

ECCLESIASTES: KOHELETH'S QUEST FOR LIFE'S MEANING

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Theology in
Grace Theological Seminary
May 1975

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PREFACE

It was during a series of lectures given in Grace Theological Seminary by Professor Thomas V. Taylor on the book of Ecclesiastes that the writer's own interest in the book was first stirred. The words of Koheleth are remarkably suited to the solution of questions and problems which arise for the Christian in the twentieth century. Indeed, the message of the book is so appropriate for the contemporary world, and the book so cogently analyzes the purpose and value of life, that he who reads it wants to study it; and he who studies it finds himself thoroughly attached to it: one cannot come away from the book unchanged.

For the completion of this study the writer is greatly indebted to his advisors, Dr. John C. Whitcomb, Jr. and Professor James R. Battenfield, without whose patient help and valuable suggestions this thesis would have been considerably impoverished.

To my wife Beverly, who has once again patiently and graciously endured a writing project, I say thank you.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Few books of the Bible have suffered in recent years from so much neglect as the book of Ecclesiastes. Furthermore, a large portion of those who have studied it have unsympathetically criticized and maligned both its author and its message, until it has come to be all but ignored by even those who accept its canonicity and inspiration. The author of this book has been accused of scepticism, of fatalism, and of Epicureanism. His words have been denounced as "not revelation" and human only.¹ It is contended that "anyone who essays to explain Coheleth is doomed to failure; it is vanity and a chase after wind."² Another has called it "the strangest book in the Bible."³ Suspected in days of orthodoxy,⁴ neglected in periods of optimism, treasured in

¹E. Schuyler English, *et al.*, eds., *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 696, 702.

²Roland E. Murphy, "The Pensées of Coheleth," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 17 (1955), 314.

³R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes* (hereinafter referred to as *Ecclesiastes*), in *The Anchor Bible*, ed. by W. F. Albright and David Noel Freedman, *et al.* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1965), p. 191.

⁴Robert Gordis, *Poets, Prophets and Sages* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 327.

days of frustration and disillusionment, the writings of Koheleth have always drawn men, yet somehow eluded them. Still, the enigmatic writing of the king of Jerusalem endures, the symbol of the ache of disillusion and of the peace that is possible afterwards. "Whoever has dreamt great dreams in his youth and seen the vision flee, or has loved and lost, or has beaten barehanded at the fortress of injustice and come back bleeding and broken, has passed Koheleth's door, and tarried awhile beneath the shadow of his roof."¹

The book is unworthy of the abuse it has often received at the hands of commentators, for it consists of, as John Trapp said more than three hundred fifty years ago,

golden words, weighty, and worthy of all acceptance; grave and gracious apophthegms, or rather oracles, meet to be well remembered . . . compiled and composed with such a picked frame of words, with such pithy strength of sentences, with such a thick series of demonstrative arguments, that the sharp wit of all the philosophers, compared with this divine discourse, seems to be utterly cold, and of small account.²

It is not, and probably never will be, among the most popular books in the Bible. Yet, after one has studied this book, it is difficult for him to regard it with indifference. It will either be distrusted and minimized, or it

¹Ibid., p. 325.

²John Trapp, *A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*, Vol. III (5 vols.: London: R. D. Dickinson, 1660, reprinted, 1868), p. 155.

will be accepted and utilized.¹ It is from this book that many Christians, though separated in time from its author by several thousand years, and much richer than its author in available theological knowledge, could gain a very needed message: that a life lived for self and the world is "vanity" and that nothing "under the sun" ever really satisfies.²

The book is not, however, without its problems and obscurities, and the problems posed by Koheleth seem to take on increased proportion as they cut across contemporary concepts of thinking. But if the reader will approach the book with an open mind, divest himself of unfavorable presuppositions, and seek to understand the book for what Koheleth meant it to be, he will see what he is being warned against, and how wise that warning is for this age.³ All that is needful is to read Koheleth himself with sympathy and imagination. "Then the dry bones will take on flesh and his

¹Arthur Maltby, "The Book of Ecclesiastes and the After-Life," *The Evangelical Quarterly*, XXXV:1 (January-March, 1963), 39.

²Ecclesiastes is included among the "Wisdom" literature of the Bible. For an excellent discussion of this classification, see W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach or Ecclesiasticus*, in *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1912), p. xlvii.

³Thomas V. Taylor, "Studies in Ecclesiastes" (unpublished mimeographed material for lectures in Grace Theological Seminary, March, 1972), p. 8. The page numbers of the material were added by the writer of this thesis.

spirit will live again."¹

It is the purpose of this thesis to examine the book of Ecclesiastes in order to determine the veracity of its teachings and the cogency of its argument; to understand its outstanding teachings; and to explain some of the more prominent difficulties. Included as necessary corollary discussions are the problems of authorship and date (and the underlying problem of the linguistic background of the book), the theme and development of thought in the book, explanations of significant problems, a summary of the prominent theological teachings, New Testament parallels to the teachings of Ecclesiastes, and parallels in other Near Eastern literature.

Bible quotations are the writer's own translation, unless otherwise annotated.

¹Gordis, *Poets, Prophets, and Sages*, p. 329.

CHAPTER II

THE TITLE

Translation

The English title, "Ecclesiastes," comes from the first line of the book in the Septuagint: Ῥήματα Ἐκκλησιαστοῦ υἱοῦ Δαυιδ.¹ Ἐκκλησιαστοῦ is a translation of the Hebrew קהלת, the Hebrew title of the author which is also used for the book, and usually transliterated, Koheleth or Qoheleth. Both the derivation and the meaning of this word are enigmatic. The word occurs seven times in the book: three times in the first part (1:1, 2, 12). and three times in the conclusion (12:8, 9, 10), with one occurrence in the middle (7:27). It is not a proper name, but an appellative, a fact evident both from its having the article in 12:8 and its being construed with a feminine verb in 7:27.² This fact has been recognized by major translators over the centuries, as evidenced in the LXX translation (meaning, "one who participates in a popular assembly"), the title of Luther ("Der

¹Alfred Rahlfs, ed., *Septuaginta*, Vol. II (2 vols: Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, reprint, 1972), p. 238. This is the text of the LXX used throughout the thesis.

²Christian David Ginsberg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth* (hereinafter referred to as Coheleth) (2 vols. in one: New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., reprint, 1970), p. 1.

Prediger"),¹ and Jerome's title "Concionator."² Actually, the English title "Ecclesiastes" is a direct carry-over from the Vulgate, which merely transliterated the LXX.³

Meaning of קה־ל־ק

"The precise signification of this appellation has, from time immemorial, been a matter of great contention, and the occasion of numerous and most conflicting opinions."⁴ While some feel that the meaning of the name is truly lost and will be forever unknown,⁵ others, notably Renan and Zimmermann, have suggested ingenious solutions to the meaning of the word. Renan's guess was that קה־ל־ק is an abbreviation, much as רמבם is an abbreviation for Maimonides, but Gordis contends that this "explains nothing."⁶ Jastrow suggests that "Koheleth" is a *nom de plume* for Solomon and that the

¹H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (hereinafter referred to as *Ecclesiastes*) (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), p. 38

²*Ibid.*

³Robertus Weber, *et al.*, eds., *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, Vol. II (2 vols.: Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1969), p. 986.

⁴Ginsburg, *Cohleth*, p. 1.

⁵Gordis, *Poets, Prophets and Sages*, p. 326.

⁶*Idem.*, *Koheleth, the Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes* (hereinafter referred to as *Koheleth*) (New York: Schocken Books, 3rd augmented edition, 1968), p. 203.

word was arrived at by substituting the root קהל, "assemble," for שלם, "complete," and by having a ת replace the ה of שלמה.¹ This suggestion Gordis labels "too ingenious to be convincing."²

Zimmermann's Interpretation

Zimmermann has a much more involved argument for the derivation of the word.³ He contends that the equivalent of קהל in Aramaic is the feminine participle of כנשה, since כנשה is a very frequent translation word for קהל in the Targumim.⁴ According to him, the writer of the book used this pseudonym with ברך דוד to attract attention to his work. It is assumed that he knew of the name אגור (Prov. 30:1) and modeled his pseudonym upon it (כנש=אגר=gather).⁵ אגור is regarded in rabbinic tradition as one of the names of Solomon. It is fairly certain as well (according to Zimmermann)

¹Morris Jastrow, Jr., *A Gentle Cynic: Being a Translation of the Book of Koheleth, Commonly Known as Ecclesiastes, Stripped of Later Additions* (hereinafter referred to as *A Gentle Cynic*) (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1919), p. 68.

²Gordis, *Koheleth*, p. 204.

³Frank Zimmermann, "The Aramaic Provenance of Qoheleth," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, XXXVI:1 (July, 1945), 43-5.

⁴Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (hereinafter referred to as *Dictionary*), Vol. I (2 vols.: New York: Pardes Publishing House, Inc., 1950), pp. 651-2.

⁵This would be the original according to Zimmermann's theory.

that קֹהֶלֶת must mean "Solomon," perhaps cryptically, as Renan long suspected. It is Zimmermann's hypothesis of an Aramaic provenance of Koheleth which supplies his key here, for he finds his answer to the cryptogram in numerology. כְּנֶשֶׁה adds up arithmetically to שְׁלֹמֹה (כ=20; נ=50; ש=300; ה=5; total, 375. ש=300; ל=30; מ=40; ה=5; total, 375).¹

While C. C. Torrey speaks of Zimmermann's hypothesis as "convincing,"² the writer is unconvinced not only because such a theory presupposes an Aramaic original for the book, which is doubtful enough in itself (and must preclude Solomonic authorship), but also because of the untenability of such numerological interpretations generally.³ It must not go unnoticed that Targum Jonathon uses קֹהֶלֶת not כְּנֶשֶׁה.⁵

¹Zimmermann, "The Aramaic Provenance of Qoheleth," 43-4.

²Charles C. Torrey, "The Question of the original Language of Qoheleth," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, XXXIX:2 (October, 1948), 156-7. For the numerical value of all the Hebrew letters, cf. J. Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, second edition, 1959), p. 1.

³Cf. John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968).

⁴פְּתִיגְמֵי נְבוּאָה דְּאַתְנַבָּא קֹהֶלֶת הוּא מְקִרְאוֹת גְּדוּלוֹת reads: שְׁלֹמֹה בֶר דָּוִד . . . (מְקִרְאוֹת גְּדוּלוֹת, Vol. 1 [New York: Parses Publishing House, Inc., 1951]). This is translated, "The words of the prophecy which Koheleth who is Solomon, the son of David, prophesied." Sperber also has קֹהֶלֶת, but does not point it (א-ד-א, כְּתָבִי הַקֹּדֶשׁ בְּאַרְמִית, ed., אֶלְכַּסְנֹדֶר שְׁפֶרְבֶּר, [New York: בריל: ליידן], 1968), p. 150).

⁵Jastrow states that the Targum thought of Solomon as קֹהֶלֶת (Jastrow, *Dictionary*, Vol. II, p. 1322).

Historical Interpretations


There have been numerous other explanations for the word, including suggestions that the word means "preacher," "gatherer of wisdom," "collector," (as of a compiler of a book), "eclectic" (because of his supposed skill in selecting and purifying the best of the systems of different philosophers), "accumulated wisdom," "reunited soul" (describing Solomon's readmission into the congregation of Israel in consequence of his repentance), "penitent" (describing the contrite state of Solomon for his apostasy), "assembly," "academy," "old man," "exclaiming voice," "Sophist," "philosopher," and "departed spirit."¹ Most of these suggestions, however, are better discarded. Perhaps the best explanation is one which finds its roots in a linguistic and historical explanation of the word within Hebrew itself.

Linguistic Analysis

קָהַלְתְּ is the Qal active participle, feminine singular, from the root קָהַל, meaning "to assemble."² This verb is

¹Ginsburg, *Cohemoth*, pp. 3-7.

²F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (hereinafter referred to as BDB, *Lexicon*) (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 874; cf. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (hereinafter referred to as KB, *Lexicon*) (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), p. 829.

the root to which Albright traces the word קוֹל, "voice," rather than to the root קול, since in the Siloam inscription the word is written קל, not קול.¹ קהל can be compared with the Arabic *qalah*, the Ethiopic *kal'ha*, the Aramaic קלא, and the Syriac , all with the idea of "to call," from the original idea of "sound."² The ambiguity, however, is not in the verbal root, but in the participle as used in the context of the book. The feminine participle refers to the author of the book, who is obviously masculine if Solomon is meant, and who is to be construed as masculine in any case, since the word is qualified by בֶּן־דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ בִּירוּשָׁלַם.

Some, in fact, trace the Hebrew word back to an Aramaic original, most of those being adherents to the theory of an Aramaic original for the book. One of the reasons for supposing that קהלֹת was originally an Aramaic term is that the verb קהל is not used in the simple conjugation in Hebrew, but is so used in Syriac, where it is supposed, "it can only

¹W. F. Albright, "The High Place in Ancient Palestine," in *Supplements to Vetus Testamentus*, Vol. IV, ed. by G. W. Anderson, *et al.* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957), p. 256. Cf. Loren Fisher, ed., *Ras Shamra Parallels*, in *Analecta Orientalia*, 49 (Roma: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1972), II 497 a-g, p. 329; II 94 g, p. 136. For the Siloam inscription, see H. Donner and W. Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, Band I (3 Bände: Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1971), text 183, line 3, p. 34.

²BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 874; KB, *Lexicon*, p. 831. Cf. also the discussion of קל in Charles-F. Jean and Jacob Hoftijzer, *Dictionnaire des Inscriptions Sémitiques de l'Ouest* (hereinafter referred to as *DISO*) (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), p. 258.

represent an old heritage once common to all Aramaic."¹

Edward Ullendorff has likewise suggested that קהלת is actually a translation of an Aramaic form, קהל. He blames the translator for some of the confusion when he states that "the translator was apparently not quite clear about the function of the *status emphaticus* in Aramaic (hence קהלת appears in Hebrew with or without the definite article)."² He further states that in Aramaic-Syriac קהל not only connotes "to summon an assembly" (=הקהיל [the *Hiph'il*]), but also means "litigious, pertinax."³ "It would be hard to imagine a more suitable name for the putative author of the book of Ecclesiastes than the 'arguer.'"⁴ קהלת is variously defined among the lexicons as "a collector" (of sentences) or "a preacher,"⁵ as well as "speaker (in an assembly)."⁶ Since the verb means primarily "to gather together into an assembly," or "to assemble," it is doubtless best to relate it directly to the meaning, "collecting" or "assembling." If this definition is accepted, then there are three questions about this collecting which must be answered: (1)

¹H. L. Ginsberg, "Ecclesiastes," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1971 ed., VI, 353.

²Edward Ullendorff, "The Meaning of קהלת," *Vetus Testamentum*, 12 (April, 1962), 215. The *status emphaticus*, however, is most elemental in Aramaic, and it is incredible that any translator worthy of the name should be "unfamiliar" with it.

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 875.

⁶KB, *Lexicon*, p. 829.

What did Solomon collect? (2) Why does he bear this name here?¹ (3) Why is the word in the feminine gender?

What did Solomon collect?

An examination of the passages in which the verb קָהַל is used, either in the *Niph'al* or the *Hiph'il*, reveals that the word is invariably used for collecting or gathering persons, especially for religious purposes. Likewise, its derivatives, קָהַל, קִהְלָה, מִקְהֵלִים, and מִקְהֵלוֹת, without exception denote assemblies or gatherings of people.¹ "The natural signification of קִהְלָה therefore is, *an assembler of scattered people into the more immediate presence of God; a gatherer of those afar off unto God.*"²

Why does Solomon bear this name?

The historical event which gave rise to the name is probably that recorded in 1 Kings 8 (cf. 2 Chr. 5), where the writer records that Solomon gathered all Israel together for the dedication of the temple, that epoch-making assembly which was among the most important in all the history of Israel.³ On this occasion, Solomon not only called the

¹KB, *Lexicon*, p. 829; BDB, *Lexicon*, pp. 874-5.

²Ginsburg, *Cohemoth*, p. 2."

³C. H. H. Wright, *The Book of Koheleth, Commonly Called Ecclesiastes* (hereinafter referred to as *Koheleth*) (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1883), p. 85.

people together, but he also preached to them indirectly through the prayer in which he consecrated the temple, and directly through his blessing and exhortation of the people. It is not without significance that the root קהל appears in this chapter no less than 5 times (1 Ki. 8:1, 2, 14, 22, and 55). It is entirely possible that Solomon was named קהל as a result of this temple dedication.¹

The feminine gender

There have been numerous explanations for the feminine gender of קהל. Wright explains it on the analogy of Arabic formations as an intensive feminine formation.² Others have suggested that there is really no problem involved in this usage since there are other instances in which an individual occupying a post of honor is designated by a name descriptive of the functions he discharges or the dignity he enjoys.³ Some examples are ספרת, "scribe" (Neh. 7:57), and פכרת in the compound name הַצִּבִּי'ם פַּכֶּרֶת, "hunter of

¹Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (hereinafter referred to as *Ecclesiastes*), trans. by M. G. Easton (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprint, 1970), p. 202.

²W. Wright, ed. and trans. from the German of Caspari, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*, revised by W. R. Smith and M. J. de Goeje, Vol. I (2 vols.: Cambridge: At the University Press, 1955), p. 137, sect. 233.

³Duncan H. Weir, "Ecclesiastes," *Fairbairn's Imperial Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, reprint, 1957, II, 184.

gazelles" (Ezra 2:47).¹ Apparently these names were first extended to people holding the office and finally became personal names.² A further parallel can be seen in Arabic nomenclature where the feminine form of the word may be used to denote an activity, office or function. Thus, Friday is known as the *Yaum al-Jum'ah*, the Day of Gathering (for prayer). The word *Khalīfah* is used for the supreme ruler of the Islamic world. It is only in transliteration that the word has been "masculinized" into "Caliph." "Here is an invariable use of the feminine to indicate a masculine office. Similarly, for the leading divine or a first-rate scholar, the feminine *'Allamāh* is employed."³

On the other hand, Ginsburg maintains that the feminine gender is employed because Solomon personifies wisdom, a view which he feels finds confirmation in Ecclesiastes 7:27, where קֹהֵלֶת (אֶמְרָה קֹהֵלֶת) is used with a feminine verb (אֶמְרָה קֹהֵלֶת), a usage even Rashi and Ibn Ezra, though interpreting קֹהֵלֶת differently, explained by the fact that "wisdom is being spoken of."⁴ Yet, the explanation offered for the word in

¹Wright, *Koheleth*, p. 279.

²Georg Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, trans. by David E. Green (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), p. 336.

³Eric F. F. Bishop, "A Pessimist in Palestine (B.C.)," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, 100 (January-June, 1968), 33.

⁴Ginsburg, *Cohemoth*, p. 7.

connection with the feminine gender as used in other Semitic languages seems to have the most force.¹

Conclusion

It is the conclusion of the writer, therefore, that the translation "assembler" is probably most accurate. Anyone who assembles will probably also speak to the assembly, and therefore the meaning "preacher" is logical by extension. Throughout this thesis, however, the writer prefers to follow the example of most authors by simply transliterating the word "Kohleth."²

¹For further examples see E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. and trans. by A. E. Cowley (hereinafter referred to as GKC, *Grammar*) (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 393, sect. 122r.

²The precise transliteration would be *qōhelet*, but initial K and C are so widely used in place of Q, that the most common transliteration, Kohleth, is employed.

CHAPTER III

DATE, AUTHORSHIP, AND LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

Introduction

The matter of the date and authorship of Ecclesiastes is an extremely complex subject, not only because the date and authorship are inevitably interrelated, but also because one's view of the linguistic background of the book also determines the boundaries for fixing the authorship and the date. These three subjects are therefore considered together in this chapter.

Authorship and Linguistic Background

The Traditional View

Ecclesiastes has traditionally been ascribed to Solomon. This tradition finds its basis in a number of indications in the book, not the least of which is that Solomon was the only immediate **מֶלֶךְ עַל-יִשְׂרָאֵל** **בֶּן-דָּוִד** who was **בִּירוּשָׁלַם** (Eccl. 1:1, 12).¹ The significance of this fact should not be overlooked, for this categorical statement

¹This tradition is evidenced in the title of the book in the Targum and the Syriac Peshitta. For the relationship of the Targumim and the Peshitta, cf. R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (hereinafter referred to as *Introduction*) (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), pp. 240-42.

must be honestly explained by any who attempt to circumvent Solomonic authorship. Such Solomonic authorship has, beginning with Luther and accelerating in the last century, been almost universally abandoned. Liberal and orthodox alike have concluded that it is a late document, and therefore could not have been composed by Solomon toward the end of the tenth century B.C.

Arguments Against Solomonic Authorship

It is said that one of the first to question the Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes was Luther, who in his *Table-Talk* explained the book as one of the more recent of the Old Testament. He supposed that the book was written by Sirach rather than Solomon, and that it might be "a Talmud, collected from many books, perhaps from the library of King Ptolemy Euergetes, in Egypt."¹ In his rejection of the Solomonic authorship he was followed by Hugo Grotius (1644), who based his argument of lateness on the language of the book. Finally, in the present, many scholars have completely discarded Solomonic authorship. Scott, for example, states: "It is quite out of the question that the king

¹Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 204. Though the writer was unable to find the edition of *Table-Talk* which included this statement, it is well to note that Luther seems to support Solomonic authorship in "Defense and Explanation of All the Articles" (in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 32, ed. by George W. Forell [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958], p. 84).

[Solomon] was in fact the composer of the whole book of Proverbs, of Ecclesiastes and Wisdom"¹

A literary device

It is first of all suggested that Solomon was intended

to be a mere artistic device designed to present more effectively the message of the unknown late author. Since Solomon was known to have experienced the satisfaction of every human ambition and had drunk to the full every possibility of earthly pleasure, he would serve as an admirable test case in evaluating hedonistic enjoyment and intellectual achievement as over against a life entirely devoted to God.²

Fohrer, accordingly, states that "actual Solomonic authorship is out of the question. The association with Solomon is a mere literary form, only slightly disguised and not carried out systematically."³

While Muilenburg contends that "a Solomonic origin has been given up by all modern scholars, and it [Ecclesiastes] has subsequently been dated as early as the fourth century B.C. and as late as the time of Herod,"⁴ it appears

¹R. B. Y. Scott, "Solomon and the Beginnings of Wisdom in Israel," in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, Vol. III of *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), p. 262.

²Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (hereinafter referred to as *Introduction*) (Chicago: Moody Press, revised ed., 1974), pp. 478-9.

³Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 336.

⁴James Muilenburg, "A Qoheleth Scroll From Qumran," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 135 (October, 1954), 20-21.

that the sequence of events was just the opposite. On the basis of its language, it was dated later than the time of Solomon; consequently, Solomonic authorship was given up. Scott is among the most adamant in his denial of the Solomonic authorship. He glibly assures his readers that "there is of course no possibility that the Solomon of history composed this book; to claim this is like claiming that a book about Marxism in modern English idiom and spelling was written by Henry VIII."¹ He feels so certain that the role of Solomon is assumed for literary effect that he states that "no-observant reader could suppose otherwise."²

Appeal is often made to other books where such a literary device is apparently used. The most notable is the apocryphal book known as the Wisdom of Solomon. It is generally believed that this book was written in Greek during the first century B.C., even though the superscription of the book claims for it Solomonic authorship.³ The appeals

¹Scott, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 95-6.

²*Ibid.*, p. 96.

³Cf. Rahlfs, *Septuaginta*, Vol. II, p. 345, where the title reads ΣΟΦΙΑ ΣΑΛΩΜΩΝΟΣ. The Peshitta extended the superscription to "The Book of the Great Wisdom of Solomon, the Son of David" (W. O. E. Oesterley, *An Introduction to the Books of the Apocrypha* [London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1935], p. 196). Also see W. J. Ferrar, *The Uncanonical Jewish Books* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1918), p. 33; and especially, R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, Vol. I (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1913), p. 519.

to such a book, however, are not valid, for this apocryphal book is not inspired and whatever falsehoods it might perpetrate are really of little concern.¹ On the other hand, Ecclesiastes is inspired, and while Wright is certain that "the authority and trustworthiness of the book of Ecclesiastes are not imperilled by the denial of its Solomonic authorship,"² such a denial appears, in fact, to be accomplishing that very peril. The book states that the author was (1) a son of David, and (2) King over (in) Jerusalem. No one fits this description except Solomon. Therefore, a denial of Solomonic authorship necessarily involves a denial of the integrity of at least two verses in Ecclesiastes (1:1, 12), for there could not be a more explicit description of Solomon, unless his name were used. Only if one concedes that such a literary idiom is legitimate can it be concluded that "its author was not Solomon, but one of 'the wise' whose name can no longer be recovered;"³ and that it was written "not in the time of Solomon, i.e. about 930

¹Zimmermann argues that most of the Apocryphal books, including the Wisdom. of Solomon, were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic (Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qoheleth* [New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1973], pp. 98-100).

²Wright, *Koheleth*, p. 110.

³Samuel Cox, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* in *The Expositor's Bible*, ed. by W. Robertson Nicoll (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903), p. 19.

B.C., but some five or six centuries later."¹ Only then can one agree with Wright that

the author had not the slightest idea of committing any fraud whatever, but simply sought to assert in the strongest manner possible that the views he advocated, in direct opposition to the Jewish sensualist school of Alexandria were in full accordance with the utterances of that heavenly wisdom which had been bestowed upon the great Solomon.²

Barton, for instance, is so certain about the non-Solomonic authorship that he makes this asseveration: "The fact that Solomon is not the author, but is introduced in a literary figure, has become such an axiom of the present day interpretation of the book, that no extended argument is necessary to prove it."³ He further asserts that upon the basis of the book's linguistic features, Solomonic authorship is "unthinkable."⁴

There are other arguments against Solomonic authorship of the book which shall be taken up below. All who deny his authorship would agree with Ginsburg, who, after enumerating several other proofs against it, proposed that

¹*Ibid.*

²Wright, *Koheleth*, p. 80.

³George Aaron Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (hereinafter referred to as *Ecclesiastes*), in *The International Critical Commentary*, ed. by S. R. Driver, *et al.* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), p. 68.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 59. Also cf. Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament, An Introduction*, trans. by Peter A. Ackroyd (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 493.

"the strongest argument, however, against the Solomonic authorship of this book, is its vitiated language and style."¹ There is, however, little agreement about these phenomena, consisting of many supposed Aramaisms and affinities with other books which are late and/or partly Aramaic, such as Nehemiah, Daniel, Ezra, and Malachi.² But it is primarily out of respect for these linguistic features of the book that the date of composition is lowered, and Solomon's authorship is denied. The linguistic background of the book is therefore considered next.

Aramaic background

Those who argue that the language of Koheleth can be explained upon the basis of Aramaic influence can be divided into two groups. There are those, first of all, who view the language of the book as a reflection of post-exilic times, when the Jews were speaking Aramaic increasingly, and when Hebrew began to be influenced as a consequence. Many contend that the Hebrew of Koheleth bears strong resemblances to the Hebrew of the later Mishnah.³ The second group asserts that the book was originally written in Aramaic.

¹Ginsburg, *Cohleth*, p. 253.

²E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952), pp. 339-40.

³*Ibid.*, p. 40.

Definition of "Aramaisms"

The use of "Aramaisms" for dating a book is one of the most tenuous procedures in biblical linguistic study. For many years such arguments were proposed to support a late date for such books as Daniel, Jonah, and Chronicles. However, in recent times such a position has generally been abandoned, for from the earliest times Hebrews and Arameans were in constant and intimate contact.¹ Yet, Wright, Ginsburg, Delitzsch, and others of their era, though not destructively critical, felt that the Aramaisms of Ecclesiastes indisputably rendered it late.² Lamentably, Gordis is correct when he states that "one still encounters the simplistic argument that the existence of an alleged 'Aramaism' is evidence of a late date for the document."³ On the other hand, a more balanced and sophisticated analysis of Aramaisms has been recently emerging, as evidenced by Barr's division of Aramaisms into four categories:

1. "Aramaism" may mean a statistical displacement towards what is more frequent in Aramaic, and more

¹Raymond A. Bowman, "Arameans, Aramaic, and the Bible," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, VII:2 (April, 1948), 70.

²Cf. Wright, *Koheleth*, p. 120; Ginsburg, *Cohleleth*, p. 253; and Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 210-17.

³Robert Gordis, "On Methodology in Biblical Exegesis," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, XLI:2 (October, 1970), 105.

infrequent in Hebrew. It is common knowledge, for instance, that אָתָּא is the normal Aramaic word for the verb "come." This word does occur, however, in the Hebrew of the Old Testament in about twenty instances, mostly in poetry. But if אָתָּא is found to occur more frequently for "come" in a certain text, and especially outside a poetical context, then "the situation in this regard is more like that which exists in Aramaic, and someone may say that this is an 'Aramaism.'"¹ This is a most unfortunate circumstance in terminology, for there is no question that the phenomenon itself is real Hebrew; "the only difference is in the distribution and frequency."² It is of incalculable importance that any discussion of such phenomena distinguishes between what is not normal Hebrew, and what is only statistically unusual.

2. "Usage may be identified by means of an appeal to Aramaic, where this usage has not previously been recognized as existing in Hebrew though it is well known in Aramaic."³ This is meant to be an identification of a normal, if uncommon usage in Hebrew, not an identification of an Aramaic word which does not appear in Hebrew. Here, too, the term "Aramaism" is unfortunate. In such cases, the

¹James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (hereinafter referred to as *Philology*) (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 121.

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*, p. 122.

usage is a native Hebrew one, inherited from earlier Semitic, but when it is called an "Aramaism" this only means that the sense was discovered in Aramaic, because through its sparse usage in extant Hebrew literature, its meaning had been lost.¹

3. "'Aramaism' may mean that an expression of Aramaic type was deliberately used, or that, if not deliberately, at least in fact, the existence of an Aramaic phenomenon is actually affecting the choice and the character of Old Testament usage."² It is possible, for instance, to explain unusual locutions by northern Israelite speakers such as Hosea on this basis,³ and it might also be possible to explain many of Koheleth's unusual expressions upon the basis of all the contact he had with foreign, Semitic-speaking peoples such as the Arameans, the Moabites, and especially, the Phoenicians.

4. Lastly, the term "Aramaism" is sometimes "used when scholars hold that a text was originally written in one language and then translated into another, and that the characteristics of the diction of the former state have been carried over into the latter."⁴ This has been argued for both Job and Ecclesiastes, but, as Barr and Gordis point out,

¹*Ibid.*

²*Ibid.*, pp. 122-3.

³*Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁴*Ibid.*

if they were translations, they were rather poor ones.¹

Gordis characterizes Aramaisms in a slightly different fashion:

(1) examples of the North-West Semitic vocabulary and usage indigenous to both Aramaic and Hebrew, which became frequent in Aramaic but remaining rare (or poetic) in Hebrew. Such forms are generally early and cannot be invoked for a late date and are not really "Aramaisms" at all; (2) Hebrew borrowings from nearby Aramaic during the pre-Exilic period, especially during the heyday of the Syrian Kingdom; (3) later Hebrew borrowings during the Babylonian Exile and the early post-Exilic period, when Aramaic became the *lingua franca* of the Near East; (4) idioms and morphological forms introduced into Hebrew and patterned after Aramaic usage, with which the Hebrew writer or speaker was familiar, because Aramaic had become the vernacular of the Jewish community.²

History of Aramaic

Old Aramaic is the language (with some dialectical variants) of the most ancient inscriptions from Damascus, Hama, Arpad, Šam'al, and Assyria. Aramaic forms a considerable and widespread group whose earliest manifestations (in extant inscriptions) go back to at least the first millennium, and survives in a few places to the present.³ It is no doubt true that "l'araméen fortement influencé par le

¹*Ibid.*; cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, p. 414.

