INTRODUCTION

The book of Ecclesiastes may be one of the most unusual books in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. Without question, scholars have been intrigued by the approach to life and knowledge taken by the writers of and speakers in the book of Ecclesiastes. Often noted for his pessimism at best and, at times, near nihilism, Qohelet shapes a narrative that shows a good deal of awareness of a wisdom community tradition of writing in Israel/Judah.¹ Robert Gordis has noted that “Almost from the beginning, readers of Koheleth were troubled by the inconsistencies and contradictions in which the book apparently abounded.”² Scholars in particular and readers in general still seem to be grappling with some of the most fundamental questions about the book, not the least of which are its structure and whether we understand the remarks as tinged with irony on the part of Qohelet or on the part of the framer of the narrative who concludes the book. Still, however, the most profound of these questions is “Do we take the speaking voices—two or perhaps three of them—in the text as serious, or do we read one or all of them ironically?”

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¹. For the purposes of this work, I will deal with the English text as presented in the New Revised Standard Version and the Hebrew text as represented in Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (Stuttgart: Deutsche Biblegesellschaft, 1997). Key words in the text will be presented in Hebrew with their English translations. With respect to a wisdom community tradition, such a concept has been proposed by scholars, although any specific identification or evidence has traditionally been lacking. What does seem clear is that the collection of wisdom was important to the theological life of some segments of the community. For suggestions, see Gerhard von Rad, Wisdom in Israel, trans. James D. Martin (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 14-23; James L. Crenshaw, Old Testament Wisdom, rev. and enlarged (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 1-54. Scholars vary in spelling the name of the speaking voice as Kohelet, Koheleth, Qohelet, and Qoheleth. This work uses Qohelet. Throughout this thesis, the word הָבל is translated as “vanity or futility.” Its actually meaning relates to vapor, something insubstantial. The translation “worthless” or “meaningless” does not carry that element as clearly as vanity or futility.

In large measure, part of that divide in how to understand textual voices has been facilitated by the difference between historical-critical scholarship and those approaches that rely on literary criticism, particularly deconstruction and the beginning stages of postcolonial theory. The underlying ideologies, implicit in the critical approaches, reach very different conclusions raised by this enigmatic text. Ecclesiastes, included in the Writings (the Writings), is deeply rooted in re-examining the shaping fantasies of one of the most challenging institutions within Israel’s history: the monarchy and Solomon as a paradigmatic figure. Writing from the vantage of a postcolonial writer himself in Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile and restoration have long passed and perhaps even as late as the third century BCE, Qohelet puts forth a Solomonic wisdom for a new age. There remains a monarchy—a Ptolemaic monarchy in Egypt—that is controlling the means of production in Judah, now a province of the Ptolemaic empire. The chief question that might be asked: “How does an historic monarchy in Israel/Judah differ from that imposed from outside”? Would anyone writing in the Ptolemaic period have a different perspective on Israelite monarchy, not the over-determined Deuteronomistic

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Histories whose intentions were never about accurate historical representation? That the voice of Israel’s former legendary monarch would speak should be no surprise; that surprise will come in terms of what he says.

For the purposes of consistency in this research, the word “Ecclesiastes” is used to refer to the book itself while the name “Qohelet” is used for one of the two—or perhaps three—speaking voices in the text. The majority of the text is composed in the voice of Qohelet. Other voices provide context and reaction to that mysterious voice.

**Challenges of Interpreting the Voice of Qohelet, the Nature of the Narrator, and Text Formation**

To get a sense of the way scholars approach the book of Ecclesiastes, we should look at the opening statements in some highly influential commentaries on the book. In the *Jewish Publication Society Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, Michael V. Fox observes the following:

Ecclesiastes is a strange and disquieting book. It gives voice to an experience not usually thought of as religious: the pain and frustration engendered by an unblinking gaze at life’s absurdities and injustices. …. Koheleth is not a methodological thinker who has worked out a systematic world view and now presents it in organized fashion. There is much irregularity and repetition in the way he develops his thought, and much tension among his observations and beliefs. Some of his ideas pull in opposite directions, and many run counter to familiar religious principles.5

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Readers should hear in Fox’s remarks a sincere attempt to take the text at face value for the basis of interpretation. Attention is clearly given to the peculiarities of form and development of ideas. The narrative of the book of Ecclesiastes is hardly linear. Further, Michael Carasik contends that the oppositions are actually worked out even in the manner of the narrative’s “twists and turns” that are the keys to understanding. Form is indeed important to meaning, given the multiple voices in the text and the postures assumed by those voices.

