3-1-1964

A Study of Ecclesiastes

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Recommended Citation

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Among the books of the Bible Qoheleth[1] has the distinction of being the most distrusted by the pious but best liked by the skeptic. It is disturbing to acknowledge that a sacred book has pleased the agnostic or the pessimist more than it has edified the saint. The range of opinion regarding origin and purpose of the book is vast. Indeed, to recount and evaluate even the major theories would require a separate study.[2] The following is an attempt to present only one interpretation of Qoheleth and his world.

DIALECT

Qoheleth employs certain grammatical and lexical features which do not occur elsewhere in the Old Testament. The use of the absolute infinitive followed by a personal pronoun to express a past action is shared in the Bible only with Esther, but it is a common feature in Ugaritic and Phoenician.[3] The phrase "shadow of silver"

occurs in Ugaritic also, thus obviating the supposed Aramaism.[4] The person who collects religious revenues is called "angel," or simply "messenger." Dahood has observed that in Phoenician this term is a correlative of "priest."[5]

These and many other cogent parallels to Phoenician and Ugaritic passages have been collected by Dahood.[6] Those based on precise correspondences (without emendation of the text) carry the conviction that Qoheleth's dialect is closer to the "Canaanite" than most of the other Biblical books.

The major textual variants are ascribed by Dahood to errors in copying from a *Vorlage* which lacked all *matres lectionis*. Since he assumed that the book was written in the "fourth-third century B.C.," he believed that the original must have followed the Phoenician pattern of orthography, which was the only Canaanite system

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[1] The writer's title, *Qôheleth*, has been used throughout because it more closely approximates a personal cognomen. References to the book, however, use the title familiar to English readers, Ecclesiastes.

[2] Cf. the introduction by O. S. Rankin, *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), V, 3—14.

[3] Always with a past meaning. Eccl. 4:2 (cf. Esther 3:13; 9:1). Phoenician examples: Kilamuwa I, 7 f.; Azitiwadi I, 13, 17, 18, 20;

II, 18, et al. Ugaritic: Text 49:I, 25; II, 13; text 52:68—71. Cf. J. Friedrich, *Phönizisch-Punische Grammatik* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1951), p. 133, n. 1; C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Manual* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1955), p. 64.

[4] Eccl. 7:12; Ugaritic text 51:II, 27. Cf. H. L. Ginsberg, *Studies in Koheleth* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), p. 22; C. H. Gordon, "North Israelite Influence on Post-exilic Hebrew," *Israel Exploration Journal*, V, 85.

[5] Phoenician *Ma'asub* insc., 2, 3. G. A. Cook, *A Textbook of North Semitic Inscriptions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), p. 48. Cf. also Mal. 2:7, where *kôbēn* is parallel to *mal'ākh*. M. J. Dahood, "Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth," *Biblica*, XXXIII (1952), 207.

[6] Ibid., pp. 201—21.

of that period lacking vowel letters.[7] However, most of his examples involve plural subjects with singular verbs, a matter of final vowels. But these may be due simply to a syntactical peculiarity.[8]

It is interesting to note that the relative pronoun most used in Phoenician at this time almost always had a prothetic *alef*, which is absent in Qoheleth.[9] If he lived and wrote in Phoenicia, it is strange that such a commonplace detail of Phoenician morphology would escape him. Qoheleth's form also occurs in Joshua, Judges, Canticles, and in a few other passages, all of which might be ascribed to North Israelite origins. Dialectically, Qoheleth has a striking tie-in with Esther; to wit, the absolute infinitive plus personal pronoun to express the past tense.[10] At any rate, the parallels to Ugaritic and Phoenician show quite decisively that Qoheleth's book is not a translation from Aramaic.[11]

Gordon has suggested, on the basis of these linguistic similarities among several post-exilic books, that they represent the dialect of the northern Israelite tribes, carried by them to Mesopotamia and Persia only to appear in the Old Testament canon at a later date. The books of this period which reflect strong Canaanite affinities are Chronicles, Esther, and Qoheleth.[12] The chronicler no doubt lived in Judea; the unknown author of Esther reveals an intimate knowledge of the Persian court and customs. Since neither of these linguistically similar writings came from Phoenicia, it is unnecessary to assume that Qoheleth did either. The Canaanitisms may be northern Hebraisms and permit an alternative suggestion if other evidence should warrant it.

