Chapter 1

Establishing the Voice of Qohelet and His Discourse (Ecclesiastes 1:1-6:9)

In her introductory notes to Ecclesiastes in the New Interpreter’s Study Bible, Eunny P. Lee proposes that the first two important divisions of the book are the superscription (1:1) and Part I that she entitles “Everything is vanity and a pursuit of wind” (1:2-6:9).¹ The first of these, of course, is a textual authenticating device that merits particular consideration as it sets up the elaborate literary fiction that drives the text, and the second of these considers the first iteration of Qoheletian discourse that establishes the basis for the speaker’s authority and experience as well as his initial observations about the limitations of human life on the earth, typically referred to as تحت الشمس (under the sun).²

Before examining the text, however, something must be said about the postcolonial viewing of this material. If the period of writing of Ecclesiastes is the third century BCE, then our view of material circumstances and social anxieties associated with those ruling at the local level in Judea/Jerusalem can only be determined by what scholars refer to as a “postcolonial optic,” which is simply a word to indicate the means of viewing the text itself. In this particular case, the text provides an optic of an age, rather than a specific moment we can pinpoint with historical accuracy.³ Fernando F.


² This phrase is a common one in the book of Ecclesiastes. I am following the description of meaning noted by Fox, Ecclesiastes, 4.

³ For an excellent introduction to the “postcolonial optics” that may be used in critical practice, see Fernando F. Segovia, “Mapping the Postcolonial Optic in Biblical Criticism: Meaning and Scope,” in The Bible and Postcolonialism, ed. Stephen Moore and Fernando F. Segovia (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2005), 23-78.
Segovia suggests there are multiple ways of understanding the term. For the purposes of this work, the following comments seem most helpful: “The postcolonial as conscientization is a realization of the problematic of domination and subordination in the geopolitical realm.”

In essence, because of the lack of specific historical reference to the period, except for the considerably later historian Josephus (37-c.100 CE) and a few letters of the third century BCE, we must focus on larger cultural phenomenon—the postcolonial optic is thus more conceptual and theoretical than an absolute reflection of the historical moment imaged in the text.

Leo G. Perdue and Warren Carter propose some of this general “postcolonial optic” during the Ptolemaic period of rule over Judea:

One conclusion is that Ptolemaic power did not interfere with, let alone overturn, native Judean/Israelite religious, cultural, and political structures. Priests associated with the Jerusalem temple and local elite families like the Tobiads know the hybridity of gaining Ptolemaic favor even while they represent Judean/Israelite traditions and identity. From this hybrid place, they represent alien and native interests in exercising societal leadership. Second, the Ptolemaic rule imposed officials as administrators at local village levels throughout Judea/Israel, thereby exercising grassroots control. Third, a primary role of these administrative structures and personnel involved collection of taxation. They were the means of the extraction and acquisition of wealth that the Hellenistic ideology of kingship, practiced by Alexander and his successors, foregrounded and on which the Ptolemies depended in the reciprocal imperializing-colonized dynamic. Extracted wealth was foundational for paying troops, exercising benefactions, securing gratitude, and rewarding loyalty, displaying the power and status of victory.

What such an optic suggests is that a person living in Judea during this period of time might actually have never seen the Ptolemies directly, except when wars occurred in this area with a power struggle between the Ptolemies and Seleucids. By the end of the third

4. Ibid., 65.


6. Ibid., 159.
century, Judea fell into Seleucid control. In Ecclesiastes, Qohelet certainly seems aware of surveillance from the power structures when one goes before the king (8:2-9); people with the power are always watching. But given that Qohelet assumes for himself the position of king, several possibilities exist. The Deuteronomistic Historian in II Samuel 7:1-17 asserts that a descendant of David will always be on the throne. Perhaps Qohelet is mimicking that prophetic spirit in the Second Temple period. If Qohelet is from the elite class, it might even be possible for him to claim Davidic ancestry. What seems more likely, however, is that he is adopting the persona of the legendary Solomon, and in postcolonial terms, is providing “hidden transcripts” to readers that will allow them to cope with the realities of being under colonial surveillance in the Ptolemaic period by suggesting his own legendary history as a model through which he will reveal codes to that later audience. That anxiety, fear, and disillusionment about human capacity would litter his speech would thus not be a surprise but actually an expectation that could provide hope for the days ahead.

The Superscription: Developing the Literary Voice

Ecclesiastes 1:1 reads “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.” The NRSV translation here would actually be improved with the word “Qohelet” for “the teacher,” particularly given that there is no definite article in the Hebrew text. The NRSV phrases “son of David, king in Jerusalem” actually in

7. For a discussion of hidden transcripts and their potential “revelation” within texts of the Second Temple period, see Anathea E. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 31-37. Drawing on the work of James C. Scott, she argues that “the hidden transcript finds its way onstage through an infra-politics of anonymity, ambiguity, and disguise. Anonymous speech forms such as rumor, gossip, and folktalese encode messages of resistance to be shared among those who have ears to hear. Songs of courage, hope, anger, or sorrow carrying promises of retribution and reward can be sung out loud in the presence of the master while those who sing them deny that they carry any meaning at all” (33).
Hebrew more literally would be “son of King David in Jerusalem.” As scholars have long noted, the form in the beginning suggests royal biography, found in many Northwest Semitic royal inscriptions, with the intention of “propagandistic exaltation of the deeds of the kings in question.”\(^8\) From the start, readers find some familiar and also some unique ideas. As James L. Crenshaw correctly notes, such superscriptions are also normative in texts of the prophetic and wisdom traditions, typically assigned by editors and compilers.\(^9\) The form is thus a mimic of accepted textual practice. Given that the tradition would also include a name, when readers encounter קהלת (Qohelet), there is an immediate sense of difference. This is hardly a name; instead it is a function. A feminine Qal participle based on קהל suggests a person who calls together an assembly. Clearly, the writer here—the second voice that we find also in chapter 12:9-14—is employing a “professional code” that also contains within it the potential for an “oppositional code.”