Working in the tradition of form criticism, Roland E. Murphy contends that the text circles around several significant themes: vanity, joy, wisdom, the fear of God, the treatment of the just and the wicked, and finally the notion of God. Further, he makes this observation:

The reader should be ready, therefore, for the tensions within the book, to keep them in careful balance. One must do this, moreover, without the dubious method of eliminating certain phrases or verses as being insertions of a later hand. There is another pitfall as well. Precisely because Qoheleth’s viewpoints are so sharp and extreme, the modern reader may relativize them into a “biblical” homogeneity. The radical features of his thought can be tamed by the way in which the book is read in a larger context, even a biblical or ecclesial context. This is not to deny the right, or even the need, of anyone to absorb Qoheleth into a larger context. But the cutting edge of the book has to be retained.

For the writer, finding the right generic context is vital to understanding the message of the text. Examining the text in light of wisdom forms is highly important to understanding the textual intentions as well as tensions.

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8. Ibid., 53.
Ideological-based criticism has also been influential in the study of Ecclesiastes.

In her study entitled *Israel’s Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading*, Dianne Bergant makes the following observation about the voice in the text:

Class bias can be seen in other places in the book as well. Qoheleth describes himself as surpassing everyone in wealth (2:4-10). He even possessed slaves (v.7). His observations and evaluations are from the particular perspective of wealth and power. His class consciousness cannot be easily masked. Being a man of integrity, he disapproves of crediting royal might with saving a city when the feat was really accomplished through the wisdom of a poor man (9:14-16). Yet, he is upset when members of the lower class assume the standing of the privileged (10:7, 16). He counsels compliance with royal bidding, not merely because the king exercises authority and obedience is his due (8:2-4) but as a safeguard against royal requital (10:20) or capriciousness (10:4). Still, he does not question the legitimacy of royal rule. Although he does value wisdom more highly that he values money, the distinction between them is not always sharp (7:11f).9

Working from the model of liberation theology critical practice, Bergant suggests further that Qohelet’s most significant contribution may be to the question of the “theory of retribution” or what others may call the commitment to covenant theology as enshrined in the book of Deuteronomy.10 She makes a number of interesting observations that affirm the kinds of difference that separate liberation theology criticism from postcolonial criticism. Qohelet’s positionality in the text is complex; that he can also voice the vision of the view from below, even showing sympathy for human suffering (Ecclesiastes 4:1-3), suggests that his vision is more multifaceted than a liberationist reading would suggest. Still this approach looks at the voice as one that provides insight. The critical approach, however, does not take into consideration the more than subtle nuances that the

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10. Ibid., 118-19.
voice provides in its examination of a people living under the colonial eye of the
Ptolemies.

At the other end of the scale is critic Carolyn J. Sharp, influenced by the norms of
literary criticism, who argues in opposition to Fox,

While the views of the character “Qohelet” are not precisely coterminous with
those of the frame narrator, Fox argues that the latter generally approves of
Qohelet and is largely in sympathy with his perspective, a view that the present
essay will argue is fundamentally misguided. More is at stake in the double
voicing of this text than a simple framing of the skeptical voice by the more
traditionally pious frame narrator. Distance is built rhetorically into the text
between the reader and “Qohelet” as well as between “Qohelet” and the frame
narrator—and not only at the beginning and end of the book.11

Further, she argues that the book itself actually refutes the value of wisdom and instead
asserts the primacy of obedience to Torah.12 From her perspective, Qohelet makes
wisdom itself futile—the ultimate deconstructive act. The problem that readers are left
with in this sense is whether or not the text still possesses meaning apart from the final
verses of the last chapter. Certainly, the earliest readers must have thought that the text
had meaning, and clearly those who were responsible for its status in the canon did as
well. The earliest readers were certainly aware of verbal subterfuge, and they must have
embraced it as an avenue for understanding.