MILIEU

The commercial atmosphere which pervades Qoheleth's work is amply demonstrated by Dahood. He lists 29 of the most prominent business terms used in the book. To these should be added two interesting nouns from 12:12. Dahood has observed that *spr* and *hg* occur in parallelism in Ugaritic.[13] Therefore, he is doubtless correct in rejecting the existence of a noun *lhg* in this context.[14] Taking a cue from him, one may render the verse: "Of making many accounts there is no end, and much reckoning (checking ledgers?) is weariness to the flesh." The Septuagint rendering accords well with this interpretation.[15] Margoliouth had observed long ago that certain Neo-Hebraisms, including the term for "business," do not occur in Qoheleth.[16] Therefore he felt the book must have been written before 250 B.C.

Some of the mercantile expressions in

[7] Ibid., p. 43.

[8] Cf. E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, trans. and rev. A. E. Cowley, 2d Eng. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), p. 11 (2h).

[9] Phoenician *'š*; Old Hebrew *ša* (Genesis, Judges), otherwise *še* (also Moabite) = Akkad. *ša*. Used like Hebrew *"ašer*, Friedrich, p. 51.

[10] Esther 3:13; 9:1; Gordon, *IEJ*, V, 86.

[11] Cf. Ginsberg, pp. 16—39.

[12] Gordon, *IEJ*, V, 87, 88.

[13] Kret, 90, 91: "*hpt* troops which are without counting; *tnn* troops which are without reckoning."

[14] Dahood, p. 219.

[15] *s^efārim = biblia*, which means "accounts" in Hellenistic papyri. Cf. J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd., 1930), p. 110. *lahag = melētē*, "practice, consideration."

[16] D. S. Margoliouth, "Ecclesiastes, Book of," *Jewish Encyclopaedia*, V, 32.

Qoheleth have striking Akkadian proto-types. For example, Gordon has noted that *'āmāl*, a key word in the sage's discourse, has the same usage as Akkadian *nēmelu*, viz., "profit, property, substance," rather than "labor" as in the English versions.[17] This is clear in 2:18, where *'āmāl* is something that can be left to someone else. It must signify tangible stuff. The idiom "Money answers everything"[18] appears strange in a Hebrew context but corresponds perfectly with Mesopotamian usage. The Akkadian word meaning "to answer" also signifies the act of paying for something, that is, satisfying a financial obligation.[19] The possible Hebrew cognate for the Akkadian indefinite pronoun, meaning "something," is used to signify (with the negative) a man's loss of all his property[20] in an expression which carried an Akkadian flavor.[21] Another term for "property," used twice by Qoheleth[22] (and only twice more in the Hebrew Old Testament),[23] must be Mesopotamian in origin because it is apparently a Sumerian loan word.[24] The word is also known in Bib-lical Aramaic[25] and other related dialects.[26] One Phoenician occurrence in the feminine gender is cited by Harris.[27] In Eccl. 2:8 Qoheleth uses a common Semitic term for royal "wealth" which, though used inter-nationally, occurs in the Old Testament only with reference to Israel as God's "possession," with the exception of this passage and one other post-exilic refer-ence.[28]

Special note must be taken of *yithrōn*, which appears in Qoheleth alone of the Hebrew Old Testament books.[29] Its root is Common Semitic, meaning "to remain, be left over," and the Akkadian (also the Aramaic) adjective signifies something "ex-traordinary."[30] It was pointed out long ago by Genung that this word expresses a pivotal idea of the whole book.[31] The customary English rendering, "profit," fails to reflect Qoheleth's conception. In 1:3

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[17] Gordon, *IEJ*, V, 87.