Who is this person, and why is he not simply identified as Solomon? Eric S. Christianson suggests that the intention in using the name with this particular meaning may be to establish a connection to Solomon’s summoning the people when the Temple is dedicated (I Kings 8:1-2).\(^10\) Whatever the case may be, the intention is to establish authority—a voice—connected with the descendant of Israel’s legendary דוד (David). While the word בן (son) may allow for more than an immediate linear descendant of


David, the most obvious connection would be to Solomon, particularly with the reinforcement of location in Jerusalem. A reader in third-century Jerusalem could only imagine the elites, including the “tax farmers,” within the Jewish community under the Ptolemies as an extension of that voice. Historically, the city of Jerusalem seems particularly connected in Israel’s history with David, who made it his capital after conquering the city, and Jerusalem seems particularly connected with Solomon, who is responsible for the building of the Temple, palace, and buildings associated with monarchical rule (I Kings 6-7; II Chronicles 2-9).

Why would, however, the apparent “literary fiction” be used? Was it an intentional way to authorize the remarks? Would readers and hearers of the book closer to the time of composition have assumed that Qohelet is Solomon? Perhaps all that we may say is that the intention is to authorize the text in such a way that a legendary voice of the past—one associated with building, rule, and writing or collecting wisdom materials—comes into play. The stage is set for this postcolonial Solomon who is not Solomon but whose voice mimics that of the legendary king with ambivalence. The difference between those two voices—even the slippage between the two—must be carefully observed. As has long been recognized, linguistic forms alone preclude the book’s being written near the time of King Solomon.

---


Qohelet’s Opening Observations (Eccles. 1:2-11)

From his superlative הבל (vanity of vanities or futility of futilities) in 1:2—a phrase that is repeated after the speech tag אמר קהלת (says Qohelet)—the speaker provides a kind of pleasurable sound rumbling as Hebrew often does that is matched by the הבל (vanity or futility) rooted even in the natural processes of nature or the changing of one generation by another. The opening is one of several more extended poetic touches in the book. Verse 1:2 by its nature gives a rather overdetermined meaning for the sequences which is reinforced in 1:8 with כל הדברים גنيים (all things are wearisome). Thoseדברים (things) could also be translated as "words." Both the things described in nature and perhaps even the very words to describe them simply wear out the speaker. Further, those same words or things bring such weariness that a person cannot even say them (1:8b).

Readers might wonder if Qohelet is not projecting his own internal feelings onto nature itself. Nili Samet suggests that 1:4, “A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever,” is if human beings are involved in cyclic movement, the natural world itself is. Literally everything “under the sun” is a part of the cycle.14

While R. N. Whybray suggests this opening poem is optimistic, his interpretation seems an incorrect reading of the evidence.15 Delight in nature found in Job in the whirlwind speeches or contemplation of the joyous movement of the sun in Psalm 19:5 are not found in this description. Every element seems to have a “fixed path” as Michael


Fox has observed. If these are the words of the מֶלֶךְ (king) in Jerusalem, then readers truly have to wonder what the words mean. Nature follows a process that is locked in its cycles, and nothing is new. Nature itself is weary, while “the earth remains forever” (1:4b). This sense of cycle is presented as both natural, but futile, and Qohelet will match this conception with time and process in chapter 3 to very different conclusions. What can be said from this opening portion where even memory itself will not bring about positive results?

In her study of this passage, Jennie Barbour notes that Qohelet’s polemic against change and newness is actually a rejection of apocalypticism and the “eschatological ethic.” She underscores that observation, growing out of the work of Seow and Krüger, with a reference to Qohelet’s rejection of remembrance in 1:11 against the kind of language found in Isaiah 55:13 and 56:5 with respect to “lasting memorials for those previously unremembered.” Such a comment is significant, particularly given that Second and Third Isaiah are thought to have been written late in the exilic period and likely find final shape in the post-exilic period. Now perhaps significantly later in the post-exilic period, now deep into the Second Temple period, this speaker has reformulated the imagery more typical of other communities—less hopeful of change, less anticipating the appearance of an immanent God, with a preference for a God of radical transcendence.

16. Fox, Ecclesiastes, 5.
What seems unclear at this point is why Qohelet takes this strategy and why his remarks show a kind of ambivalence that rises out of his own identity.