There is strong general consensus that the book may be dated from the third
century BCE, based on linguistic forms and Persian loan words and the general
expression of ideas. There is a growing awareness that the material of the book may also
have some connection to the contemporary history of that period, displayed in certain


advice-giving scenarios. Clearly, the opening of the book where the speaker says “The words of Qohelet (קהלת), son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1), would tempt one to see the speaker as Solomon. In fact, that was the traditional association from the time of Midrash Kohelet Rabbati, even arguing that Qohelet was another name for Solomon. Both C. L. Seow and Jennie Barbour, however, note that much of the description in 2:4-8, a royal autobiography or “royal testament,” echoes the kinds of inscriptions that are found in Persian and other Near Eastern documents, not those of the tenth-century BCE Solomon. In fact, Barbour suggests that the “son of David” notation could refer not only to an immediate son, but also to later descendants, and that the descriptions may actually contain echoes of other monarchs such as Hezekiah. Whatever the truth may be—and that at times is a significant challenge in Ecclesiastes—the speaking voice of Qohelet is problematic in a way in which much of earlier scholarship has failed to account.

In his introduction to postcolonial theory and biblical studies, R. J. Sugirtharajah makes an interesting observation about Qohelet as a person who launches a potential reading of the sage’s literary production:

It was written during the Hellenistic period when Palestine was under Ptolemaic control. There emerged a new class of people—traders, crafts, and business people who took advantage of imperial policies. The Preacher himself was one of the beneficiaries who built great houses, owned gardens and

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15. Murphy, The Tree of Life, 50-51. Murphy, however, suggests that this ancient category is too limiting for the material we actually find in the book.


plantations, developed irrigation systems, gathered wealth, possessed herds, flocks, and slaves, and surrounded themselves with many concubines (2:4-8). He was influenced by the ruling ideology which created a cultural milieu in which the creation and pursuit of money became increasingly important. His vocabulary was filled with commercial terminology—business, occupation, money, riches, success, ownership, financial bankruptcy. He not only advised his reader/hearers to be publically loyal to the king and the powerful—“Even in your thoughts do not curse the king, not in your bed chamber curse the rich” (10:20)—but also postulated the notion that “money answers everything” (10:19). His counsel to potential trouble-makers was not to interfere in policies and economic matters but enjoy life as long as you can and as much as you can (3:12). For the poor he had only bad news. Nothing can change their situation (4:1-3; 5:12).18

Sugirtharajah is one of the first scholars to employ a postcolonial approach to biblical texts. In his introduction, he labels the voice of Qohelet as an example of a voice that embodies what he terms the “hegemonic code,” the use of authenticating devices by those in power to establish the dominant ideological view, particularly of those who are in power based on class.19

While there is much to commend in Sugirtharajah’s observation, there is a problem. Since the text attempts to fabricate in some measure the “biography” of Solomon found in I Kings 3-11 and II Chronicles 1-9, established through what Barbour, using the literary critical theory of John Hollander, refers to as echoes of those texts, it seems unlikely that the third-century BCE writer of Ecclesiastes would completely divorce that speaking voice from one of Israel’s great kings.20 Walter Brueggemann suggests that the material found in I Kings 3-11 should be understood as part of a “bold interpretive imagination” that brings together materials from folklore and traditional royal


19. Ibid., 79-81.

narratives as well as material from temple archives, liturgical evidence and theological texts.\(^{21}\) What seems clear is that the so-called histories are themselves pastiches that reflect a shaping fantasy of the Deuteronomistic Historian on whose work the Chronicler also depends in addition to his locating additional materials.\(^{22}\) It seems quite clear that the writer(s) of Ecclesiastes drew on these for the shaping of Qohelet’s “autobiographical fiction” of Ecclesiastes 2:4-8. Such a portrait is exceptionally complex and merits careful exploration in chapter one.

As this study argues, rather than establishing an “ahistorical” Solomon, the writer of Ecclesiastes, in creating that “literary fiction” that the book most certainly uses, actually does intend for readers to be drawn imaginatively to this master legendary figure of wisdom. In that way, Solomon can speak to a new age—an age where the Ptolemies have established a kind of control in Judah and are working through local officials to enforce their policies, collect their taxes, and hold the power of rule. Writing in the Second Temple period, Qohelet reimagines one of Israel’s most intriguing and problematic figures: Solomon. In some sense, he becomes a mimic of the kind of ruler that Judah is currently facing. The “historical” Solomon’s intriguing qualities had been noted by the Deuteoronomistic Historian as one whose own colonial practices in the building of empire upon the backs of the people is a situation akin to slavery.\(^{23}\) The imposition of heavy taxation to build the Temple and fund the enterprise of empire and the syncretistic practices of building not only the Temple but also temples to the deities


\(^{22}\) For a helpful study on the ideology of the Chronicler, see Sara Japhet, *The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and its Place in Biblical Thought* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009).