[18] Eccl. 10:19.

[19] Cf. *Codex Hammurapi, apālu*, "to answer," col. XXI, line 98; XXIII, 71, et al.

[20] Eccl. 5:13, 14; *me'ûmâ = mimmû*.

[21] Cf. Br. Mus. text 84-2-11, 165: *mimmâ ina qātiya lā muššurā*, "Nothing at all has been left in my hand," cited by M. Muss-Arnolt, *A Concise Dictionary of the Assyrian Language* (Berlin: Reuther and Reichard, 1905), p. 564b. *Codex Hammurapi*, col. VII, 1, 2; XII, 32, 43; et al. Cf. also Deut. 24:10.

[22] *nekhāsîm*; Eccl. 5:18; 6:2.

[23] Joshua 22:8; 2 Chron. 1:11 f.

[24] *nik(k)as(s)u*, from Sumerian NIG.SIT, "account," i. e. NIG, "property," plus SIT, "to count," according to G. R. Driver and J. C. Miles, *The Babylonian Laws*, II, 196.

[25] Ezra 6:8; 7:26.

[26] W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, ed. L. Koehler (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1951), p. 1100.

[27] *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, 3783, "And any man who steals a gift that is the *property* of Tanit the face of Baal," cited by Z. S. Harris, *A Grammar of the Phoenician Language* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1936), p. 124.

[28] *segullâ*, 1 Chron. 29:3; Koehler, s. v. Note Deut. 14:2, et al., where Israel is God's "property" (KJV, "peculiar people"). In a Meso-potamian context *sugullu* is usually a herd of cattle or horses.

[29] Eccl. 1:3; 2:11,13; 3:9; 5:8,15; 7:12; 10:10,11.

[30] Aramaic *yattir*, Dan. 2:31; Akkad. *(w)a-tru*, Friedrich Delitzsch, *Assyrisches Handwörterbuch* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich'sche Buchhand-lung, 1896), s. v.

[31] J. F. Genung, *Words of Koheleth* (Bos-ton: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1904), pp. 20, 214 f.

it is contrasted with *'āmāl* (usually trans-
lated "toil"), which has already been shown
to mean "profit." His question is: "What
is the *real* profit in profit?" Is there a re-
ward in life which exceeds the mere ac-
cumulation of material substance? Perhaps
"benefit" would be a better rendering. His
meaning is clearly seen in 10:11, where
there is no "benefit" to be derived from
snake charming if the viper has already
struck. One obscure passage for which an
explanation may be ventured is 5:9. In
spite of many injustices in government,
"There is a *benefit* in all of this, a king is
served for the field." People served the
king, and in turn the king maintained law
and order. The central authority regulated
the water supply and other aspects of
agriculture which made it possible for the
peasant to till his land unmolested. This
is typical of Mesopotamian society,[32] and
this pithy maxim was probably often ut-
tered by the farmers.

Other details of the social order have
Mesopotamian affinities. Qoheleth alone
of all the Biblical writers used the term
"villein." [33] Dahood noted its occurrence
as a proper name in Phoenician, but it is
far more prominent as the designation of
a distinct social class in Akkadian society.[34]
Besides bureaucracy,[35] which would aptly

describe some aspects of life under the
Persians, another type of political structure
existed as well, viz., feudalism. The Great
King was served by local kings, who in
turn were surrounded by warrior nobles
and paid for their services in grants of
arable land. This institution of *ilku*, known
under the Hellenistic monarchs as the
cleruchy, existed for over two millenia in
the ancient Near East. Those who held
a land grant in exchange for *ilku* were
required "to go" *(alāku)* on the missions
and expeditions of their liege lord.[36] An
intensive participle of the cognate Hebrew
verb, "to go," occurs only twice in the
Old Testament. The first passage defines it
by parallelism as "an armed man." [37] The
second, in Qoheleth, is admittedly ob-
scure.[38] Nevertheless, on the basis of the
foregoing, it might not be idle to hazard
the following interpretation of the passage
and its context:

> Better is a wise peasant youth than an old
> and foolish king who can no longer be
> advised; because he (the youth) had come

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[32] Cf. Henry Rawlinson, *The Cuneiform
Inscriptions of Western Asia* (London: n. p.,
1891), V, 56:10, in which the inhabitants of
a free state established *(ukin)* a king: *ana atri
ḫamat ša šākin* ᵐᵃᵗ*Namar*, "for extraordinary
assistance of the governor of Namar," cited by
Delitzsch, pp. 249, 281.

[33] *miskēn*, Eccl. 4:13; 9:15 f.

[34] *muškēnu*, a person of less than full citi-
zenship whose legal status is specifically defined,
e. g., *Codex Hammurapi*, references in Driver,
II, 391b.

[35] Eccl. 5:8, 9.

[36] Note *Enuma Elish*, IV, 69, where *ilāni
rēšūšu = ālikū idīšu*, "the gods, his helpers, go-
ing at his side"; and *Sennacherib* (Chicago
Prism), VI, 26, *ālikūt idīšu*, "those who go at
his side," viz., the junior allies. Cf. W. von
Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (Wies-
baden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1959), p. 32.

[37] *'iš māgēn*, Prov. 6:11. Cf. Ugaritic *ḫlk* in
Kret, 92, where it is parallel to *tls, ḫpt, tnn,* and
ḫdd, all of which apparently describe various
types of soldiers. The service rendered by the
ilku holder was apparently corvée or financial
rather than military (*The Assyrian Dictionary*
[Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University
of Chicago, 1956—], VII, 80). Note Aramaic
ḫᵃlākh, Ezra 4:13, 20; 7:24; Driver ltr. 8:5,
frag. 8:1, which is vocalized as though it were
an Akkadian infinitive. (G. R. Driver, *Aramaic
Documents of the Fifth Century B. C.* [Oxford:
Clarendon Press, 1957], p. 70).

[38] Eccl. 4:15; note context vv. 13-16.

out of prison to rule, since he had been born poor in his own kingdom. I saw all the living, the vassals, under the sun with that youth, the successor who would stand in his (the king's) place, over all of whom he was in leadership.[39] Yet succeeding generations will not rejoice in him.

Could this be a parody of Darius' usurpation? He was of less than royal rank, may have been in jeopardy under the Magian due to his loyalty to Cambyses, and could not have gained the throne without the aid of the feudal lords. Gaumata was more popular than the Behistun inscription would have one believe, and Darius was later tagged "the huckster" for his oppressive fiscal policies.[40]

Thus Qoheleth would appear to be rooted in the commercial tradition of Mesopotamian society. Large numbers of Israelites were settled there by the Assyrians, and the captives from Judah followed over a century later. Jeremiah told them to settle down and contribute to the prosperity of their new home.[41] Many Jewish names are known in the Murashu tablets from Nippur.[42] The clients of the sons of Murashu comprised a diverse mixture of ethnic elements. Though it is not certain

that the illustrious proprietors of that business house were Jewish, their transacting business on Jewish holidays does not preclude that possibility. Consider the Jerusalemites who were willing to trade with Phoenician merchants on the Sabbath.[43] One can make a good case for ascribing the Babylonian banking house of Egibi to Jewish origin.[44]

References to sacrifice and temple worship[45] are often construed as evidence of a Palestinian provenance for Qoheleth. However, the exiles of Ezekiel's day were equally concerned with things ritual, and during the restoration wealthy Jews of Babylonia sent a delegation to Jerusalem with money donated to the temple cause.[46] The Jewish colony at Elephantine, the extreme opposite end of the Persian Empire, even had their own priesthood and temple long before the invasion of Cambyses.[47]

The Code of Hammurapi provides a convenient, though not exclusive source for Mesopotamian illumination of Qoheleth. Its special relevance to the Persian period consists in the fact that it had been carried off to Susa as a prize of war, and it was widely known in Mesopotamia through other copies in circulation. Studies of ancient Persian sources indicate that the code received a new lease on life from Darius.