Qoheleth’s Developing Inquiry: What Do This Tell Us? (Eccles. 1:12-2:26)

This seemingly autobiographical comment that runs from 1:12 to 2:26 demonstrates what Sugirthajrah calls the “hegemonic code,” as was noted in the introduction, yet the statements of the testing out of his own limitations and desires are more complex. Thomas Krüger observes:

If 1:12-2:26 demonstrates the failure of the overdrawn expectations of a “successful life” using the example of a king, it also calls into question the assumption that the high and mighty have special wisdom at their disposal. Corresponding claims and self-representations are caricatured in the royal travesty. Many aspects of the text can be seen as parody of OT stories of Solomon’s wisdom and wealth. In addition, certainly for the first readers the text also addressed experiences with the Hellenistic rulers of its time, as well as with the contemporaries, who on a small scale, could afford or wanted to live “like a king” (Job 29:25).

Readers can certainly find caricatured images of rulers of non-Judean origin in the books of Daniel and Esther, so contemplating the speaking voice in Ecclesiastes in this manner may assist our understanding of the writer’s methods. As Crenshaw notes, it is normative in ancient narrative for a king to be the one dispensing wisdom. That Qohelet also tells us that he has “acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me” (1:16) and that he “had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem” (2:7) has a rather hollow ring of comparison, given that if we assume the voice is that of “Solomon,” only David had ruled before him in

---


First Kings 4:22-28 does provide an impressive catalog of acquisitions and gifts as does II Chronicles 9:13-28. The voice assumes a kind of imperial quality where he alone is suited by his own nature to be able to explain the great philosophical meanings of wisdom and folly, but we are more inclined then to accept his appraisal of madness, even as a self-critique. If this is a formula for a royal inscription found widely in surrounding cultures, then its parodic use here sets up an “autobiographical account of the king’s virtues and exploits.”

In the midst of the autobiographical comments are two aphoristic statements that erupt in the text, reminiscent of the book of Proverbs. They merit being considered separately from the other comments. Qohelet says,

“What is crooked cannot be made straight.
And what is lacking cannot be counted.” (1:15)

and

“The wise have eyes in their head,
But fools walk in darkness.” (2:14)

The first of these seems almost a comment on Isaiah 40:4-5 which suggests the crooked can be made straight for the approach of the coming of God. Of course, readers can find other images of crookedness in wisdom texts (e.g., Prov. 2:15, 14:2, 17:20, 21:8, 28:6, 28:18). Qohelet thus suggests an oppositional position to such an image. The latter of

22. Fox, Ecclesiastes, 8.

these suggests that in his own wisdom he is one empowered to see through his own vision. W. Sibley Towner suggests the second of these statements is “conventional wisdom.”\textsuperscript{24} Thus in the small space Qohelet seems both to reject the conventional and affirm it at the same time. Such a procedure is not unusual in the text of Ecclesiastes, but it makes establishing a clear line of interpretation and how to read it difficult. The approach is likely indicative of the way in which Qohelet understands his readers to be living in an era where being both skeptical and circumspect are the keys to survival as they must certainly have been under Ptolemaic rule.

In 1:12-18, Qohelet sets out his overall plan at a very abstract level that will receive specifics in 2:1-24. What strikes the point of postcolonial critique from the start is that one “when king over Israel in Jerusalem” (1:12) in the midst of describing what he did actually undercuts the evaluation made by himself controlling an understanding of his own events. In both 1:14 and 1:17, he says “all is vanity and a chasing after wind” with some variation in the second iteration. What seems also intriguing is an expression in 1:13, לְבֵי (literally, \textit{my mind} in some translations). The expression is actually “my heart,” used some twelve times in 1:12-2:26, which suggests “he is reflecting on the process of perception and discovery, and the heart has a central role in that process. Koheleth is watching his mind at work.”\textsuperscript{25} Krüger notes a parallel to the Solomonic story in Gibeon in I Kings 3:4-15 and II Chronicles 1:1-12.\textsuperscript{26} The irony, of course, is that the II Chronicles passage mentions Solomon did not ask for possessions, but, of course, in Ecclesiastes

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} W. Sibley Towner, “The Book of Ecclesiastes,” in \textit{The New Interpreter’s Bible in Twelve Volumes} (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 5: 300.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Fox, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 8.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Krüger, \textit{Qoheleth}, 63.
\end{itemize}
2:1-26, the speaker claims significant possessions. If wisdom is the desired possession in the expressions of the Deuteronomistic Historian and the Chronicler, then this postcolonial Solomon has rendered that acquisition as הבל (vanity or futility) with the addition of רעיון רוח (a pursuit of wind). With his insight, Qohelet concludes, “For in much wisdom is much vexation and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow” (1:18). Such a conclusion is intriguing to contemplate. Crenshaw suggests that it might relate to educational practices in the Ancient Near East where the pains of corporal punishment were thought necessary for learning.27 From the start, this postcolonial Solomon/Qohelet is skeptical about what wisdom provides. It is quite possible to read in this section that ambivalence that comes with postcolonial critique: whatever the value is, it is muted.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-26, by definition, invites a direct comparison with the portraits of Solomon created by the Deuteronomistic Historian and Chronicler. Such a comparison does not imply that the writer of Ecclesiastes had access to these texts or was influenced by them. These texts do, however, suggest ways in which Solomon was presented to later readers.