\(^{23}\) Brueggemann, *Solomon*, 87-103.
of his foreign wives make Solomon one of the most ambiguous figures in Israel’s historical narrative. That the later Chronicler does not mention the last of these issues related to Solomon likely suggests that in the Second Temple period, there was an attempt to re-imagine the figure of Solomon.\textsuperscript{24} Clearly, these two “historical” traditions work toward different ends. The Qoheletian voice of “Solomon” in that sense provides counsel about how to cope in a world where the common denominators of understanding power that were a part of the legendary kingdom of Israel can now be traced in the empires of which the Jews/Judahites are now a subject people. This is an Israelite wisdom that at times sounds like the pithy statements of the Solomonic identified collections within the book of Proverbs that erupts from time to time in the body of the text of Ecclesiastes along with what seems to pass for scattered bits of Israelite and Judean history selected by the speaking voice of Qohelet.

\textbf{Postcolonial Theory and Application in Ecclesiastes}

Because postcolonial approaches to texts seem to be almost as diverse as the individual scholars who apply the method to texts, outlining what a postcolonial approach looks like is important for the purposes of this study.

So what exactly does postcolonial theory examine and what are its intentions?

R.S. Sugirtharajah defines a postcolonial approach in three ways:

In one sense, as an expression, it marks the formal decline of Western territorial empires. On the other, as a theory, it has several functions: (a) it examines and explains especially social, cultural, and political conditions such as nationality, ethnicity, race and gender both before and after colonialism; (b) it interrogates the often one-sided history of nations cultures, and peoples: and (c) it engages in a critical revision of how the “other” is represented.\textsuperscript{25}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 160-80.
\end{itemize}
This research is going to examine all three of these areas in Ecclesiastes, but certainly area A will certainly receive the greatest attention as this is the domain from which Qohelet himself speaks.

This thesis will be using postcolonial theory not to refer to the thesis writer’s own position of writing as has often been the case where, for example, an Asian-American woman might write on the book of Ruth as indicative of her culture and thus provide a window of meaning into the ancient past through the lens of the critic herself. That is what Gail Yee does. That approach can be valuable, but it is not posture used in this study.26 Instead a more neutral position on the part of this thesis writer is assumed so that the postcolonial whispers in the text may be heard in light of the text’s own historical moment.

The present study employs a postcolonial approach from the vantage of the text of Ecclesiastes itself within its own location in the Second Temple world of the third century BCE. The work of R. S. Sugitharajah and Homi Bhabha will be used to examine the text as form itself and to look at particular features within the text that speak to the distinct voice in the past of Israel’s history in this new and potentially bewildering period.

26. The following representative studies are written from the perspective of the scholar’s own postcolonial status, represented through ethnic and national status. The concern is less about the text itself representing a colonial/postcolonial view than the position of the hearers or readers toward those texts: Gail Yee, “‘She Stood in Tears Amidst Alien Corn’: Ruth, the Perpetual Foreigner and Model Minority,” Toward Minority Biblical Criticism: Framework, Contours, Dynamics, ed. by Randall Bailey, Tat-Sing Liew and Fernando Segovia, Seisma Studies (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 119-40; Daniel Patte, gen. ed., Global Bible Commentary (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004); Aliou Niang, Faith and Freedom in Galatia and Senegal, Biblical Interpretation Series 97 (Amsterdam: Brill Publishers, 2009); Stephen D. Moore, “Questions of Biblical Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delph; or, the Postcolonial and the Postmodern,” The Bible in Theory: Critical and Postcritical Essays, Number 57 (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2010), 309-25.
The next few pages will outline the underpinning assumptions of these scholars and their methods.