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[39] Cf. *Sennacherib* (Chicago Prism), IV, 2, *anāku . . . pānuššun aṣbat*, "I took the lead (in front of them)."

[40] For a complete discussion of the problem with references, cf. A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 107—10.

[41] Jer. 29.

[42] H. V. Hilprecht and A. T. Clay, *Business Documents of Murašu Sons of Nippur* (vol. IX, *The Babylonian Expedition of the University of Pennsylvania;* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1898), pp. 27, 28. Cf. also Clay's introduction in vol. X, same series, and his *Light on the Old Testament from Babel* (Philadelphia: The Sunday School Times Co., 1907), pp. 404 ff.

[43] Neh. 13:15-22; cf. T. Fish, "The Murashu Tablets," *Documents from Old Testament Times*, ed. D. W. Thomas (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1958), p. 96.

[44] Egibi = Jacob (?); Olmstead, p. 192.

[45] Eccl. 5:1-7.

[46] Zech. 6:9-15.

[47] A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B. C.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), No. 30, line 13.

When he codified the laws for his empire, Hammurapi's spirit pervaded his edicts.[48]

DATE AND AUTHORSHIP

The Persian loanword for "decree"[49] and the absence of any Greek influence in the vocabulary both serve to support the supposition of an eastern origin.[50] Even the expression "under the sun," though often ascribed to Greek or Phoenician influence,[51] has been found to be typical of Elamite also.[52] There is much in favor and nothing against the assumption that Qoheleth wrote his book in Achaemenian Mesopotamia before Alexander the Great. Beyond his familiarity with the business climate of that area and his enigmatic title, Qoheleth, nothing can be said about his identity.[53] But it is his attitude to that world that is the permanent value of his work.

LITERARY CHARACTER

Qoheleth is rightly classed among the Wisdom writers of the Ancient East. Affinities with the Egyptian branch of that literature are manifold.[54] His disgust with a topsy-turvy society is anticipated by Ipu-wer (ca. 2100 B.C.).[55] That God is the author of a man's financial state is affirmed by Ptah-hotep (ca. 2400 B.C.).[56] If the passage in Eccl. 12:3-7 be construed as an allegory on old age, then a more concrete description of the same thing from Ptah-hotep should also be compared.[57] Man's confrontation with the life-death mystery, so frequently pondered by Qoheleth,[58] seems to echo the sad refrains of the Harpist's lament.[59]

The inscription on the tomb of Petosiris (ca. 300 B.C.)[60] reflects sentiments like those in Eccl. 9:7-9. Here is a formula for facing life. A man must accept the present, the future is in the hands of God. The most *impressive literary parallel* to this same passage is the advice of the barmaid to Gilgamesh.[61] Mesopotamian affinities are also seen in the admonitions towards reverence of a king,[62] which bear a notable similarity to a passage in the sayings of Aḥiqar.[63] This latter text is all the more interesting because Aḥiqar, though appearing in Aramaic in the earliest preserved manuscript, gives many indications that it was originally written in Akkadian.[64]

[48] Olmstead, pp. 120—28.

[49] *pithgām*, Eccl. 8:11; Esther 1:20.

[50] Gordon, *IEJ*, V, 87.

[51] Greek ὑφ' ἡλίου; Phoen. *Tabnit*, 7 f.; *Esmunezer*, 12.

[52] J. Friedrich, "Altpersisches und Elamisches," *Orientalia*, XVIII, 28, 29.

[53] *Qôheleth*, qal fem. pt., from the root *qbl*, "to assemble."