The Legendary Solomon of I Kings 3-11: Developing Parallels

The Deuteronomistic Historian in I Kings 3-11 presents an image of King Solomon that provides significant details about an important phase in Israel’s history, and The Deuteronomistic Historian also provides important clues about the perception that was given of this legendary king to the post-exilic and Second Temple periods of the Judean community. Curious from the start of Chapter 3 is a reference to a marriage to a

27. Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 76.
daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt (v. 1). Walter Brueggemann notes that “Solomon had allied himself with Pharaoh, the antithesis of everything Israelite. There is no doubt that it was a political marriage, designed to serve political interests. The marriage signals Solomon’s significant departure from what traditional Israel treasured most.”

How ironic it is then that the Qoheletian voice deals with life under the Egyptians almost 800 years later. At the same time, the Deuteronomistic Historian is quick to note that Solomon worshipped YHWH at the high places before the temple was built. In a night dream (3:5-15), Solomon prays for a discerning mind in order to make judgments before the people—an aspect that Brueggemann notes would be the expected role of the king.

Further Terence E. Fretheim notes that this request for wisdom and understanding is not a “miraculous reconfiguration of Solomon’s brain cells” but is instead a very human kind of practical wisdom that is obtained through instruction and guidance. Such a request is immediately followed with his discerning the claims of two women involving a child and how to determine who the birth mother is. The narrative has thus built in the concept of the wise man who seeks wisdom and understanding for his rule.

Chapter 4, however, charts the significant build up of governmental offices, chief among them were secretaries, recorders—new and specific roles of his administration—commanders, priests, and a person to oversee forced labor (4:6). What seems clear is that “this is a ‘writing government’ of a formal kind with many records and statistics.”


29. Ibid., 46-53.


31. Ibid., 58.
also seems clear here is that Solomon decentralizes his administration with these acts. Considerable detail is given in the narrative to the role of taxation, its officials, and its methods of collection. Solomon’s rule while described in 4:20-28 is presented in terms of opulence—a specific opulence that is critiqued in Ecclesiastes 2. The conclusion of the chapter mentions Solomon as a collector of wisdom and that his wisdom is greater than the wisdom of other nations surrounding Israel. Clearly, whether we regard this material as in any way “factual,” the legendary Solomon has a series of activities that culminates in this moment in a collection of wisdom sayings. Neither is it clear at what level of the Deuteronomistic Historian’s work the material in question may have been added.32 Chapters 5 through 8 treat the building of the Temple, the extensive connections with nations beyond Israel for the materials and workmanship of the Temple, and the rituals at its dedication, including Solomon’s speeches and prayer of dedication. The intention here is to establish Solomon as a dedicated follower of YHWH. His palace, other government buildings, and aspects of public works outside Jerusalem are included. The Queen of Sheba visits and comments on the display and his wisdom in particular, further adding to the mythology of Solomonic sapience. Chapter 11, however, suggests the connection between Solomon’s syncretistic practice of religion and external and internal strife that would see an end of his reign. The event also signals an end to a united monarchy.

The portrait of Solomon presented by the Deuteronomistic Historian might be termed “ambivalent,”33 for it shows not only the grandeur and opulence of Solomon,  


33. Brueggemann, 1 & 2 Kings, 57-81.
along with elaborate building and governmental expansions, but also oppression and
syncretism in religious practices that quickly become a mainstay of commentary in much
of I and II Kings. Such ambivalence reflects how much the Deuteronomistic Historian is
also affected by the difference in time when he reflects upon the contribution of the
power structure within Israelite/Judean history to the collapse of monarchy, the sin of
syncretism, and the reason for exile through his theological prism.

The Legendary Solomon of II Chronicles 1-9

Written considerably later than the material in I Kings, and perhaps drawing on
that same material, although changing the focus more to the work of Solomon in the
building of the Temple and the spirituality of that experience, Second Chronicles does not
include as much attention to Solomon’s marriages to foreign wives, although his
marriage to an Egyptian princess is noted (II Chron. 8:12). Solomon is a very strict
Yahwist in the Second Chronicles text, without compromise, and he is credited by the
Queen of Sheba with possessing great wisdom (II Chron. 9:1-12). This considerably later
text maintains the opulence of Solomon (II Chron. 9:13-28) and his international
character in establishing relationships with Egypt (II Chron. 1:14-17). What seems clear
is that the connection between Solomon and the building of the Temple and his piety in
that space are the focus of the Second Chronicles material. His role as one who
conscripted workers, however, remains in II Chronicles 2. As Ralph Klein has noted, the
Chronicler often omits details from I Kings 3-11 that would darken or compromise the
presentation of Solomon.34 While it does seem clear that the Chronicler’s ideological
perspective is different from the Deuteronomistic Historian, what also seems apparent is

that this later portrait of Solomon, while mentioning the forced labor, is not quite as invested in detailing Solomonic wisdom. For example, apart for Solomon’s prayer for wisdom (II Chron. 1:10-13), the primary evidence of Solomon’s wisdom in Second Chronicles is in a passage relating to the visit from the Queen of Sheba (II Chron. 9:1-12). This text, however, is written closer to the time of Ecclesiastes, but if the second writer/editor of Ecclesiastes did have access to either Kings or Chronicles, the legendary material seems to cohere more with the material in Kings.

With these historical backdrops in mind, we can now examine the autobiographical portrait in Ecclesiastes 2:1-8.