²Gordis, "On Methodology in Biblical Exegesis," 107.

³Sabatino Moscati, ed., *An Introduction to the Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages in Porta Linguarum Orientalium*, Neue Serie, VI, ed. by Bertold Spuler and Hans Wehr (hereinafter referred to as *Comparative Grammar*) (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1969), pp. 10-11.

cananéen."¹ Old Aramaic, was, essentially, an unknown language before the end of the 19th century. Then several inscriptions were discovered at Zinčirli: the Panammu II Inscription in 1888, the Panammu I in 1890, and the Bir-RKB in 1891. In 1891 the inscriptions of Sin-zer-ibni were discovered at Nerab, and in 1898 Peiser published the enigmatic inscription on a stele from Örddek-burnu. In 1908 Pognon published the important Zakir Stele, which he had previously discovered.²

Because of its affinities with contemporary Canaanite, and its considerable divergences from later Aramaic, the language of these inscriptions was regarded by most scholars as an artificial mixture of some kind. The two Panammu Inscriptions, moreover, presented so many special problems in orthography and morphology when compared with the other inscriptions, that it became necessary to suppose a separate Zincirli dialect.

With the discoveries of more recent years, sufficient data accumulated to classify the language of the inscriptions as Old Aramaic.³

The relationship of Aramaic to the Hebrew of the Bible is not always clear. It is known that from the very beginning of the Hebrew nation (Abraham) there was a relationship with the Arameans (Abraham's stay in Haran, Gen.

¹Henri Fleisch, *Introduction a l'Étude des Langues Sémitiques* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1947), p. 71.

²Frank M. Cross and David N. Freedman, *Early Hebrew Orthography* in *American Oriental Series*, ed. by James B. Pritchard, Vol. 36 (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1952), p. 21.

³*Ibid.*, p. 22.

11:31). Laban, of course, used Aramaic in his encounter with Jacob, recorded in Genesis 31:47. From the time of David forward there was widespread contact with Arameans. David married an Aramean (Maacah, 2 Sam. 3:3; 1 Chr. 7:14), and Solomon ruled over much of Northern Syria (1 Kings 4:21).¹ It is not to be supposed strange, therefore, that there should be cultural (and therefore linguistic) interchanges. "The mutual influence of the two languages [Hebrew and Aramaic] reaches back to early times: Aramaisms occur in the earliest part of the Old Testament."² Driver has argued that Hebrew is not pure Canaanite, but a mixed language in which traces of the original Aramaic substratum are still perceptible.³ Even in "Old Aramaic" several cultural strains are observable.

Syria has always been a melting-pot in which the diverse cultures, Semitic and non-Semitic, of the adjacent areas have blended into curious mixtures. It is thus with the so-called "Old Aramaic" of the region, which is almost completely Canaanite rather than Aramaic. In the Kilamwa inscription it is only the word "son" (*bar*), used in the royal genealogy, that can be recognized as Aramaic. Syntax and vocabulary are

¹For the extent of Solomon's kingdom, see the maps in Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *Macmillan Bible Atlas* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1973), p. 74, maps 113 and 115.

²R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1941), p. 687. Cf. also GKC, *Grammar*, pp. 16-17, sect. 2u, w.

³G. R. Driver, "Hebrew Language," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1972, XI, 279-80.

usually Canaanite; there are even instances of the waw-consecutive usually associated with Hebrew. The spelling of words manifests the defective short forms frequently encountered in Phoenician. The alphabet too is distinctly Canaanite; the letters are quite similar to those of contemporary Phoenician but with the odd difference that the characters are not incised but carved in relief and in such fat and pudgy shape that the general appearance of such writing resembles Hittite hieroglyphs. In some instances even the shape of the monument suggests a Hittite prototype. Indeed, such royal names as Quril, Kilamwa, and Panamwa, found in these inscriptions are non-Semitic, apparently Anatolian. Thus, in most "Old Aramaic writing, several cultural strains are observable, and there is almost nothing distinctly Aramaic."¹

These characteristics of the "Old Aramaic" are extremely important to the discussion of the Solomonic authorship, because the period from which these apparently very homogeneous inscriptions date, is approximately the time in which Solomon lived.

It may also be that the language of Ecclesiastes differs somewhat from other biblical literature because the style most of the books were written in was apparently a "specialized literary *genre* which was studied and cultivated by the artists and writers of that period."² According to Chomsky, furthermore, it may be

safely announced that the classical models of the biblical language are not typical of the daily conversational language employed by "the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker." Undoubtedly, the conversational

¹Bowman, "Arameans, Aramaic and the Bible," 70.

²William Chomsky, *Hebrew: The Eternal Language* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), p. 48.

language was simpler, more flexible, and lacking the artistry characteristic of the biblical style. It had more in common with the so-called mishnaic or post-biblical Hebrew. It made up in simplicity, flexibility, and dynamic qualities for what it lacked in grandeur and elegance.¹

Chomsky concludes that there seems to have existed in pre-exilic Palestine two distinct linguistic traditions.

Side by side there were the literary or classical tradition and the popular or conversational tradition.

The first tradition followed generally the Canaanitic or Ugaritic literary models, which date back to the pre-biblical days. In its poetic style, its parallelisms, vocabulary, metaphors, and locutions, the Bible frequently evinces a striking resemblance to these ancient documents. The second tradition had its roots, apparently, in the vernacular, which the early Hebrew ancestors had brought with them from their native homeland in Mesopotamia, namely, Aramaic. These two linguistic traditions admitted, on occasion, of free intercrossing and mutual influence, as will be pointed out in Chapter IX of this volume. It is nonetheless quite probable, as will be indicated later, that the Canaanite influence was prevalent in literary Hebrew, while the Aramaic influence was preponderant in the vulgar or conversational Hebrew.²

The possible influence of Canaanite on the language of Koheleth is taken up below. For the present, however, the reader should notice that at least part of the linguistic peculiarities of the book may be a reflection of a more conversational than literary Hebrew.

Late-dating by Aramaisms

In his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Wright compiled

¹*Ibid.*, pp. 48-9.

²*Ibid.*, p. 49.

at least 98 expressions which he said were "worthy of notice as belonging mainly to the modern period of the Hebrew language,"¹ and which, therefore, supported the contention that the Aramaisms of the book make a late date certain. Others, such as Hengstenberg, who allowed only ten Aramaisms in the book, are much more modest.² It is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss each of these instances individually, but the methodology of such procedures must be carefully scrutinized.

When one speaks of "Aramaisms" he must first of all define which of the types of Aramaisms he means.³ If it is an "Aramaism" so named because it is statistically unusual, but perfectly normal Hebrew, its bearing on the date of the book is negligible. If an Aramaism is used to date Ecclesiastes, it must be proven that (1) the word was borrowed at a time subsequent to Solomon, and that (2) Hebrew did not have and would not have used such an expression. These two criteria seem reasonable enough, but they make it very

¹Wright, *Koheleth*, pp. 488 ff.

²Ernest W. Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (n.p.: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1960), p. 9.

³Cf. the distinctions of Barr and Gordis above. On the relationship of Hebrew and Aramaic, cf. Zellig S. Harris, *Development of the Canaanite Dialects*, Vol. 16 in the *American Oriental Series*, ed. by W. Norman Brown (New York: Kraus Reprint Corporation, reprint, 1967), pp. 1-28.

difficult for the late-date theory of Ecclesiastes, predicated upon the language of the book, to stand. This is for several reasons.

Limited vocabulary.--While it is true that there is presently extant a vast Hebrew vocabulary, it is not true that the Hebrew of the Bible represents all the Hebrew words which must have been in use in ancient times. It is true, for example, that the word **שָׁעָה** does not appear in biblical Hebrew, though it does appear in biblical Aramaic and in modern Hebrew.¹ One must nevertheless be very cautious in pronouncing on these grounds that it did not exist in Hebrew during biblical times, for the word appears as a Canaanite gloss in the Amarna letters.² One here reaches the limits which are set for linguistic assertions about a dead language which has left only a very restricted body of literature. There are numerous objects and realities of Hebrew life for which biblical Hebrew has no known name. The non-occurrence of the word in the literature presently extant is not proof that it was unknown.³ The same applies to

¹BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 1116.

²It is listed as "šētu, Stande [hour], kanaan.?" [canaanite?]" in J. A. Knudtzon, Herausgeber, *Die El-Amarna-Tafeln*, Band II (zwei Bände: Aalen: Otto Zeller Verlagsbuchhandlung, Neudruck, 1964), p. 1521; 138:76.

³James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., revised, 1969), p. 107.

instances of *hapax legomena*, whose only parallels can be found in Aramaic. It is almost inconceivable

that the seven or eight vocables found in the Hebrew Bible constituted all the words that were current in the language during that period, just as it would be absurd to assume that the 25,000 words used by Shakespeare or the 12,000 words employed by Milton represent the total vocabulary in vogue in their respective periods.¹

Later documents.--Furthermore, one may not legitimately maintain that a document is late merely because it contains words which do not occur in the earlier ones presently extant. Wilson could assert in 1926 that "every new find of Egyptian Aramaic papyri gives us words not known before--except, if at all, in documents written hundreds of years later."² Wilson felt that it was "obvious that a kind of proof that will prove almost everything to be late, and especially the parts considered late to be early, is absurd and inadmissible as evidence in a case designed to prove that some documents are later than others because they contain words of this kind."³ By statistical analysis of the books of the Old Testament he demonstrated that some of the later books (Ezra 1-6, Malachi, Ezekiel) have a far smaller

¹Chomsky, *Hebrew: The Eternal Language*, p. 209.

²Robert Dick Wilson, *A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament* (hereinafter referred to as *Investigation*) (Philadelphia: The Sunday School Times Co., 1926), p. 132.

³*Ibid.*, p. 133.

percentage of words occurring 5 times or less, and also occurring in the Talmud, than do some of the earlier writings ("J," "E," Sam. --Kings, "P," and the "Deuteronomist").¹ The presence of "rare" words in a document is no proof of its relative lateness. Many of these "rare" words were labeled "Aramaisms" in previous years because they were more common in Aramaic than in Biblical Hebrew, but the argument is not valid.²

H. L. Ginsberg alleges that the Hebrew of Koheleth must represent "the latest stage in the evolution of biblical Hebrew"³ because the root תִּקַּח (4:12; 6:10) "can only be borrowed from Aramaic; and not before the seventh century B.C.E., since the initial consonant represents a Proto-Semitic ṭ which was only shifted to t in Aramaic in the seventh century B.C.E."⁴ He also argues that the nouns פִּרְדָּסִים and פֶּתִיגִם must be late because they are borrowed from Persian and "Persia only emerged from obscurity in the middle of the sixth century B.C.E."⁵

In these statements, however, he has made some basic

¹*Ibid.*, p. 135.

²But see GKC, *Grammar*, where upon this basis these are late-dated: Joshua, Ruth, Jonah, Ecclesiastes, Job, *et al.* (p. 16, sect 2u).

³Ginsberg, "Ecclesiastes," p. 350.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*

methodological errors. He has assumed that the word תִּקְרָא could not have been known earlier than the Aramaic inscriptions in which it is now extant (the word originated only just prior to the inscription?) and he assumes that the precise date of the phonetic shift of which he speaks is known (it originated just prior to the inscriptions?). As to the "Persian" words, Ginsberg again assumes too much. He not only supposes that the words could not have been adopted earlier than the period of Persian domination, he also supposes that they could not have been shared by Hebrew as words common to both. From a purely linguistic standpoint, there is nothing about the words which is necessarily strange or foreign. It is true that the usual Hebrew pattern is formed with a triconsonantal root, but

forms are attested over the entire Semitic area on the pattern C₁aC₂C₃aC₄u: e.g. Heb. 'aqrāb, Syr. 'əqarbā, (Eth. 'aqrab "scorpion." Examples of other four-radical patterns are Akk. *humsīru* "mouse," Heb. 'akkabīš "spider," Syr. 'uqbārā "mouse," Ar. *qunfud* "hedgehog," Eth. *hanbāl* "saddle."¹

It is one thing to make assertions like Ginsberg's; it is another to substantiate them. In view of the very scanty inscriptional evidence available for Aramaic from the early part of the first millennium B.C., it seems better to resist generalizations about what words were or were not in the language, and when they originated.

¹Moscatti, *Comparative Grammar*, p. 84.

Reasons for Aramaisms.--There are yet other factors in deciding the impact of the supposed Aramaisms of Ecclesiastes. A Hebrew writer could have used an Aramaic word to denote a thing, or to express a thought,"either because there was no Hebrew word that he could equally well employ [at least from his own vocabulary], or because he was himself strongly under Aramaic influence, or because he wanted to show off his acquaintance with foreign tongues."¹ Both the former and the latter of these are distinct possibilities for Solomon. Certainly they are just as possible as the overworked second one.

It should not escape the reader's notice that Solomon had every opportunity to imbibe foreign expressions. As was previously pointed out, he had a step-mother who was an Aramean, Maacah (2 Sam. 3:3), of which union with David were born Tamar and Solomon's notorious brother Absalom (2 Sam. 13:2). When difficulties beset him in Jerusalem, it was to his Aramean grandfather in Geshur that Absalom fled for protection.² A certain close relationship is therefore assumed, and it is not improbable that Solomon himself may have at times visited this step-grandfather as a child, not to speak of the contact he probably had with the Aramaic-

¹Wilson, *Investigation*, p. 140.

²Bowman, "Arameans, Aramaic, and the Bible," 70.

speaking Maacah. Furthermore, Solomon himself married an Aramean (1 Kings 3:1, 11:3). He also had other wives from the Ammonite, Moabite, Hittite, Phoenician, and Egyptian kingdoms.¹ He even occupied Damascus during his reign² and built store-towns in Hamath.³ Consequently, one would not be surprised that he might choose to write something spiced with foreign expressions and words. This is only a conjecture, but it is a possibility.

Noun formations.--It has also been alleged that nouns ending in ך are Aramaisms. The same is argued for many of those ending in ךל. However, it has been demonstrated that such nouns are found throughout Semitic languages at all stages of their development.⁴

¹Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, Vol. I (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, reprint, 1967), p. 161. Also see Charles Foster Kent, *The Founders and Rulers of United Israel* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), p. 1.

²Theodore H. Robinson, *A History of Israel*, Vol. I (2 vols.: Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, reprint, 1934), p. 256.

³Merrill F. Unger, *Israel and the Arameans of Damascus* (London: James Clarke and Co., Ltd., 1957), p. 54.

⁴Moscatti, *Comparative Grammar*, pp. 82-3; 96 ff. Cf. also Wilson, *Investigation*, p. 202, where he says, "The lists of Thutmes [sic.] III have seventeen nouns ending in ך out of 119 all told. The Sendscherli Inscriptions have no nouns in ך but the Sachau papyri have scores. They are found also in the Sabeian and Minean Inscriptions and are common in Arabic and Syriac. There are 14 in the code of Hammurabi alone and 26 in the Babylonian of the Amarna Letters."

Exclusive of proper names, about one hundred and forty nouns ending in n are found in Biblical Hebrew. Sixty-three of these are met with in the Pentateuch. Of the sixty-three, the Targum of Onkelos renders twelve by the same nouns ending in n, and fifty-one by other nouns, most of them ending in n. It will thus be seen that where the subject-matter is exactly the same, the Hebrew original and the Aramaic version have exactly the same number of words ending in n. Judging from this fact, it is left to our readers to determine, if they can, whether the ending n is more characteristic of Aramaic than of Hebrew.¹

There are several specific instances of supposed Aramaisms in Ecclesiastes which Wilson discusses. While it is true that the word שְׁלֹטֹן is found only in Ecclesiastes (8:4, 8), it is also true that its root occurs in Akkadian, as well as in Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, and Syriac.² Sometimes "rare" words are "rare" only in the sense that they appear few times in the biblical text. This does not mean that they were not common in the Hebrew language.

Reasons for non-routine terms.--Besides the fact that some of the terms in Ecclesiastes may be strange only because such a small amount of literature from Solomon's time is presently extant, there are other reasons which can

¹Wilson, *Investigation*, pp. 147-8. It is also interesting that in the Mesha inscription, the plural ending *in* is consistently used, instead of the more Hebraic *im*. Yet, in many respects the Mesha inscription is very similar to Hebrew (Chomsky, *Hebrew: The Eternal Language*, p. 67; cf. Cross and Freedman, *Early Hebrew Orthography*, pp. 39, 43; A. H. Van Zyl, *The Moabites* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960], p. 171-2).

²Wilson, *Investigation*, p. 151.

be adduced for their peculiarity. One may be that the character of the subject matter, rather than the lateness of the time of composition, has made the language somewhat different.¹ Furthermore, it is difficult to see why it would be more likely that the thoughts of the unconventional writer would find expression in the language of every day, or the language of the historian or prophet. Koheleth was a sophisticated writer who may have written for learned readers and, who, in any event, wrote for some audience who would be able to understand and appreciate his language.² Moreover, if Solomonic authorship is accepted for Ecclesiastes, and Davidic authorship for many of the Psalms, Solomon would certainly have had an exceedingly rich literary heritage from his father, which may have had the effect of making his own writing (especially if he chose to let it) singularly distinctive. Who, having translated the Psalms can gainsay David's vocabulary?

In addition, the task of the writer of Ecclesiastes was rendered difficult by two other facts. The Hebrew language has rather simple structure, and only a relatively few syntactic devices are available to express all possible nuances of meaning. Moods of verbs must be inferred from the

¹*Ibid.*, p. 150.

²Mitchell J. Dahood, "Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth," (hereinafter referred to as "Qoheleth") *Biblica*, 33:1 (1952), 31, note 1.

context, and subordinate clauses of all varieties are externally indistinguishable from coordinate clauses. These factors obviously complicate the understanding where precision is essential.¹ Yet another difficulty in the understanding of Koheleth, his modes of expression, and his vocabulary, is that he was struggling to use Hebrew for philosophic purposes, a use to which the language was not normally applied. A millennium and a half later, "medieval translators still found that Hebrew had not yet fully developed the flexibility, precision and vocabulary necessary for the treatment of philosophic themes."² Koheleth's comparative success in this respect is a tribute to his literary skill.

Conclusion on Aramaisms

It is, therefore, the conclusion of the writer that the date, and the limits it places upon the authorship, must be decided by means other than inferences drawn from the literary style or linguistic peculiarities of the book. Aramaisms may be used to prove or to disprove Solomonic authorship, depending upon one's presuppositions and biases. In any event, one cannot but agree with Harrison, who affirms that "the presence of Aramaisms is no necessary

¹Gordis, *Poets, Prophets and Sages*, p. 343.

²*Ibid.*

indication of late date."¹

An Aramaic, original

In addition to those who view the language of Ecclesiastes as heavily influenced by Aramaic, and therefore late, there are those who argue strongly for an Aramaic original for the book, of which the presently extant Hebrew Koheleth is apparently a rather poor translation. This theory was first raised as a question by Burkitt, has been maintained by Zimmermann, and vigorously defended by H. L. Ginsberg.² Burkitt published his brief analysis of the style of Ecclesiastes in 1921, in which he concluded that the style was neither natural nor correct, and therefore must be a translation from Aramaic.³ There are numerous arguments from the Aramaic offered as solutions to the various enigmas of the book. Representative samples will suffice to demonstrate the methodology.

Introduction

There are many verses which those who propose an

¹Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 1075.

²Gordis, *Koheleth*, pp. 374, 413. Cf. F. C. Burkitt, "Is Ecclesiastes a Translation?" *Journal of Theological Studies*, 22 (1921), 23 ff.; F. Zimmermann, "The Aramaic Provenance of Koheleth," 17-46; and H. L. Ginsberg, *Studies in Koheleth in Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America*, Vol. XVII (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), pp. 16-40.

³Dahood, "Qoheleth," 31.

Aramaic original feel are much more easily translated upon the basis of that theory. Following is a discussion of three of them.

Ecclesiastes 7:12.--The NASB translation of this verse is "wisdom is protection just as money is protection." The margin is, "lit., *in a shadow*." The Hebrew reads: כִּי בְצֵל הַחֲכָמָה בְּצֵל הַכֶּסֶף. Rowley says, in reviewing the reasons for an Aramaic original, that "the strongest individual argument [for such an original] in the reviewer's opinion, is the claim [of Ginsberg and Zimmermann] that בְּצֵל in 7:12 goes back to the Aramaic בְּטַל in the first case and בְּטַל in the second, and that these were wrongly taken to be nouns when they should have been regarded as verbs, yielding the sense 'when the wisdom goes, the money goes.'"¹

There are several problems with this argument, however. First of all, if the "original Aramaic" had בְּטַל in 7:12, why did the translator not use the same Hebrew word for it (בְּטַל) as he did in 12:3. To be sure, this is the only occurrence of the word in the Hebrew Old Testament, but it appears to have a legitimate Hebrew usage, attested in Akkadian as *batālu*.² It is passing strange that the

¹H. H. Rowley, "The Problems of Ecclesiastes," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, XLII (1951-2), 88.

²KB, *Lexicon*, p. 119. Cf. also Riekele Borger, *Babylonisch-Assyrische Lesestücke*, Heft I (3 Hefte: Roma: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1963), p. LI.

supposed translator would have used another word, when the Hebrew and Aramaic words were identical both in spelling and meaning. It is true that **צ** and **ט** are both emphatic phonemes and therefore closely akin, something which, no doubt, points to two related proto-Semitic roots.¹ This fact does not, however, support the Aramaic original hypothesis. It should also be noticed that Symmachus, the Peshitta, Jerome, and the Vulgate seem to support another reading: **כְּצִלְ חֲכָמָה כְּצִלְ**, while the LXX and others support a variant of this: **כְּצִלְ חֲכָמָה כְּצִלְ**.² The word **כְּצִלְ** would consist of the inseparable preposition **כ** and **צִלְ**, from the verbal root III. **צִלְ**, meaning "to be or grow dark."³ **כְּצִלְ** here would mean "shadow."⁴ The targum seems to support the NASB translation above, rather than the one based on an Aramaic original.

While it is true that the written targum material is rather late, it is also true that it preserves a tradition, probably dating at least to the time from which the supporters of the Aramaic original hypothesis would say that the book of Ecclesiastes should be dated (third or

¹Cf. several other Semitic languages which have a cognate beginning with t in KB, *Lexicon*, p. 804.

²Rudolf Kittel, ed., *Biblia Hebraica* (Stuttgart: Wurttembergische Bibelanstalt, 1966), p. 1220.

³KB, *Lexicon*, p. 804; cf. BDB, *Lexicon*, 853.

⁴KB, *Lexicon*, p. 803.

fourth centuries B.C.). The targum seems to be much easier to explain in terms of an original written in Hebrew, rather than one written in Aramaic. One wonders why the targum would differ so much from what the Aramaic original was supposed to have been. Is one to suppose that the Aramaic was translated into Hebrew, and then the Hebrew was translated back into Aramaic for the targum? If Ginsberg's and Zimmermann's hypothesis were correct, for instance, one would have expected to have found **בְּטֵל**, "to be void, abolished, suspended; to cease to exist" in the present verse.¹

Finally, the translation of this verse suggested by Ginsberg and Zimmermann does not fit the context. Such a circumstance makes any suggested translation very doubtful. The Aramaic original hypothesis does not seem to offer a valid solution to the problems of this verse.

Ecclesiastes 10:15.--Perhaps the most striking example of the difficulties created by the Aramaic original hypothesis of Zimmermann is to be found in this verse, translated, "the toil of a fool tires him so that he does not know to go to a city." It reads in Hebrew: **עָמַל הַכְּסִי' לֹא יָדַע לָלֶכֶת עַל-עִיר**.
תִּיגָעֵנוּ אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע לָלֶכֶת עַל-עִיר.

¹Jastrow, *Dictionary*, Vol. I, p. 157.

He [Zimmermann] confesses that he cannot solve the last part of the verse, but undertakes to explain the changes of gender and number in the first half. The Aramaic reads **טעחותא דשטיא תשל הינה**. The translator rendered **טרחותא** by **עמל**. The next moment, in translating **תשלטינה**, he forgot that his Hebrew read **עמל**, a masculine noun, and so he mechanically wrote the verb in the feminine **תיגע**. But his lapses were not yet at an end. He misread **דשטיא** as a plural and rendered it **הכסילים**, but, at the very next word, forgot that he had rendered it thus and recognized it as a singular, hence the singular suffix in **תיגעא**.

That this passage is difficult is clear. That this explanation meets the situation seems considerably less certain. The illustration is only one of many indicating the depths of stupidity and incompetence which must be assumed for the translator who, judging by Chapter XII, was not as inept as the theory cheerfully assumes.¹

Again, this observation by Gordis seems to be supported by the targum.² Even though the actual composition of Targum Onkelos is somewhat later than the Aramaic original was written, one would have expected in the targum a reflection of a good deal more of the reconstructed Aramaic original than one finds.

Ecclesiastes 11:1.--It is also suggested that this verse, translated in the NASB, "Cast your bread upon the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days," is an instance in which an Aramaic original explains an otherwise inexplicable enigma. Zimmermann's argument is

¹Robert Gordis, "The Original Language of Qoheleth," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, XXXVII:1 (July, 1946), 70-1.

²Cf. the text of **כרך ד, כתבי הקדש בארמית, שפרבר**, p. 165.

that the translators confused the "original Aramaic" I. פָּרַס (spread, as a sail, garment, etc.) and II. פָּרַס (break, as in breaking bread).¹ Thus, the Hebrew "translators" rendered the phrase שֶׁלַח לַחֲמֶךָ עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם (according to II. פָּרַס), using the word לָחַם. Again, however, the roots for both I and II פָּרַס appear in Hebrew (although Aramaic I. פָּרַס is Hebrew פָּרַשׁ).² Why would a translator have used words other than those completely cognate, however, especially when the resultant sense of his translation in Hebrew is apparently so strange? A good translator would have used Hebrew פָּרַס, which has the same meaning as Aramaic פָּרַס. There must have been a reason for this circumstance, and the explanation one finds most satisfying is that which posits a Hebrew original, which, when written had a clear meaning, but which now is lost. The targum interprets the verse in the sense of giving לָחֶם (alms, help) to the poor, for which one would eventually be rewarded. Perhaps the explanation is to be

¹Zimmermann, "The Question of Hebrew in Qoheleth," 92. Cf. also Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qoheleth* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1973), pp. 111-12.

²BDB, *Lexicon*, pp.828, 831. This same root is found in relation to food in Ugaritic. Cf. Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), p. 470, #2110. *DISO* gives a meaning for I. לָחַם of "assiéger," ("to besiege, to dun"), found in the Mesha inscription, but this does not seem to help much (p. 137). Dalman suggests "Unterhalt," ("support") and "Masse," ("assets"), which would fit this context (Gustaf H. Dalman, *Aramäisch-Neuhebräisches Handwörterbuch zu Targum, Talmud and Midrasch* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1967), p. 216.

found in such a different shade of meaning for the word לָהֶם, as the targum has done.¹

Proofs for a Hebrew original

Besides the failure of the Aramaic original hypothesis in these specific instances to account for completely cognate Hebrew words which could have been used, and were not, there are several other difficulties which seem to make a Hebrew original more probable.

Two Hebrew dialects.--Chomsky makes an interesting observation about different dialects in Hebrew, which may not always have been reflected in the biblical style:

It must therefore be assumed, as has already been pointed out, that alongside the literary classical style there existed a simple conversational style, employed especially by the peasants and simple folk of the backwoods, particularly in the northern part of Palestine, where these erotic pastoral idylls [i.e. the Song of Songs] must have been in vogue. It is inconceivable that even in Jerusalem, the average man in the street, even during the heyday of the classical period, spoke the noble and majestic prose typical of Amos and Isaiah, or even of Genesis and Deuteronomy. More probably, men like Amos and Isaiah, after writing down or delivering their lofty and noble messages in the classical style, addressed their acquaintances or members of their family in the simple conversational dialect, including colloquialisms and slang, current among the rest of the people. This non-classical style must have gained currency during the exilic and post-exilic periods, owing especially to the unsettled and transmigratory conditions of the people of those days. It often takes centuries for a new word-coinage to take root and be widely

¹ כרף ד-א, כתבי הקדש בארמית, שפרבר¹, p. 166.

employed. Little wonder, then, that many of the so-called mishnaic words, grammatical forms and syntactical constructions, are already in evidence in the Bible, to a greater or lesser degree.¹

It has already been suggested that Solomon may have been influenced by his Aramean relatives, as well as his foreign wives. Both the intended recipients and the contents of the book may also have affected his style. It will also be suggested below that he may have been influenced by a Phoenician literary genre of the philosophic discourse. Finally, his style may have been influenced by the common conversational language of the people. It is easily seen, therefore, that no one solution may totally solve the problems with the peculiarities of the language of Ecclesiastes. The best solution seems to be one which finds a number of different influences at work upon the author.

Paronomasia.--The phenomenon of paronomasia, which exist in the present Hebrew text, and which would not have existed in an Aramaic text, also argues against an Aramaic original. "Thus in 7:1, the play on *šem* and *šemen* would be lost in the Aramaic *sum* and *misha*."² This same paronomasia occurs in Song of Solomon 1:3: שֶׁמֶן תּוֹרֶק שְׁמֶךָ. Other instances of paronomasia in the book are "7:6, *hassīrīm*,

¹Chomsky, *Hebrew: The Eternal Language*, p. 161.

²Gordis, *Koheleth*, p. 413.

'thorns,' and *hassīr*, 'pot'; and 9:5 *zēkher*, 'remember,' and *sākhār*, 'reward' (rather than the usual *yithrōn*)."¹ Ginsberg counters by offering an example of a supposed paronomasia in the "alleged Aramaic of 3:4, *raqed*, 'dance,' and 'arqed, 'mourn,'"² but as Gordis states, "this rhetorical usage among fourteen pairs of verbs in the Catalogue of Seasons is hardly impressive."³

Canaanite parallels.--The vocabulary of Koheleth reflects a very ancient Canaanite literary background. "That the singularly inept translator whom the theory [of an Aramaic original] creates would render the Aramaic original into Hebrew, using words and phrases derived from a very ancient Northwest Semitic literary tradition, is another extreme coincidence difficult to accept."⁴

Ben Sira.--Ben Sira's verbal dependence on Ecclesiastes also strengthens the case for the Hebrew original. "It would surely be remarkable that Ben Sira (c. 190 B.C.E.) could use the Aramaic 'original' of Koheleth and translate its phraseology into Hebrew which resembles the independent translation of Koheleth, not produced until much later!"⁵

¹*Ibid.* ²*Ibid.* ³*Ibid.* ⁴*Ibid.*, p. 414.

⁵*Ibid.* Later, that is, according to their theory.