As an *appropriate* to understanding any biblical text, Sugirtharajah notes that texts “are not innocent and that they reflect the cultural, religious, political, and ideological interests and contexts out of which they emerge.”\(^\text{27}\) Such an understanding of the writings of the Deuteronomistic Historian has been “normative” since the development of the term by Martin Noth, but perhaps with less or fewer political implications.\(^\text{28}\) To put the approach into even more basic terms Sugirtharajah observes, “What postcolonialism does is to highlight and scrutinize the ideologies these texts embody and that are entrenched in them as they relate to the fact of colonialism.”\(^\text{29}\) Using the categories of Stuart Hall, Sugirtharajah notes that in any text, readers can find four embedded codes: hegemonic, professional, negotiated, and oppositional.\(^\text{30}\) Each requires a definition, and each of these codes can be found in the book of Ecclesiastes. A brief example will be given following a definition of the code.

Hegemonic codes “legitimize, consolidate, and promote the dominant values and ideological interests of the ruling class.”\(^\text{31}\) Readers can readily see that the speaking voice of Qohelet as affirming and underwriting that particular position, but at the same time,
that dominant position is undercut with references to the enterprises as little more than vain or futile attempts (הבל). We can see this aspect most clearly in the portion of narrative that seem to reflect an autobiographical fiction (i.e., Ecclesiastes 2:1-11).

Professional codes are “concerned with preservation, centralization, and interpretation of laws, traditions, and customs. They promotes law and order, ideas of nationalism, regionalism, and authority.”32 While one might expect Qohelet’s testimony to fall within these codes, the words of the speaker/narrator in the final verses of the narrative seem more directly oriented toward this voice (Ecclesiastes 12:9-14).

Throughout the narrative, he has also been present with his constant אמר קהלת (said Qohelet) that frames the Qoheletian remarks. In that way, this second voice that concludes the narrative is able to make the readers recall that Qohelet does not have the ultimate control of the narrative. Form-critical and historical-critical scholars often contend that the final verses of chapter 12 are added later and thus should be considered in that way.33 From a literary-critical perspective, the actual differentiated voices are present earlier and should be considered as part of the total narrative, not as an addition.

Negotiated codes refer to “how an event, action, or experience is interpreted or rearticulated to meet new theological or ideological situations.” 34 This definition is at the heart of this thesis, for indeed the legendary Solomon’s words are presented by Qohelet who argues that experience has taught him that the wise schemes are vain or futile attempts (הבל). While Barbour may have not considered her discoveries about the book of

32. Ibid., 79.


34. Sugirtharajah, Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation, 79.
Ecclesiastes through a postcolonial lens, she finds echoes of texts, histories, and formulas from other portions of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The situations of the Second Temple period of the third century BCE are quite different from those of monarchic Israel or Judah. Not surprisingly scholars have credited this period with the final editing of the inchoate Torah as well as the Prophets (נביאים). Ecclesiastes, which shows knowledge of both segments of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, retunes the traditions of wisdom and ultimately points them toward the Torah—at least through the concluding voice of the final chapter.

Finally, oppositional codes relate to “the voice of the marginalized which finds its place in the discourse in spite of the fact that the text is produced by those who have vested interest.” On the surface, this code might be more problematic to locate in a text where either the hegemonic voice of Qohelet reigns supreme for much of the text or the framing voice of the narrator at the beginning and ending of the text and with some editorializing in the midst of the proclamation that can be seen. In a sense, this is the voice of resistance against the other codes. One might argue that a passage such as Ecclesiastes 3:11, “He has made everything suitable for its own time; moreover he has put a sense of the past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end,” reflects a kind of upending of the traditional perspective of wisdom that centers around insight in Proverbs. Leo Perdue argues that Ecclesiastes “engages critically and often opposes the conventional wisdom.”

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35. Barbour, *The Story of Israel*, 37-76. Actually this is part of the thesis of the entire work. Throughout the book, she proposes many echoes of other biblical texts.


study of Ecclesiastes, Katharine J. Dell observes that the book may be read from a position of the dominant cultural voices or of those who are the oppressed. Qohelet does comment about the lot of the suffering who have no one to protect or comfort them (4:1). While that notation is not as clear as a direct voice of the oppressed rising in the text would be, there is some recognition of human pain that could escape the eye of the dominant people in the culture. Dell concludes that “both would probably come to the same conclusion that life should be enjoyed in the present, whoever you are, and that nothing can ultimately be changed.”38 To what extent the words of Qohelet, the shaping fantasy of the narrator, and the total production of the book provide a resistance to the dominant voice remains a matter of debate.