**Further Development of Qohelet’s Portrait (Eccles. 2:1-26)**

Such a listing of works of the speaker is also reminiscent of inscriptions in Ancient Near Eastern texts and monuments such as the Moabite Stone. As Barbour demonstrates, however, the more likely comparisons can be made when Greek writers recalled Persian court behavior, particularly in the Persian-style gardens on 2:5, even solidified with the late loan word פארסים (parks). In this chapter, which is a “conversation with himself,” with cross cultural comparisons to the Egyptian “Dialogue between a Man and His Soul,” it is the heart that will provide another examination. What may strike readers is that the typical voice of kingship would hardly undercut itself in such a way. Like the speaker of Psalm 104:15, Qohelet explores the wonders of wine. He engages in elaborate building schemes. He has slaves, and apparently slaves are born

---


to him. He acquires much livestock, money from various means—perhaps gained through war or extortion or the sale of slaves—and musicians. All of these attempts are encircled with the recursive notion that all of this action is vain and not worth it (2:11, 2:15, 2:17, 2:21, 2:23, 2:26). What seems apparent is that at least some of this wealth has been obtained through imperial efforts, but rather than enriching a country, the speaker has only sought to enrich himself. The weariness inscribed in the very processes of nature (1:8) is here reflected even in the futility of that accomplished through the process of work itself—even when individuals are unable to rest because of the weariness of the work itself (2:23). All of this is assessed as הַבַּל (vanity or futility). While the cries of the embedded oppressed codes are not heard here, readers can certainly imagine their presence in the midst of the words of a consumption-driven speaker whose desires seem only a small step away from utter hedonism, with only a minor check of his לב (mind or heart). What also seems possible is that the speaker has pressed his own hegemonic code speeches to such an extreme that they become parodies of themselves. The Solomon of legend who oppressed others in I Kings 12:4 is not the Solomon of Ecclesiastes. Here he seems more like a remodeled Persian king from the book of Esther, a Ptolemaic monarch, or a rich Judean landlord.

Chapter 2, however, ends with a momentary stay with hope that will become another recursive strain in Qoheletian discourse. Qohelet says:

There is nothing better for mortals that to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil, This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind. (2:24-26)
The same notions are repeated in 3:12, 5:17, and 8:15, with some linguistic variations. Clearly, Qohelet is working toward some theological understanding of good things being a divine gift; those are to be enjoyed or appreciated. He states what in other wisdom texts might have been called covenant theology—that God rewards the good and punishes the wicked (cf. Psalm 1). On the surface, this passage seems to reflect a dominant and hegemonic theological voice—the voice of a follower of an imperial God. Krüger, however, suggests some missing pieces of this seeming conclusion that trouble its easy assumptions. He notes that passages such as 1 Kings 4:20 and Psalm 72 suggest that people faired well during the days of Solomon—at least through the ideology of the writers. Krüger says, “By contrast it does not occur to King Qoheleth that as ruler he could contribute to the happiness of his subjects. Here at the end of his reflections, however, the idea seems to come to him that he is perhaps not the only person ‘who can eat and who must worry.’”  

38 Qohelet has not yet completed his own work, but Qohelet in the book is not a man of action, but of thought. His actions lie in the past, whether his own or those assigned from the cultural and textual memories of Israel’s monarch.

The final verse has attracted a good deal of attention for many reasons. Crenshaw suggests that it is not intended to relate to Qohelet’s passing judgment upon God’s actions.  

39 At the same time, it would be a mistake to reject that idea completely. In chapter 3:11, Qohelet sees that the ways of God are mysterious and hidden from human understanding. Qohelet’s God does operate with a demonstrable hand of blessing which should be enjoyed, but that same God does seem remote and arbitrary. Pleasure in the


moment, while itself its own reward, is still tinged with חסoblin (vanity or futility). Thus in a moment where readers think they might find closure, the postcolonial Qohelet undermines any security. Things are just too insecure for certainty. Has Qohelet become the mimic to cultural circumstances of living in the world of oppressed people? That answer must remain open at this point.

**Eccles. 3:1-8: The Poetics of Time**

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 is probably one of the most well-known parts of the book, no doubt assisted by the song version of the Byrds in 1965, and perhaps by readings at funerals. Such modern situations, of course, are very different from the original *Sitz im Leben* of the text. Much speculation has circulated around the potential for reading these time markings as demonstrating determinism. C. L. Seow suggests that “There is an appropriate time for everything. Placed properly in its present context, however, it becomes clear that the poem is not about human determination of events or even human discernment of times and seasons. It is about God’s activity and the appropriate human response to it.” In connection with the same topic, Mette Bundvad suggests that when the time is appropriate, the human being would still have to embrace it as a matter of choice. Such an understanding can be seen in 2:24-26, where the divine action of pleasure is not a product of human timing and expectation. The categories noted in this poem are complex, and as Barbour suggests, may “echo” some specific moments in the life of the Israelite/Judean community, based on a reading of overarching themes in

---


Qoheleth Rabbah. In particular, Rabbi Joshua of Siknun sees “the poem’s time of giving birth and dying to the birth and death of the nation, the planting and plucking up to the settlement in the land and the exile, killing and healing to the deaths in the siege and the promise of restoration, and so on.” In many ways, this reading of the book of Ecclesiastes demonstrates exactly what one might expect—an attempt to make sense of the enigmatic materials of the book. It might be better to see these “not [as] specific moments in time but rather an occasion or situation that is right for something.” At the same time, however, a postcolonial reading does suggest that the hegemonically coded voice of Qohelet may be providing his hearers or readers with “hidden transcripts” with which to interpret their contemporary times.