Characteristics of a translation.--There is a very fundamental objection to the widely-held theory that a difficult text *ipso facto* presupposes a translation from another language. When faced with a difficult original a translator may misread it for lack of an adequate knowledge of the vocabulary, and he may misconstrue the grammar. He may tacitly emend the text, fail to penetrate its meaning, and add irrelevant thoughts to it. But ultimately he decides upon some view of the passage, which he then expresses in his own idiom. "His version may be incorrect, but it will be clear and intelligible far more so than the original, all the difficulties and alternatives of which will have been ignored or obscured in the process."¹

Other things being equal, it may therefore be maintained that a difficult text may be presumed to be the original rather than a translation. In general, the translation hypothesis may be described as visiting the sins, real or imaginary, of the author, upon an unlucky translator. To him no folly or stupidity is deemed impossible. Thus Dr. Zimmermann asks us to believe that in 9:1 the "translator slipped, thoughtlessly incorporating the Aramaic **עבד יהוה** into the text instead of the usual **מעשה**" (p. 20). But the word **מעשה** occurs in the book sixteen times before this passage, and four times thereafter, all within 222 verses. This would be a remarkable lapse of memory, since the translator had rendered it correctly in the verse immediately preceding and had then rapidly recovered, nine verses later.²

A translator is always conscious of the distinctions between the two languages on which he is engaged, for that

¹*Ibid.*, p. 69.

²*Ibid.*, p. 70.

is, after all, the purpose of his task. He is trying to take a document written for the speakers of one language and render it in a language and idiom intelligible to the speakers of another language. If it were really a Hebrew translation of an Aramaic original, it is not unreasonable to suppose that in such a case the supposed Aramaisms would have been Hebraized as well.¹

On the other hand, a creative writer, familiar with two closely related languages, and "struggling to express his original thought, might unconsciously [or consciously] employ a word or even a usage from the other language."² Such has been a common practice in every age, even up to the present time, in which scholarly English writers employ especially descriptive and concise foreign terms from Latin, French, and German quite frequently.

Finally, no one suggests why such a Hebrew translation would have been made in the first place. Other canonical works were left in Aramaic. Moreover, if the book does date from the post-Exilic period (which the Aramaic original theory assumes), in which Aramaic had become the *lingua franca*, why would a translation have been made away from the language of the people?

¹Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 338.

²Gordis, "The original Language of Koheleth," 83.

Conclusion on an Aramaic original

On the basis of the above evidence, it is the conclusion of the writer that the theory of an Aramaic original for Koheleth invents more problems than it solves. It seems best to view the present Hebrew Koheleth as the original.¹

Ecclesiastes 1:12

It is generally argued by those rejecting Solomonic authorship that the words אֲנִי קֹהֵלֶת הָיִיתִי מֶלֶךְ should be translated, "I, Koheleth, was king." In this statement, the writer is allegedly reflecting on a time when he was monarch, but is not at the time of his statement.² The Talmud has joined to this verse a fable in which Solomon is compelled to descend from his throne on account of his sins. An angel bearing his likeness takes his place upon the throne and Solomon wanders throughout the land, claiming that he is really the king, but is disbelieved and belittled by the people. While he goes about begging, this is what he says: "I, Koheleth, was king in Jerusalem." Finally, upon

¹Cf. Robert Gordis, "The Translation Theory of Qoheleth Re-Examined," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, XL:1 (July, 1949), 116..

²Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 205-6.

his repentance, he is reinstated.¹

There is no proof from Scripture for this story, and some of its details are ludicrous. It does demonstrate, however, the difficulty some have seen in maintaining Solomonic authorship in the face of Ecclesiastes 1:12. Delitzsch argues at length that such a statement could not have been made by a man who was still king.² הָיִיתִי is the Qal perfect, first person, common, singular, of הָיָה. Archer has suggested that a fitting translation might be, "I became king,"³ but one would have expected to find a לְ following הָיָה for this translation, though the translation is not precluded by its absence. The NASB translates it I "have been" king, while the ASV translates it "was." But the problem is not really the translation; it is the interpretation of the translation which presents the ambiguity. It is helpful in this instance to compare Jonah 3:3, where the perfect of הָיָה is used to describe the state of Nineveh as Jonah found it.⁴ "Nineveh was [and still is] an exceeding great city" is the sense of the verse. The verse cannot mean, "Nineveh was

¹Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 4 (4 vols: Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), pp. 165-72.

²Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 205-6.

³Archer, *Introduction*, pp. 485-6.

⁴Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 255.

[and is no longer] a great city," for such a statement would be meaningless for Jonah. Likewise, the meaning of Ecclesiastes is: "I, Koheleth, was [and still am] king over Israel in Jerusalem." This seems to be a perfectly legitimate understanding of the verse.

Ecclesiastes 1:16

Another objection to the Solomonic authorship is that 1:16, "Behold I have magnified and increased wisdom above all who were over Jerusalem before me," is an anachronism and is inexplicable in terms of Solomonic authorship.¹ This objection is apparently grounded in the supposition that the author is here referring only to former kings, and since David and Solomon had been the only Israelite kings in Jerusalem, the remark seems to be somewhat misplaced. There are two answers to this, however. First of all, if Solomon were speaking only of kings, he could have been referring to the long line of non-Israelite kings which had preceded him, two of the most notable of which were Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18) and Adonai-Zedek (Josh. 10:1,

¹Otto Zöckler, "Ecclesiastes," trans. by William Wells, in vol. V of *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, ed. by John P. Lange (12 vols., reprinted: Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), p. 13.

26).¹ But the best explanation is probably that Solomon is referring to all (i.e., anyone and everyone), not just kings, who had preceded him in Jerusalem. The remark is therefore completely proper and understandable. 1 Kings 4:31 speaks of Solomon's superiority and draws a comparison with Heman, Chalcol, and Darda, who may very well have been sages in pre-Davidic Jerusalem.²

The Sitz im Leben of the book

It has been contended that whereas Ecclesiastes seems to reflect a time when misfortune, misery, and oppression prevailed, the time of Solomon was one of prosperity and happiness. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether the book really does reflect a period of dissatisfaction and oppression. In any event, it is difficult to make generalizations about the state of the common people, when so little is told about the period in the Bible, and when most of what is told is concerned with the monarchy. It is, however, a misconception to maintain that Solomon's period was one of prosperity and happiness. It may very well not have been,

¹Cf. the letters of 'Abdu-Heba, prince of Jerusalem, requesting Egyptian assistance in his struggles with the 'Apiru (W. F. Albright, trans., "The Amarna Letters," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. by James B. Pritchard [hereinafter referred to as *ANET*] [Princeton: Princeton University Press, third ed., 1969], pp. 487-9).

²Archer, *Introduction*, p. 485.

considering the taxes necessary to support Solomon's extravagances, and considering Solomon's institution of "compulsory or statute labor."¹ Furthermore, prosperity does not equal happiness, and this is the very point that the author of Ecclesiastes seems to be arguing. There is nothing in the tone of the book which precludes its being written during Solomon's time.

Arguments for Solomonic Authorship

Phoenician background

Introduction

Mitchell Dahood is the primary advocate of the view that Koheleth was written in the fourth century B.C. in Hebrew, but using Phoenician orthography, and that it shows heavy Canaanite-Phoenician literary influence.² The essential difference between Hebrew and Phoenician orthography, a difference which became more pronounced in the post-exilic era, was the use of final and medial vowel letters by the Hebrew and the total lack of them in standard Phoenician

¹Martin Noth, *The History of Israel*, trans. by Stanley Godman (London: Adam and Charles Black, revised ed., 1958), p. 209.

²By "literary influence" is meant the morphological, syntactical, and lexical phases of the author's style. Cf. Dahood, "Qoheleth," 22. Cf. the many points of similarity in Zellig S. Harris, *A Grammar of the Phoenician Language* in the *American Oriental Series*, ed. by W. Norman Brown, *et al.*, Vol. 8 (New Haven, Conn.: American Oriental Society, reprint, 1971).

orthography.¹ According to Dahood, the medial *matres lectiones* were introduced into Biblical Hebrew about the sixth century B.C. under Aramaic influence.² The use of *matres lectiones* became more and more common until by the time of the Dead Sea Scrolls (first and second centuries B.C.) even short vowels were represented sometimes by vowel letters.

Thus, while a work composed in Hebrew in the fourth-third centuries would have been amply supplied with final and internal *matres lectiones*, a work composed in the standard Phoenician orthography of the corresponding period would not have had these vowel letters, and the possibility of confusing the singular and the plural of nouns in the construct chain, unless the context unambiguously determined the meaning, would have been much greater.³ Dahood's thesis arises from the fact that the variant readings in Qoheleth reveal that they are mostly of the type which would have arisen from the editing or copying of an original text which

¹*Ibid.*, 35-6. Cf. GKC, *Grammar*, p. 5, sect. 2k; and E. Arbez, "Notes on the New Hebrew Manuscripts," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 12:1 (January, 1950), 173-8. Also cf. Cross and Freedman, *Early Hebrew Orthography*, pp. 11-20.

²Dahood, "Qoheleth," 35. On the development of *matres lectiones* in Aramaic, cf. Cross and Freedman, *Early Hebrew Orthography*, pp. 31-4.

³Dahood, "Qoheleth," 36. For an extensive discussion of the Phoenician script of the later periods, see J. Brian Peckham, *The Development of the Late Phoenician Scripts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

lacked all vowel letters.

If this is proven correct, there are two choices which may be made about the origin of Koheleth. One may either say that (1) the book is still to be late-dated, but that the variants and problems are to be explained on the basis of Phoenician orthography, as it would have been current in the third or fourth centuries B.C., or (2) that the book was written at a much earlier time in the history of the Hebrew language when normal Hebrew orthography would not have included *matres lectiones*.

Linguistic uniqueness

It is important to recognize that "linguistically the book [of Ecclesiastes] is unique."¹ All the linguistic data, including vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and style of the book have convinced Archer that the text of Ecclesiastes fits into none of the periods of the history of the Hebrew language. He states that

no significant affinities may be traced between this work and any of those canonical books which rationalistic higher criticism has assigned to the Greek period (Daniel, Zechariah II, Joel, and portions of Deutero-Isaiah). So far as the early post-Exilic period is concerned, the Heb. of Ecclesiastes is quite as dissimilar to that of Malachi, Nehemiah, Ezra and Esther as to any of the pre-Exilic books. This raises insuperable difficulties for the theory of Delitzsch and Young, who date

¹Gleason L. Archer, Jr., "The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of Ecclesiastes," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, XII:3 (Summer, 1969), 167.

it around 430 B.C., and of Beecher in the ISBE, who makes it 400.¹

Furthermore, the linguistic problem is not solved by moving the date forward to the Greek period or the Intertestamental period. There are "absolutely no affinities between the language of Ecclesiastes and that of the Qumran sectarian literature."² An actual comparison of this text with the Hebrew of the Talmud and the Midrash shows fully as great a dissimilarity as to any book of the Old Testament Canon. "No truly objective or scientific examination of these linguistic data can come out to any other result than that present evidence fails to establish the contemporaneity of Ecclesiastes with any period whatever in the history of Hebrew literature, on the basis of the documents now extant."³

A literary genre

Gordis asserts that "the concept of a 'normal literary Hebrew' has little or no meaning except within the context of specific literary genres."⁴ It is the feeling of Archer that Ecclesiastes belongs to a particular literary genre, that of the philosophic discourse. There is increasing evidence that in the Near East differing styles can

¹*Ibid.*, 168.

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*, 169.

⁴Robert Gordis, "Qoheleth and Qumran--A Study of Style," *Biblica*, 41:4 (1960), 402.

often be classified according to differing literary genres.

"Modern discovery makes completely justifiable the position that the ancient Semitic cultures cultivated differing styles and choices of vocabulary according to the conventions of each genre such as demonstrably obtained in the ancient Hellenic culture."¹

Just as in Akkadian literature, legal codes and contract tablets present a great contrast to each other both in technique and style, and these in turn differ from the epistolary or historical prose coming from about the same period, so also in Hebrew a conventional language in style came to be used, which was felt to be peculiarly fitting for each literary genre.² This same phenomenon can be observed in Greek literature, where it is found that once a genre was developed in a particular locality or city-state, the dialect and lexical stock of the original perfecters of this genre became standard for all subsequent composers in it from that time forward, regardless of the idiom and style

¹Archer, "The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of Ecclesiastes," 169.

²*Idem*, *Introduction*, p. 482. For examples of the style of a legal code, cf. Codex Hammurabi in Borger, *Babylonisch-Assyrische Lesestücke*, Hefte II, III; and G. R. Driver and John C. Miles, eds., *The Babylonian Laws*, Vol. II (2 vols.: Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1955). For an English translation of Akkadian prose, cf. A. Leo Oppenheim, trans., "Babylonian and Assyrian Historical Texts," in *ANET*, pp. 265-271.

prevailing in the composer's own area. "Thus, since it was Homer who first brought the epic to its classical perfection and did so in the Old Ionic dialect (with some admixtures of other dialects spoken in his locality), it became the convention from then on for all composers of epics to employ his Old Ionic, regardless of what their own native tongue might be."¹ Likewise, the Dorian Greeks were the perfecters of choral poetry, so all choral poetry from that time forward had to be in Doric, even in the midst of Attic dramas. The same held true for lyric love poetry, which was written in the Aeolic dialect.²

It is, therefore, not impossible that Ecclesiastes belonged to a special genre just as distinct as the Psalm, the Historical Narrative, and the Levitical Code. It had, consequently, a distinct literary tradition behind it, which was apparently derived from a segment of the Canaanite culture which had first developed it as a literary form.

This was the genre of the philosophical treatise, a type of literature with which a genius of wide-ranging interests like Solomon would undoubtedly have encountered in Phoenician circles. During his reign there were close commercial and political relations with King Hiram of Tyre, and Solomon's keen interest in literature and wisdom would naturally incline him in this direction. As a careful observer of literary form and tradition, it is only to be expected that he preserved a distinct style

¹Archer, "The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of Ecclesiastes," 169.

²*Ibid.*

and vocabulary for a love poem like *Canticles* and a collection of apothegms like *Proverbs*. This variety of treatment and style is no more striking than that observable in the later prophets, such as Hosea and Isaiah, when they shifted from oratorical prose to emotionally charged poetry, with its omission of the definite article and its adoption of parallelistic structure.¹

One of the first to point out the foreign nature of the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes was Professor Margoliouth of Oxford.² He offered a rebuttal to those who were explaining the linguistic peculiarities of Koheleth on the basis of Aramaic or Mishnaic traits. He pointed to the frequency of the participial present, the unintelligibility of certain phrases which are apparently not garbled in transmission, the lack of sharpness in some of the aphorisms, the complete omission of the name יהוה, the utter lack of reference to distinctive Jewish matters as pointing to foreign Hebrew, and yet he asserted a late date (about 400. B.C.), though not as late as some of his contemporaries were proposing.³

It is possible that the "philosophical discourse genre" used a dialect more similar to conversational Hebrew, the Hebrew Chomsky argues was ultimately the foundation of Mishnaic Hebrew.⁴

¹*Ibid.*, 170.

²David Samuel Margoliouth, "Ecclesiastes," *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*, V, 32-4.

³*Ibid.*, 33.

⁴Chomsky, *Hebrew: The Eternal Language*, pp. 49, 161.

Dahood's arguments

As stated previously, Dahood's hypothesis is that the book was originally composed by an author who wrote in Hebrew, but who employed Phoenician orthography, and whose composition shows heavy Canaanite--Phoenician influence.¹ He is supported in this opinion by W. F. Albright.² The cases he lists in support of his arguments are too numerous to cite exhaustively. However, several of them are discussed so that his theory as a whole may be evaluated.

Ecclesiastes 1:10.--This verse affords an example characteristic of several textual problems, which Dahood cites as originating in *scripto defectiva*. The Massoretic text reads: לְעֵלָמִים אֲשֶׁר הָיָה מֶלֶךְ פָּנָנִי while several other manuscripts read: לְעֵלָמִים אֲשֶׁר הָיָה מֶלֶךְ פָּנָנִי. Though some have attempted to justify the singular verb on the ground that the Hebrew Bible is not always exact in the agreement between the subject and the verb, even when the subject comes

¹Dahood, "Qoheleth," 32. These ideas were originally formulated by Dahood in his doctoral dissertation at the Johns Hopkins University, entitled, "Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth." Cf. also Mitchell Dahood, "Phoenician Elements in Isaiah 52:13-53:12," in *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright*, ed. by Hans Goedicke (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 73.

²"[Ecclesiastes] betrays Phoenician influence in spelling, morphology, syntax, vocabulary and content" (W. F. Albright, "Some Canaanite-Phoenician Sources of Hebrew Wisdom," in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East, in Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. III [Leiden: E. J. Brill, reprint, 1969]), p. 6.

first, Dahood feels that there are too many discrepancies of this kind to ascribe them to the grammatical imprecision of the author. He feels that it is much more reasonable to suppose that the original reading was a purely consonantal הי , which could have been taken as the singular, or as the plural.¹ In the same manner Dahood explains most of the variants in the book.

Ecclesiastes 1:16.--The Massoretic text reads: כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־הָיָה , while several other manuscripts read: כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־הָיוּ ,² though this is not reflected in Kittel's apparatus.³ This would have been a very easy mistake to make, for a copyist, who would probably have been inclined to write the simplest form of the consonants הי .

Ecclesiastes 2:2.--The Massoretic text reads: זֶה־זֶה , while some other manuscripts have זֶה־זֶה and זֶה־זֶה ,⁴ though, again, this is not reflected in Kittel's apparatus. It would have been difficult for these variants to have arisen

¹Dahood, "Qoheleth," 43. By the time of the Siloam inscription (c. 700 B.C.) , the word appears as היה (cf. Donner and Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, Band I, text 189, p. 134.

²Dahood, "Qoheleth," 37.

³Rudolf Kittel, ed., *Biblia Hebraica* (Stuttgart: Wurttembergische Bibelanstalt, 1966), p. 1212.

⁴Dahood, "Qoheleth." Cf. Harris, *A Grammar of the Phoenician Language*, p. 53.

had Koheleth been composed in the *scriptio plena* of the fourth century Hebrew orthography; but in Phoenician spelling (and possibly in Solomon's time) the masculine and the feminine demonstrative pronoun "this" was spelled merely by the letter י.¹

Ecclesiastes 2:24.--The Massoretic text reads יִהְיֶה, while many other manuscripts read יִהְיֶה. In Phoenician spelling both the feminine and masculine third person pronouns are written יִהְיֶה.² Since in this context either gender is grammatically justifiable, the present differences resulted. It is reasonable, therefore, that the *Vorlage* may not have been provided with vowel letters.

Other examples.--Dahood lists many more examples. While it is, regrettably, beyond the scope of this thesis to be more specific, it should be noted that Dahood also finds Phoenician parallels in several other areas. Koheleth employs the masculine plural suffix: יִהְיֶה for a feminine antecedent no less than five times, and the feminine plural suffix יִהְיֶה is not to be found in the book at all. The feminine demonstrative pronoun is יִהְיֶה instead of the normal

¹A form יִהְיֶה is found only on an inscription from Ur, but it is not known which Phoenician dialect this represents (Harris, *A Grammar of the Phoenician Language*, p. 53).

²*Ibid.*, p. 47.

Hebrew זא.¹

Dahood also finds a parallel in the relative pronoun **ש**, often used in Ecclesiastes instead of **אשר**. **ש** is probably closely related to Phoenician **שא** and Akkadian *ša*.² It occurs, in fact, as early as the ninth century B.C. in the Nora inscription from Sardinia.³ It occurs in the Song of Deborah (**שְׁקִמָּה**, Jud. 5:7), and in several other pieces of literature, all, including the song of Deborah, associated with northern Israel. The discussion of **ש** by Segal is especially helpful:

Now, whatever the relation of the two forms to each other, there can be no doubt that **ש** is just as old as **אשר**, if not older. Its confinement in the earlier books of the Bible to North Israelitish documents would prove that its use must have been common in the colloquial speech of Northern Palestine, under the influence, to some extent at least, of the Phoenician **שא**, **ש**, the Assyrian *ša*, and, perhaps, also the Aram. **י**, **י**. The scarcity of its occurrence even in these documents must be explained by the assumption that it was regarded as a vulgarism which the literary language had to avoid. Its use gradually extended to Southern Palestine, and being the shorter and more pliable form, it must in the course of time have entirely supplanted the longer **אשר** in the language of the common people, and from this it descended directly to MH. But the literary prejudice

¹*Ibid.*, p. 54. Cf. Dahood, "Qoheleth," 38.

²Harris says: "One can only guess at the origin of its initial **א**" (Harris, *A Grammar of the Phoenician Language*, p. 55). He also notes, however, that in some individual Semitic and especially Phoenician words, a prothetic **א** is used before a sibilant followed by a consonant (*Ibid.*, note 21).

³Donner and Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, Band II, p. 63; cf. Band III, p. 23.

against it seems to have remained even after BH had ceased to be a living speech. Hence its nonoccurrence in Esther, its scarcity in Chronicles, and the anxiety to avoid it which is displayed by a studious imitator of the ancients like Sirach, and even by such an independent mind as the author of Qoheleth.¹

Yet another similarity Dahood finds is the use of the indefinite pronoun. The development of the indefinite pronominal combination **שׁ מה** is peculiar to Koheleth, but is attested in the Kilamuwa inscription (ninth century B.C.), which contains the "etymologically identical compound **מאשׁ**, which has the meaning 'that which.'"²

Further similarities which Dahood adduces include the non-synocopated use of the article, nominal formations, the use of prepositions, the use of adverbs, and the use of conjunctions. Syntactical similarities include the use of the infinitive absolute followed by the independent personal pronoun, the periphrastic future, the accusative of time, and the accusative of place.³

¹M. H. Segal, *A Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 43.

²Dahood, "Qoheleth," 45. Cf. Donner and Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, Band I, p. 5, Inscription 24, line 4; Band II, p. 32.

³For an excellent summary of Dahood's arguments, cf. Archer, "Linguistic Evidence for the Date of Ecclesiastes." For the complete arguments see Mitchell Dahood, "Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth," *Biblica* 33:2 (1952), 191-201. This is a continuation of his first article, and is differentiated hereinafter only by the page numbers, since it is cited as "Qoheleth" as well.

There are also a number of lexical borrowings. For instance, the term **אָדָם**, normally the generic term for mankind or for the population of a locality, is the predominant word in Koheleth (49 times; 7 times for **אִישׁ**), a ratio of preference which cannot be duplicated in any other book of the Old Testament.¹ In some instances the word is even used where an individual man is intended (2:18 21). Such a ratio of preference can, however, be roughly duplicated in the ninth century Phoenician Azitawadda inscription.²

It is particularly significant that the key phrase of the book, **תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ** (under the sun), which occurs 27 times in Ecclesiastes, has, in all of ancient Northwest Semitic literature thus far discovered, been found only in Phoenician, in the inscriptions of Tabnit and Eshmun'azar of Sidon.³ There are many other instances of parallels with

¹Solomon Mandelkern, *Veteris Testamenti Concordantiae*, Vol. I (2 vols.: Graz: Akademische Druck-U. Verlagsanstalt, 1955), pp. 12, 13, 51-2.

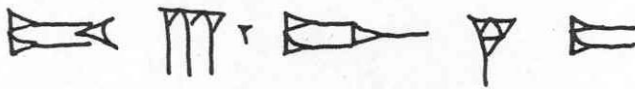
²Dahood, "Qoheleth," 202-3. Cf. Donner and Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, Band I, pp. 5-6, text 26; Band II, pp. 35-43. Azitawadda is the prominent person of the inscription. It is also known as "Karatepe," after the place where it was found. Cf. also Cyrus H. Gordon, "Azitawadda's Phoenician Inscription," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, VIII:2 (April, 1949), 108-115.

³Cf. Donner and Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, Band I, p. 3, text 14; pp. 3-4, text 13; Band II, pp. 17-19, 19-23. Cf. also Franz Rosenthal, trans., "Canaanite and Aramaic Inscriptions," in *ANET*, pp. 653-4; Tabnit and Eshmun'azar are translated in *Ibid.*, p. 662.

Phoenician words, and even cases of attestations of words in Ugaritic (fifteenth to twelfth centuries B.C.), which had formerly been called Aramaisms.¹

Because of the great similarity between the vocabulary of Koheleth and Phoenician and Ugaritic, Dahood declares that "lexically, the book of Ecclesiastes stands alone in the old Testament."² Of the 29 Aramaisms claimed by Kautzsch (*Die Aramaismen im AT*), for example, Dahood feels that at least a dozen of them can be shown to be not direct Aramaic borrowings at all, but "derived from the rich Canaanite-Phoenician vocabulary in use along the eastern Mediterranean seaboard."³ Dahood also cites 29 commercial terms which are used throughout the book, showing that whoever the author was, he was probably very acquainted with the business world, and very interested in commerce.⁴

Gordon also sees Ugaritic parallels in Ecclesiastes, though he would not draw from them the same inferences that Dahood does. For example, the phrase **קִצְלֵי הַכֶּסֶף** (Eccl. 7:12), is also found in Ugaritic, in Text 51:II:27:⁵



(*zl ksp*). Gordon suggests the translation "shade" for *zl*,

¹Dahood, "Qoheleth," 203-4.

²*Ibid.*, 201.

³*Ibid.*, 202.

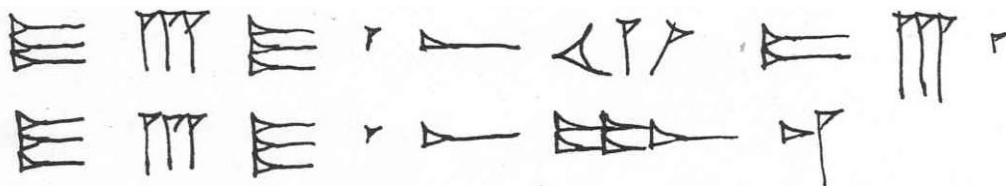
⁴*Ibid.*, 221.

⁵Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, p. 170.

and "shelter, house," for a derived form, *mzll*.¹ This compares favorably with the NASB translation, "money is protection."

Gordon further points out that not only are northern idioms to be found in Ecclesiastes, but also northern grammatical and lexical features. He feels that the northern character of Ecclesiastes should be stressed rather than its reputed "very late" or "Greek" character.²

There is a further Ugaritic parallel in Ecclesiastes which should be considered:



(*hlh tšpl hlh trm*). This is translated by Dahood, "Behold it is slack, behold it is erect" (Text 52:32).³ The pairing *špl // rm* equals the balance found in Ecclesiastes 10:6.⁴

¹*Ibid.*, p. 407, #1052; cf. p. 422, #1284.

²*Ibid.* Since he dates the book late, he attributes the northernisms to "the impact of northern exiles on the Hebrew language" (p. 99, note 1). He also attributes such things as the ׀ masculine plural suffix, so common in post-biblical Hebrew, "normal in Moabite and dialectal in non-Judean O.T. compositions such as Prov. 31:3 (מלכין) and Job 18:2; 26:4; 34:3; 38:2 etc. (מל׀)" not to Aramaic, but to dialectal Canaanite (*Ibid.*).

³Mitchell Dahood, "Northwest Semitic Philology and Three Biblical Texts," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages*, II (1972), 19, note 3.

⁴*Ibid.*

This, of course, neither proves dependence, nor interrelationship, but it is well at least to notice the similarity.¹

Use of Ugaritic

It is, perhaps, well to say a word about the use of Ugaritic. Some have objected, for instance, that the use of Ugaritic to help illumine the biblical text is invalid because Ugaritic word meanings are so often uncertain. But Dahood is correct when he contends that "Cartesian clarity is not demanded of a Ugaritic text before it can be called upon to elucidate in some manner a biblical verse."² The Ras Shamra materials bear upon the present problem, because they have revealed that Hebrew poetry (Ecclesiastes included) is more archaic, sophisticated, subtle, and complex than earlier generations of scholars could have imagined.³

It is true that one must exercise great caution in comparative studies. Often a scholar will see the whole field of Near Eastern studies through the lenses of his

¹Cf. Psalms 113:6-7 and 138:6. It is difficult to fix the date of Psalm 113, since it is ascribed to no one. Psalm 138, however, is ascribed to David. שפל is also found in the Aramaic proverbs of Ahiqar (A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* [Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1923], p. 217, col. X, lines 149, 150; translated on p. 225); cf. *DISO*, p. 317.

²Dahood, "Northwest Semitic Philology and Three Biblical Texts," 19.

³*Idem*, "Hebrew-Ugaritic Lexicography V," *Biblica*, 48:3 (1967), 423.

particular specialty. Thus, in some ways Dahood is justly criticized for relating too much to Northwest Semitic.

Gordis has reacted very strongly against this, and complains that "today it is Pan Ugariticism which holds the field.

The uncertainties of interpretation with regard to the extra-biblical texts being adduced are all too often ignored."¹

He further asserts that little or no attention is being paid to the problem of channels of communication, which are assumed to have existed between fifteenth century Syria and the Hebrew psalmists and Wisdom sages, which, he says, were nearly a millennium later. He is assuming, however, that they were really that much later (when there is good evidence they were not), and he is forgetting that there is good evidence that at least in the time of Solomon such intercourse was extensive. Gordis greatly overstates his case when he declares that in some quarters the Bible has become "little more than a poorly transmitted corpus of Ugaritic literature, which for two millennia has been misunderstood at hundreds of points by those unfamiliar with the 'original' language."²

¹Gordis, "On Methodology in Biblical Exegesis," 94-5. For similar sentiments see P. Wernberg-Møller, review of Zephania. *Versuch einer Neuübersetzung mit philologischem Kommentar*, by L. Sabottka, in *Journal of Semitic Studies*, XIX:1 (Spring, 1974), 105-7.

²Gordis, "On Methodology in Biblical Exegesis," 94-5.

Rainey, while preferring to reject the main points of Dahood's work on Ecclesiastes, nevertheless finds some validity to it in certain particulars. He states, for example, that Dahood has drawn a good parallel with reference to the absolute infinitive followed by a personal pronoun to express a past action, something which is shared by Ecclesiastes only with Esther in biblical literature, but which is a common feature in Ugaritic and Phoenician. He also feels that the phrase mentioned above, "shadow of silver," which occurs in Ugaritic and therefore obviates what was once labeled an Aramaism, is a valid parallel.¹

Evaluation of Dahood

Gordis remains totally unconvinced by Dahood's work. He feels that his arguments from orthography are overdrawn, and that the problem is better solved by assuming continued mixed orthography down to the second century A.D. It does not appear, however, that he musters sufficient evidence to overthrow the fact that the text of Koheleth is most easily explained on the basis of original consonantal spellings. Gordis feels that the primary weakness of the theory is that it postulates Phoenician influence where the Hebrew literary

¹A. F. Rainey, "A Study of Ecclesiastes," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXXV:3 (March, 1964), 149.

tradition itself offers a thoroughly satisfactory explanation.¹ He prefers to explain the phenomena of the text on the basis of the various elements of Koheleth's style as he sees them: (1) biblical; (2) proto-Mishnaic; and (3) Aramaic influence. The writer is inclined, however, to agree with Archer's estimation of Gordis' criticisms of the Phoenician theory: "If this, then, is the ablest rebuttal that can be brought against the theory of a Phoenician background for Ecclesiastes, it is only reasonable to conclude that it stands confirmed and vindicated."² This statement is not meant, either by Archer or by the writer, to include the totality of Dahood's argument (late date, etc.), but to show the validity of his main point: that many of the textual variants and difficulties can be explained on the basis of a *Vorlage* written defectively, and on the basis of the book's reflection of a Canaanite literary genre. Unknowingly, Dahood offers arguments which substantiate both an early date for the book, and, consequently, Solomonic authorship.