These four codes provide powerful insights into this enigmatic text, but the observations of Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, particularly around the concepts he defines as ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity, extend those observations in the form of gesture and action in the text. Since Bhabha is working within the context of how African culture confronts the oppressive colonial presence of Britain/Europe in Africa, we must be careful not to attribute to the text of Ecclesiastes a kind of presentism that moves the biblical text into a nineteenth and early twentieth-century setting. Ambivalence in Bhabha’s conception specifically refers to the way in which the people who are subject to various colonial forces look down on themselves as if they were their masters. In essence, one becomes the image of what one hates.39 Could that possibly


define the position of Qohelet, perhaps suggesting the reason why much of his perception about the world revolves around חבל (vanity or futility)? Mimicry relates specifically to the way in which those who are the colonized begin to imitate the culture and behaviors of those who colonize them. As Bhabha writes, “Then colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference which is almost the same, but not quite.” Further, “in order to be effective mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.”40 In a sense then, mimicry can look a bit like parody. What would seem apparent from the start is that Qohelet is a mimic and that the “slippage” is not only apparent, but the source of meaningful critique, both of himself as a reminder of that tenth-century BCE monarch as well as the representation of authority in Ptolemaic Judah. At the same time, that mimicry actually takes on more the image of the ironic: mockery.41

Hybridity relates specifically to the mixture of cultures of both the dominant form and the colonized being combined in some way.42 In her study of Proverbs and in particular Lady Wisdom (Sophia), Mayra Rivera suggests Lady Wisdom is the perfect emblem of hybridity, given that she seems to be the nexus of a number of different traditions including those of deities in some Ancient Near Eastern mythologies. Whatever Lady Wisdom is, “she disturbs, intervenes, [and] unsettles.”43 In a similar way, the

41. Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 121-31; Perdue and Carter, Israel and Empire, 18-19.
42. Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 168-69; Perdue and Carter, Israel and Empire, 16-18.

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Wisdom Teacher/King affirms, unsettles, advises, despairs in the form of literature common to the Ancient Near East and to Israel in particular; he combines the past and present and yet exists as a critique on both worlds. Of all of these forms mimicry, because it also carries with it a form that can be dramatized, seems to be the most helpful in understanding the postcolonial perspective. The entire expression attributed to Qohelet is mimicry of an ancient ancestor of the Hebrew/Jewish past, now filled with both ambivalence and showing evidence of hybridity with the cultures to whom he is speaking.

In addition to these two critics and their ideas, one further concept must be included. Drawing on the scholarship of James C. Scott, Richard Horsley and Anathea E. Portier-Young, in their studies of the apocalyptic genre and its use during the late Second Temple Period, suggest that information is given to the community through the means of “hidden transcripts.” Portier-Young suggests that these “hidden transcripts” surface through “Anonymous speech forms such as rumor, gossip and folktales [that] encoded messages of resistance to be shared among those who have ears to hear.” The encoded resistance narrative in Ecclesiastes surfaces in the myriad advice for survival in a variety of different settings.

With the critical perspectives of Sugirtharajah and Bhabha along with Horsley and Portier-Young, this thesis finds evidence to engage aspects of the textual, including the elaborate verbal gestural forms that are rooted in this clearly postcolonial period of

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Judean and Diaspora experience. Qohelet is very much a subject, one through whom various forces of past and present pass, and he attempts to help his readers to comprehend the future. How does one act? How does one live? How does one cope with the present circumstances? Is there any way forward other than simply enjoying what pleasures are possible in an oppressive and ambiguous world?

**Qohelet in the Context of Ptolemaic Judah**

Historians of the Ptolemaic period typically look to texts from Josephus and the Zeno Papyri to aid our construction of this period of time, reaching from the time of Ptolemy I Soter (305-282 BCE) down to the battle of Paneas in 198 BCE that resulted in Judah’s falling to Seleucid rule. The period was also noted for four different segments of Syrian Wars (274-271, 260-253, 246-41, 219-217 BCE). The continuing struggle over the duration can be seen through the shifting alliances that were beginning, where rich tax farming families would choose sides in their support of either the Ptolomies or Seleucids. Historians note that “tax farmers” were “private citizens who [joined] with the Ptolemaic administration in exploiting their own people.” In essence, the “tax farmer” was a tax collector of sorts working for the empire. In conquering or acquiring territory, the Ptolemies claimed their land through a kind of “royal absolutism.” Sneed observes that “the Jews as a people were generally free as long as taxes were paid.” The Ptolemies seem to have been particularly keen in watching the population and the number of