In order to examine the text more closely, it seems prudent to quote this hauntingly beautiful poem before looking at the “hidden transcripts” that seem to be present in the text:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to weep, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep and a time to throw away;
a time to tear and a time to sew;
a time to keep silent, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace. (Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8)

43. Ibid., 58.
44. Fox, Ecclesiastes, 20.
Taken as a unit of thought, certain patterns immediately emerge. That the poem begins with birthing and ends with peace may be significant. Scholars have typically noted that birth and death are beyond human agency and hidden in God’s mystery. From the aspect of the postcolonial, however, several of these contrasting pairs stand out in such a way that they may relate to Israel/Judea’s past or perhaps to the Judean present in the midst of Ptolemaic rule. To plant and to pluck up certainly picks up on images that can be located in the prophetic call of Jeremiah (Jer. 1:10). In a world of Ptolemaic rule and also in a world where Judea serves as a land bridge between the domains of Egyptian and Syrian rule, whatever is planted is often subject to the vagaries of war and theft by troops, all too common in the ancient world. In the postcolonial world of the Second Temple period, the questions of killing take on new dimensions. The verb לָחרוג (to kill)—a qal infinitive construct—suggests along with לָרפָא (to heal)—a qal infinitive construct—could be taken as a “course of action which is meaningfully carried out in succession.” Without any particular historical moment in mind, Crenshaw suggests that these events were “facts of life” for the speaker of the book of Ecclesiastes. Whether this experience is tied in the final verse in this poem to war is unclear. What would seem particularly problematic is the ambivalence with which war is presented. There is no evidence here of just war or holy war or action to eliminate the practice of idolatry. The event simply seems to fold into the amorphous conception of time in such a way that it becomes authorized.


Verse 5 that deals with stones and embracing has occasioned very different kinds of readings. Using historical Jewish interpretations, some note that the reference to throwing away and gathering stones may relate to sexual activity, and that certainly carries forward in the second portion of the verse that deals with embracing. At the same time, the reference to stones could also relate to “casting stones on an enemy’s field to destroy it or to make it unproductive during such events as war.” In connection with the sexual reference, this verse could certainly be read as an oppressive or subversive code which would argue against the more natural expressions of sexuality found in the Hebrew Bible. Qohelet does not really seem interested in halakah. If the reference relates to the destruction of crops, all sorts of possibilities exist, down to the level of not providing goods to one’s occupying forces.

In this world, there is a time for quietness and a time to speak. Such a demarcation seems rather normative in wisdom literature, but there are later passages in Ecclesiastes that caution against too much speech. This kind of self-monitoring behavior would again be necessary in the midst of circumstances where one might now experience challenges of safety brought on by speech that is not circumspect.

In a real way, given that each pairing represents opposition behaviors, Qohelet is suggesting that the power of the situation relates to the decision-making power of people. They are the ones who decide the time that is appropriate. Whatever the specific Sitz im Leben that Qohelet has in mind, the ability to discern just that right time is part of the

47. Fox, Ecclesiastes, 21; Lohfkin, Qoheleth, 60; Seow, Ecclesiastes, 161.

subversive and oppositional force of a person or people. Such a time is not determined by the king but is discerned by the watchful speaker or actor.

**Reflective Meaning: Eccles. 3:9-15 and Inclusio**

Readers may observe that Ecclesiastes 2:24 and Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 repeat similar sentiments about the possibilities of enjoyment of food and contemplative pleasure. In that way, Qohelet has made his poetic council of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 seem like a momentary digression, but we should always exercise a hermeneutics of suspicion here, for from the postcolonial vantage, no text is “innocent” in its intention. What that particularly means is that any biblical text has an ideology which drives it, and that the relationship between text and external reality may be compromised in order to achieve the ideological intention. At the same time, when Qohelet appears to find patterns of meaning, he quickly pulls away with these words: “He has made everything suitable in its own time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (3:11). From the postcolonial vantage, there are some interesting possibilities. As Towner observes, “the picture is of human creatures endowed with a keen consciousness of the passage of time, yet not endowed with the capacity to make any sense of it.” Roland Murphy has gone so far as to suggest that the last portion of 3:11 actually suggests “a fantastic statement of divine sabotage.” Read in this way, God may be seen as an imperial lord who holds the power, and while humans may mimic God at times in understanding appropriate times for action,

---

49. The notion that words or text are not innocent is a staple of postcolonial theory. See the exploration of this topic in Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 79-84.


God still controls the ultimate sense of time’s continuity. There is not a sense of oppression here; there is simply an awareness of God as the imperial keeper of meaning. Yet rather than an occasion for the human subjects to push back on divine prerogative, the reference actually affords a time to enjoy what can be enjoyed. God’s handicraft in creation inspires wonder. For Qohelet the postcolonial turn simply provides an opportunity to see a God whose ways cannot ultimately be known, yet they are dissolved in a wonder of what can be perceived.