Building and commerce

If there is one activity which characterized the reign of Solomon, it was building. It is doubtless as a

¹Gordis, *Koheleth*, pp. 416-17.

²Archer, "Linguistic Evidence for the Date of Ecclesiastes," 180.

builder that Solomon himself would probably have desired to be known.¹ He spent seven years building the Temple (1 Kings 6:38), and thirteen years building his own house (7:1). He built stables, fortresses and cities. A reading of 1 Kings 1-13 gives one the impression that Solomon's chief occupation was building and commerce. When he was not building, he was sending convoys distant points of the world. It is not without significance, therefore, that the book of Ecclesiastes abounds with references to building, labor, and commerce. Dahood's long list of commercial terms occurring in the book constitutes a most compelling evidence in favor of Solomonic authorship.² Building was Solomon's life, and it is not surprising that building, labor, and commerce are often the main backdrop against which Koheleth discusses the real value of life.

Tradition

It is often overlooked that tradition is itself an historical phenomenon with which the true historian must grapple. Tradition should not be believed just because it is tradition; but neither should it for that reason be rejected. It is true that from the standpoint of biblical

¹Theodore H. Robinson, *A History of Israel*, Vol. I (2 vols.: Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, reprint, 1934), p. 248.

²Dahood, "Qoheleth," 221.

scholarship, tradition is inferior in trustworthiness, since it is not inspired as the Bible is. It is also true that much of Jewish tradition is ridiculous and extravagant. Yet uninspired history and tradition cannot be *ipso facto* discarded. The universal ascription of Solomonic authorship to the book of Ecclesiastes cannot, therefore, be precipitately dismissed.¹

It was taught by Jewish tradition "that Solomon wrote Canticles, with its stress on love, in his youth; Proverbs, with its emphasis upon practical problems, in mid-life; and Ecclesiastes, with its characteristic pessimism, in old age."² It was the general opinion of the church, based upon many of the sayings of Ecclesiastes, that Solomon repented in later life of many sins he had committed, and that before he died he left this book as a memorial to the folly of sin.³ Though there is no specific indication elsewhere in Scripture about such a repentance, the book of Ecclesiastes makes such a thing possible. It is true that if he did repent, it is a matter of surprise that there is

¹Such authorship is assumed, for instance, in I. Epstein, ed., *The Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*, trans. by H. Freedman, Vol. I (New York: The Soncino Press, 1972), tractate *Shabbath*, pp. 30a-30b.

²Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 1073.

³George Gilfillan, *The Bards of the Bible* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1851), p. 133.

not the least intimation of so interesting and important a circumstance, either in the books of Kings and Chronicles, or in Josephus.¹ Yet such an argument *ex silentio* is not conclusive. It would be little wonder if Solomon were finally brought to his senses in the last days of his reign. He had lived as high as any--and as sinfully--and had discovered that life lived only for self and possessions is in the end nothing but utter futility. Could not Ecclesiastes be the recording of his turning to God in the end?

Internal arguments

There are also several strong indications within the book that it is Solomonic. These are the references to: (1) unrivaled wisdom (1:16); (2) unequaled wealth (2:8); (3) a tremendous retinue of servants (2:7); and (4) opportunities for carnal pleasure (2:3). "No other descendant of David

¹Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, in vol. V of 9 vols. of Josephus in the *Loeb Classical Library*, trans. by Ralph Marcus (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937), Book VIII, Chapters 1-7. Josephus does, however, give an interesting insight into the relationship between Solomon and Hiram of Tyre: "In return Solomon, among many other gifts, made him a present of land in Galilee in the district called Chabulon. But the main bond of friendship between them was their passion for learning. They used to send each other problems to solve; in these Solomon showed the greater proficiency, as in general, he was the cleverer of the two. Many of the letters they exchanged are preserved at Tyre to this day" (Josephus, *Against Apion*, in vol. I of 9 vols. of Josephus in the *Loeb Classical Library*, trans. by H. St. J. Thackeray [London: William Heinemann, 1926], p. 207, 1:17).

measures up to these specifications"¹ as well as does Solomon. The book's reflection of the practice of polygamy (2:8) also argues for at least a pre-Exilic date. It is very doubtful that a post-Exilic book would have reflected such a practice, for it had fallen, by that time, into disrepute, and largely, therefore, into disuse.²

Date

One's view of the date is, as with the authorship of the book, closely connected with one's estimate of the linguistic features of the book. Pfeiffer confidently maintained in 1934 that "Ecclesiastes wrote his book sometime between 250 B.C. and 150 B.C."³ Others were even bolder and asserted that the book showed "Sadducean influence" and thus would have dated from a time closer to Christ.⁴ Cyrus Gordon discerns in the book Babylonian influence, and would date it late in post-Exilic times. He says that it was

¹Archer, "The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of Ecclesiastes," 168.

²Paul Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. by William Heidt (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1950), p. 191. Cf. the discussion of Eccl. 2:8 below.

³Robert H. Pfeiffer, "The Peculiar Skepticism of Ecclesiastes," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LIII (March-December, 1934), 100.

⁴Hermann Schultz, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. I (2 vols.: Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1892), p. 434.

written in "Achaemenian Babylonia before Alexander's conquest."¹ Most contemporary scholars, however, now set the lower limit for the book's date in the third century, a position virtually forced upon them by the discovery of part of a copy of Ecclesiastes at Qumran. Muilenburg declares that

the upshot of our comparison with 4Q, DSIa, and the Manual [of Discipline], on the one hand, and the Edfu papyri, on the other, makes it clear that 4Q lies between the former and the latter. From a paleographic standpoint, therefore, one must date our fragments about the middle of the second century B.C. This gives the *coup de grâce* to earlier views of the date of composition, such as those of Graetz, Renan, Leimdorfer, König, and others, and makes unlikely a dating in the second century.²

One must assume that the book had been written and had been in circulation for some time, and that it was either accepted as Scripture, or had at least attained some degree of respect, to have been copied and preserved at Qumran at this early date. Thus, from this standpoint alone, third century date is as late as one may legitimately date it.

Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that there is every possibility that the book represents a literary genre dating back to the tenth century. Since there are so many

¹C. H. Gordon, "North Israelite Influence on Post-exilic Hebrew," *Israel Exploration Journal*, 5:2 (1955), 87.

²James Muilenburg, "A Qoheleth Scroll from Qumran," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 135 (October, 1954), 23-4.

other convincing proofs for Solomonic authorship, a tenth century date is chosen. The book was probably written during the later part of Solomon's life, and reflects his view of life after having departed from the Lord and indulged in many sins. If it was written by Solomon in later life, it reflects a repentant heart--something anyone who reads the narratives of his life must surely hope he had.

Conclusion

The purpose of the rather detailed discussion of the linguistic background of Ecclesiastes has been to find what limits that puts on authorship and date. It was shown that the supposed Aramaisms are mostly non-existent, and, at all events, are insignificant. The hypothesis of an Aramaic original was likewise rejected. The close relationship Dhood shows between the Ugaritic literature of Moses' time and the language of Ecclesiastes leads one to deduce that it may reflect a literary genre cultivated among Phoenician-speaking peoples and adopted from them by the gifted author of the Hebrew Koheleth, whose style was also affected by other dialectical influences.¹ It is the writer's opinion that the best solution is one which explains the linguistic peculiarities of the book on the basis of several factors,

¹Archer, "Linguistic Evidence for the Date of Ecclesiastes," 181.

the most important of which are: (1) a Canaanite literary genre; (2) tenth century defective Hebrew orthography; and (3) Northern Israelite dialectical influence.

This seems to be a most reasonable deduction to make from the linguistic evidence presently at hand. The grammar, language, and style of Koheleth cannot support an argument for the spuriousness of the book as a work of Solomon. Koheleth, then, was Solomon.

CHAPTER IV

KOHELETH'S THEME AND DEVELOPMENT OF THOUGHT

Introduction

Opinions concerning the theme, aim, development of thought, and value of Ecclesiastes are almost as varied as its interpreters. The estimations of it have ranged all the way from Luther, who thought it was so worthwhile that it should be read every day¹ to Hartmann, who said, "This book which contains almost as many contradictions as verses, may be regarded as the Breviary of the most modern materialism and of extreme licentiousness."² One would expect little more than the above conclusion from what Hengstenberg has labeled "soulless, spiritless, vulgar rationalism,"³ but for the student who has presupposed before examination of the book, that by virtue of its inclusion in Scripture it must certainly be more than "the work of a morose Hebrew philosopher, composed when he was in a dismal mood, and in places

¹Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, pp. 32-3.

²Hartmann, *Das Lied vom Ewigen* (St. Galle, 1859), p. 12, cited by Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 183.

³Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, p. 33.

thoroughly tedious,"¹ a higher and more noble estimation must of necessity be sought and found ("All Scripture is . . . profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness," 2 Tim. 3:16). It is only upon the basis of a correct understanding of Koheleth's theme and development of thought that the book can be rightly understood.

Theme

Almost every commentator on the book of Ecclesiastes has proposed a theme for Koheleth different from every other commentator,² but in general, these commentators may be divided into two large groups: those unsympathetic with the book, and those who are sympathetic.

Unsympathetic Interpretations

It is the opinion of some that Koheleth was facing a problem on which he did not have sufficient light to solve. He saw great injustice in the world; he saw the wicked go unpunished and the righteous unrewarded. The author of this book, it is alleged, speaks only from the standpoint of one who is observing the world, and what is done "under the

¹*Ibid.*

²For the most thorough summary of all the interpreters of Koheleth up through the middle of the nineteenth century, cf. Ginsburg, *Cokeleth*, pp. 27-243.

sun,"¹ for that is all he knows.² This position is summarized in the *New Scofield Reference Bible*, which states that "Ecclesiastes is the book of man 'under the sun' reasoning about life. The philosophy it sets forth, which makes no claim to revelation, but which inspiration records for our instruction represents the view of one of the wisest of men" ³ In another publication Scofield makes his view clear when he states:

The student should notice that it is not at all the will of *God* which is developed, but that of *man* "under the sun" forming his own code. It is, therefore, as idle to quote such passages as ii.24, iii.22, etc., as expressions of the divine will as it would be to apply Job ii.4, 5 or Gen. iii.4. The constant repetition of such expressions as "I perceived," "I said in my heart," "then I saw," etc., sufficiently indicate that here the Holy Spirit is showing us the workings of man's own wisdom and his reaction in weariness and disgust.⁴

¹Cf. the discussion of this phrase below.

²John Howard Raven, *Old Testament Introduction* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1910), pp. 304-5.

³English, *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 696. It is noteworthy that most of the revisers felt that the approach of the book was rather pessimistic. Gaebelein, in fact, said that there was "no hope of immortality in this book. It's a cynical volume, and is sometimes entitled 'The Gentle Cynic.' . . . it is human earthly philosophy, and I feel that it is here by inspiration to show us the best that natural man can do." (Transcript of the Proceedings of the New Scofield Reference Bible Committee, Trans. G., #155, Rev. 1, Eccl. #1A, SRB 696, Disc 23a [examined by the writer in the rare book room of Grace Theological Seminary Library, Nov., 1973]). Cf. also J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), p. 143.

⁴C. I. Scofield, *The Scofield Bible Correspondence School*, Vol. I (Los Angeles: Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1907), p. 111.

Another contends that "Cohemoth would be the first to admit that he has not presented a finished *Weltanschauung* [world view]. He is groping through the conflicting facts of experience and belief."¹ Another asserts that "Ecclesiastes is not only a skeptic with reference to the philosophical systems of his day, but also with reference to the pursuit of a *summum bonum* of abiding truth."² Pfeiffer feels that the concept of divine revelation is totally foreign to Ecclesiastes. Koheleth refuses to accept anything on faith. "He tests the validity of doctrines and value judgments and, like Bertrand Russell, he thinks 'that it is undesirable to believe a proposition when there is no ground whatever for supposing it true.'"³ Another maintains that "L'auteur se demande si l'homme retire un profit réel de toute sa peine (1:3). La méthode employée pour élucider ce problème est celle de la sagesse humaine (5:13)."⁴ Skehan says that a man for whom prophecy was apparently no more, for whom the kingdoms of Israel were dead (supposing, as he does, that the

¹Roland E. Murphy, "The Pensées of Cohemoth," 306.

²Pfeiffer, "The Peculiar Skepticism of Ecclesiastes," 108.

³*Ibid.*, 101.

⁴René Paché, ed., *Nouveau Dictionnaire Biblique* (Lausanne: Editions Emmaüs, 1961), p. 205. The translation is: "The author asks himself if man derives a real profit from all his work. The method employed to elucidate this problem is that of human wisdom."

book is post-Exilic), and for whom the Christian message to the individual soul did not exist, should have said what Koheleth did say: "vanity of vanities, all is vanity."¹ Von Rad rather cavalierly dismisses the book as a "sceptical marginal note on the tradition of the wise men, although of course it is a very bitter one."² He further states that when it is so taken, one is "delivered from the hopeless task of understanding its content as a consistent unity of thought, because it rests wholly upon the traditional themes of the Wisdom literature, though freely glossing them."³ Yet another feels that the doubts expressed in it are no mere dialectic show, but doubts that are honestly felt.⁴ Stadelmann asserts that the author of the book views the world as moving aimlessly and human activity as advancing similarly, in a perpetual cycle, without producing anything with meaning. The author of Ecclesiastes is disillusioned with the world and feels that it lacks specific purpose. He

¹Patrick W. Skehan, *Studies in Israelite Poetry and Wisdom* (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1971), p. 237.

²Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. I (2 vols.: New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962), p. 455.

³*Ibid.*

⁴Schultz, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. I, p. 434.

therefore views the world with a certain skepticism.¹ John Bright also takes a similar "low" view of the book.² Still another commentator feels that Ecclesiastes shares with Job a rather deep pessimism with regard to man's knowing and understanding the nature and purposes of God. "This position, representing late Jewish thought, contrasts sharply with the earlier prophetic conviction that God is known directly and fully in vision and the spoken word."³

Another author avers that Koheleth can find no meaning in life, that life to him is empty, vain, and profitless. "Neither material possessions, human friendship, nor religious devotion alter the fact that nature is oppressive, that death is the negation of all good, that God is therefore untouched by the plight of creatures."⁴ Koheleth's advice, therefore, is a form of Epicureanism.⁵ It is asserted that the God of Koheleth is a completely transcendent God, remote, inscrutable, unknowable. This God, it is said,

¹Luis I. J. Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1970), p. 8.

²John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1967), pp. 136, 152, 157-8.

³J. Stanley Chesnut, *The Old Testament Understanding of God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), p. 17.

⁴J. L. Crenshaw, "Popular Questioning of the Justice of God in Ancient Israel," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 82:3 (1970), 389.

⁵*Ibid.*

"deliberately withholds from man knowledge of his ways in order to keep man in his place."¹ With this estimation Scott agrees when he maintains that "in Ecclesiastes God is not only unknown to man through revelation; he is unknowable through reason, the only means by which the author believes knowledge is attainable."² The mood of the writer, he further asserts, is one of disillusionment and resignation.

"His ethic has no relationship to divine commandments, for there are none."³ He further states that the only satisfaction open to man is the enjoyment of being alive. The author, Scott boldly asserts, is a rationalist, an agnostic, a skeptic, a pessimist, and a fatalist. "In most respects his views run counter to those of his fellow Jews. The title of a modern autobiography, *Treadmill to oblivion*, seems to sum up most (though not quite all) of his conclusions about life."⁴ Though not quite so radical in his view of the book, Driver also feels that the primary assertion of the book is that life under all its aspects is unsatisfying and disappointing and that the most man can do is enjoy it--

¹Charles C. Forman, "Koheleth's Use of Genesis," *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 5 (July, 1960), 262.

²Scott, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 191.

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 192.

though in moderation.¹ Some Jews, in fact, misunderstanding the inherent balance of the book, "tried to store away the book because they found in it words they felt tended to heresy."²

Many more such opinions could be gathered; their number is almost limitless, especially among those inclined, in accordance with their basic working presuppositions, to treat the Bible with less respect.³ Yet such estimations of Ecclesiastes are not the only ones which have been made, and they are not to be supposed to be the correct ones. It is the opinion of the writer that when each of Koheleth's statements are taken in their context, and understood according to the avowed purpose of the author of the book, these statements are true, and applicable even to the contemporary Christian who has the advantage of much more revelation than Koheleth had.

¹S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), p. 470.

²C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 206.

³Cf. W. O. E. Oesterley, and Theodore H. Robinson, *Hebrew Religion: Its Origin and Development* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1931), p. 332; and George A. F. Knight, *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1959), pp. 87, 337.

Sympathetic Interpretations

One writer suggests that the book is a sermon descriptive of Solomon's fall into great sin, his discovery of the absolute uselessness of a sinful and self-centered life, and his subsequent recovery of his fear of God.¹ Leupold at least partially supports Oehler and others who believe that the aim of the book is to inculcate resignation, a "resignation coupled with a clear and intelligent faith."² Another sees the theme of the book in the form of a question: "What is the chief good?"³ Hendry suggests that

Qoheleth writes from concealed premises, and his book is in reality a major work of apologetic or "eristic" theology. Its apparent worldliness is dictated by its aim: Qoheleth is addressing the general public whose view is bounded by the horizons of this world; he meets them on their own ground, and proceeds to convict them of its inherent vanity.⁴

Of all the commentaries written on Koheleth, perhaps the one of Ginsburg is the most thorough, and in many respects, the best. There is much truth in his view of the

¹Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. III (6 vols.: New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.), pp. 979-80.

²Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 20.

³Baxter, *Explore the Book*, p. 143.

⁴G. S. Hendry, "Ecclesiastes," *The New Bible Commentary*, ed. by F. Davidson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), p. 538.

theme of the book, which he feels is

to gather together the desponding people of God from the various expediences to which they have resorted, in consequence of the inexplicable difficulties and perplexities in the moral government of God, into the community of the Lord, by shewing them the utter insufficiency of all human efforts to obtain real happiness, which cannot be secured by wisdom, pleasure, industry, wealth, &c., but consists in the calm enjoyment of life, in the resignation to the dealings of Providence, in the service of God, and in the belief in a future state of retribution, when all the mysteries in the present course of the world shall be solved.¹

Eichrodt urges that "the author of Ecclesiastes, by the relentless use of *reductio ad absurdum* demolished all attempts to make the divine power manageable by the categories of human reason, and taught men to worship the incomprehensible greatness of God their Creator by humble resignation to the relativity of human existence."²

A Suggested Theme

In each of these sympathetic statements there is some truth. Assuming that Solomon is the author, the book does, indeed, describe some of his past sins and it does record his personal faith in God. It is true that underlying the entire book is the question: "What is the chief good?" At the end of his life (which seems to be the

¹Ginsburg, *Cohemoth*, pp. 16-17.

²Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. I, translated by J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 263.

perspective of the author), he is asking an open question to any who may answer: what is most worthwhile for a man to do while yet on the earth? It is true, as well, that he counsels resignation to the will of God, for, as he wisely states, in such a resignation to and reliance on the fact that God is sovereign there is to be found true consolation and peace. "We are anything but masters of our fate, and God has decreed it so."¹ It cannot be disputed, moreover, that he does in some instances bound his comments by the world of the seen, but great caution should be used in applying this generalization to every particular in the book. He does not limit every statement by the world of the seen. Most of all, it must be remembered that the writer is not, as some have imagined, a gloomy misanthrope, who looks on everything with a jaundiced eye; but a believer in God who is striving to behold everything in the light of God, and who seeks to lead men to the true good by leading them to a life of faith in God.

Among those who have best apprehended the message of the book are Thomas Taylor and J. Stafford Wright. Taylor summarizes the theme of the book in terms of what it claims itself to be. He feels that the book aims to present

¹Derek Kidner, "Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament," in *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, ed. by J. Barton Payne (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1970), p. 126.

- an empirical analysis (1:13, 17; 2:1-8; 2:12; 4:1; 7:15, etc.)
- of the affairs (1:17; 2:1-8; 4:1, etc.)
- that most interest man as executed by one
- thoroughly capable (1:16; 2:9-10; etc.)
- of full indulgence and guided in the conclusionary processes
- by the wisdom of God (3:14; 12:11)¹

Wright most ably discusses all the divergent opinions about the theme of Ecclesiastes, and lands on a very sympathetic, and in the estimation of the writer, a very correct one. He is careful to remind his readers that when one is trying to understand any book or composition, it is first of all important to survey the preface or introduction and the conclusion.²

The conclusion of Ecclesiastes is found in 12:13, 14: The conclusion, when all has been heard is: fear God and keep his commandments, because this applies to every person; for God will bring every work into judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil."

¹Taylor, "Studies in Ecclesiastes," p. 8.

²J. Stafford Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," (hereinafter referred to as "Ecclesiastes" and to be carefully distinguished from Wright, *Koheleth*), in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), p. 137.

The orthodoxy of this statement is beyond question. Matthew 19:17 records Christ's statement that "if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." 1 Corinthians 3:13 says, "and the fire itself will test the quality of every man's work." It is very important to understand the significance of this conclusion, for

if the book is a unity, it stands to reason that no statement elsewhere in the book can be interpreted as a final conclusion if it contradicts the statement at the end of the book. Or, to put it from another angle, if any statement in the course of the book is given as a final conclusion, it must be interpreted in the light of the ultimate conclusion at the end. This is not a matter of inspiration or non-inspiration; it is the treatment that we should give to any book written by a reasonable man.¹

The phrase, "vanity of vanities, all is vanity," and its variations, for instance, must be interpreted in light of the entire book, and in light of the conclusion. Because the theme of the book is best understood by a proper recognition of the development of thought by the writer, this topic is considered before a conclusion regarding the theme is drawn.

Development of Thought

One of the difficulties that the book of Koheleth presents, particularly to the occidental mind, is its development of thought. The book is not organized as one might

¹*Ibid.*, p. 138.

organize a similar work in his own contemporary culture, and it does not pursue a format even remotely similar to that of present Western literature. Many suggestions about Koheleth's development of thought have been offered. One writer states that he is "convinced that the golden key and the Ariadne-thread through this seeming labyrinth is to be found in the assumption that the author is conducting a dialogue with himself, just as the book of Job contains dialogues between Job and his friends."¹ Ginsburg, in his characteristically elegant style, states that the development of thought

which the sacred writer adopts to carry out this design is most striking and effective. Instead of writing an elaborate metaphysical disquisition, logically analysing and refuting, or denouncing *ex cathedra*, the various systems of happiness which the different orders of minds and temperaments had constructed for themselves, Solomon is introduced as recounting his painful experience in all these attempts. Thus, by laying open, as it were, to the gaze of the people the struggles of a man of like feelings with themselves, who could fully sympathise with all their difficulties, having passed through them himself, and found the true clue to their solution, the sacred writer carries out this design far more touchingly and effectively than an Aristotelian treatise, or the Mount Ebal curses upon the heads of the people, would have done.²

Another suggests that Koheleth's purpose was merely to collect current proverbs, and mold them into some sort of

¹S. DuToit, "Ecclesiastes," *Christianity Today*, 5:21 (July 17, 1961), 32-3.

²Ginsburg, *Cohleth*, p. 17.

a pattern, citing 12:9, 10, and 11 as proof.¹ While it is virtually certain that Koheleth did employ some aphorisms current in his own day, the book certainly is not only a collection of wise sayings. A simple reading of the book will demonstrate that. Maltby affirms that the seeming contradictions of the book can be resolved in one of the following ways, by assuming:

(a) that the author was including objections to his own ideas and endeavouring to answer them, [or] (b) that the book reflects the struggle between his higher and lower nature, [or] (c) that the work reveals the development of his own outlook and philosophy, beginning at the start of his quest and leading us through to the end.²

He accepts the last view. There is a certain attraction to this view, but it is not, in the opinion of the writer, completely correct. Furthermore, if one precisely apprehends the development of the book, there are no contradictions.

Another suggestion is made by Zockler, who says that Koheleth first places man in a dilemma by stating something favorable to the world, and then balancing his statement with the biblical view in order to show the "vanity, unrest, and joylessness of a consciousness detached from God and devoted solely to the impressions of worldly vanity."³

¹Cox, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, p. 23.

²Arthur Maltby, "The Book of Ecclesiastes and the After-Life," *The Evangelical Quarterly*, XXXV:1 (January-March, 1963), 39-44.

³Zockler, "Ecclesiastes," p. 23.

Certainly, one of the most remarkable features of the book is the way in which one statement is balanced by another, and in which any one statement cannot be separated from the context of the thrust of the entire book, if it is to be rightly understood. Hendry has termed this phenomenon "counterpoint."¹

While the writer hesitates to agree completely with Zockler in saying that a number of statements are made by Koheleth which are favorable to the world, he agrees that the most important aspect of the development of the book is that of balance. Isolated from their context, and thus from their inherent balance, some passages seem, indeed, to be little more than reflections of worldly thinking. Taken in their context, however, and thus modified by all other statements in the book, all of Koheleth's statements are found to be completely true in the context in which he made them, and in the sense in which he meant them. Examples of this balance are demonstrated below in the discussion of selected difficulties.

This concept of "balance" is, after all, only the principle of interpreting a verse in its context. It is most unreasonable to extricate verses from a book like Ecclesiastes, interpret them devoid of their literary environment, and expect to arrive at a legitimate

¹Hendry, "Ecclesiastes," p. 539.

interpretation.¹

Conclusion

If one remembers, then, what the book of Ecclesiastes aims to be: "an empirical analysis . . . by one . . . guided in the conclusionary processes by the wisdom of God,"² and what is the outstanding characteristic of its method: balance, he will find much less difficulty in Koheleth's words and will not have to resort to interpretations which seem to circumvent supposed problems by a completely unwarranted discarding of Koheleth's words as merely human and non-revelatory. It "does not seem worthy of God to occupy valuable space in the Bible with the arguments of the skeptic and of the natural man That is the difficulty with Scofield's theory."³

Based on a proper understanding of the development of thought of the book, it can be seen that Solomon's theme is to show his readers the total and unmitigated insufficiency of every human effort to obtain real and lasting happiness, which cannot be secured by wisdom, pleasure,

¹Cf. A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 99-113; Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), pp. 135-8; and Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), pp. 182-210.

²Taylor, "Studies in Ecclesiastes," p 3.

³Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 137.

industry, wealth, success, or any other human endeavor (though there is nothing sinful in them), but consists in the calm enjoyment of life (itself a gift from God to be enjoyed), in the resignation to the dealings of a Sovereign God, in a life spent in serving God, and in a belief in a future state and retribution, when not only shall all the mysteries in the present world be solved, but all the wrongs shall be righted.¹

¹Ginsburg, *Cohemoth*, pp. 16-17.

CHAPTER V

SELECTED DIFFICULTIES

Introduction

To any reader of Ecclesiastes who is also familiar with the other parts of Scripture, it is immediately apparent that Koheleth says things, which upon a cursory examination, appear to be difficult to harmonize and explain. For this reason it was for many years among those books whose place in the canon was disputed: it was an "antilegomenon."¹ Some have suggested that the work was originally a book of unrelieved pessimism, and that the original has now been interpolated and adorned "with orthodox allusions to God and judgment, and a happy conclusion, in order to bring it into harmony with the canon of Scripture."² Morris Jastrow, in fact, in his *A Gentle Cynic*, has as his last chapter one which he entitles "The Words of Koheleth in Their Original Form, Stripped of Subsequent Interpolations, Maxims and Comments."³ In an appendix he includes: "I. additions by the 'pious' commentators; II. additions by the 'maxim'

¹Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 189.

²Minos Divine, *Ecclesiastes* (London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1916), p. 208.

³Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic*, p. 197.

commentators, and III. miscellaneous comments and glosses."¹

In the light of such abuse, it is the purpose of this chapter to examine selected difficulties with a view to gaining a more complete knowledge of and a better appreciation for the teachings of Ecclesiastes.

Vanity of Vanities

No discussion of Ecclesiastes would be complete without an investigation into the meaning of the phrase, profusely used by Koheleth, and perhaps most characteristic of the general impression most have of the book, הַבָּל הַבָּלִים.

It is not surprising that the word הַבָּל appears more times in Ecclesiastes (40 times) than in the entire remainder of the Old Testament (33 times).²

Definition

הַבָּל is a masculine noun whose basic meaning is "vapour, breath, vanity."³ It is used in Isaiah 57:13 to describe what will carry away idols--a breath. It is used "elsewhere always . . . [as] figurative of what is evanescent, unsubstantial, worthless, vanity, as . . . of the

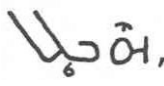
¹*Ibid.*, p. 243.

²Mandelkern, *Veteris Testamenti Concordantiae*, Vol. I, p. 307. Cf. F. N. Jasper, "Ecclesiastes: A Note for Our Time," *Interpretation*, 21 (July, 1967), 262.

³BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 210.

fruitlessness of all human enterprise and endeavour . . .”¹

A meaning of "exhalation, damp" is also suggested.² The

Syriac is , a also translated "vanity, emptiness."³

The word apparently does not occur in extant Ugaritic and Phoenician texts.⁴

הַבֵּל is the construct of **הֶבֶל** which can be traced to verb **הִבֵּל**, "to steam, exhale, to breath."⁵ Gordis has suggested that as used in Ecclesiastes the word has two nuances of meaning: the breath (**הֶבֶל**) is (a) unsubstantial and (b) transitory.⁶ These two nuances are added to by Meek, who suggests that in the context of the book at least five are discernible: (1) futile (1:2); (2) empty (6:12); (3) sorry (6:4); (4) senseless (8:14); and (5) transient (11:10).⁷ It is extremely important that the interpreter of the book recognize the possibility of different connotations for the word in different contexts within the book.

¹Ibid.

²KB, *Lexicon*, p. 223.

³J. Payne Smith, ed., *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1903), p. 99.

⁴Cf. Richard E. Whitaker, *A Concordance of the Ugaritic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 210; Donner and Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, p. 7; and *DISO*, p. 62.

⁵Ginsburg, *Cohleth*, p. 259.

⁶Gordis, *Kohleth*, p. 205.

⁷Theophile J. Meek, "Transplanting the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 79 (1960), p. 331.

For example, in 11:10, "So remove vexation from your heart and put away pain from your body, for childhood and the prime of life are" **הַבָּל** the translation "vanity" in the sense of "unsubstantial" gives a very wrong impression. But if **הַבָּל** is understood in the sense of transitory, then the verse is once again comprehensible. It is well translated in the NASB: "fleeting."

It is common, for the superlative sense, to use a substantive in the construct state before the plural of the same word. Such is the case with **הַבָּל הַבָּלִים**.¹ Other instances of this idiomatic construction are found in Exodus 26:33, **קֹדֶשׁ הַקֳּדָשִׁים**, "The most holy place," and Song of Solomon **שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים**, "the most excellent song."² One viable translation of this phrase in Ecclesiastes, therefore, might be "utter futility--all is futile."³ This expression also involves several figures of speech. Ecclesiastes 1:2 is an example of "mesarchia," or repetition of the same word or words at the beginning and middle of successive sentences.⁴ It is also a case of "polyptoton,"⁵ or repetition

¹GKC, *Grammar*, p. 431, sect. 133i. ²*Ibid.*

³H. L. Ginsberg, ed., **חמש מגלות וספר יונה** (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), p. 57.