46. Ibid., 92-93.

47. Ibid., 91.
animals and flocks that were required to be reported “for taxing purposes.” Readers might be tempted to think of Qohelet as one of these “tax farmers,” but that identification may be too hasty. What is clear is that land and what could be extracted from it both in terms of taxation and goods, in particular olive oil, were very important to the Ptolemies. Judah formed an important part of the nexus of their power, and Judah also served for a good deal of this period as a buffer zone between Egypt and Syria. At the same time, the four Syrian wars suggest that stability was not easy. Evidence also suggests that Egyptian troops were housed in Jerusalem during the period, raising the anxiety level that was most certainly felt in the period. As we will see, Qohelet seems to feel that anxiety in particular ways. In fact, the anxiety present in his discourse may well relate to this feeling of occupation, watchful eyes, and heavy taxes that make life of the poorest residents very hard.

While readers must be careful not to press the identifications beyond possibility to assumed certainly, it seems likely that Ecclesiastes dates from the “last quarter of the third century BCE” and that this allows for “the teacher’s criticism of an unjust, hierarchical government (5:7[8]) and the period of diminishing influence of the Ptolemaic influence in the eastern Mediterranean world. The decline of the Egyptian empire ruled by the Ptolemies would have occasioned a prevailing sense of pessimism in an area that included Judah.” If power is beginning to fall apart, then the question would certainly be more apparent about how one might conduct one’s self in the current moment. That the images of self-monitoring, fear, suggested solutions, and perhaps an implicit wish for


change would surface should not be a surprise. That the text would abound in practical wisdom and instruction should not be a surprise. What seems apparent in this particular moment that the text imagines is that a full-scale post-colonial understanding lies considerably into the future. What seems apparent now is that the whispers—even the thoughts of the heart and mind—figure forth a postcolonial age that can exist only within and perhaps on one’s table with eating and drinking along with the enjoyment of labor. The revolution and reimagined world lie outside of the Qoheletian imagination—an imagination that focuses on the here and now and on advice for survival toward that future age.

Outline for the Study of the Qoheletian Discourse

A great deal of scholarship on the book of Ecclesiastes concentrates on its themes, its structure, and its authorship. A postcolonial approach affords an opportunity to look deeply into the very methods that the writer uses in adapting the voice of Solomon to Qohelet. A postcolonial reading highlights how the writer takes that monarchic-period voice of Solomon and adapts and critiques it in the Second Temple period, long after high point of Israelite monarchy is over in the face of foreign empires and their surveillance. In essence, postcolonial criticism provides a critique of multiple empires. The approach highlights Qohelet’s methods and provides a more historically focused reason for the tone of voice in the narrative itself.

There is no scholarly consensus on the outline of Ecclesiastes—that is, the natural breaks and divisions within the book itself. This current study follows a design noted by
Eunny P. Lee in the *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*. Some studies of Ecclesiastes follow themes rather than structure, even though there is some progression of ideas. The royal autobiography and establishment of the voice of Solomon through Qohelet are the subject of chapter one that treats Ecclesiastes 1:1-6:9. Chapter two provides a reading of the largest block of material in the text—Ecclesiastes 6:10-12:8—related to the contradictory sense of learning that the writer has accomplished. Particular attention is given to the role of eating and drinking and the enjoyment of labor as its own act of resistance in a world that anticipates the postcolonial. Chapter three considers the particular significance in light of postcolonial theory of the Epilogue of the book (Ecclesiastes 12:9-14) that provides a frame for understanding the wisdom narrative of the book. In this final chapter, consideration is given about how we are to understand the text in light of two voices that seem to both praise and/or limit the overall impact of Qohelet’s words. Readers are left to contemplate the idea that the narrator/editors may be afraid of the implications of the words of Qohelet. The conclusion provides a summary of the key ideas found in the thesis.

The book of Ecclesiastes, with the voices of Qohelet as the postcolonial Solomon and his critique by the narrator/editor, provides one of the most intriguing explorations in the appropriation of wisdom tradition of Judah in the Second Temple world. Until we capture the sense of what that postcolonial position means, we cannot understand the voice of sapience, its critique, and its re-appropriation.

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