The question, of course, should remain in the reader’s mind about whether Qohelet has led us through seeming liberation and human mimicry of a divine understanding merely to place us exactly where we were in the previous chapter. Throughout this study, we see the potential for Qohelet’s knowing the prophetic tradition with its use of oracles as statements of divine will and suggested immanent appearance. Qohelet in chapter 1 began his observations of nature as following a circular kind of pattern. In chapters 2 and 3, he has led his readers on a circular quest whose intention is to free the community from its insistence on being able to interpret the divine will. There are no omens, no urim and thummim, and no words from prophets—the thing which Saul himself laments in I Samuel 28 he no longer has. The prophets decline in representation during the Ptolemaic period, and for the writer of Ecclesiastes, that makes access to divine will almost impossible in the Qoheletian world. Living in that postcolonial world is challenging. That is the whole purpose of the discourse: finding a way to cope in a world where many of the institutions of an Israelite/Judean past are no longer present or are at least tied to the will of a foreign power. It should not be surprising that a Second Temple Jewish writer would want to access the wisdom from Solomon for that age.
Qoheletian Observation and Oppositional Codes (Eccles. 4:1-16)

The challenge of understanding Qohelet as a speaker is to surrender a conception that all of his statements are going to follow systematically or represent any one-coded system in postcolonial discourse. In this chapter, readers find both the rise of the oppositional code along with some seemingly standard material found in other texts of wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible. The autobiographical element of chapters 1 and 2, with its monarchic perspective now turns the focus on the powerless, their oppressors, and a body of aphoristic wisdom.

Readers of Ecclesiastes quickly become accustomed to Qohelet’s empiricist observations from sight. Ecclesiastes 4:1-3, however, raises some new and intriguing insights:

Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them. On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; but better than both is the one who has not yet been born, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

Aron Pinker notes a number of translation issues in this passage, and he suggests the following as an alternative:

Again I saw all the oppressed that are punished under the sun. And here, the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them, And from the hand of their oppressors—a blow, with none to comfort them. And I am praising the dead who have already died, above the living who are yet alive. And better than both of them [is] who has not been, who has not seen the evil that has been done under the sun.52

Further, Pinker suggests that “It is likely that the oppression of the Ptolemaic government was mimicked by that of the powerful rich.”\textsuperscript{53} His postcolonial reading of this passage has some interesting possibilities. He imagines a particular scenario behind Qohelet’s observation about a farmer who is unable to produce goods and who would be removed from his land. In that way “Death for them is a blessing, and they would have been even better off not to be born.”\textsuperscript{54} The question that remains is what is Qohelet’s mental and emotional commitment to this scene? Pinker suggests that Qohelet is “emotionally detached,” but suggests that we still cannot settle whether he is showing “an expression of empathy with the oppressed or a cold rational observation.”\textsuperscript{55}

What seems to be missing is viewing the literary fiction of Qohelet back to the Solomonic experience. The Deuteronomistic Historian in I Samuel fashions narratives that are both pro-monarchic and anti-monarchic. In I Samuel 8:10-18, kings are typically described as those who “take” (נָתַן)—an image repeated multiple times in the narrative for obvious rhetorical effect, culminating in the image of slavery itself (I Sam. 8: 17). And “in that day you will cry out because of the king you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day” (I Sam. 8:18). I Kings 4 describes Solomon’s building up the numbers of his administrators as well as the tremendous wealth that was extracted to support the grandeur of his reign. I Kings 5:13-18, the Deuteronomistic Historian describes the forced labor requirements for the building of the Temple and other buildings in the monarchical complex. In I Kings 9:20-22, the Deuteronomistic

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 399.\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 403.\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 404.
Historian describes Solomon’s making slaves of non-Israelites. Taken as a group, these passages suggest a Solomon who is capable of observing significant human misery exacted by his hands or those of his government, and the Deuteronomistic Historian suggests that the heavy hand against the people was a reason for the division of kingdoms in 1 Kings 11-12. Thus a reading of Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 may indeed echo the oppressive hand of Solomon of an earlier day.

Why would Qohelet then assume the position that might be understood as sympathetic for that suffering enacted in a later period? This is hardly incorporating Solomonic remorse or repentance for earlier actions. The intent may actually be to reimagine the image of the legendary king in a more favorable light. In the same way, the Chronicler does not describe the extraction of wealth from the people with as much depth as the Deuteronomistic Historian; Qohelet is re-appropriated as an oppressor who understands oppression and can imagine the depth of despair that it produces. What seems to be missing, however, is any sense of liberation. Qohelet is an observer and counselor, no longer the one who is prescribing the actions of a king.

In addition to the opening unit of thought about the oppressed, Qohelet also comments upon the envy of labor and the “solitary individual” (4:7). In a spirit of self-monitoring and surveillance in this Ptolemaic-governed world, it is “better to receive modest income from moderate, calm labor than twice as much earned by toil and agitation.”56 The anxieties about not having descendants are deeply encoded into the Hebrew and Judean mind and widely manifest in the texts of these communities over a long period of time, but here they are linked with the idea that labor is particularly

56. Fox, Ecclesiastes, 28-29.
worthless when there are no children and one has deprived one’s self of enjoyment. In essence, the foolish person here has failed at self-monitoring in an age of uncertainty.

Being alone in the postcolonial world would not be desirable for any number of reasons, and Qohelet provides those acknowledgments in aphorisms in 4: 9-12. Having at least one companion can serve for connections and safety. Such notions as Seow notes can be found in texts as early as *Gilgamesh*.\(^{57}\) The new community which Qohelet espouses is no longer the nation but is a relatively small set of connections, maybe even two or three.