⁴E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint, 1970), p. 260.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 284.

of the same part of speech in different inflections, from the Greek πολὺπτωτον.¹

The Septuagint translation of this phrase is, ματαιότης ματαιότητων. This can be compared with Romans 8:20, which reads, τῇ γὰρ ματαιότητι ἣ κτίσις ὑπετάγη . . . , "for the creation was subjected to futility. . . ." The Greek word, as used in the New Testament, seems to contain all the nuances that the Hebrew לִבְנָה does, "emptiness, futility, purposelessness, transitoriness."² For the LXX usages of the word as a translation of לִבְנָה, Liddell and Scott suggest the translations "vanity, purposelessness."³ Greek translators of the Old Testament sometimes used the word ἄτμις,⁴ meaning "steam,," "vapor."⁵ In the New Testament the suggested

¹*Ibid.*, p. 267.

²W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (hereinafter referred to as *Lexicon*) (a translation and adaptation of Walter Bauer's *Griechisch-Deutsches Worterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der ubrigen urchristlichen Literatur*, fourth revised and augmented edition, 1952) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 496.

³Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (hereinafter referred to as *Lexicon*), revised and augmented by H. S. Jones and R. McKenzie (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 1084.

⁴Aquila and Theodotion translated the phrase, "ἄτμις ἄτμιδων τὰ πάντα ἄτμις" (Fridericus Field, *Origenis Hexaplorum*, Tomus II [2 vols.: Oxonii: E. Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1875], p. 380).

⁵Liddell and. Scott, *Lexicon*, p. 271.

meanings are "mist," "vapor," "smoky vapor," or "steam that rises from a pot," and used typically of nothingness.¹ New Testament uses which may be compared are Acts 2:19: αἷμα καὶ πῦρ καὶ ἀτμίδα καπνοῦ, "blood and fire and smoky vapor"; and James 4:14: ἀτμὶς γάρ ἐστε, "For you are a vapor."²

H. L. Ginsberg suggests the translation, "all is zero." He connects this with 1:3, "What advantage does man have in all his work" by translating "Since everything is zero ('vanity') what plus ('profit') is there in the goods one acquires?"³ Scott translates 1:2, "Breath of a breath! (says Qoheleth). The slightest breath! All is a breath."⁴

Usage of הָבֵל

There are ten areas of life which Koheleth pronounces הָבֵל. They have been listed as follows:⁵

¹Arndt and Gingrich, *Lexicon*, p. 120.

²For more New Testament comparisons, see J. M. Fuller, ed. and abridger, *Ecclesiastes*, in *The Bible Commentary*, ed. by F. C. Cook and part of Baker Book House's set, *Barnes' Notes on the Old & New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), p. 91.

³H. L. Ginsburg, "The Structure and Contents of the Book of Koheleth," in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, ed. by M. Noth and D. Winton Thomas, *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. III (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), pp. 138-9.

⁴Scott, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 209.

⁵Baxter, *Explore the Book*, p. 163.

2:15-16	The "vanity" of human wisdom	Wise and foolish alike have one end, death
2:19-21	The "vanity" of human labor	Worker no better than the shirker in the end
2:26	The "vanity" of human purpose	Altho' man proposes, it is God who disposes
4:4	The "vanity" of human rivalry	Much success brings envy more than joy
4:7	The "vanity" of human avarice	"Much" feeds lust for "more" yet oft eludes
4:16	The "vanity" of human fame	Is brief, uncertain, and soon forgotten
5:10	The "vanity" of human insatiety	Money does not satisfy. Increase only feeds others
6:9	The "vanity" of human coveting	Often gain cannot be enjoyed, despite desire
7:6	The "vanity" of human frivolity	It only camouflages the inevitable sad end
8:10, 14	The "vanity" of human awards	Bad often honoured. Good and bad get wrong deserts

"Futility of futilities, all is futile." "Fear God, and keep his commandments . . . God shall bring every work into judgment." The first is Koheleth's verdict on all life and the second is his counsel in view of the verdict. But is the verdict true? That is what Koheleth examines for his readers, turning life over and over in his hands so that it is seen from every perspective. He forces his readers to admit, that from a purely human standpoint, and without inclusion of God and cognizance of his commandments and ensuing judgment, life is, indeed, vain, futile, empty, in a word, zero. Yet he does not mean that it is so in the sense that it is not worth living. Koheleth's use of **הָבֵל** describes something vastly greater than that. All life is vanity in this sense, namely, that it is unable to give us the key to itself, and it is unsubstantial.

The book is the record of a search for the key to life. It is the endeavor to give a meaning to life, to see it as a whole. And there is no key under the sun. Life has lost the key to itself. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." If you want the key you must go to the locksmith who made the lock. "God holds the key of all unknown." *And He will not give it to you.* Since then you cannot get the key, you must trust the locksmith to open the doors.¹

One must acquiesce to the sovereignty of God. Only then does life gain perspective and meaning. Only then do the things Koheleth pronounces "zero" begin to add up. All things are **הָבֵל** only for those who do not enthrone God at the

¹Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 140.

center of their existence as absolute Sovereign.

Thus, while the recurring phrase **הָבֵל הֶבֶלִים** might at first glance seem to be the utterance of a spirit sunk in the abyss of despair, yet,

looking into the treatise more narrowly, we find that we have misapprehended its true character--that a principle aim of its author is evidently to inculcate contentment and the quiet enjoyment of the blessings which God has bestowed--that throughout the whole are scattered precepts and exhortations which are by no means in harmony with the dark meaning we have attached to the opening words.¹

Relationship of the Name "Abel"

Some have connected the word "Abel," the name of the second son of Adam, with the word under discussion, for they consist of the same consonants (**הָבֵל**). It is suggested that when Adam and Eve named their son they underscored the reality of the fall of man and the resultant curse upon the world,² the same truth under discussion by Paul in Romans 8:20, "the creature was subjected to vanity." One writer suggested that Adam and Eve were apparently so overcome by the discovery of the vanity of earthly life under the curse that they named their second son **הָבֵל**.³ C. C. Forman makes an interesting conjecture about the use of the word:

¹Weir, "Ecclesiastes," p. 186.

²Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 42.

³H. Carl Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Life View As Seen in His Recurring Phrases," *Westminster Theological Journal*, XXXVII:1 (Fall, 1974), 66-7.

Not only is man of the substance of the ground but his second born is significantly called Abel, a name derived from the Hebrew stem **הבל**, meaning "breath of wind," "vapour," "vanity," and the like. The significant point here is that Abel is the personification of the nomad, and therefore, according to ancient Hebrew notions, the representative of the ideal life. Yet the first nomad whose way of life was the most acceptable to God bore in his name this telling description of the essential nature of life even in its most favorable manifestation. Life, at best, is a transitory thing of no substance--it is **הבל**: "Abel's brief life is the life of Everyman."¹

In the opinion of the writer, however, such inferences as those cited above about the name Adam and Eve gave to their son rest on a tenuous assumption, namely, that the name "Abel" in whatever language Adam spoke would have meant the same as its Hebrew counterpart, and would have had the same affinities with the name for "vanity" in Adam's language. It is, perhaps, best not to draw any inferences from Abel's name, especially since the text does not specify any reason for that particular name (Gen. 4:2).

Jewish Interpretations

Several interesting ancient Jewish traditions about **הבל** are extant. They serve to show the ridiculous extravagances possible, rather than to illuminate the text. One such comment from the Midrash on Ecclesiastes 1 states:

Solomon used the word "vanity" seven times, to correspond with the seven stages which man goes through. In his infancy he is like a king, fondled, kissed, and made much of. At the age of two or three years he is

¹Forman, "Koheleth's Use of Genesis," 257-8.

more like a pig rolling in the mud, etc. When about ten years of age he is somewhat like a little kid, jumping about and skipping. About the age of twenty he resembles the wild horse in his lusts and desires. When married he is not unlike the ass in his dulness and cheerlessness and sleepiness. Becoming a parent, he becomes bold like the dog in his anxiety to obtain sustenance for his family. And in his old age, with his furrows and wrinkles, he is not unlike an ape.¹

Not quite so extravagant is this quotation from Midrash *Koheleth Rabba*:

דוד אמר אדם להבלדמה לאיזה הבל אם להבל של תנור של לירה יש
בו ממש בא שלמה בנו ופירש הה"ד הבל הבלים

David said: "Man is like a vapor." What kind of vapor? If it be the vapor of an oven or the vapor of the hearth, it has some substance. Then Solomon his son came and explained: "Thus it is written: 'vapor of vapors!'"²

This is probably a reference to Psalm 39:5 (Heb., v. 7), in which David says that "every man at his best is a mere breath [הֶבֶל]." It is not Solomon alone, therefore, who makes this estimate of man's situation.

Another Jewish legend is reflected in this interpretation by a modern commentator

The word *hebel* is to be reckoned as occurring seven times in the verse, each plural denoting two. The number seven corresponds to the days of the world's creation. Koheleth, accordingly pronounces the judgment that the seven days of the creation were the height of vanity.³

¹Samuel Rapaport, *A Treasury of the Midrash* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1968), p. 178.

²Gordis, *Koheleth*, p. 205.

³A. Cohen, ed., *The Five Megilloth*, in the *Soncino Books of the Bible* (London: The Soncino Press, 1970), pp. 108-9.

Conclusion on הָבֵל

It is of inestimable importance to the understanding of the use of this word throughout Ecclesiastes, that one clearly apprehend the differences in nuances of meaning as it is used in differing contexts by Koheleth. In certain contexts the translations "futility" or "zero" (in the sense of adding up, ultimately, to nothing substantial and lasting) are, perhaps, the best translations. In other instances the translation "transitoriness," may be better. In general, the uses of the term by Koheleth may be summarized as follows: (1) that which passes away more or less quickly and completely; (2) that which leaves no adequate result behind; and (3) that which fails to satisfy the mind of man, which naturally craves something permanent and meaningful.¹ Is all הָבֵל? In the context in which Koheleth says it--yes.

Under the Sun

Early in his composition Koheleth uses a phrase, which like הָבֵל הָבֵלִים, is to be characteristic of his book: תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ. It is to this phrase that those interpreters who feel that Solomon's perspective is non-revelatory and completely terrestrial often appeal for support of their views. "Ecclesiastes is the book of man 'under the sun' reasoning

¹Fuller, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 87.

about life."¹ "Man 'under the sun' might from his own experience mistakenly think that the earth would continue indefinitely as it now is."² The copious use of this term in the book, however, does not necessarily suggest that the writer's viewpoint is merely earthly. A more detailed examination of the phrase is in order.

Occurrences of the Phrase

It is most important that the contexts in which the phrase is used, and the subjects in connection with which it is used be fully understood. All 27 occurrences of the word in the book of Ecclesiastes, together with an explanation of the contexts are listed below.

- 1:3 Toil under the sun does not bring gain
- 1:9 Nothing new under the sun
- 1:10 Everything done under the sun is vanity
- 2:11 Nothing to be gained under the sun
- 2:17 What is done under the sun is grievous
- 2:18 Koheleth hates the toil he has done under the sun
- 2:19 The one following him will use everything for which he toiled and used wisdom under the sun
- 2:20 He despaired of all the toil of his labors under the sun
- 2:22 Questions what lasting value one gets from all his labor under the sun

¹English, *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 696.

²*Ibid.* Cf. BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 1039.

- 3:16 Wickedness in the place of justice under the sun
- 4:1 He saw all the oppressions which are practiced under the sun
- 4:3 Refers to the evil deeds done under the sun
- 4:7 He saw the vanity under the sun of one who works with no goal in mind except to work
- 4:15 Viewed all the living who move about under the sun
- 5:13 It is a grievous evil under the sun that some keep riches to their hurt
- 5:18 Reference to one's toil under the sun
- 6:1 Evil under the sun of wealthy man who cannot enjoy his wealth
- 6:12 Who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?
- 8:9 Applied his mind to all done under the sun
- 8:15 The days of his life which God gives a man under the sun
- 8:17 Man cannot find out the work done by God under the sun
- 9:3 That all die is an evil under the sun
- 9:6 The dead have no more share of that done under the sun
- 9:9 Enjoy life with one's wife all the days God gives under the sun
- 9:11 Under the sun the race is not to the swift
- 9:13 An example of wisdom under the sun
- 10:5 That folly is set in high places is an evil under the sun

There are two conclusions which can be immediately drawn from this list: (1) This entire book is obviously not limited by **הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ תַּחַת**. (2) **הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ תַּחַת** obviously means the same

thing, essentially, as **עַל־הָאָרֶץ**,¹ and is so used because the writer is an earth-dweller and his topics are drawn from earthly events.

Definition of the Phrase

The phrase **תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם** is used in Ecclesiastes almost as many times as **הַבַּל הַבָּלִים**, and does not occur elsewhere in the Old Testament, though it does appear in the later Hebrew writings. The Aramaic Targum reads **תַּחַת שְׁמַיָא**,² and the LXX translates it **ὑπὸ τὸν ἥλιον**.³

Since this phrase was current among the Greeks at a later time, some have supposed that it was borrowed from their philosophers and rendered into Hebrew. This has become a very hazardous position, however, in view of its discovery in two 5th century B.C. Phoenician inscriptions, those of Tabnit and Eshmun'azar of Sidon. In all of ancient Northwest Semitic and West Semitic literature thus far unearthed, these two inscriptions and the book of Ecclesiastes are the only places the phrase has been found.⁴

¹Cf. Ginsburg, *Cohemoth*, p. 260.

²**כִּרְךָ ד-א, כְּתַבִּי הַקֹּדֶשׁ בְּאַרְמִית, שְׁפַרְבְּר**, p. 151.

³Cf. Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, p. 769.

⁴Cf. Donner and Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, Vol. I, p. 3, #13, lines 7, 8; #14, line 12; and vol. II, p. 17, #13 and p. 19, #14; *DISO*, p. 310; and Archer, "The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of Ecclesiastes," 177.

Written ,¹ the phrase apparently meant the same as its Hebrew counterpart. At least its occurrence in Phoenician attests to its use in what Archer has termed the rich mutual vocabulary of Hebrew-Canaanite. There is no reason, however, that the idiom could not have been coined independently by different peoples at different times and in widely separated places. It is, after all, one of the most natural idioms, and is just another way of expressing "under heaven"² or "on earth." It is identical to saying "the world of men,"³ or "among those who are alive," and by it Koheleth designates "the place where the affairs of human life are enacted."⁴

Significance of the Phrase

The definition of the phrase is certain enough. It is the significance of its use in the book which must be decided. It is erroneous, in the opinion of the writer, to limit all the teachings of the book to things terrestrial only on account of Koheleth's employment of this phrase. It

¹J. Brian Peckham, *The Development of the Late Phoenician Scripts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 66-7.

²Gordis, *Koheleth*, p. 205. Cf. תחת השמים in Ex. 17:14; Deut. 7:24; 19:14; and particularly Eccl. 2:3 and 3:1.

³Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 219.

⁴Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World*, p. 72.

is true that many things he speaks of, he limits to the earth. Thus, when he says **הָאֵל הַכֹּל הָאֵל**, Koheleth speaks only of those things upon the earth which he is discussing. He certainly does not mean that everything without exception in the entire universe is futile or transitory, for that would include God, heaven, salvation, etc., and many other things which transcend the arena with which Koheleth is immediately concerned.

In those instances in which Koheleth specifically says **תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם**, he has limited his immediate comment to the world of the human; but there are many things in his book that Koheleth does not limit by **תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם** (as demonstrated by the list above, pp. 112-13), and these it is necessary to let speak for themselves. Koheleth's viewpoint, it must be carefully noted, is not only that of a man under the sun; he makes numerous statements throughout the book which transcend such a limitation.

The Relationship of Inspiration and Revelation

Introduction

It is, perhaps, proper at this point to consider, briefly, the interrelationship between inspiration and revelation, for it is this relationship upon which one's interpretation of Ecclesiastes in general, and several important subsequent passages in particular, ultimately hinges. Is it true that Ecclesiastes contains only the reasonings of man

under the sun? Is it true that none of Koheleth's conclusions are revelation? Is it proper to strip an entire book of its claim to revelation, and conclude that it contains only the erroneous thoughts of a man, accurately recorded by inspiration?¹ These are the questions to which the writer addresses himself in the following discussion.

Definition of revelation and inspiration

Revelation

Revelation is of two kinds, general and special. In its general and widest signification revelation is any kind of knowledge of which God is the ultimate source and cause.² Special revelation is the written revelation of Scripture. In Scripture revelation involves truths about man and God, which God has revealed to man, which he otherwise could not have known.³

Inspiration

Inspiration involves the inerrancy of the facts recorded in written revelation. Plot all facts contained in

¹English, *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, pp. 696; 702, note 1.

²William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. I (2 vols.: Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, reprint, 1971), p. 62.

³Cf. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. by Samuel G. Craig (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint, 1970), pp. 71-102.

Scripture are a result of revelation. Some historical and geographical facts, for instance, were the observations of the writers of Scripture, and were not supernaturally revealed to them. Inspiration, however, guarantees the veracity of these recorded facts.¹ Inspiration must also in some way involve the worthiness of the thoughts inspired and recorded, for the Scriptures say that "all Scripture is God-breathed (θεόπνευστος) and is therefore useful for doctrine . . . " (2 Tim. 3:16). Furthermore, inspiration also included the moving of the writer by the Holy Spirit to write certain things: "No prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was even made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet. 1:20, 21, NASB). Thus, God was ultimately responsible for the ideas, choice of material, and words of Scripture. Inspiration must be extended at least that far.

Correlation of inspiration and revelation

The primary problem regarding inspiration and revelation in the book of Ecclesiastes concerns the interrelationship between them. The correlation of these two aspects of God's work in bringing the Scriptures into being is a matter of considerable disagreement. Some, on the one hand, emphasize the differences between them:

¹Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. I, p. 70.

They differ, first, as to their object. The object of revelation is the communication of knowledge. The object or design of inspiration is to secure infallibility in teaching. Consequently they differ, secondly, in their effects. The effect of revelation was to render its recipient wiser. The effect of inspiration was to preserve him from error in teaching. These two gifts were often enjoyed by the same person at the same time.¹

With such a distinction Chafer agrees when he states

It [the Bible] is, by its own claims, not only a *revealed* body of truth, but is the *only* revealed body of truth. It is a supernatural interposition into the affairs of men. This claim, of necessity, implies two divine operations, namely, *revelation*, which is the direct divine influence which communicates truth from God to man; and *inspiration*, which is the direct divine influence which secures an accurate transference of truth into language which others may understand.

While these two divine operations do often occur together, it is equally true that they often function separately.²

On the other hand, there are those who emphasize the inseparability of inspiration and revelation:

Inspiration refers to the miracle of *conservation* whereby the Spirit has preserved and conserved divine revelation (cf. Is. 30:8). Revelation *generates* Scripture! Inspiration settles its actual form that the text might serve as an "adequate, authentic, and sufficient vehicle of special revelation." Revelation and inspiration are inseparable, though they are not identical. The creation of *graphe* is the final stage in quite an extended process of divine revelation.³

¹Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (3 vols.: Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., reprint, 1973), p. 152.

²L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (8 vols.: Dallas, Tex.: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), p. 50.

³C. H. Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation--The Foundation of Christian Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), p. 35.

Orr, likewise, feels that the two are inseparable:

But now another fact has to be taken into account. If, on the one hand, it has been seen that, in the order of inquiry, revelation precedes inspiration, it has become not less clearly evident that over a large area, in the fact itself, revelation and inspiration are *closely and inseparably united*. Internal revelation, e.g., such as we have in prophecy, or in the "revelation of Jesus Christ" claimed for himself by Paul, is not conceivable save as accompanied by an inspired state of soul. Inspiration is involved in the very reception of such a revelation; is a necessary condition of the revelation being apprehended, possessed, and communicated to others. In the very acknowledgment, therefore, of revelation as an element pervading the Bible and giving unity to its parts, there is implied an acknowledgment of inspiration. Just as, on the other side, there can be no degree of inspiration, however humble, which does not imply some measure of revelation. Revelation and inspiration thus go together, and conjointly give to the written word a *quality* which distinguishes it from any product of ordinary human wisdom.¹

In the writer's opinion, the inseparability of inspiration and revelation is an important point. These two operations of the Spirit must not be confused; but neither may they be divorced.

Koheleth's revelational teachings

The controversy concerning revelation in Ecclesiastes is, perhaps, best resolved by an examination of Koheleth's teachings. Consequently, the following list of his concepts and statements is offered to the reader. The list consists of truths which the unaided mind of man would have had trouble

¹James Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), pp. 199-200.

deducing, and, hence, are apparently revelation, either directly or mediately through revelational statements of other inspired authors of Scripture. The list is, of course, subjective, but the examples serve to demonstrate the difficulty with dismissing the entire book as non-revelational.

- 1:13 God has given men the task of understanding things
- 1:15 Predestination--God's sovereignty
- 2:24, 25 No man can have enjoyment apart from God
- 2:11 God has put "eternity" in man's mind; God has made everything beautiful in its time; God's ways are inscrutable
- 2:14 Whatever God does endures forever; God's control of the world
- 2:17 God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter and work
- 2:18 God is testing the sons of men to show they are but beasts
- 5:2 God is in heaven
- 5:4 God has no pleasure in fools
- 5:18 God gives us the few days of our lives
- 5:19 God gives wealth and possessions
- 5:20 God keeps a man occupied with joy in his heart
- 6:2 God sometimes does not empower a man to enjoy his wealth
- 7:13 God is completely sovereign
- 7:14 God is completely sovereign
- 7:18 He who loves God will "come forth from them all"

- 7:20 There is not a righteous man on the earth who does good and never sins: total depravity
- 7:26 He who pleases God escapes evil women
- 7:29 God made men upright, but they have "sought out many devices"
- 8:12 Confidence that it will be well with those who fear God
- 8:13 It will not be well with the wicked
- 8:17 Inscrutibility of God
- 9:7 God has already approved what you do
- 9:10 The condition of the dead in Sheol
- 11:5 Man does not know the works of God who makes everything
- 11:9 God will bring man into judgment for whatever he does
- 12:7 At death, the spirit returns to God who gave it
- 12:13, 14 Man is to fear God and keep his commandments, because God will bring every deed into judgment

Conclusion on revelation and inspiration

Among those writers who wish to make a rigid distinction between revelation and inspiration generally, and who use this distinction to solve the supposed problems of Ecclesiastes by saying the book is inspired, but not revelation, there are two examples generally cited which purportedly illustrate the necessity for such a distinction elsewhere in Scripture. These are the words of Satan in Genesis 3:4, and Job 2: 4, 5, and the words of Job's friends. There

are, however, several serious difficulties with these analogies.

It is perhaps most important to notice that the erroneous words of Satan and Job appear in narrative sections, and are in the form of quotations. It is obvious to the reader of the passages who is speaking, and that what is said is only being quoted. In contrast to this, Koheleth is quoting no one. He states facts which he evidently understands to be true, and which under inspiration he was compelled to write, much as Paul wrote things he felt to be true, and under inspiration was protected from error.

A second difficulty with these analogies is that, at least in the case of Satan, the recording of Satan's words must of necessity have involved direct revelation. Neither the writer of Job, nor the writer of Genesis would have had any way of knowing what Satan had said. It is true that in the case of Genesis, Moses could have been using some very ancient, but still accurate source. But considering the very corrupt state of the Babylonian creation epics even at a time much before Moses, dependence upon such a source seems remote at best. One does not, therefore, escape the problem by saying that they were not revealed. The distinction to be made is that on the one hand, in the case of Satan's words, God revealed to the inspired writer an historical fact, namely, what had been said. On the other hand, material was revealed to Scripture writers for the express

purpose of instructing their hearers in truth. Such teaching would certainly not be erroneous. In the one case, that of Satan's words, the revelation involved only something which had happened (Satan's speaking of the words) and the content of that occurrence. In other cases God revealed to Scripture writers spiritual truths which the human mind could not by itself conceive. Yet, in both instances what was recorded in Scripture involved revelation.

There is yet another problem with the analogy drawn between the words of Satan and Job's friends, and the teachings of Ecclesiastes. Since revelation is the disclosure of new truth that is inaccessible to the ordinary human mind, all those teachings in Ecclesiastes which fall into that category must have been revealed. The list above contained the teachings which the writer would fit into this category. While it is true that the subjectivity of the list might make some of the citations questionable, not all of them are. An excellent example of this is Solomon's view of Sheol. One must surely question how what Koheleth said about Sheol cannot be revelation. It is not only inconceivable that Koheleth could have discovered anything certain about Sheol by his own unaided intellect; it would have been impossible. It is axiomatic that it is impossible for anyone to discover anything certain about life after death by means of his own mind.

Thus, one has two choices to make about what Koheleth says about Sheol: (1) One may say that his statements are revelation from God and are, therefore, trustworthy; or (2) one may say that his statements embody the thoughts of his own imagination, and are therefore erroneous. But if inspiration is to be defined as that work of God which insures freedom from error in presenting truth,¹ then the teachings of Ecclesiastes cannot at the same time be erroneous and inspired.

It might still be argued that the book is an accurate record of Solomon's erroneous thoughts. But such a solution really only begs the question. Such an interpretive device could be used on any Scripture whose understanding was not readily apparent, or which seemed to contradict other Scripture when not taken in its entire context or seen in its entire perspective. If one is to dismiss Koheleth's teachings precipitately because they are sometimes difficult to understand, is one also justified in doing the same with John or Paul or Peter? Is it not also possible that their erroneous thoughts were accurately recorded by inspiration? Such a procedure would, of course, effectively negate inspiration and would ignore the fact that all Scripture is God-breathed.

¹Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. I, pp. 70-71.

As has already been pointed out, inspiration according to Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20, 21) implies much more than the accurate recording of a perplexing mixture of true and erroneous thoughts. It implies the choice of material and the guarantee of the material's veracity. The inclusion in Scripture of quotations of the erroneous statements of persons other than the writer, can never warrant the exclusion of an entire book from revelatory status.

It might also be objected that since the teachings of Ecclesiastes often find their roots in daily life, it cannot claim revelatory status. Such a proposition, however, applied to books such as Proverbs would also rob them of that status. It is true that many of the observations of Proverbs could have been, and were by others, made only on the human level; it is also true, as with Ecclesiastes, that many of them could not have been, and were not.

In the opinion of the writer, anyone who presupposes the inspiration of the book of Ecclesiastes by virtue of its inclusion in the canon without any evident distinction from the other canonical writings, is forced to concede that where it speaks on a topic, it speaks with authority and truth. The context of the book indisputably implies this kind of a perspective. An interpreter should guard himself from the kind of conceit which assures him that the problem in understanding is not with him, but with the text. Is it

not the safer path to admit that the problem is more probably with the interpreter? All calumny against the book's revelatory status should therefore be avoided. Any inaccurate statements made by men or Satan and quoted in Scripture will be made obvious as such by their contexts. Such is not the case with the book of Ecclesiastes.

The Meaning and Place of Pleasure

Introduction

Of all the themes of Ecclesiastes, there are two which have been greatly misunderstood and which have, consequently, suffered the most abuse. One of these is Koheleth's doctrine of death and immortality; the other is his teaching about the meaning of pleasure and the place of it in the life of the godly. It is the meaning and place of pleasure that is now considered. The method of consideration is an examination of all the salient passages of the book on the topic.

Consideration of the Texts

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

Description of the experiment


This section introduces the reader to what some have labeled "Koheleth's experiment." As many men before and after him Koheleth decided that he would test the pleasures of the world to see what meaning he could find in them: "I said to myself, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure.

So enjoy yourself" (2:1a). Thereupon he investigated pleasure by participation: stimulating his body with wine (2:3), building houses for himself (2:4), planting vineyards for himself (2:4), making gardens and parks (2:5), planting all kinds of fruit trees (2:5), making ponds of water for himself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees (2:6), buying female slaves, and homeborn slaves (2:7), amassing flocks and herds larger than all who had preceded him in Jerusalem (2:7), collecting silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces (2:8), providing himself with male and female singers and the pleasures of men--many concubines (2:8). Koheleth also relates that he became great and increased more than all who preceded him in Jerusalem, and his wisdom stood by him (2:9). Anything that his eyes desired he did not refuse himself, and he did not withhold himself from any pleasure available to him, for, he says, he was pleased with all his labor (building activity?) and he considered these pleasures his just reward for that labor (2:10).

Linguistic analysis

Ecclesiastes 2:1.--It is crucial, not only to the understanding of this passage, but also to the understanding of Koheleth's view of "pleasure" in general, to understand the word translated "pleasure," **שְׂמֵחָה**. It is a feminine noun

from the root **שׁמח**, "to rejoice, be glad,"¹ and is comparable to the Akkadian *šamāhu*, to flourish, to be glad.² It is used of mirth, gladness, joy, gaiety, and pleasure.³ It is most important that the reader marks this fact about the word: it has no necessary sensuous or sinful connotations except as the context in a particular usage would suggest

such.⁴ Both the verb:  (2 Aqht 11:9), and

the noun:  ('nt: 11:26) are found in

Ugaritic, where the meaning "to rejoice," and "joy" respectively are suggested by Gordon.⁵ The intent of Solomon seems to be to "enjoy a cheerful life,"⁶ and the word here might be better translated idiomatically in English as "fun," with all the diverse connotations that word has.⁷

¹BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 970; KB, *Lexicon*, p. 924.

²Borger, *Babylonisch-Assyrische Lesestücke*, Heft I, p. LXXX.

³BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 970.

⁴Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 58. Cf. KB, *Lexicon*, pp. 924-5. The Aramaic Targum has **כתבי הקדש בארמית, שפרבר** (חדוה **כרך דא**, p. 151). This is defined by Jastrow as "joy, rejoicing," with no necessarily evil connotations (Jastrow, *Dictionary*, Vol. I, p. 426).

⁵Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, p. 491, #2432.

⁶Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 233.

⁷Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 59.

Ecclesiastes 2:3.--The first of Koheleth's experiments in fun or enjoyment involves the use of wine. From the perspective of the 20th century Christian the word itself automatically suggests something evil. While not excusing or suggesting the use of wine among contemporary American Christians, the writer cautions against condemning Koheleth just because he used it himself. He was living in another culture and in another time, and only the misuse, not the use of wine is condemned by Scripture, an evidence of which is Christ's own use of it (Matt. 26:29). Koheleth here describes his experiment: תַּרְתִּי בְּלִבִּי לְמִשׁוֹךְ בַּיַּיִן אֶת־בְּשָׁרִי.

מִשׁוֹךְ the Qal infinitive construct from מָשַׁךְ, "to draw, drag,"¹ according to BDB. For the present passage they suggest the meaning "cheer (draw, attract, gratify)."² Both Kittel (in the lower textual apparatus)³ and KB, however, propose to emend the text to לְשִׂמּוֹךְ.⁴ KB then relate the word to the word סָמַךְ, with a meaning suggested in this context of "support, refresh."⁵ It is not impossible that the שׁ and מ could have interchanged. It is also not impossible that the שׁ and ס could have been switched. Such a proposal, therefore, has some merit, and it certainly makes

¹BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 604.