[54] Cf. Rankin, pp. 15 f.

[55] Eccl. 9:11; 10:7; "The Admonitions of Ipu-wer," trans. J. A. Wilson, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. J. B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), pp. 441 ff.

[56] "The Instruction of the Vizier Ptah-hotep," trans. J. A. Wilson, op. cit., p. 413; cf. Eccl. 3:13; 5:18, 19.

[57] Ibid., p. 412.

[58] Eccl. 2:24; 3:12, 13; 5:17; 9:7-9; 11:7-9.

[59] Trans. Wilson, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 467.

[60] G. Lefèbvre, *Le tombeau de Pétosiris* (Le Caire: Imprimerie de l'Institute Francais d'Archéologie Orientale, 1924), I, 161.

[61] "The Epic of Gilgamesh," trans. E. A. Speiser, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 90.

[62] Eccl. 8:2-4.

[63] "The Words of Aḥiqar," trans. H. L. Ginsberg, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, pp. 428, 429.

[64] Cowley, pp. 205—7.

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It should not be thought freakish that a book with Qoheleth's apparent "secularism" should arise among the exiles of Mesopotamia. At the Elephantine garrison the Jews never make a reference to the Law of Moses, nor do they seem to have possessed copies of the Sacred Scriptures.[65] Yet they did have a copy of Aḥiqar's proverbs. So it would seem that for many Jews of the Persian diaspora international wisdom books were the main religious literature.

The work must now be considered as a book. As to those who would dissect it into several pieces and assign each fragment to an author of a special temperament (pessimist, pietist, moralist, etc.), Genung has challenged them to prove the soundness of their method by entering the literary workshop and creating a great masterpiece by this means.[66] Naturally a literary masterpiece has many antecedents. How else could it touch the chords of human existence and thus survive the tests of time? That would be especially true of wisdom literature, which consisted of short, pithy proverbs that were passed from mouth to mouth throughout the world. In the hands of literate sages, these sayings were often collected and grouped according to subject matter. Sometimes the proverbs on a theme supplemented one another. They often gave contrasting aspects of the same topic.

In Qoheleth's work can be seen an attempt to weave together into a connected whole the sage's observations about life. In much of the book he is successful at writing prose discourse, but in some passages, especially the later chapters, he finds it necessary to employ the wise man's old standby, the proverb.[67] In his concluding remarks he takes occasion to explain his own method.[68] He admits that he has painted with borrowed pigments. He pondered, analyzed, and set in order[69] many proverbs. He sought to bring some semblance of order out of the chaos. Independent proverbs are like goads, they prick the mind or conscience at one particular point; their poignancy serves to drive home one truth. On the other hand, when one wise man, or shepherd, collects these barbs under logical and pertinent headings,[70] they are transformed from goads into nails. An isolated jab is soon forgotten; but a row of nails firmly driven in is meant to hold fast, to endure in force.

The principle Qoheleth used in carrying out his work was induction.[71] He pursued his quest for the real benefit ($yithrōn$) of life by examining the phenomena of life itself. Genung has aptly observed that the book does have, contrary to the consensus of opinion, a real internal unity of structure. There is a refrain (often misunderstood as an expression of Epicureanism) which recurs several times, albeit with variations, throughout the book. This is the admonition to eat and drink and to see good in one's $'āmāl$.[72] Using these

[65] Ibid., p. xxiii.
[66] Genung, p. 164.

