⁵² is able to express it.

No eye is satisfied with seeing.

No ear is fulfilled from hearing.

1:9 *Whatever⁵³ has been is what will be*

and whatever has been done is what will be done.

There is nothing new under the sun.

1:10 *Suppose⁵⁴ there is something about which someone says,*

'See this is new.'

It already existed in ancient times

which were before us.

1:11 *There is no remembrance of former things,*

nor also of later things which will come.

There will be no memory for these things

among⁵⁵ those who will come afterward.

In Ecclesiastes 1:8 the natural world is left behind in order to focus on the human world. The first statement in 1:8, '*all things are weary*', is a transitional statement. Although the phrase '*all things*' could be translated 'all words',⁵⁶ it is better to understand the phrase as summarizing what has gone before and anticipating the emphasis on speaking in the next clause. This also leaves three parallel clauses for the rest of the verse, which deal with speaking, seeing, and hearing.

Some commentators understand 1:8 to be very positive. Whybray explains the verse as expressing the overwhelming effect of the ceaseless activity of natural phenomena on the observer; that is, they

leave him speechless. The eye and the ear are not able to take in what they perceive.⁵⁷ Hubbard sees 1:8 to be describing the mystery inherent in creation: a person cannot describe it in words, an eye cannot see it clearly enough to be satisfied, and an ear cannot be filled with hearing about it.⁵⁸

An important word in 1:8 is the adjective translated ‘weary’ (*yēgē’īm*). Ogden comments that apart from the translation of this word with the connotation of weariness, there is no reason to take these verses as expressing a negative view of futility.⁵⁹ The adjective is related to the root *ygē’*, which can mean ‘labour’ (Josh. 24:13; Prov. 23:4) or ‘weary’ (2 Sam. 23:10; Ps. 6:6; Isa. 43:22). Although it is possible that 1:8 may be expressing the labour or *exertion* of ‘all things’ in the sense of ceaseless activity,⁶⁰ the burden of proof falls on those who would omit the aspect of weariness from this adjective. The other uses of this adjective mean ‘weary’ (Deut. 25:18; 2 Sam. 7:12), and the related word *yēgē’a’* (12:12) is understood by many to express the idea of that which is ‘weary’.⁶¹

If one understands 1:8 to refer to ceaseless repetition in nature, then the assertions concerning speaking, seeing, and hearing refer to the fact that these activities are also endless. Just as the sea is never full, the eye always sees things, the ear always hears things, the mouth continues to speak. They are never full.⁶² However, the context and the meaning of *yēgē’īm* as ‘weary’ points to the futility of these activities. In describing the continuous, futile activity of the natural world in 1:4–7, only one negative was used (1:7). However, in describing the human world of experience in 1:8, three negatives are used. In relationship to speech, no one is able to express the true condition of futility and weariness that characterizes the world. In light of the rest of the book of Ecclesiastes, the idea is that no one is able to speak meaningfully about the world (8:17); in other words, human words never achieve their purpose.⁶³ The same idea is

expressed in relationship to the eyes and ears. The eyes and the ears never achieve a final goal or result.⁶⁴ The eye would be satisfied if it had no desire to see more and the ear would be filled if it had no desire to hear more, which would be a result of being satisfied with one's interaction with the world of experience. As Qohelet will argue later in the book, there is no real answer to the futilities of life. Thus 1:8 seems to be a judgment on the empirical possibilities of human knowledge, which are limited and always fall short.⁶⁵

Natural phenomena and the human experience of speech, sight, and sound have been examined, and in 1:9–11 history comes into view. The keynote of these verses is that *'there is nothing new under the sun'*. Some try to understand this expression in a positive way. Whybray argues that the parallel between nature and human life is an indication of the limitations with which people must live their lives 'as an integral part of the whole "work of God"'.⁶⁶ Lohfink takes 'new' (*hāḏāš*) as a negative word. In a world of unending duration and return, what is 'new' could only be worse than what exists; it may even describe what is wicked. Thus the statement 'there is nothing new under the sun' is a negative formulation of a universal triumph.⁶⁷

However, it is difficult to give the expression 'there is nothing new under the sun' a positive meaning. The emphasis in 1:9–11 is on 'a paralyzing repetition of the past'. The two-fold repetition of 'whatever' in 1:9 reinforces the claim of recurrent phenomena.⁶⁸ The use of 'already', 'ancient times', and the double use of the verb 'to be' (translated 'has been') in 1:10, in response to the possibility that something is new, stresses the entrenchment of the past and the impossibility of something new occurring in the future. The fact that something seems new is due to the faulty faculties of human 'memory' (1:11). Thus history is going nowhere and individuals are destined to live lives that never achieve fulfilment.⁶⁹ Such a

view contrasts with other teaching in the OT, where history is seen as controlled by God and moving toward a goal.⁷⁰ The word ‘memory’ is used to mark memorable events in Israel’s history (Exod. 12:14; Josh. 4:7). If there is no memory, then the anchor of the past is lost.⁷¹ The possibility of something new is seen in the exhortations to sing a new song (Ps. 96:1), the possibility of a new covenant (Jer. 31:31), and the prospect of a new heavens and a new earth (Isa. 65:17).⁷² To say ‘there is nothing new under the sun’ negates these possibilities and demonstrates an ‘under the sun’ perspective, which stands in sharp contrast to the flow of redemptive history in the OT.

Homiletical implications

One of the key words of Ecclesiastes, *hebel*, is translated in the Septuagint as *mataiotēs*, which is the term used in Romans 8:20 to describe the subjection of creation to futility. The creation groans as it waits to be set free from the bondage of decay. Ecclesiastes 1:1–11 sets forth a similar viewpoint. Qohelet gives a true assessment of the world from an ‘under the sun’ perspective without the hope expressed in Romans 8. There is no doubt that he describes a world struggling under the effects of the curse, but his limited earthly perspective keeps him from affirming various answers that other Scriptures offer. Thus his view of the activities of creation (sun, wind, streams) and his view of history is very different from the rest of Scripture. Qohelet sounds very modern because he describes the despair of a world that has no purpose and is going nowhere. However, the futility to which creation has been subjected can be overcome. Creation itself is eagerly awaiting freedom from bondage, just as the sons of God, although groaning inwardly, are eagerly waiting for the redemption of their bodies (Rom. 8:18–25). Futility will not have the last word because Jesus has taken upon himself our

sin, the curse, and the futility of life.⁷³ We have seen the power of the new creation in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and have experienced what it is to be a new creature through the firstfruits of the Spirit. We are able to see beyond the earthly horizon of this world to the light of the glory of the new heavens and the new earth. When that day comes the former things, which in context refers to the troubles of life, will not be remembered (Isa. 65:16–17).