²*Ibid.*

³Kittel, *Biblia Hebraica*, p. 1212.

⁴KB, *Lexicon*, p. 574.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 661.

better sense in the context.¹ The LXX translated it τοῦ ἐλκύσαι, translated "to drag."² The LXX translators thus understood the Hebrew word to be מְשֹׁךְ. Both Graetz and Gordis emend the text to לַמְשֹׁךְ, which would be translated in the context, "to embrocate my body with wine."³ It is difficult, from the language alone, to infer whether Koheleth envisioned the use of wine as a mere drunken sensualist, or as a connoisseur. But with the qualifying phrase he uses to describe the experiment, וְלִבִּי נִהְיָ בְּהִכְכְּמָה, one can hardly lend support to the former theory.⁴ It seems, rather, that this is best taken as a reference to a "consumption of wine which enables a man to get the highest possible enjoyment by a careful use of it, so that the appetite is sharpened, enjoyment enhanced, and the finest bouquets sampled and enjoyed."⁵ The thought of crude extravagance seems to be excluded when he states that his mind (לֵב) was still keeping control by means of wisdom.⁶

¹Such a meaning for סַמֶּךְ is also supported in Aramaic, Palmyrene, and Nabatean (*DISO*, p. 194).

²Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, pp. 534-5.

³Wright, *Koheleth*, p. 325; cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, p. 214.

⁴Cf. Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, p 234.

⁵Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 60.

⁶For an excellent discussion of the various meanings of לֵב, see J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), pp. 225-6.

The succeeding phrase, **וְלֹא־חִזַּבְסָּלָהּ** is much more difficult to understand. There is no particular problem with the meaning of **חִזַּבְסָּלָהּ**, from **חִזַּב**, "to grasp, take hold, take possession."¹ The key to understanding the phrase is in the word **בְּסָּלָהּ**. This is a feminine noun from the verbal root **סָּל**, "to be foolish, or a fool."² The lexicon states that it is usually used in a moral or spiritual sense,³ but this does not mean that it always is. It can be compared with the Syriac **ܣܬܠܐ**.⁴ It is suggested that by "folly" here is meant the pleasures in the following verses.⁵ It is probably used here in the "neutral" sense, denoting all those harmless and enjoyable forms of nonsense which are known, but which are not immoral. Perhaps the word **סָּלָהּ** contains Koheleth's conclusion concerning what some of the "fun" in which he engaged ultimately turned out to be: folly. That is, he found it to contain no lasting meaning or satisfaction. He performed this experiment, not to reveal

¹BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 28; KB, *Lexicon*, p. 29.

²BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 698. The **לָהּ** ending is widely used in Semitic languages for abstract nouns, such as *šarrūtu* in Akkadian for "kingship" and **מְלָכֻת** in Hebrew for the same concept (Moscati, *Comparative Grammar*, p. 83; cf. Harris, *A Grammar of the Phoenician Language*, p. 58; and GKC, *Grammar*, p. 241, sect. 86k).


³BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 698; cf. KB, *Lexicon*, pp. 657-8.

⁴Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, p. 377.


⁵Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 60.

in sensuality, but to see whether he, with all the vast resources at his command, could not discover how to sweeten the years of man's existence.¹ In this he failed.

Ecclesiastes 2:8.--The last of the most difficult expressions in this section is found in 2:8, translated by the NASB, "many concubines." The phrase is **וְשָׂדֵה וְשָׂדֵה** is apparently in apposition to **תַּעֲנִיגוֹת**, "pleasures." The lexicon lists the meaning of **שָׂדֵה** as "unknown," comparing it to the Akkadian *šadâdu*, "love," but noting that this word lacks evidence.² The word may be related to the root **שָׂד**, which can be compared with the Aramaic plural **שָׂדֵי** and

Syriac  "breasts,"³ for which the Hebrew is **שָׂד**.⁴

Koehler and Baumgartner suggest tracing the word to the root

 found in Ugaritic in 1 Aqht: 215; Text 52:59, et al., and translated by Gordon, "lady."⁵ The change from **ד** to **ת** would not be unusual, involving, as it does, a change between two non-emphatic dental plosives, the voiceless **t** and voiced **d**.⁶ It is interesting that Akkadian does not

¹Ginsburg, *Cohleth*, p. 278. ²BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 994.

³Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, p. 605.

⁴BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 994. This position is defended by Gordis, who says that **שָׂד**, "breast" is used synecdochically, as a part for the whole, hence, "woman" (Gordis, *Kohleth*, pp. 218-19).

⁵KB, *Lexicon*, p. 950; and Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, p. 495, #2500. Cf. also p. 342.

⁶Moscatti, *Comparative Grammar*, p. 31, sect. 8.21.

appear to distinguish between \underline{t} , \underline{d} , and the emphatic plosive \underline{t} in final position, but this was probably due to the peculiarity of the cuneiform system.¹ The comparison with Ugaritic, therefore, is probably the best presently available, and the translation "concubine," as in the NASB is probably justified, since women multiplied by a man such as Solomon, who was famous for such things (1 Kings 11:1-4) would probably be for this purpose.² This is certainly a much more justified translation than that of the LXX, whose translators were also apparently mystified by the term, and who translated it οἰνοχόον καὶ οἰνοχόας, "pourers of wine," evidently as a result of tracing the root to the Aramaic כִּדְשׁ, "to pour" (though not necessarily used of wine).³

Conclusion on 2:1-11

Following the style of many ancient writers, Koheleth has given his readers his conclusion at the beginning of his description of the experiment (2:2): "Concerning laughter I said, 'It is madness,' and concerning fun, 'What

¹*Ibid.*, sect 8.23.

²Cf. A. R. Hulst, *Old Testament Translation Problems* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), p. 130.

³Barr, *Philology*, p. 235. Cf. also the interesting translation "the luxuries of commoners--coffers and coffers of them," which is based upon the fact that while כִּדְשׁ occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible, it means "chests" in the Mishna (Ginsberg, *חמש מגלות וספר יונה*, p. 59, note a).

does it accomplish (do)?" It might be paraphrased colloquially, "I went out and had a good time, had a good deal of fun and laughs, but in the end it all turned out to be hollow, for such things give no lasting satisfaction." Thus, he concludes in 2:11: "So I considered all my activities (work) which my hands had done, and the labor which I had labored to do, and behold, all was transitory (הֶהָל) and of no lasting benefit (וְרַעוּת רוּחַ), and there was no accrued lasting profit in human life (תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם). All of his labors and experiments, which Koheleth had thought might bring שְׂמֵחָה, ultimately had no יְתָרוֹף (advantage, profit, as in what is left over on the balance sheet).¹ But his view of pleasure (fun) and its meaning and place is only beginning to emerge. Its relation to this particular experiment is only one side of it. Yet it is one side which should not be forgotten: fun can be secured; it can be enjoyed; indeed, a certain amount of it may be psychologically healthy. But when it is terminated and analyzed for any lasting benefit or profit, it (all wise men should serve themselves notice) is zero (הֶבֶל).

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

Description of the passage

One of the preoccupations of Solomon is his building

¹Gordis, *Koheleth*, p. 205.

activity, which he also calls his labor (עָמַל). He worries about the man who will come after him ("What will the man who comes after the king do, except that which has already been done?" 2:12), and he worries that his successor will not appreciate all his work, and that he will be a fool and not a wise man (2:18, 19). He realizes, as he begins to think about it, that the same fate befalls both the wise and the fool, both the industrious (as he classes himself) and the slothful (which he worries that his successor will be, and he was not far wrong--1 Kings 12:14 ff.): both die. All his labor has concerned itself with the earth--and he finds that earth's rewards are just that and only that and no more than that. They cannot be lasting. Hence, he says: "There is no more lasting remembrance of the wise man than the fool, for in the future all will be forgotten. O how the wise man and the fool alike die!" (2:16). This realization made him so despondant that he said: "So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous (כָּבֵד) to me, for all is transitory (הֶבֶל) and of no lasting benefit (וְרֵעוֹת רִיחַ).¹ Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor (עָמַל), in which I took part (עָמַל) under the sun, and which I must leave to the man who will be after me" (2:17, 18). Because the man inheriting all his work might be

¹Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Life View as Seen in His Recurring Phrases," 67.

a fool, he says: "Therefore, I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor which I had performed (עָמַל) under the sun" (2:20).

This is the background against which Koheleth makes his statement in 2:24, the first half of which has often been quoted in support of the contention that Koheleth was advocating unbridled sensualism: "there is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and for his soul to see good in his labor"(2:24a). This statement, however, must be balanced not only by what the writer says in the immediate context: "This also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God, for who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him (except me)?" (2:24b, 25), but also by the context of the entire book. The last verse of this section is, on a cursory examination, the most difficult to connect with the preceding context. Solomon laments that to a person who is good in His estimation He (God) has given wisdom and knowledge and joy (שְׂמֵחָה = pleasure), while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting (amassing),¹ so that He may give to one who is good in God's sight. This, too, is transitoriness and striving after wind.

It is natural to assume, as is often done, that Solomon is here classing himself as the one who is טוֹב לְפָנָי. He, after all, is the one who was wiser than all הָאָדָמָה.

¹Gordis, *Koheleth*, p. 152.

who were before him in Jerusalem. Yet, one wonders if he has changed places briefly, for here he speaks of the task of gathering and amassing, exactly what Solomon had done during his life, as **הַבֵּל**. Is it not possible that he may have written this later in life, when he would have classified himself as **חֹטֵא**? If so, it is easy to understand why he would pronounce the task of amassing possessions which, ultimately, are given to good men, a futile task for the sinner. Yet, even if Solomon considers himself "wise" here, the passage is coherent, and is even more so, if **הַבֵּל** is translated "transitoriness."

Linguistic analysis

Ecclesiastes 2:24.--The first phrase in question in this section is **אֵין טוֹב בְּאָדָם שְׂיֵאָכַל וְשָׂתָה**. Usually, this phrase has been translated as it has above, following the NASB, "There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink. . . ." It is suggested by Leupold, however, that the expression is better translated, "It is not a good thing inherent in man that he is able to eat and drink"¹ In support of this translation he argues that the "positive and not the comparative usage is used in Hebrew."² Barton, however, follows the comparative usage, as do most others.³

¹Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 74.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 74-5.

³Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 84.

Either rendering changes the sense little. Hengstenberg suggests an interrogative, "Is it not good?" noting that אִי אֵל can sometimes be used that way, even though one would expect אֵל לֵא. He cites 1 Samuel 21:9 as an example of such a usage.¹

Ecclesiastes 2:25.--The problem in this verse centers about a textual problem involving the word מִמֶּנִּי, "apart from me." Many versions over the years, including the LXX, Vulgate, Syriac, and most English versions have either emended the text (in the case of the more recent ones) or had a different *Vorlage* before them when they translated.² The LXX translates, πᾶρεξ αὐτοῦ, "from him," as does Jerome and the Syriac, though the Targum follows the Massoretic text, מִיָּנִי, "from me."³ Ginsberg argues for this translation,⁴ but Delitzsch and most others reject it.⁵ Either one renders a good sense, but the Massoretic text is to be preferred and followed, since it makes the best sense. The translation would then be: "Who shall drink and who shall

¹Hengstenberg, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 84-5.

²Cf. Kittel, *Biblia Hebraica*, p. 1214.

³כֹּרֶךְ ד-א, כְּתָבִי הַקֹּדֶשׁ בְּאֵרֵמִית, שְׁקִרְבֵּר, p. 153.

⁴Ginsburg, *Cohemoth*, p. 301.

⁵Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 252. Cf. Scott, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 218.

eat more than I?¹ It is a rhetorical question, and the answer is, "no one!" Solomon had all the advantages possible, and in spite of this, his pronouncement upon all of these things was **הֵבִיל**. This is not to say that he discounts the advisability of eating and drinking; everyone must do that. Furthermore, Koheleth views the enjoyment of such things as from God.

Conclusion on 2:24-26

At the center of Koheleth's statements is the realization that for purely earthly things, the only enjoyment of them is on the earth, and so if they are to have any meaning they must be enjoyed in the present world. Just because they have no lasting value does not mean that their present enjoyment is futile or sinful. It is only important that one recognize that temporal things can only be enjoyed temporally and temporarily, and that if lasting evidence of and satisfaction from life is desired, it must be sought elsewhere--in the place of which Koheleth eventually tells his readers--the keeping of God's commandments.

Ecclesiastes 4:8

Against such unthinking materialism Koheleth continues to warn in Ecclesiastes 4:8: "There was a certain

¹Cf. Cohen, *The Five Megilloth*, p. 122, and Ginsberg, **חמש מגלות וספר יונה**, p. 61.

man without a dependent, having neither son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor. Indeed his eyes were not satisfied with riches and he never asked, 'And for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?'" (NASB). "This too is a transitory and grievous task." There are many who labor out of a sense of compulsion, for whom the acquisition of goods seems to be an end in itself. They never consider what good their work or possessions do them; they never enjoy any of the fruit of their labor. Yet, they work on, driven by a materialism that is, as Koheleth rightly states, **הַבֶּל** and **רָע עֲנֵן**. **רָע** is used in the Scripture both in a morally evil sense and in the sense of "disagreeable."¹ It does not necessarily connote evil. **עֲנֵן**, from **עָנַן**, is used only in Ecclesiastes and means "task."² Here it is in the construct: "a task of disagreeableness."

Thus, Koheleth says, for the man who works only for himself, gets no benefit from his work, and who does not consider the very little lasting value it will have either for himself or for those who will inherit the work, it is a disagreeable task. Nothing could be more true. Again, Koheleth is not counseling rampant sensuality as a solution to life's problems. He only counsels that if one works hard, he should also share in the enjoyment resultant from that work.

¹BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 948; cf. KB, *Lexicon*, pp. 896-7.

²*Ibid.*, p. 775; cf. "occupation," KB, *Lexicon*, p. 721.

Ecclesiastes 7:15-18

Description of the passage

This passage is among the most perplexing of the entire book. It has been used by many to advance their dictums that Solomon counseled sensualism--a sort of proto-Epicureanism. Before the passage is completely dismissed on the basis of only a rather hasty examination, it is incumbent upon the interpreter of the Bible to seek to understand completely the true meaning of the text. Koheleth's statement may not be as obvious as it seems. It is, after all, not straightforward prose, but a highly condensed philosophical aphorism. Koheleth states:

I have seen everything during the days of my transitoriness. There is a righteous man who perishes in spite of his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs (his days) in spite of his wickedness. Do not be excessively righteous, and do not be overly wise. Why should you cause yourself ruin? Do not be excessively wicked, and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? It is good that you grasp the one and also from the other do not rest your hand, for the one who fears God shall go up with all of them.

Linguistic analysis

וְעִם־כָּל־הֵם.--The *וְ* of this verse is variously translated.

Normally, of course, it is translated "in," but there are many other uses including "at," "by," and "with."¹ If it were translated "with" it would be the *beth comitatus* which

¹BDB, *Lexicon*, pp. 88-90; KB, *Lexicon*, pp. 102-105. Cf. *DISO*, pp. 30-31 and Moscati, *Comparative Grammar*, p. 121.

occurs frequently throughout the Old Testament (cf. Prov. 3:19).¹ This one seems to give a better sense than the other one often suggested, "in the sphere of," but both are comprehensible.² Perhaps the best suggestion is that it be taken adversatively, "in spite of."³ The word ܐܢܝܢ is also in question. It is a very common word throughout the Bible and is usually used with reference to moral righteousness, though there are other uses.⁴ The word was used with reference to kings in the sense of "legitimate" and Jean and Hoftijzer suggest the translation "pieux" ("pious") for the word as it appears in the Aramaic Ahiqar, line 128.⁵ In view of the antithetical parallelism used in this passage (the righteous . . . the wicked), it is probably being used in some moral or religious sense.

Ecclesiastes 7:16.--It is important in this verse to

¹Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms*, Vol. III in *The Anchor Bible*, ed. by W. F. Albright and D. N. Freedman (3 vols.: Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday S, Company, Inc., 1970), pp. 38-44, 266, and 310. Ugaritic has given broader meanings to many prepositions, though the appeal here is not to Ugaritic. Cf. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, p. 370, #435.

²Gordis, *Koheleth*, pp. 276-7. Cf. BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 90.

³BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 89, III c.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 842; KB, *Lexicon*, p. 794.

⁵*DISO*, p. 243. "Légitimité" is one of the meanings suggested for ܐܢܝܢ II., and "pieux" is one of the meanings suggested for ܐܢܝܢ III. Cf. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.*, pp. 216, 244.

notice that צַדִּיק is in parallelism with חָכָם, just as in the next verse רָשָׁע is in parallelism with סָכָל. There have been many attempts to bring this verse into line with the orthodox view of life which assumes that man cannot ever be too righteous in the moral sense (cf. Eccl. 7:20, "there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins"). The Midrash, the Targum, and Rashi all refer it to judges: "be not too righteous when the criminal is found guilty of death in thy court of justice, so as to have compassion on him and not execute him," taking צַדִּיק in the sense of clemency.¹ Others have taken it in the sense of hermitical piety, where one neglects the maintenance of the body.²

Barton, as one might suspect, suggests that "Qoheleth really implies that one may sin to a moderate degree."³ This, however, ignores the entire tone of the book (cf. 12: 13, 14). Zöckler feels that 7:16, 17 constitute "a warning against that strictly exact, but hypocritical and external righteousness of those predecessors of the Pharisees to whom the preceding verse referred."⁴ For those who take a late date of composition, a connection with the Pharisees is not so difficult to imagine, though as a group they were

¹Ginsburg, *Cohemoth*, p. 379.

²*Ibid.*

³Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 144.

⁴Zöckler, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 108.

certainly most famous much later.¹ But if Solomonic authorship is defended, it is doubtful that even their predecessors are here envisioned. Still, it is possible that there were the overly scrupulous even in Solomon's day. Wright suggests that the phrase "be not righteous overmuch" displays playful irony.² He further suggests that the verse should be compared with James 1:21: διὸ ἀποθέμενοι πᾶσαν ῥυπαρίαν καὶ περισσείαν κακίας, "therefore putting off all filthiness and all abundance of wickedness." The writer does not, of course, imply that a moderation of wickedness is acceptable, as long as the abundance of it is avoided. While it would be convenient to apply such a meaning to the present passage, it does not seem legitimate to do so, for there is an unmistakable parallelism here, and the point of the first part of it is, "be righteous, but not too much," so the last part must follow, "be wicked, but not too much."

Ginsburg suggests that the solution lies in taking the immediate context into consideration. In the preceding verses of chapter 7, Koheleth is propounding the "common-sense view of life."³ It is not, however, his final conclusion. It was pointed out earlier that this book must be

¹Cf. Hugo Mantel, *Studies in the History of the Sanhedrin*, in *Harvard Semitic Studies*, Vol. XVII (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 54 ff.

²Wright, *Koheleth*, p. 389.

³Ginsburg, *Cohleth*, p.380.

interpreted in the light of the whole, and that each statement must be allowed to be balanced by others bearing on the subject in the book. Hence, Ginsburg's suggestion has a great deal of merit. The passage may also be connected with verse 13:

The meaning may be best explained by a paraphrase. Solomon states how the wise man should regard the "crooked (v. 13) work of God" when it bears upon him. He says in effect, "Do not think that thou couldst alter the two instances (described in v. 15) of such crooked work so as to make it straight, that thou art more righteous or more wise than He is Who ordained these events. To set up thy judgment in opposition to His would imply an excess of wickedness and folly, deserving the punishment of premature death. But rather it is good for thee to grasp these seeming anomalies; if thou ponder them they will tend to impress on thee that fear of God which is a part of wisdom, and will guide thee safely through all the perplexities of this life." The suggestion that these verses are intended to advocate a middle course between sin and virtue is at variance with the whole tenor of the book.¹

Yet another explanation is offered by Delitzsch:

The correct meaning of "be no wicked over-much" may be found if for **תרשע** we substitute **תִּחַטָּא**; in this form the good counsel at once appears as impossible, for it would be immoral, since "sinning," in all circumstances, is an act which carries in itself its own sentence of condemnation. Thus **רשע** must here be a setting oneself free from the severity of the law, which although sin in the eyes of the over-righteous, is yet no sin in itself; and the author here thinks, in accordance with the spirit of his book, principally of that fresh, free, joyous life to which he called the young, that joy of life in its fulness which appeared to him as the best and fairest reality in this present time; but along with that, perhaps also of transgressions of the letter of the law, of shaking off the scruples of conscience which conformity to God-ordained circumstances brings along with it. He means to say: be not a narrow rigorist,

¹Fuller, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 103-4.

--enjoy life, accommodate thyself to life; but let not the reins be too loose; and be no fool who wantonly places himself above law and discipline: Why wilt thou destroy thy life before the time by suffering vice to kill thee (Ps. xxxiv. 22), and by want of understanding ruin thyself (Prov. x. 21)?¹

It is best to take the passage in the context of Ecclesiastes as a whole, and the tone of the book taken as a unity is certainly not licentiousness. If the view of the book about life is not as philosophically elevated as the New Testament, Solomon cannot be justly condemned. After all, he had few of the books of the Old Testament which are now extant, much less the entire New Testament. But he could not have suggested a life of sin, for he specifically commands to keep the law (12:13, 14) and warns of a coming judgment (11:9). Perhaps Koheleth is merely suggesting the avoidance of a legalism which kept the letter, but ignored the spirit of the law.

Ecclesiastes 8:15

In a section in which Koheleth reaches some of his greatest heights ("Although a sinner does evil a hundred times, and he may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for the ones who fear God, for the ones who fear Him openly; but it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he

¹Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 325-6. Cf. also the excellent translation in Ginsberg, *חמש מגלות ופסר יונה*, p. 68.

does not fear God"), Koheleth again makes a statement about **שְׂמֵחָה**: "So I praised enjoyment, for there is nothing better for a man under the sun than to eat, to drink, and to be joyful (**שְׂמוֹחַ**), for this will accompany him in his labor during the days of his life which God has given to him under the sun."

It is perhaps due to the familiarity of the Epicurean phrase, "eat, drink, and be merry," that this verse has been connected with that type of philosophy, especially since a number of English versions have translated it thus. It should be obvious, nevertheless, that there is absolutely nothing necessarily evil about what Koheleth is saying. In spite of all the perplexities and inequities of the world, there are three things that a man can do, which he should do, indeed, which he must do: eat and drink and be joyful. The first two are necessary physiologically; the last is necessary psychologically. The reason Koheleth gives for suggesting this enjoyment of the most basic things of life (he could get no more basic), is that **הוּא יְלֵוְנוּ בְּעִמְלֹו**. In **חֲמֵשׁ מִגִּלְתָּ וּסְפַר יוֹנָה** phrase is translated "That much [that is, the eating and drinking and enjoying himself] can accompany him, in exchange for his wealth, through the days of life that God has granted him under the sun."¹ The translation "wealth" for **עִמְלָו** is not the normal one. This is a

¹Ginsberg, **חֲמֵשׁ מִגִּלְתָּ וּסְפַר יוֹנָה**, p. 71.

masculine noun normally translated "trouble, labor, toil."¹ Only by extension of the idea of labor to include the ultimate result of it could it mean "wealth."² The sense of the passage seems to be better understood if עָמַל is translated "toil" or "labor." The eating and drinking and enjoyment are then seen as a respite from monotonous or tiring labor, and the advice to participate in enjoyable activities is well taken.

Ecclesiastes 11:9, 10

These are two extremely intriguing verses, containing, as they do, two ideas juxtaposed, which certain commentators have labeled contradictory.

Koheleth's advice is:

Rejoice (פִּשְׁ) young man in your youth, and let your heart be pleasant in the days of adolescence. And go in the way of your heart, and according to the vision of

¹Scott's suggestion that עָמַל means "the sheer expenditure of energy with no result" is unfounded (cf. Scott, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 243).

²An important semantic principle in Hebrew, which possesses wide ramifications, is that the same term will be used to express both a quality or an act and the consequences of that quality or act. Thus the noun חֵץ means both "strength" and "wealth," i.e., what is acquired by that strength. אֵץ means both "vigor" and "wealth." חַטָּא means both "sin" and "punishment." There are several other instances in Ecclesiastes where such an extension of the idea of עָמַל might legitimize a translation of "wealth," but 8:15 does not appear to be one of them. For a complete discussion of the use of עָמַל in Ecclesiastes, cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, Appendix D, "On the Meaning of עָמַל in Koheleth," pp. 418-20. Cf. also, KB, *Lexicon*, p. 715.

your eyes; but know that for all these things God will call you in judgment. So banish care from your heart and take sorrow out of your body, for childhood and the prime of life are going.

This seems to be the advice of an old man to young is nothing necessarily evil connoted here. On the contrary, Koheleth cautions young men to remember that they will be called into judgment for whatever they do. Koheleth is fully aware of the depravity of man (7:20), and what effect that depravity will have on one's דָּרֶךְ and מְרָאָה (from רָאָה). Still, he advises young men to follow their desires. He must mean, then, morally good desires, else he would not have warned them to remain cognizant of the coming judgment. He is not saying, as Barton contends, "self-denial is self-destruction."¹ His mention of judgment precludes that. He counsels only that it is wise to take advantage of the many good activities available to one in his youth, for as age increases many of these opportunities decrease, and when gone, they, as youth, are gone forever. Surely no one can condemn Koheleth for saying, "Enjoy your youth while you have it," for he balances this by his affirmation that youth is the best time to "remember" one's Creator (12:1).

Conclusion

As many men before and after him, Koheleth decided

¹Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 185.

that he would test the pleasures of the world to see if they contained any **יִתְרוֹן**, any lasting benefit. He did not withhold from himself any available pleasure. Yet, when he added up everything at the end of the experiment, he had to admit, honestly, that all is "zero," for all is transitory. In terms of lasting benefit and meaningful progress, it is all futile.

Throughout the book he periodically returns to the subject of pleasure or "fun." He concludes that a certain amount of fun is useful temporally, but it certainly is not an end in itself, and if one expects it to provide lasting satisfaction in itself, it is a dead end. In fact, the benefit of pleasure is often so illusive, and may be so harmful, that Koheleth decides that in some cases "Sorrow is better than laughter, for when a face is glum, a heart may be happy. The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning, while the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure" (7:3, 4). He does not mean this, of course, in the absolute sense, but what he says is true, as any thinking man knows. He balances these kinds of statements by others such as the one just considered above, "Rejoice young man, during your youth." Koheleth has looked at pleasure and has concluded that "no matter how spirited the event, it provides no lasting assuage to man's ills. It gives but a certain momentary

release and at best is soon gone."¹ Yet while life lived only for enjoyment is "vanity," life may still be enjoyable and yet holy when legitimate pleasures are enjoyed within the sphere of God ("this . . . I have seen is from God's hand . . ."), and with the understanding that a future judgment is certain.

Death and Immortality

Introduction

There can be no doubt that the thought of death is that which presses most heavily upon the mind of Koheleth. It is death which more than anything stamps "vanity" upon all terrestrial things. Through the fear of death man is all his lifetime subject to bondage, for man lives but to die, and what is worse, over death he has no control (8:8). He is the creature of an irresistible law; in this he is not much different from brutes (3:19). But the problems with Koheleth's views on this subject come not so much from his statements about death itself, for all those are easily seen to be true. The objections to Ecclesiastes on this subject have been raised about what Koheleth predicates of existence after death. The entire question of immortality in the Old Testament is, of course, very perplexing, and among Bible students there is little agreement even upon the concept.

¹Taylor, "Studies in Ecclesiastes," pp. 4-5.

Furthermore, one should not expect to find in Koheleth's words the final word on the doctrine of immortality. Yet, one would expect, in view of the inspired and revelatory nature of the book, that what Koheleth says on the subject, however incomplete, would nonetheless be accurate.

It is to the understanding of the most salient of Koheleth's statements on the subject that this section is devoted. These include 2:12-17; 3:15-22; 4:1-3; 5:13-17; 6:1-6; 9:1-12; 11:7-10; and 12:7, 13, 14.

Consideration of the Texts

Ecclesiastes 2:12-17

Of all the passages touching on immortality in the book of Ecclesiastes, this is one of the least perplexing. Koheleth's statements here are straightforward, and are misunderstood only if the context is not considered. His asseverations about the value of pleasure have been discussed above. After concluding that all such "fun" is הֶבֶל, the writer proceeds to say concerning the wise and the foolish that שְׁמִקְרָה אֶחָד יִקְרָה אֶת־כָּל־ם ("one fate befalls all of them," 2:14). This conclusion immediately raises questions in the mind of the Christian, because Christian doctrine states that the wicked are punished at death, and the righteous are rewarded. This objection should not be raised in the present instance, however, because what Koheleth means is perfectly clear. In 2:16 he reveals this when he says in an

exclamation: **וַאִיךָ יָמוּת הַחֲכָם עִם־הַכְּסִיל** ("O how the wise man dies with the fool"). This is the point of Koheleth's statement in the passage under consideration. Death is no respecter of the wise and the fool, the righteous and the unrighteous; it claims everyone. Hence, righteousness that is truly that (and therefore acceptable to God) is futile in this respect: it will not postpone death forever, and death will cancel all efforts which have been earthly and only earthly.

Ecclesiastes 3:15-22

This passage is somewhat more perplexing. It is often cited to prove that Koheleth had no conception of immortality, or that if he did, he was not completely convinced of it. The difficulties begin with verse 19 and continue through verse 22:

For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of the beast (**בְּהֵמָה**) is one for them. As this one dies, so dies that one, for their spirit is one and the same, and there is no advantage of man over the beast, for all go to one place; all are made from dust and all return to the dust. Who knows if the spirit of the sons of men goes upward, and the spirit of the beast downward to the earth? And I have seen that there is nothing better than that man should be joyful (**יִשְׂמַח**) in his work, for that is his proper share, for who will bring him to see what will occur after him?

Figures of speech

Bullinger suggests that 3:18 contains two important figures of speech. The first is heterosis, from the Greek **ἕτερος**, and means the exchange of one voice, mood, tense,

person, number, degree, or gender, for another. Thus, when Koheleth says **אֶמְרָתִי אֲנִי בְּלִבִּי עַל־דְּבַר־תְּבִינַת הָאָדָם**, he means, "according to the reasoning of man, or human reasoning: i.e., man says in his heart."¹ He also states that there is an instance of pleonasm in 3:18, the figure of speech by which more words are used than the grammar requires, from the Greek **πλεονασμός**. "Here the figure shows that the emphasis is on 'men' in contrast to 'beasts.' Yet I said in my heart respecting MEN, God has chosen them to show that they, even they, are like beasts."²

Psychology of man and animals

One of the problems in this passage arises out of the fact that theologians often find in the words **נֶפֶשׁ** and **חַיָּה** meanings more technical and more circumscribed than the words actually have in Scripture. It is true that when God created man He **יָפַח בְּאַפִּיו נְשָׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה** (Gen. 2:7), but it is also true that when God created animals, He put in them a **נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה** (Gen. 1:30). Therefore, as far as the **נֶפֶשׁ** is concerned, there is no essential difference between man and animals, at least as distinguishable from the words. It is even more revealing that when the animals went into the ark, they are described as those which had a

¹Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, pp. 510 and 524.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 405, 408.