[67] Ibid., pp. 175—6.
[68] Eccl. 12:9-12.
[69] Note the typically Akkadian use of $tiqqēn$ = D stem of $taqānu$, "to set in order," the antonym of $dalāḫu$, "to disturb."
[70] $ba'alē\ '^asēfôth$, apparently the sayings which serve as lead lines to introduce the topic or general trend of the section which follows. (Genung, p. 359)
[71] Eccl. 1:13.
[72] Eccl.2:24-26; 3:22; 5:18-20; and 9:7-10 (possibly echoed in 7:16-18 and 11:9).

passages as landmarks, one can see that the material between them usually gathers around a particular theme, an aspect of life. Genung adopted the following "outline" to trace the course of Qoheleth's thought: [73] Proem, 1:2-11, the fact and the question; (1) an induction of life, 1:12—2:26; (2) times and seasons, ch. 3; (3) in a crooked world, 4 and 5; (4) fate and the intrinsic man, 6:1—7:18; (5) advantages of wisdom, 7:19—9:10; (6) wisdom encountering time and chance, 9:11 to 11:6, though the division might better be made after v. 8; (7) rejoice and remember, 11:7—12:7; epilogue, 12:8-14. From time to time Qoheleth was obliged to rely upon a concatenation of proverbs to tell his story. In such instances, for example, 7:1-13, the total impact of the series must be emphasized. Two extremes are contrasted in 7:16, 17; it is their juxtaposition which comprises Qoheleth's lesson. When studied in this light, many supposed inconsistencies disappear.

PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS

The goal of Qoheleth was not merely to proclaim "All is vanity (i. e., ephemeral)," though his investigations disclose much that is. It was needful first to discount everything in life that possessed no lasting value in order to answer the real question, "What benefit (yithrōn) does man have in all of his profit ('āmāl) for which he labors under the sun?" [74] At the very beginning it is made clear that he does not intend to permit "otherworldly" speculations to interfere with his study. Man can only know the temporal facts, those which are "under the sun." While

admitting the existence of God, he refuses to be other than an agnostic about immortality, [75] at least until he has found the true essence of mortality.

In his first survey, 1:12—2:26, he examines, under the guise of a Solomon, all those things which men prize the most: wisdom, pleasure, wealth, self-indulgence. All of these are found wanting in permanent value, though wisdom is deemed superior to folly because through wisdom the wise man has the power of cognition. [76] Yet wisdom and wealth are subject to the same limitation; they do not solve the life-death enigma. He concludes by affirming that the true good for man is to "see good," that is, find real enjoyment, in his 'āmāl. This is a gift of God vouchsafed only to those who please Him. [77]

Next he confronts man with the essential temporality of all existence. There is a time and a season for everything. In the midst of it all there is man; and in man there is a spark of life which, though confined in temporality, seems to answer to something outside of space and time. Man has "everlastingness" ('ôlam) in his heart. [78] Therefore, his problem may now be defined

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[73] Genung, pp. 186—9; 209—11.

[74] Eccl. 1:3.

[75] E. g., Eccl. 3:18-21.

[76] Eccl. 2:12.

[77] Eccl. 2:24-26.

[78] 'olām ('ôlām), that which is both prior and subsequent to the created existence; Psalm 90:2; 103:17; 106:48; Neh. 9:5, et al. Exception must be taken to Dahood's interpretation, p. 206, on the following grounds: (1) there is already a noun derived from 'lm, viz., ta'alumâ, meaning "hidden thing." When the verb means "be concealed," a passive form is required. (2) The Ugaritic form he cites is not a verb but the common Ug. noun ǵlm, "lad." Text 125:50 refers to the lad Ilḥu and his sister Itmnt; Kret, 19 f. reads: ǵlm ym, "lads of a day," i. e., they died prematurely on the day of birth.

in terms of an "eternal" man in a temporal world. The task of living in this environment is aggravated because, although man is vaguely aware of an intangible quality within himself which transcends mortality, he finds himself trapped in the dimensional world, unable to discover the work of God from either beginning or end. Because of this inherent limitation, man is totally deprived of evidence about an after-life.[79] So Qoheleth reverts to his former conclusion, man must seek enjoyment of his 'āmāl in the here and now.