Can poverty ever be a desirable state? For Qohelet, in a countercultural way in this postcolonial world, it can. Krüger suggests that the image of the child who is in poverty and wise linked with the old king who is foolish and old “could likewise express the hope for a usurper from the lower social strata.”\(^{58}\) Further, Krüger suggests that the reference might be to the succession of Ptolemy V after Ptolemy IV, with the older king being understood as foolish.\(^{59}\) While it seems vaguely possible that this could be the historical reference, the idea is only tentative. In another sense, what more appropriate advice could be given than from a former king of Israel about the nature of leadership? That it may be futile is suggested by the familiar assessment leading to the word הָבֵל (vanity or futility). Such a warning coheres with “Alas to you, O land, when your king is a servant (child), and your princes feast in the morning” (Eccles. 10:16). Qohelet, in a

\(^{57}\) Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 189.

\(^{58}\) Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 103.

\(^{59}\) Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 103.
manner seen frequently in the text, raises readers’ expectations only to throw them down. He can even mimic the tyrant at times.

**Self-Monitoring, Controlling Desire, and**

**Distinguishing the Wise from the Foolish (Eccles. 5:1-6:9)**

From a series of imperatives about conduct and speech to a series of recommendations about the nature of formalized speech in the form of vows to comments designed to help the reader place justice, external oppressions, and economics in context to great acquisitions of money or numbers of offspring, Qohelet in his circuitous way continues to assert his momentary stay against the difficulties of life. Qohelet remarks that “This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life that God gives us; for this is our lot” (Eccles. 5:19).

At the Temple, in 5:1, the person is to be careful of rashness in speech before God, with being silent for listening being more important than offering sacrifice. It would be a mistake to jump to the conclusion that Qohelet downplays sacrifice. In fact, similar ideas to these can be found in I Samuel 15:22. Self-monitoring is also desirable in the fulfilling of vows before God (5:4), for one does not wish to be a fool. Such attention to the speed of fulfilling vows may also have to do with the reality of the day when plans are less in the hand of those who desire to fulfill them than in the hands of those who are watching these postcolonial Judeans.

In the midst of the self-monitoring devices suggested, Qohelet issues what seems like an obvious “hidden transcript”—if that irony can be seen—in the following words:

If you see in the province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, do not be amazed at the matter; for the high official is watched by a
higher, and there are yet higher ones over that. But all things considered, this is an advantage for a land: a king for a plowed field. (Eccles. 5: 8-9)

Certainly the vital life of any country in the ancient world lies in the production of crops for the well-being of all. But what is shocking is that Qohelet recognizes oppression, and while in no way authorizing it, suggests that it simply exists. The secret seems to be one of endurance in the midst of that oppression. Who are the higher and higher groups of official watchers? Certainly, for the Solomonic voice, it would be all the official offices that were created to oversee the production of work in his day that supported the aggrandizement of his monarchy. Thus the Qoheletian voice refracts that advice for those living under Ptolemaic rule and the lower officials most certainly who were Judeans themselves. In essence, the ordinary people here who are subsistence farmers are being watched by Judeans, who are being watched by Egyptian officials too. What seems intriguing is that the words actually encourage the embrace of the external monitoring behavior for the advantage of all, even the king. Krüger suggests that the Ptolemies likely encouraged the Judean farmers to push for greater harvests as a means of securing greater wealth for all concerned, including the tax farmers.60 At this point, the text is thick with code possibilities. Since Qohelet is mimicking the voice of monarchy, the hegemonic code seems apparent—it is official. The opposition code is implicit, given that the peasant farmers are encouraged through the activity to find their own good. Survival in this postcolonial world benefits those closer to the soil and their survival which is actually a push back against oppressive rule.

---

In a kind of climax to this section of Ecclesiastes, Qohelet observes and questions rhetorically:

All human toil is for the mouth, yet the appetite is not satisfied. For what advantage have the wise over fools? And what do the poor have who know how to conduct themselves before the living? Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire; this also is vanity and a chasing after wind. (Eccles. 6:7-9)

This passage presents a very clear and present lack of conclusion about desire—something that always prevents closure as is even suggested in the book’s opening poem. As Towner observes, the beginning of this quotation is very traditional in the wisdom tradition. What is also clear is that even if wealth and wisdom are connected, the conclusion is in no way definite.61 The checking of desire is related to self-monitoring—a frequent theme throughout the book.

**Conclusion**

To this point in the book of Ecclesiastes, readers have seen a plethora of answers. Of course, none is actually adequate. That the text provides a kind of circular narrative around the idea of the pleasure—within reason—of eating and drinking at a feast should actually be no surprise. In the midst of the behaviors of restraint, feasting remains important to celebrate success. The illusive and transitory nature of Qohelet’s advice is a testimony to the changing postcolonial world. This portion of the text reminds readers how carefully aware and circumspect they must be in a world that seems in constant flux. Adopting the voice of one of Israel’s greatest monarchs, Ecclesiastes, through the voice of Qohelet, establishes parameters of meaning. That הָבַל (vanity or futility) circulates throughout the text should not discourage readers who should also be skeptical of

---

arriving at a complete and satisfactory reading of the past and the present. Qohelet knows the frustrations of the past and lives into the uncertainties of the moment. A postcolonial world is not in any way afraid of those uncertainties because it is aware of the ideological narratives of the past, even if the writer chooses to reject them.