רוּחַ הַיּוֹם (Gen. 7:15). This same term is applied to both animals and man in Genesis 7:21, 22. Therefore, as far as the words of Scripture are concerned, both animals and man have a נֶפֶשׁ הַיָּהּ and a רוּחַ הַיּוֹם. Their psychological distinction must be made on a different basis than these words.¹

In the present context it is the רוּחַ of man which is under consideration. The primary meanings of the word, depending upon the context are "breath," "wind," and "spirit."² It is used to describe the wind in various ways (east wind, north wind, day wind). רוּחַ is also used to describe the quarter of the wind (east side=רוּחַ הַקֶּדִים), to describe the air or gas from the womb (Isa. 26:18), and as a metaphor for a vain or empty and meaningless thing (Job 7:7), and for one's temper or disposition. It is also used to describe the vigor or animation of a person, and the desire of a person.³ It is further used in the Bible to describe the mind, and the same root is used for "smell." Koehler and Baumgartner list the present passage under the sixth general heading, "breath, element of life, the natural spirit of

man." It is found in Ugaritic as



(rh),

defined by Gordon as "'wind,' 'spirit,' and possibly

¹On the soul of man, cf. Franz Delitzsch, *A System of Biblical Psychology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint, 1966), pp. 209 ff.

²BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 924; KB, *Lexicon*, pp. 877-9.

³BDB, *Lexicon*, pp. 924-6.

⁴KB, *Lexicon*, pp. 877-9.

'scent.'"¹ It is also found in Phoenician with similar meanings.² The term was, therefore, a widely used, and extremely elastic one.

It was translated by a number of Greek words in the LXX, including πνεῦμα, ἄνεμος, θυμός, θυμόω, νοῦς, πνέω, πνοή, φρονέω, φρόνησις, ψυχή.³ It was translated by the Vulgate as *spiritus*. Some have contended that before the Exile רוּחַ signified only "breath,"⁴ but this is untenable considering its many meanings prior to that not only in biblical literature, but also in such extrabiblical literature as Ugaritic and Phoenician. The word is used both in connection with God⁵ and in connection with "evil spirits,"⁶

¹Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, p. 483, #2308 and 2314. It is found in 3 Aqht 25, 36 and 'nt:II:2, where it possibly means the scent of animals.

²Cf. *DISO*, p. 276, where three basic meanings are given: (1) "vent" ("wind"), (2) "esprit" ("spirit"), and (3) "Esprit" ("Spirit"). It is also found in Sefire (cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967), p. 104, Sf. III, 2.

³Cf. Elmar Camilo dos Santos, *An Expanded Hebrew Index for the Hatch Redpath Concordance to the Septuagint* (Jerusalem: Dugith Publishers, n.d.), p. 190.

⁴Paul Van Imschoot, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. by Kathryn Sullivan and Fidelis Buck, Vol. I (2 vols.: New York: Desclee Company, 1954), p. 173.

⁵Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 160.

⁶Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. by Arthur W. Heathcote and Phillip J. Allcock (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1958), pp. 122-3.

presumably demons. The רוח is given man by God (Zech. 12:1) and it is His spirit (Gen. 6:3). Physical life is dependent upon the רוח . If God recalls His רוח , all things die (Ps. 104:29), and idols are dead because they have no רוח (Ps. 135:17). רוח is responsible for sensation and emotion: it grieves (Isa. 65:14), is patient (Eccl. 7:8), loses heart (Isa. 61:3), is prudent (Prov. 17:27), humble (Prov. 29:23), proud (Prov. 16:18). All decisions depend upon the רוח (1 Chron. 5:26), for it possesses intelligence (Job 20:3). The spiritual part of man (religiously) meditates upon God's providence (Ps. 77:7) and serves God (Ps. 51:12) in repentance (Ps. 51:19).¹

Thus, when one comes to this passage in Ecclesiastes he must allow Koheleth to choose one of these various uses for רוח , and to use it in whatever manner he chooses, either by limitation or broadening of its meaning according to the context.

Again, Koheleth clearly states his meaning: there is no advantage for man over the beast because they all go to the same place, physically speaking, to the dust. This is a universal fact: all living things, whether human or brute, eventually die, and eventually decompose. From the purely physical point of view, all disappear.

In verse 21, however, Koheleth apparently begins to

¹Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 160.

discuss the immaterial part of man, and his provenance after death. It has been translated above by the writer, "Who knows if the spirit of the sons of men goes upward, and the spirit of the beast, if it goes downward to the earth?"

The problems which interpreters have had in understanding the verse are demonstrated by the remarkable punctuation of the Massoretes, which Ginsburg says is due to euphemism:

The different schools of textual critics had a different pronunciation of the *He* (ה) which precedes the two participles, *עֹלָה* *goeth upward*, and *יֹרֶדָה* *goeth downward*. According to one School it was the interrogative (ה... ה) and denotes whether it (i.e. the spirit of man) *goeth upward* . . . whether it (i.e. the spirit of the beast) *goeth downward*. This School recognized the fact that the verse before us is part of the general argument, and that the proper answer to this question is given at the end of the book. The Chaldee, the Septuagint, the Syriac, the Vulgate, Luther, the Geneva Version and the Revised Version follow this School, and take the *He* (ה) interrogatively. Another School of redactors, however, with a sensitive regard for the devout worshippers who had to listen to the public reading of the passage, were anxious to obviate the appearance of skepticism, and hence took the *He* (ה) as the article pronoun and interpreted the clauses in question, *that goeth upward* . . . *that goeth downward*. It is this School which the Massorites followed in their punctuation of the two participles, viz. *הַיֹּרֶדָה . . . הָעֹלָה*.¹

This verse has been a great problem, especially to

¹Christian David Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Masoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., reprint, 1966), pp. 461-2.

the destructively critical writers.¹ Hengstenberg (who does not fall into that category) suggests several reasons for rejecting the interrogative view: (1) According to the pointing, the \aleph can be the article. (2) The interrogative translation involves the writer in a glaring contradiction with himself. (3) The interrogative view involves the writer in a contradiction with the rest of the Old Testament. Hengstenberg would, therefore, translate it, "Who knoweth the spirit of the children of men that goeth upward, and the breath of the beast that goeth downward."² It remains, however, that the ancient versions took it interrogatively, a fact which cannot be lightly dismissed. It is assumed that if the LXX translators, for instance, had a *Vorlage* before them which allowed them to translate it in a manner more easily harmonized not only with the rest of the book, but with the rest of the old Testament, that they would have done such. Yet, they translated it: **καὶ τίς οἶδεν πνεῦμα υἱῶν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου;**

Furthermore, the passage does not involve the contradictions that Hengstenberg supposes. It is possible to take it in the interrogative sense and still correlate it

¹Cf. Bernard W. Anderson, *The Living World of the Old Testament* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., Ltd., 2nd ed., 1967), p. 504, in which he argues that Koheleth did not believe in immortality at all. Cf. also Scott, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 222-3, and Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 110.

²Hengstenberg, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 119-21.

with the book as a whole, and the Old Testament.

It seems best, therefore, to explain the problem in terms of retaining the interrogative reading. Perhaps it is better understood, if one inserts an answer to the question. Who knows if the spirit of man ascends upward and that of the beast downward?--no one.¹ No one knows, that is, except God, and this is surely the point Koheleth is making here. He cannot mean by his question that the spirit of man does not ascend (i.e., go to God), for he specifically states (12:7), "then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it." "It may certainly be said of *mi yode'a*, as of *ignoratur*, that it does not exclude every kind of knowledge, but only a sure and certain knowledge resting on sufficient grounds."² In the end the matter is solved for Koheleth by faith--as, indeed, it must be solved for anyone in any age. Who knows what happens to the נִשְׁמָה of man?--no one except those who believe what God says about it. It is interesting that the Midrash on Ecclesiastes chapter 3 says: "All souls go upwards; but for those of the righteous there is a resting place, whilst those of the wicked are fugitive."³ The

¹Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, pp. 1021-2

²Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 271.

³Rapaport, *A Treasury of the Midrash*, p. 181.

writers of the Midrash evidently did not feel that Solomon's statements precluded immortality.

Immortality

As previously stated, some have mistakenly understood Koheleth to be saying here that there is no immortality: "The writer is aware of the doctrine of human immortality, but he cannot accept it; there is no proof for it."¹

Another alleges that the doctrine of immortality is stated only in one or two doubtful expressions in the book, and that the whole tenor of the book is not that the heart or the spirit is immortal, but that, whether it is or not, in the heart is planted the thought, the consciousness of eternity--and the longing after it.² Another, assuming the late date of the book, contends that the book is a Sadducean document, and that it preserves their denial of the doctrine of immortality, a denial, which was still evident in Christ's day (Matt. 22:23).³

None the less, these views neither represent the teaching of the entire Old Testament on the subject, nor the

¹W. O. E. Oesterley and Theodore H. Robinson, *Hebrew Religion: Its Origin and Development* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1952), p. 365.

²Alexander Maclaren, *The Books of Esther, Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, in *Expositions of the Holy Scriptures* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), pp. 338-9.

³Oesterley and Robinson, *Hebrew Religion: Its Origin and Development*, pp. 364-5.

teaching of the book of Ecclesiastes. Koheleth's views of Sheol, and the Old Testament view in general, will be discussed below under the topics of the ninth chapter. Here, it is sufficient to let Koheleth speak for himself in other places in the book to demonstrate that he does believe that for man there is existence after death.

(1) His belief in a future judgment demands it.

"God will judge both the righteous and the wicked man" (3:17); "God will bring you to judgment for all these things" (11:9); "God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil," (12:14). (2) Man has an "eternal home" (12:5). (3) The spirit of man (רוח) returns to God at death (12:7). One certainly cannot agree with Jastrow, who concludes that if there is anything beyond death, Koheleth's system of thought collapses.¹

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3

Koheleth surveys the world and he sees so much misery and oppression, and so little comfort in it, that he feels compelled to exclaim: "So I congratulated (שִׁיחֵי) ² the dead who are already dead, more than the living who are still living. But better than both of them is the one who never came into being, who has not seen the evil work which is

¹Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic*, p. 129.

²BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 986.

done under the sun (4:2-3). This statement is certainly not the normal human way of viewing life. Yet, for Koheleth's purposes, it is eminently appropriate, for what he says has a certain truth in it. One suspects that he means more than Gordis deduces from the passage:

The spectacle of wickedness in the seats of justice and the fruitless tears of the oppressed fill Koheleth's heart with despair. Nor can he find consolation in the shadowy doctrine of retribution in another world, which he dismisses with a shrug of the shoulders. Only the pursuit of personal happiness is a sensible goal for men.¹

Cannot the passage be better understood, and more legitimately so, by trying to picture the situation Solomon was describing, and then by trying to understand what one's own reaction would be? Apparently many miseries were being brought upon the helpless and innocent by the very men who should have been ameliorating the condition of the community.² These conditions were so intolerable that Koheleth regarded those whom death had relieved from these bitter sufferings as happier than those who endured them. In fact, conditions were so deplorable that Koheleth says that those who had never been born were better than the living. There have been many situations in which such a statement would have been true for God's people, including not only the time

¹Gordis, *Koheleth*, pp. 158-9.

²Ginsburg, *Cohemoth*, p. 322.

of Solomon,¹ but also the period of the Exile, the time of Antiochus Epiphanes, the Roman period, various times throughout the middle ages in Europe, not to speak of the Nazi holocaust. It is true that 1 Kings speaks of the reign of Solomon in glowing terms (1 Kings 4:20-25; 10:6-9), but one must be astute enough to read between the lines. Solomon's wealth, wives, temples, and palaces had to be financed by someone, and as usual, it was the average citizen upon whom the bulk of that financing fell.² Furthermore, multiplied thousands of men were drafted to work for Solomon for long months and years away from home (1 Kings 9:27; 5:13-16). It is little wonder that when Solomon died the people complained to his son Rehoboam: "Your father made our yoke hard; therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke which he put on us, and we will serve you" (1 Kings 12:4).

It might seem singularly strange that the very man who was responsible for the hardship of the people should lament that hardship. Yet, if this book was written at the close of his life, it is not improbable that Solomon may have come to take tardy cognizance of what he had done to

¹This statement is one of those used to show that Solomon did not write the book, because such conditions did not obtain in his time. Cf. *Ibid.*, but see also the above discussion.

²Such bad aspects of the monarchy were predicted in 1 Samuel 8.

his people, and have written such things. He was, at any rate, correct in his conclusion: in some intolerable situations, death is to be preferred over life. To the comfortable contemporary Christian such a conclusion may seem reprehensible. To those acquainted with unutterable misery, it was not. Fortunately, however, this is not his final conclusion and he comes later to other considerations which mitigate the sting of this one.¹

Ecclesiastes 6:3, 12

Koheleth considers in this section a man who, hypothetically (though in Solomon's case, maybe not so hypothetically) has a hundred children and lives many years, but his soul has not been satisfied "with good things," and he does not even have a proper burial. He says that the miscarriage is better than this man, for a miscarriage comes and goes in obscurity (it has no name), and it is never conscious of the world and all that transpires within it. This man, for what reason the readers are not informed, apparently had a very unfortunate and unproductive life. He had many children, it is true, but he was always miserable, and his misery even followed him in death. One might ask, why would such a man exist? Why would he live and die in this manner? Perhaps

¹John Franklin Genung, *Words of Koheleth, Son of David, King in Jerusalem* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904), pp. 258-9.

it was because he did not realize that gain is only meaningful if it comes from God and if that fact is acknowledged.

Koheleth's statement can only be understood in its context. In the preceding verse Koheleth is struck with the misery of one who has been able to accumulate a great deal of wealth and possessions, but who has not been able to enjoy them, and who dies without a son, as a consequence of which a stranger, someone who is not even a relative (שׂאִי נִכְרִי) inherits his possessions. Solomon is understandably chagrined at this thought, for to "depart this life without issue, and to leave one's possessions to strangers was one of the greatest calamities that could befall an Eastern."¹ Even if the situation were reversed (v. 3) and the man had many children and lived many years, yet could not enjoy his wealth, a miscarriage is better. The reason for this is quite clear: enjoying the fruit of one's labor is a gift from God (Eccl. 3:13).

Amid all this perplexity, and in view of the ultimate indiscriminate by death between the good and the bad, the wise and the fool, the poor and the rich, Koheleth exclaims: "Who knows what is good for a man during his life, during the few years of his transitory (הַבִּל) life? He will spend them like a shadow; for who is able to tell a man what will be after him under the sun?" The answer to the first

¹Ginsburg, *Koheleth*, p. 258.

question is "no one." The answer to the second question is "no one"--no one, that is, except God. Only God can tell a man what is worthwhile for him to do while upon the earth, and while there may be a certain amount of enjoyment for man, that is certainly not the totality of his existence.

It is important to notice that Koheleth does not say, "who can tell a man what will be in heaven after he dies?" He says, "who can tell what will be done **תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם**." Only God knows the future on earth. This is what he is lamenting, and this he knows he must accept.

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12

It is this passage which has led to many of the denials of the doctrine of immortality in Ecclesiastes. One writer affirms that Ecclesiastes unequivocally states that there is no conscious immortality, in outright contradiction to the remainder of the Old Testament.¹ This has been the position of not a few commentators. This passage may be summarized thus: Koheleth is again troubled by the fact that the fate of the righteous and the wicked is the same: all die. Yet, in his estimation, for whoever is still living there is hope that his life may not be wicked but righteous, for a "live dog is better than a dead lion." The living know that they will die, but the dead do not know

¹Scott, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 246.

anything (from a physical standpoint). They have no more ability to share in the activities of earth. Since life is fleeting, it should be enjoyed, for this Koheleth considers man's reward for his labor on earth. Whatever activity one finds to do, he should do it, for in Sheol where he is going there is no such activity.¹ Time and chance overtake all, and all eventually die. A man does not know his time, and like the fish swimming happily and freely toward the fisherman's net, man is not aware of his calamity until the moment it overtakes him; then it is too late.

Old Testament doctrine of Sheol

In keeping with the scope of this thesis, it is impossible to discuss Sheol with the detail it could otherwise demand. Yet, the doctrine must be surveyed if Koheleth's statements are to be understood in their historical and Scriptural context.

One of the outstanding characteristics of the Old

¹Cf. the interesting and famous *Metaphrase of the Book of Ecclesiastes* by Gregory Thaumaturgus: "But avail thyself of all that chanceth; for neither shall any one take account of thee for these things, nor are the things that are done by men known at all outside the circle of men. And Hades, whatever that may be, whereunto we are said to depart, has neither wisdom nor understanding" (Gregory Thaumaturgus, *A Metaphrase of the Book of Ecclesiastes*, trans. by S. D. F. Salmond in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VI [10 vols.: Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprint, 1971], p. 15).

Testament is the feature of "eternity."¹ When God spoke out of the burning bush ("I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob," Ex. 3:6), he implied that in some way these men still had existence. He is the God, not of the dead, but of the living (Mk. 12:27). The first hint of immortality in the case of Enoch (Gen. 5:24; Heb. 11:5) is later expressed more vividly by David: אֶךְ-אֱלֹהִים יִפְדֶּה נַפְשִׁי אֶךְ-אֱלֹהִים יִפְדֶּה נַפְשִׁי (Ps. 49:16; 15 Eng.). When Jacob was informed of the supposed death of his son Joseph, he cried despairingly: כִּי אֶרְדָּ אֶל-בְּנֵי אָבִי שָׂאֵלָה (Gen. 37:35).

Some trace the meaning of שָׂאֵלָה to the verb שָׂאֵל, "to ask,"² and others, to the root שָׂעַל, "to be hollow, empt."³ Knight suggests that the word represented a great cavern in the center of the earth.⁴ The lexicon suggests both of these derivations, but concludes that there is no positive etymology.⁵ It is suggested by Fisher that Jacob's phrase

¹Payne, *Theology of the Older Testament*, p. 443. Payne lists five such characteristics, the other four of which are "monergism, the death of the testator, the promise of reconciliation, and the confirmatory sign."

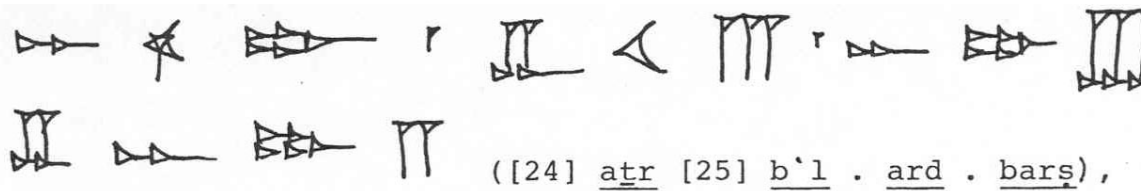
²*Ibid.*, p. 445. Some suggest that it was so named from its insatiable craving. See A. B. Davidson, *The Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. by S. D. F. Salmond (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), p. 425.

³Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 255.

⁴Knight, *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 338.

⁵BDB, *Lexicon*, pp. 982-3. Cf. KB, *Lexicon*, p. 935.

in Genesis 37:35, "I shall go down to Sheol to my son mourning" is paralleled in Ugaritic by Text 67:VI:24, 25:



"after Baal shall I go down to the netherworld."¹ Apparently, the word 𐎗𐎗𐎐𐎗 did not occur in Ugaritic in the sense of "abode of the dead," and the normal expression was *bars*, "in the earth," a usage also employed in Hebrew (Prov. 25:13).² There is no unanimity even among conservative scholars on the meaning of the word as used in the Old Testament. While liberal scholars generally take the view that "the Hebrews were no farther advanced in their thinking on Sheol than were their pagan neighbors"³ and that the concepts of an eternal place of bliss and one of punishment evolved until they are found in the advanced form evinced by the New Testament, conservatives, on the other hand, admit of a progressive revelation of the concept, so that the concept of the New Testament writers was much more complete than that

¹Loren R. Fisher, ed., *Ras Shamra Parallels*, in *Analecta Orientalia*, 49 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1972), pp. 38-9, I, 28. Cf. also pp. 27-8, I, 21, and Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, p. 180.

²Mitchell Dahood, *Proverbs and Northwest Semitic Philology* (Roma: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1963), p. 52.

³Knight, *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 338.

of the Old Testament men. Thus, the Old Testament revelation on Sheol is inferior only in the sense of less complete, not less valid or less true.¹

The word itself is variously used to mean "grave" (Prov. 30:16) and death (Ps. 18:5). Moses applied the term to the concept of "hell" (Num. 16:30). Through David God revealed that Sheol was to include the place of punishment for the wicked (Ps. 49; 88:5), and that the righteous will be rewarded (Ps. 17:15; 49). Asaph knew himself to be continually with God and so could state with confidence, "With your counsel you will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory."² This may, of course, be referring to the resurrection, not the immediate entrance of the saved Israelite into the presence of God. Still, it promises a future distinction and a future immortality for the righteous person.

It is perhaps best to allow Sheol to refer to a wide variety of things, the meanings of which must be narrowed by their particular contexts. Sheol is definitely used to refer to the grave (Ps. 6:5; 115:17, 18; Isa. 38:18, 19). Sheol also refers to the abode of the conscious dead (Ps. 13:14; Ps. 88:3). It is used for the abode of both the righteous and the unrighteous dead throughout the Old

¹Cf. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. III, pp. 510-13.

²Payne, *Theology of the Older Testament*, pp. 451-2.

Testament.¹ Assuming Davidic authorship of many of the Psalms, it is fair to say that Solomon had a rather wide spectrum of literature available to him about Sheol.² It remains now to interpret Solomon's statements in Ecclesiastes chapter 9.³

Interpretation of the passage

The verse which has posed the largest problem for those who believe in conscious existence after death for both the saved and the unsaved is found in verse 10: "Whatever your hand finds to do, verily do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or wisdom in Sheol where you are going." This is the NASB translation of:

כָּל אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא יָדְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּכַחֲךָ עֲשֵׂה כִּי אֵין מַעֲשֶׂה וְחִשְׁבּוֹן וְדַעַת
וְחִכְמָה בְּשֵׂאוֹל אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה הֹלֵךְ שָׁמָּה.

One of the most notable reactions against this verse is to be found in *The New Scofield Reference Bible*:

This statement is no more divine revelation concerning the state of the dead than any other conclusion of "the preacher" (1:1). No one would quote 9:2 as a divine revelation. These reasonings of man apart from divine revelation are set down by inspiration just as

¹Loraine Boettner, *Immortality* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1956), pp. 97-102.

²Payne, *Theology of the Older Testament*, pp. 443-63.

³See also James Oliver Buswell, Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (2 vols. in one: Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), pp. 316-22.

the words of Satan (Gen. 3:4; Job 2:4-5; etc.) are so recorded. But that life and consciousness continue between death and resurrection is directly affirmed in Scripture.¹

The matter of the interrelationship of revelation and inspiration has been discussed above in this thesis. It is enough to repeat here that to resort to this type of escape mechanism in the interpretation of any Scripture is most unfortunate, especially when, as in the case of Ecclesiastes chapter 9, only a better understanding of the context and of the meanings of certain key words is all that is necessary to see that the passage does not contradict the biblical doctrine of consciousness after death at all.

Word meanings

There are four activities which Koheleth says will not be in Sheol. It is these four which have given to many the impression that there is no conscious existence after death. Such passages are naturally seized upon by those believing in soul-sleep or annihilation, but it appears that their arguments are based too much upon the English text. The following discussion centers on these four activities.

עָשָׂה.--This word comes from the exceedingly common verbal root **עָשָׂה**. Its primary definitions are "deed, work."²

¹English, *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 702, note 1.

²BDB, *Lexicon*, pp. 795; cf. KB, *Lexicon*, p. 551.

Its uses in the Old Testament are amazingly varied and include evil works, works which are the basis for judgment (Eccl. 12:14); work or labor such as farming (Ex. 23:16); business pursuits, such as an occupation (the meaning the lexicon gives in Eccl. 9:7, 10), and enterprise (Deut. 15:10); achievement (Est. 10:2);¹ and all different types of work in particular.² The meaning "occupation" suggested by the lexicon seems to fit the context very well. It is translated in the Vulgate by *opus*, and in Greek by *ποίημα*.

לַפִּי מַאֲסָא אֲבֹתִי.--This word, from the root **בָּשַׁח**, "to think, to account," is defined in this passage as "reckoning, account."³ The related noun **בָּשַׁח**, also a masculine noun, is used of the "ingenious work" involved in the ephod. The verb is used of inventors of ingenious and artistic things (Ex. 31:4; 2 Chr. 2:13). It is often used in connection with workmen (Ex. 35:35; 38:23). In light of the context of

¹It is found in this sense in the Punic inscriptions of Tripoli (Les inscriptions en écriture néopunique de la Tripolitaine), 32:8, as *m's'*, where the sense is "mérite" ("worth, merit, achievement") (*DISO*, p. 163). For the text, see Donner and Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, Band I, p. 24, #126:8, where it reads: **לַפִּי מַאֲסָא אֲבֹתִי** **וּמַאֲסָא בְּתִי**. The writer's translation is "According to the achievement of my fatherhood and the achievement of my self" (cf. *Ibid.*, Band II, p. 131).

²BDB, *Lexicon*, pp. 795-6.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 362-3. KB, *Lexicon*, p. 340, suggests "account, device" for the uses in Ecclesiastes.

the passage and the meaning of the above word, it is possible that a better translation in Ecclesiastes 9:10 would not be "planning" (NASB) or "device," but "accounting," as the accounting done in business or trading. It is so used in Papyrus 81:1 (Imperial Aramaic),¹ and in Palmyrene. It is defined by *DISO* in various contexts as "compte des produits" (an accounting of products), or "compte des marchands" (an accounting of merchants, tradesmen). The word definitely has commercial connotations.² Interestingly, the word is the same as the name of the Biblical city חֶשְׁבֹּן.³

חֶשְׁבֹּן.--This word is from the very familiar root **חָכַם**, "to know." It is a feminine noun with the primary meaning "knowledge," used variously of "perception;" "skill in workmanship" (Ex. 31:3); "creative skill" (Isa. 40:14); the knowledge possessed by God; "discernment, understanding and wisdom" (the definition given for the present passage); and "knowledge of God" in the highest sense.⁴ It is illuminating that the word is also used to describe Solomon's workman, Hiram of Tyre (1 Kings 7:14). This word also appears in a Punic inscription from Tripoli, in the phrase **דעת התמת**,

¹Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.*, pp. 192, 196.


²*DISO*, p. 97.

³BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 363.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 395-6; cf. KB, *Lexicon*, p. 215.

"complete knowledge."¹ In keeping with the context in Ecclesiastes the word probably has something to do with skill, as in workmanship, though this is not the meaning suggested by the lexicon.

חכמה.--This is also a very familiar word in the old Testament in general and in Koheleth's book in particular. It is defined in its primary sense as "wisdom," but it can have subsidiary meanings of "skill" as in war and technical work. It is used of wisdom in administration, shrewdness, prudence, and ethical and religious wisdom.² It is also one of the words used to describe the qualities of Hiram of Tyre (1 Kings 7:14). Particularly important is the fact that it is used in the Phoenician inscription of Karatepe, 1:13, in the context of building.³ The word occurs in Ugar-

itic as  (hkmt).⁴ Though the lexicon does not so classify it in the passage under consideration, it is the preference of the writer to translate it "skill"

¹Cf. Donner and Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, Band I, p. 23, 121:1, and *DISO*, pp. 59, 329.

²BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 315.

³Cf. Donner and Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, Band I, 26:13, pp. 5-6; Band II, p. 37. Also cf. *DISO*, p. 88.

⁴Cf. Whitaker, *A Concordance of the Ugaritic Literature*, p. 259, and Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, p. 396, #859.

as in technical work, a usage which definitely fits the context.¹

Conclusion on this passage

It is once again the context which provides the clue to the meaning. It should be borne in mind that Koheleth is speaking only about the physical aspect of life in this passage. His point is that death overtakes all, so that if it is possible to enjoy life, to that extent one should enjoy it. If one has the means to have white clothes and oil on his head, he should not deny himself (9:8). He should enjoy life with the woman whom he loves and who is a gift from God (9:9). Furthermore, whatever his hand finds to do, he should do it, because where he is going in Sheol (that is, the sphere of the dead, both righteous and unrighteous), there is no "occupation, accounting, skill in workmanship, and wisdom as used in technical work (skill)." All of these things are purely physical and consequently, when the physical existence ceases, so do these. Koheleth is trying to make the point that a man should utilize the opportunities presented upon the earth, for when death comes, those opportunities are gone forever. He neither says, nor means to imply, that there is no conscious existence after death. From the viewpoint of the purely physical, "the dead

¹BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 315.

do not know anything" (וְהֵמָּה יֹדְעִים אֵינָם, 9:5), and their love, their hate, their zeal, as well as any memory of them is soon gone (9:5, 6). But this is only the physical dimension, and as it applies to the physical, everything Koheleth says here is perfectly true. There is no reason to question his veracity.

Concerning Koheleth's objective of impressing his readers with the need to utilize available opportunities while they are still living, Leupold says:

This thought is then driven home more securely by the reminder that a time is coming when opportunities for achievement will be cut off. For all those happy faculties that man possesses for doing work (*ma'aseh*), for devising new things (*chesbon*), for employing the knowledge that he has accumulated (*da'ath*), for employing constructive knowledge that is ethically motivated (*chokhma*)--all these rare privileges are at an end.¹

The passage is therefore no problem at all. While it is true that in many ways death was for the Old Testament saint a gloomy prospect (Job 10:20-22; Ps. 6:5; Isa. 38:10-20, etc.), it is also true that there was some light to alleviate the gloom (Job 19:25-27; Ps. 16:8-11; Ps. 49:15; Ps. 73:24; Isa. 25:6-8; Hos. 13:14, etc.).² Part of the light they had concerned the consciousness of the people in Sheol (Isa. 14:9-11), although if Solomonic authorship is accepted

¹Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 217.

²Alva J. McClain, "Christian Theology: Biblical Eschatology," revised by John C. Whitcomb Jr. (unpublished class syllabus, Grace Theological Seminary, 1973), pp. 14-15.

for Ecclesiastes, Solomon did not have this revelation, but certainly had others from the Psalms. Solomon is not saying that there is no consciousness in Sheol; he is merely stating that in Sheol the activities for which a man needs his body will not exist.

A suggested translation of 9:10

"Everything which your hand finds to do, do with all your might, for in Sheol, where you are going, there is no occupation, accounting, skill in workmanship, and wisdom as used in technical work."

Ecclesiastes 12:7, 13, 14

Only a brief word need be said about the concluding section of the book. It is important to note, however, that when Koheleth makes his conclusion, he affirms two very important truths: (1) The רוּחַ of man returns to God who gave it, in contradistinction to the body which returns to the dust of the earth of which it was made. (2) There is a final judgment coming for every man in which both the good and evil works will be judged,¹ and in consequence of which the best advice Koheleth can give is, אֵת־הָאֱלֹהִים יְרָא וְאֵת מִצְוֹתָיו שְׁמֹר, "Fear God and keep His commandments." This is Koheleth's final advice--the only advice any man needs.

¹A possible translation is "for God will bring every deed into judgment on every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Hulst, *Old Testament Translation Problems*, p. 134).