In the third "survey" Qoheleth faces squarely up to life.[80] Oppression, inequality, laziness, overambitiousness, all are paraded before the mind and found to be vanity. There are some positive values noted, for example, a relaxed spirit,[81] comradeship,[82] wisdom,[83] and hard work.[84] Finally, the God-given ability to enjoy one's 'āmāl is seen as the only means of triumph over a crooked world.[85]

Chapters 6 and 7:1-18 reveal a gradual transition from those aspects of life which must be rejected as unprofitable for the intrinsic man, to those which are beneficial to the upbuilding of his inner being. After 7:19 there are a series of observations regarding wisdom's superiority in certain life situations. Though all men are sinners,[86] the "sinner" may still come to a happy end by fearing God;[87] but the man who is wicked through and through,[88] who knows no fear of God, will meet a disastrous end.[89] The section ends with that most widely paralleled passage in the book,[90] which is also the fullest statement of Qoheleth's "refrain." The chief good in life is to live. Zest, courage, energy, these are the ingredients sanctioned by Qoheleth.

From 9:11 to 11:8 he returns to the problem of time and chance. No scheme is propounded to explain the events of life. Instead, the uncertainty is accepted; indeed it is itself confronted. The tyranny of fate is challenged by a champion, wisdom. He notes that, regardless of its reward whether good or ill, wisdom is better than might.[91] Wisdom is a positive benefit to any type of skill; it enabled the woodcutter to recognize that his axe needed sharpening.[92] But in view of the time and chance factor, wisdom cannot avail if it is not exercised soon enough. The ability to charm a serpent will not cure snakebite.[93] Since one cannot control the fates, he must take some risks.

Ship your merchandise upon the waters, that in many days you may attain its value. Invest a portion with seven, and even with eight, because you do not know what disaster will happen on earth.[94]

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[79] Eccl. 3:18-21.

[80] Eccl. 4 and 5.

[81] Eccl. 4:6.

[82] Eccl. 4:9-12.

[83] Eccl. 4:13.

[84] Eccl. 5:12.

[85] Eccl. 5:18-20.

[86] Eccl. 7:20; 8:11.

[87] ḥôṭē', Eccl. 8:12.

[88] rāšā', Eccl. 8:13.

[89] This interpretation was suggested by Mr. Subhi Abu-gosh in a seminar discussion at Brandeis University.

[90] Eccl. 9:7-10; cf. sup., nn. 60, 61.

[91] Eccl. 9:16, 17.

[92] Eccl. 10:10.

[93] Eccl. 10:11.

[94] Eccl. 11:1, 2. For this rendering of māṣā', cf. maṣû, "to attain" (Codex Hammurapi, col. XIV, 75; XV, 34). For nāthān, cf. nadānu, "to entrust, consign" (Codex Hammurapi, II,

One must also risk the elements, which are beyond his ken.[95]

The last section, 11:9—12:8, exhorts one to rejoice in life now, but to remember one's responsibility for his acts.

The epilogue consists of an explanation and defense of the author's method. His final admonition to fear God and obey His directions for life is placed in opposition to the toilsome life of slavery to ledgers and "figures." To declare this passage a later addition, out of harmony with the main theme of the book, is to misunder-

stand completely the course of Qoheleth's thought. He has declared that man's foremost challenge is in this life, not in vain speculation about "pie in the sky." He has tested all that men count worthy of esteem and found it wanting. Only wisdom and the fear of God provide a true *benefit* for the essential nature of man; for they enable him to understand and enjoy his temporal existence, irrespective of his material status.

Qoheleth has been called skeptic, cynic, and pessimist. He is skeptical of all that is vain, but he is neither cynical nor pessimistic. He simply rejected stones in search of a loaf. He has been accused of impiety; but let him who has never shared the sage's doubts cast the first stone.

Jerusalem, Israel.

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56 ff.). Note especially paragraphs 236—40 of *Codex Hammurapi,* which regulate liability for accidents causing loss of merchandise being shipped by riverboat.

[95] Eccl. 11:3-6.