CHAPTER VI

A SUMMARY OF THE THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE OF KOHELETH

Introduction

The theological message of the book deals not so much with the attributes of God, or with the plan of redemption, or with His workings with Israel. To be sure, one may infer from it something about God, and something about God's final plans for men, but the book is intensely interested in God's relation to men as concerns their everyday affairs: their aims, their aspirations, and their purpose in life. Most importantly, the book is concerned with men's relationship to God: do they fear God or not; and does the course of their life prove it? Many topics could be chosen from the book, but for the present study only two have been chosen. Inasmuch as is possible, repetition of former themes in this thesis has been avoided.

Consideration of the Topics

Insufficiency of Human Endeavor

The problem of knowledge

Koheleth shows the grief in knowledge in an early statement in the book: "And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task which God has given the sons

of men with which to be afflicted" (1:13). He further states that "in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain" (1:18). He also states that while God has set "eternity in their heart" men still cannot "find out the work God has performed from the beginning to the end" (3:11). God is completely inscrutable. Moreover, while seeking for wisdom, Koheleth said that it was far from him (7:23). He states, in fact, that while he sought wisdom, the only thing he found out for sure was the depravity of man (7:29).¹ He concludes that though a man should seek to understand the happenings of earth, and never sleep again while he continuously seeks, "man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun." God's providence is thus inscrutable, is incomprehensible, past finding out (8:16, 17); but that is no more than one would expect of such a magnificent and sovereign God. Even, Koheleth goes on to say, if a man should have wisdom in a particular instance, and use it to save people temporarily from a disaster, both he and his wisdom will be forgotten and despised (9:13-18).

It seems that Koheleth phrases the thought in this manner because he wants to indicate that all the "sons of men" even if they know not God, feel a deep compulsion or inner urge to discover truth. God has put that urge

¹On man's depravity, cf. Albert C. Knudson, *The Religious Teaching of the Old Testament* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1918), pp. 217-65.

into their heart. But they are at the same time caught in the difficulty that the task that God has laid upon them, by the very fact that they are human beings, fails to yield the desired result. It is hard, difficult, unrewarding; it is bad business. You strive after high objectives, but your quest fails to produce satisfactory results.¹

Thus, the more "one knows the more his frustration increases . . . both by what he doesn't know and by the alarm from what he does know. You may not like this concept, but it is true of the enterprise in itself."²

Emptiness of things

"Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no real profit under the sun" (2:11). The first thing that must be noticed about this statement is that it is a perfectly natural conclusion;³ there is nothing sinful about it. Koheleth is obviously speaking of physical things which he has accomplished, and he explains his attitude in the succeeding verses, where he says: "Thus I hated all the fruit of my

¹Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 53.

²Taylor, "Studies in Ecclesiastes," pp. 4-5.

³Because of this statement, however, Mickelsen brands Koheleth a pessimist, though he does admit that some of his pessimism might be "realism derived from empirical observation (Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, pp. 313-14). See also A. Lukyn Williams, *Ecclesiastes in The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, ed., by A. F. Kirkpatrick (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1922), p. 23.

labor for which I have labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me" (2:18). Again and again this thought, expressed in different ways, greatly troubles Koheleth. He is disturbed that while he has labored with "wisdom and knowledge and skill" (2:21) the one who inherits his work after he dies will neither appreciate, nor take care of all these things he has made (the most precious of which to Solomon must have been the Lord's temple and his own palace).

Unthinking materialism

Some men never understand the inability of material accumulation to satisfy, and never think ahead far enough to contemplate the reason for compulsive acquisition of mere earthly "things" or the destiny of themselves or their possessions. Koheleth describes such a man in 4:7-8: "There was a certain man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches and he never asked, 'For whom am I laboring and depriving myself of fun?'"

In fact, one soon discovers that the more he obtains, the more he wants: "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves affluence with its income" (5:11). Having decided upon the vanity of materialism, then, Koheleth gives some excellent advice, which if remembered amid the constant drive for accumulation, may give it

a more proper perspective: "As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so he will return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his work that he can carry in his hand" (5:15). The conclusion of the matter, thus, is that man's life does not consist in the multitude of things he possesses. "They do not content him now and he must leave them behind in time."¹ "The really wise make what they own subservient to their spiritual needs."²

Lack of personal importance

It seems to bother Koheleth a great deal that no matter who you are, when you die your status is soon forgotten and "out of sight, out of mind."³ The wise man receives no more lasting remembrance than the fool: they both die, the bodies of both decay and return to dust,⁴ and both are almost as quickly forgotten (3:19, 20). While most men live as though they were oblivious to the fact of their inevitable death, some men realize its certainty and try to make provisions for their perpetual remembrance subsequent

¹Taylor, "Studies in Ecclesiastes," pp. 4-5.

²Gains Glenn Atkins, "Ecclesiastes" in *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. V, ed. by George Arthur Buttrick (12 vols.: New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), p. 40.

³Taylor, "Studies in Ecclesiastes," pp. 4-5.

⁴For an interesting discussion on man as composed of **עפר**, see Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, pp. 313-14.

to their death. This shows that they are either unaware of or underestimate the value of "laying up treasure in heaven" where is to be found the only remembrance that is worthwhile; or, they are so inastute that they are incapable of seeing that in all of history, only a handful of men have succeeded in perpetuating their memory. "O how the wise man and the fool alike die!"¹

Conclusion on human endeavor

Koheleth concludes, then, that accumulation of things and enjoyment of "fun" are not necessarily evil unless viewed as ends in themselves, and unless performed outside the sphere of the will of God. As an end in itself, human endeavor brings only grief; it must at least be balanced by the fear of God (3:14).

God's Supply of Life's Needs

Stability

Man's problem concerning stability is simply that God is the only one who has it. His stability can be seen in

¹It is suggested that וְאֵלֶּיךָ might be better translated, "And O, how is it," for "it is an exclamatory burst of irrepressible feeling, laying open the very heart of the writer. . . . It is no skepticism in regard to God's righteous government, no denial of essential moral distinction; it is not an assertion of fatality on the other, but a cry of anguish at a spectacle ever passing before his eyes, and which he fails clearly to comprehend" (Zöckler, "Ecclesiastes," pp. 58-9, footnote on 2:16).

the way in which the natural processes of the earth are generally stable and uniform: the earth remains forever, the sun rises and sets, the wind comes and goes and comes again, the rivers flow endlessly into the sea, yet the sea is never filled and the rivers never run dry (1:4-7). "That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done" (1:9a). Moreover, Koheleth states, he knows that "everything God does will remain forever . . ." (3:14). This is in stark contrast to the instability, the mutability, and the fragile nature of man, whose life is but a vapor that dissipates almost as quickly as it appears (James 4:14). Thus, any measure of stability that man experiences, no matter how small, must come from God, who "has so worked that men should fear Him" (3:14).

Time

Man needs time; he feels the lack of it; but only God has it.¹ Since God is He who controls time, He has decreed what will happen and when it will happen. What the beautiful poem of 3:1-8 describes is that "He has made everything appropriate in its time" (3:11).² There are appropriate times for an almost innumerable variety of activities,

¹Taylor, "Studies in Ecclesiastes," pp. 4-5.

²3:11 speaks of "eternity" (עֶלְמִי) in man's heart.

Some have suggested that it should be interpreted like the Arabic *'ilm*, "knowledge," but Barr feels such a suggestion should be held in suspension (Barr, *Philology*, p. 162).

a few of which he lists. There are times for births and deaths, planting and harvesting, killing and healing, tearing down and building up, weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing, throwing stones and gathering stones, embracing and shunning embracing, searching and giving up the lost, keeping and throwing away, tearing apart and sewing together, being silent and speaking, loving and hating, fighting a war and seeking peace (3:1-8). The point is that it is God who makes appropriate times for all these things, but the plight of men is similar to that of a school of fish that swims along, each fish thinking he is free, thinking he controls his own destiny, including the events of his life, and ultimately, even the time of his demise. Yet, the school is suddenly tangled in a net, and it discovers that time has run out: someone else is in control, and he has stopped the clock (9:12). Any time for earthly activity at all is a gift of God, and it is God who will stop the clock. "Man does not know his time" (9:12a).¹

Physical requirements

Man needs certain physical commodities in order to exist. Some men think they need more than others, but in reality all men have the same general needs: water to drink, food to eat, and shelter from inclement weather.

¹See 12:1-7, where the writer seems to be writing under the pressure of a clock which is ticking double-time.

Even clothing might be considered extra-basic for mere existence. But Koheleth shows his true heart attitude, and the depth of his spiritual insight, when he states that even these basic needs, eating and drinking, are ultimately filled by God himself. "There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his work is good. This also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God" (2:24, 25). Koheleth's statements here and other places throughout the book have been the occasion for accusations of a supposed sensualism or Epicureanism.¹ It should be obvious, nevertheless, that eating and drinking no more denotes sensualism, than does the wearing of clothes. Both are normal functions of physical living. Furthermore, the reader will observe that in the passage quoted above, it is connected with labor. What enjoyment Koheleth gains, he says, is the gift of God, a statement surely not to be expected from the lips of some impious Epicurean!

Moral requirements

As with the physical requirements, man is dependent upon God to supply his moral requirements. Koheleth is not blind to man's depravity: "Indeed, there is not [one] righteous man on the earth who continually does good and who never sins" (7:20). He recognizes, too, that this was not

¹Atkins, "Ecclesiastes," p. 42. Cf. Scott, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 197.

the original condition of man: "Behold I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices" (7:29). Man can only gain God's approval by fearing Him and keeping His commandments (12:13), and for the ability to do this he is dependent upon God (9:1).

"Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly" (8:12).

Life's values

Yet another of the things of life for which man is dependent upon God is life's values. Man does not set these values; God does. "In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider this: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man cannot discover anything that will be after him" (7:14). Righteousness is of the utmost value, for he who has it is "wise" and he who does not is a "fool." This is because God "will bring you into judgment for all these things" (11:9; cf. 7:15-19).

In short, it is not our human enterprise that meets our need, but God's provision. He meets it on the basis of His gift, not our striving. As we accept what He gives, continually use and enjoy it before Him, we are blessed. As our eyes are set on His values and our ultimate accountability, we find fulfillment.¹

The feebleness of man is inherent in his creatureship.²

¹Taylor, "Studies in Ecclesiastes," p. 5.

²Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 151.

That is why he is dependent upon God for any value in life.

Sovereignty of God

In the book of Ecclesiastes the concept of sovereignty "has been confused occasionally with fatalism . . . but the driving force in Ecclesiastes is not fatalism . . . it is a personal God--not an unknowing force--an intellectual faculty to whom we are accountable."¹ This "determinism" is evident, for instance, in the statement, "He has made everything appropriate in its time" (3:11). Stronger yet is Koheleth's declaration that "Just as you do not know the way of the wind, and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things" (11:5). In the conclusion of the book God's sovereignty is evident in His coming judgment: "Because God will bring every act to judgment, everything that is hidden, whether it is good or evil" (12:14). There is to be no mistake about it, God is in complete control of the universe, and only when one has understood and acquiesced to this fact can he live a satisfied life.²

¹Taylor, "Studies in Ecclesiastes," p. 5. For a summary of determinism in the Old Testament from a liberal standpoint, see Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. II, pp. 167-185.

²Cf. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, ed. by Samuel G. Craig (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint, 1974), pp. 502-3.

Conclusion

In searching out the meaning and purpose of life by means of his empirical investigation Koheleth has learned some vitally important facts: no amount of knowledge either satisfies or suffices; the acquisition of material "things" for the sake of acquisition, and apart from the consideration of the ultimate end of life, is pure futility; no amount of fun or riches satisfies; only God can supply the most necessary things of life: stability, time, morality, and values for life. Most importantly, if one is to make any sense out of life, and if he is to have any holy satisfaction, the physical must be subordinated to the spiritual and man must live in complete acquiescence to God's total and absolute sovereignty.

CHAPTER VII

NEW TESTAMENT PARALLELS

Introduction

One of the most compelling arguments against the view that the conclusions of Koheleth are not revelation is the circumstance that so many of his statements can be found in similar form in the New Testament. There is every possibility that there was direct dependence upon the book by the New Testament writers, for even if one takes the late date of composition, the work was extant several centuries before the writers of the New Testament. Comparison with the LXX, which most of the New Testament writers used, is one of the best ways of establishing parallels.

The Parallels

There is a striking parallel between the phrase "vanity of vanities" (ματαιότης ματαιότητων) (1:2, etc.), and Romans 8:20, "For the creation was subjected to futility" (ματαιότητι). Ecclesiastes 2:24 says that such things as eating and drinking and enjoying one's labor are from the hand of God, a thought paralleled in 1 Timothy 6:17, which speaks of God "who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy." Ecclesiastes 3:11 informs the reader that man cannot "find out the work which God has done from the beginning

even to the end," a thought which Paul repeats in Romans 11:33, "How unsearchable are His judgments and inscrutable His ways!" In Ecclesiastes 3:17 Koheleth warns that "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," and Matthew 16:27 (and many other places in the New Testament) affirms that Christ "will then reward every man according to his works." Ecclesiastes 5:2 advises, "Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter before the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore, let your words be few." This is paralleled by Christ's advice to his disciples, "When you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words" (Matt. 6:7). Koheleth reminds his readers not to be surprised when they see oppression of the poor, and denial of justice (5:8), much as Peter reminds his in 1 Peter 4:12, "do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you." Some very good advice is given by Koheleth in 5:15, "As he came naked from his mother's womb, he will return as he came," which is paralleled by Paul in 1 Timothy 6:7: "For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either." Koheleth's statement that "Patience (LXX=μακρόθυμος) of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit" (7:8) is paralleled by Paul's admonition concerning the fruit of the Spirit (patience=μακροθυμία, Gal. 5:22) and the need for patience (μακροθυμίας, Eph. 4:2). "Do not be

eager in your heart to be angry" (7:9) is just another way of saying, "But let everyone be . . . slow to anger" (James 1:19). Ecclesiastes 7:20, "Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins," is closely paralleled by Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned." Ecclesiastes 8:11, "Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly; therefore, the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil," is paraphrased in Romans 2:4, "Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" The admonition "Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do it with all your strength" (9:10) is similar to Paul's advice not to be "lagging behind in diligence" (Rom. 12:11), and "whatever you do, do your work heartily," (Col. 3:23). A very striking parallel can be seen between Ecclesiastes 11:5, "Just as you do not know the path of the wind . . . so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things" and John 3:8, "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from" Finally, the last verse in Ecclesiastes 12:14, "Because God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil," is very closely related to 1 Corinthians 4:5, which says that the Lord will "both bring to light the things hidden in darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each

man's praise will come to him from God," and to 2 Corinthians 5:10, which states that all (saved) "must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his works in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."

Summary

These should suffice to demonstrate that Koheleth's conclusions are not merely "human." He is not speaking only of life "under the sun," and he does indeed speak by inspiration and from revelation. It is true that none of these similar New Testament passages necessarily demonstrate a dependence upon Ecclesiastes, but they do show that he says many of the same things which are found in the latter books of the Bible. Koheleth gives advice which, if followed, helps the contemporary Christian to understand the world in which God has placed him, to understand God's control over and relation to it, and to understand that a life pleasing to Him is one which is characterized by patient submission to the will of God and careful obedience to His commandments.

CHAPTER VIII

NEAR EASTERN PARALLELS

Introduction

It is not surprising that the writings of others in the Near East reflect some of the same questions which Koheleth raised. After all one common denominator among men both past and present is their quest for the meaning of life. It is, furthermore, not even surprising that men were able to see, by themselves and without supernatural aid, the essential futility of life if there is no hope beyond the grave. Their difference with Koheleth is that he gave some answers they could not.

Some Parallels

Mesopotamia

The Gilgamesh Epic exclaims: "Only the gods [live] forever under the sun. As for mankind, numbered are his days; Whatever they achieve is but wind! Even here thou art afraid of death."¹ This is paralleled in Ecclesiastes

¹E. A. Speiser, trans., "Akkadian Myths and Epics," in *ANET*, p. 79, III:iv:5-7. For an extended discussion of death and the afterlife in the Gilgamesh Epic, cf. Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, second ed., 1949), pp. 137-223.

1:3-4a: "What advantage does man have in all his labor which he does under the sun? A generation goes and a generation comes . . ." Gilgamesh further laments, "Do not they compose a picture of death, The commoner and the noble, once they are near to [their fate]?"¹ This seems to be paralleled by Koheleth's general observation that no matter what one's station in life, all die: "O how the wise man and the fool alike die!" (5:16). The Akkadian Proverb, "The life of the day before yesterday is that of any day,"² is similar to Ecclesiastes 1:9: "That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done." A number of parallels can be seen in "A Dialogue about Human Misery,"³ which is often called the "Babylonian Ecclesiastes," though it resembles it only superficially, and has neither the elevated philosophy, nor the theocentric hope of its namesake. The parallels are only that because of the common misery of men who are under the curse.

Hittite

Gaster draws this parallel. with Ecclesiastes 10:20:

¹*Ibid.*, p. 93a, X:vi:34-36.

²Robert H. Pfeiffer, "Akkadian Proverbs and Counsels," in *ANET*, p. 425d, III:A.K 4347, line 50.

³*Idem*, "A Dialogue About Human Misery," in *ANET*, pp. 438-40.

"Furthermore, in your bedchamber do not curse a king, and in your sleeping rooms do not curse a rich man, for a bird of the heavens will carry the sound, and the winged creature will make the matter known:"

The allusion in this proverbial phrase is to the widespread tale of *The Bird of Truth*, who discloses treachery, murder, marital infidelity, and the like. Tales of this type are to be found in Grimm, in *The Arabian Nights*, in the famous *Legend of the Seven Sages*, and in the English and Scottish ballads. A classic Greek example is the familiar story of the cranes of Ibycus. The motif is very ancient. In the recently discovered Hittite *Tale of Elkunirsa* (which evidently goes back to a Canaanite original), "Istar," disguised as a bird, overhears the love-making of Baal and Asherath and reports it to the latter's husband, Elkunirsa (i.e., *El Qoneh 'eres*, "the God who owns the earth," cf. Gen. 14:19). Related to this theme is the popular expression, "a little bird told me," the prototype of which occurs already in Aristophanes. A popular belief in Norway is that if a bird flies to a window, this signifies news.¹

Aramaic

Another writing which is parallel to Ecclesiastes in many ways is the Aramaic "Words of Ahiqar,"² which Albright dates in the second half of the seventh century B.C.³ Once again, however, the perspective is not the elevated one of

¹Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1969), p. 838.

²H. L. Ginsberg, trans., "The Words of Ahiqar," in *ANET*, pp. 427-30. For the text and another translation, cf. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.*, pp. 204-48.

³Albright, "Some Canaanite-Phoenician Sources of Hebrew Wisdom," p. 6.

Koheleth, though it is, perhaps, the most elevated of all the parallels between Ecclesiastes and Near Eastern literature generally adduced.

Egyptian

The parallels of thought between "A Song of the Harper" (dated by Wilson about 1360 B.C.)¹ and Ecclesiastes are most obvious:

Let thy desire flourish,
 In order to let thy heart forget the beatifications for
 thee.
 Follow thy desire, as long as thou shalt live.
 Put myrrh upon thy head and clothing of fine linen upon
 thee,
 Being anointed with genuine marvels of the god's property.
 Set an increase to thy good things;
 Let not thy heart flag.
 Follow thy desire and thy good.
 Fulfill thy needs upon the earth, after the command of
 thy heart,
 Until there come for thee that day of mourning.
 The Weary [of Heart] hears not their [mourn]ing,
 And wailing saves not the heart of a man from the under-
 world.
 Refrain:
 Make holiday, and weary not therein!
 Behold it is not given to a man to take his property with him.
 Behold, there is not one who departs who comes back again.²

There are differences between this and Koheleth, however, including the absence here of Koheleth's warning of future

¹John A. Wilson, trans., "A Song of the Harper," in *ANET*, p. 467.

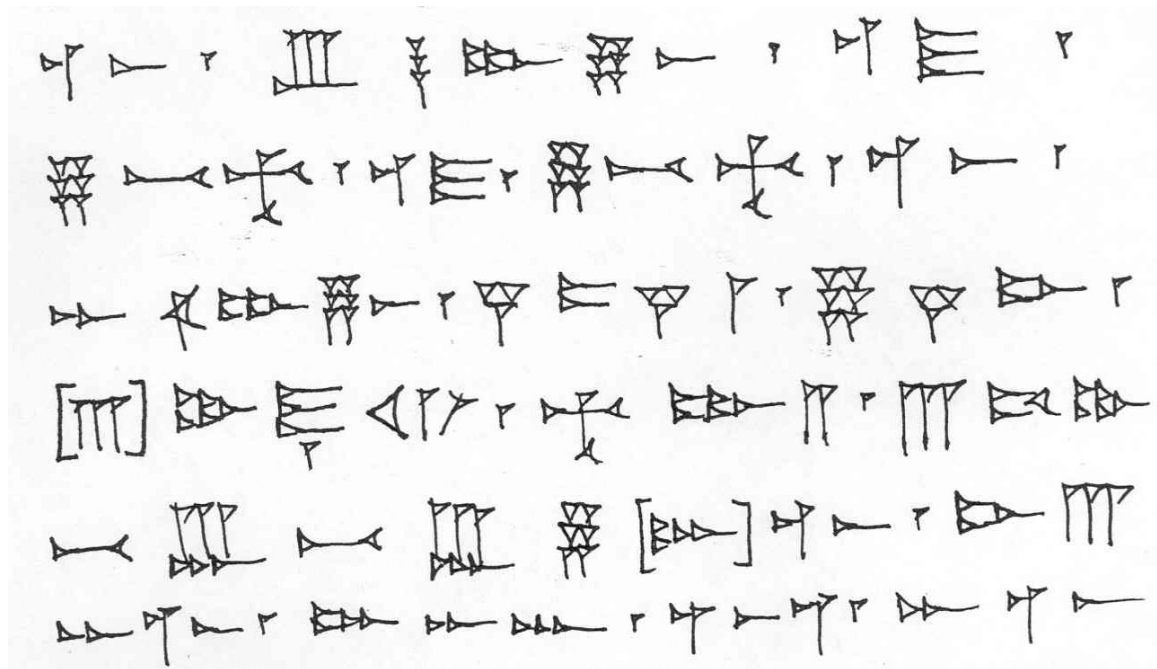
²*Ibid.*

judgment, and Koheleth's belief that after death the spirit of a man returns to God.

Another Egyptian parallel can be seen between the "Instruction of Ani"¹ ("Do not talk a lot. Be silent, and thou wilt be happy."), and Ecclesiastes 5:2: "Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought . . . therefore let your words be few."

Ugarit

The men of Ugarit also pondered the true meaning and worth of life:



The transliteration of this is:

¹*Idem*, trans., "The Instruction of Ani," in *ANET*, p. 420, iv:1.

mt . uhryt . mh . yqh
 mh . yqh . mt . atryt
 spsg . ysk . [l]riš
 hrs . lzt . qdqdy
 [w]mt . kl . amt
 wan . mtm . amt.¹

It is translated:

"Man, what does he get as his lot;
 What does he get as his destiny?
 Whiteness will be poured on my head;
 Hoariness on top of my pate;
 And the death of all (men) I will die;
 I will surely die!²

This, no doubt, represents the most that pagan men could say for sure: death comes upon everyone. But what came after death they could not say for sure, nor could they even be certain that they would exist after their body died. This is where Koheleth rises above all pagan literature: he knew what happened to the 𐤀𐤊𐤍 at death, and he could give

¹Cf. John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan in Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. V (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), p. 113.

²2 Aqht VI:34-37. Cf. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, pp. 335; 369, #424; #451, #1792. Also cf. G. R. Driver, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, reprint, 1971), p. 55; and Andrée Herdner, "Textes Mythologiques," in *Corpus des Tablettes en Cunéiformes Alphabétiques in Mission de Ras Shamra*, Tome X, ed. by C. F. A. Schaeffer (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1963).

divine advice on how to live in view of that fact.

Summary

Many other parallels could be cited. These suffice to show that men everywhere were asking the same questions: why is man on the earth and is death really all that he may anticipate? The difference between Ecclesiastes and the literature of which samples are given above, is that Koheleth gave some answers, and he gave some good ones, for he spoke of a final judgment in light of which man's life on earth should be characterized by a fear of God. Living life in recognition of and submission to this fact gives it proper perspective and true meaning.

CHAPTER IX

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It is the purpose of this thesis to examine the book of Ecclesiastes in order to determine its theological perspective, to understand its outstanding teachings, and to explain some of its more prominent difficulties. The title, **קְהִלָּת**, was first studied, and it was concluded that the word probably means "one who assembles;" and that as an appellation for Solomon, it may refer to his historic assembling of the Israelites on the day of the dedication of the temple.

The authorship and date of the book were next considered. It was pointed out that many of the "Aramaisms," once used to date the book in the post-Exilic period, are usually not Aramaisms at all, and that in any event, such Aramaisms may be just as easily explained in terms of a Solomonic date. The theory of an Aramaic original was likewise disallowed, for it generates more problems than it dissipates.

Mitchell Dahood's theory of a Phoenician background for the book was discussed next. He argues that the book was written under heavy Canaanite-Phoenician literary influence, with defective Phoenician orthography, but still in Hebrew. He also demonstrates that many of the textual

variants of the book can be explained by the theory of originally defective (no vowel letters) orthography. From his theory and data it was shown that the same facts could be applied to a Solomonic date of composition to explain the language of the book which is singularly peculiar and unparalleled in all of the Old Testament. In the tenth century B. C. Solomon would have used defective orthography. He also had numerous close and intimate contacts over a long span of years not only with the Phoenicians, but also with many other peoples who spoke Canaanite dialects, or languages closely related to Hebrew, all of which also may have affected his linguistic style.

It was also contended that it is possible that there was a particular literary genre for a philosophical discourse like Ecclesiastes, just as there was a literary genre for psalms, historical narratives, prophetic works, and certain other poetic forms (such as archaic poetry). It was concluded that the language and linguistic peculiarities of Koheleth can best be explained in terms of an original written in Hebrew in the tenth century B.C., in current defective orthography, and using a literary genre of the philosophical discourse which employed vocabulary common to Phoenician and Hebrew (and other Canaanite dialects such as Ugaritic).

The theme and development of thought of Koheleth were next evaluated, in order to discover what the

perspective of the writer was, and, consequently, what usefulness Ecclesiastes contains for the contemporary Christian. It was concluded that far from being a skeptical and pessimistic work from the hand of one who wrote only from the standpoint of man **הַשָּׂמַיִם תִּתֶּן**, Ecclesiastes, when rightly understood, presents truth which is not only consistent with the remainder of the Bible, but which is eminently suited to the situation of contemporary Christians. Koheleth demonstrates the unmitigated inefficaciousness of wisdom, pleasure, industry, wealth, success, or any other human enterprise, to provide lasting satisfaction.

Certain prominent difficulties of the book were also examined. It was shown that the word **הֶבֶל**, normally translated "vanity" throughout the book without sufficient consideration of the context in which it is used, has a number of different nuances of meaning, which if substituted for the translation "vanity" in the proper contexts, aid considerably in apprehending the meaning of the text. Among these different nuances are "futility," "unsubstantiality," "emptiness," "senselessness," and "transitoriness," of which the latter is perhaps the most useful. Thus, many circumstances and enterprises which Koheleth denounces as **הֶבֶל** are really only "empty," or ultimately "futile," or "transient," not sinful or completely useless.

It was also the contention of the writer that the phrase **הַשָּׂמַיִם תִּתֶּן**, though used copiously throughout the book,

does not, nevertheless, limit the scope of the book only to those things terrestrial (עַל־הָאָרֶץ). To be sure, in certain contexts Koheleth does so limit his comments; for the book as a whole he does not. In this connection the relationship between inspiration and revelation was also considered. The dichotomy between inspiration and revelation which the author of the note in the *New Scofield Reference Bible* sets forth in order to harmonize the truths of the rest of the Bible with the statements of Koheleth was contested as totally unnecessary and unscriptural. One must surely wonder how it can be said that Ecclesiastes is God-breathed (πᾶσα γραφὴ θεόπνευστος, 2 Tim. 3:16), and yet human only and not revelation. Those passages such as the narratives in Job and Satan's words in Genesis which record false statements unsanctioned by God, occur in contexts of statements which make such a fact prominently apparent; but to dismiss an entire canonical book as analogous to such is a serious deviation from the import of 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:20, 21.

Concerning the meaning and place of "pleasure" as Koheleth declares it, the writer contended that Koheleth was not Epicurean. To Koheleth "pleasure" or "enjoyment" is from God and is the just reward to man for his toil on earth, but it is to be enjoyed in view of the coming judgment upon men, and in view of the fact that it brings only temporary satisfaction. It only becomes wrong when it is made the chief goal in life. Life lived only for enjoyment

is **הֶבֶל** because enjoyment itself is **הֶבֶל** (transitoriness), but life may still be enjoyable, and that, in fact is how God intended it.

Koheleth's view of death and immortality was also surveyed, with the result that it was indisputably established that he did believe in conscious immortality; and more than that, a final judgment when the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked punished. Koheleth cannot be castigated for not evincing a fully-developed doctrine of eschatology, for he, after all, lived far back in the line of progressive revelation. But what God had revealed to him was true, and his veracity should not be questioned only because what he predicated of life after death is incomplete from the perspective of revelation which came a millennium later.

A short summary of two main themes in Ecclesiastes was next offered. It was shown that man, because he is finite, can only have partial knowledge of the universe and its workings. Such partial knowledge is painful, but God is inscrutable, and by his definition must remain such; consequently, all that man can do is believe the knowledge God gives him, and rest in His sovereignty. The emptiness of "things" was also shown, as was the ultimate dissatisfaction of the blight of unthinking materialism, the present magnitude of which undoubtedly makes the general situation in Solomon's day pale into total insignificance. It was shown

that the solution to the lack of personal importance and eternal perpetuation of men, with which many are so violently troubled, is found only in the importance and perpetuation which God grants the righteous. It was affirmed that it is only God who can supply the most vital and sought of life's needs: stability, time, physical requirements, moral requirements, true values for life and a dependence upon and confidence in the sovereignty of God.

For the purposes of comparison, but not to show literary dependence necessarily, both New Testament and Near Eastern parallels were adduced.

The book of Ecclesiastes is both practical and relevant. It is practical because it shatters the foundations of man-oriented thinking which does not comprehend that human enterprise, possessions, accomplishments, and pleasures give only their minute inherent satisfaction; they do not ultimately satisfy. It is relevant because man in every age has needed such a message.

Life rushes on, as this morning's shadow which is already gone, though it is but afternoon. Does man not know--that he was born only to be buried and forgotten? But wait--there is more; the grave only ends the physical. It ends all the accumulation, all the selfish and insane piling of things upon things, all the transitory activities meant to satisfy only temporarily. But there is a judgment coming and there man must account for himself; there it will be

seen whether he grasped the true nature of life. What should man therefore do? How may something accrue to him which will endure? Koheleth said it best himself: "The conclusion, when everything has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person" (12:13). Koheleth's purpose was to lead the wandering people of God back to a life characterized by such fear, and to a life totally acquiescent to the sovereignty of God. He did not fail.

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