CONCLUSION

Postcolonial approaches have made significant inroads into studies of both the Old and New Testament in the last decade, and they have produced some intriguing readings of texts that, while drawing on the method of more traditional, established scholarship, have expanded the impact of literary criticism in the opening of biblical texts in new ways. While Qohelet does say “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccles.1:9), it is fair to say that he did not know the potential for postcolonial approaches to biblical texts. What this study has demonstrated is that the whispers of the postcolonial are embedded directly in the words of Qohelet and in the composition of the entire book. Locating the historical setting of the book of Ecclesiastes at the last portion of the third century BCE, during a discernible period of Ptolemaic influence and control in the life of Judah, provides the potential for seeing a rich engagement between the assumed voice of one of Israel’s legendary monarch through the mouth of Qohelet, who has not only transformed the words of the tenth-century BCE monarch, but has also critiqued the colonialism within that tenth-century BCE monarch through a continual but at times unexpected equating of every enterprise with הַבל (vanity or futility).

In his book *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social-Science Perspective*, Mark R. Sneed summarizes a variety of critical perspectives that have been used to approach the “heterodox” character of Qohelet’s remarks. In particular, he notes the works of postcolonial perspectives, beginning with the remarks of R. S. Sugirtharajah examined in this thesis, along with his embedded codes. Sneed suggests that Sugirtharajah is correct in identifying Qohelet as an “aristocrat,” but fails to see that
“Qohelet is critical of the status quo.”¹ Indeed Qohelet can be very multi-voiced. As this thesis has shown, that variance in voice is important in a text designed to provide those “hidden transcripts” to a reading audience aware of the challenges of life in the period. That Qohelet does not foment a revolution does not make his text any less postcolonial. He understands oppression; he understands the nature of resistance; and he understands the nature of survival. For Qohelet, the postcolonial is a flicker in the mind, for the mind and heart must be free before the body can be free. In essence, we might actually develop a new term for the book of Ecclesiastes: proto-postcolonial.

The introduction to this thesis establishes a context for understanding what a postcolonial approach requires, drawing on the pioneering work of R. S. Sugirtharajah and Homi Bhabha, who both provide the vision for text analysis and also the examination of social phenomena. Many scholars have taken postcolonial approaches to texts in which they match their locations—in particular their cultures—and comment on the biblical text culture as a mirror for critique of their contemporary world. One such example involving Ecclesiastes is John Mansford Prior’s study of the biblical text in light of the “survival ethic of Ecclesiastes with the everyday resistance of the edged-out poor of today [that] is triggering a transformation of powerlessness into creative activity.”² For Prior, the ancient text becomes a model for understanding his contemporary setting in Indonesia. The approach used in this thesis has been more to illustrate Qohelet’s own location in time and to examine the implications for just that same kind of activity in his own day.


Qohelet takes on many roles and engages in many twists and turns—perhaps even with some contradictions and dismissals of even the good he finds at times. As noted in the introduction, the postcolonial is most clearly seen in the voice of Qohelet.

Chapter 1 examined Ecclesiastes 1:1-6:9 and focused on the literary fictional platform created by the opening of 1:1 and then examines the first explosion of Qoheletian discourse. The word “explosion” may seem rather dramatic, and it is selected here on purpose. Given the attention to observations of nature, to the attempts at national empire building, to times and seasons for all action through the assertion of will and sometimes by uncontrolled forces, to a survey of the oppressed who can find no comfort under a magisterial hand, to a radical self-monitoring behavior required for survival, readers are introduced that a kind of “explosive” possibility remains within. As noted, the Judean community here is not in the position noted in 1 Maccabees. The Seleucids would provoke that explosive move among some just as they encouraged a kind of aggressive dismissal of Jewish cultural identity through a radical Hellenism among others—at least as it is understood through the writer of the “historical” account. Qohelet’s advice is more internal, more related to survival, more related to the liberation of the mind. Even those wise attempts, however, carry the looming cloud of הָבל (vanity or futility).

Chapter 2 examined Ecclesiastes 6:10-12:8, noting particular differences in form—not ideas—from the first portion of the book, and at the same time, locating the oasis of eating and drinking as Qohelet’s own postcolonial construct of liberation—at least at home. The repetition of feasting and the request on Qohelet’s part for people to find pleasure in their work provide only the seeds for survival in midst of uncertain days in Ptolemaic Judah. With additional advice on self-monitoring behavior that will be
shown before kings or their representatives, with a recognition that the standard covenant theology of “deeds-consequences” does not answer the challenges of the day, and with a recognition that God is not coming in judgment against those who have oppressed the flock in Judah, it is no surprise that decay and death, even the acceptance of them would crown this section. Liberation will certainly come; the postcolonial will be a reality; but it will not happen for all. Qohelet has no timeframe for that postcolonial future. At times Qohelet could have easily held a conversation with Alexander Pope who wrote in Essay on Man: “Presume not God to scan: the proper study of mankind is man.” Qohelet’s study has actually been about humankind; God remains a mystery for Qohelet. Donning the voice of the tenth-century Solomon, Qohelet has told us a great deal about humankind—a humankind he has scanned with remarkable insight. That’s the insight needed to survive—the insights gained by the postcolonial flicker in the mind and on the table filled with food.

Chapter 3 examines Ecclesiastes 12:9-14, one of the text’s final enigmas. The relationship between the speaking voice after 1:1 to 12:8 and the concluding voice or voices has occasioned a great deal of interest. If as this thesis asserts Ecclesiastes is indeed its own postcolonial project for providing encouragement and advice to those living in Ptolemaic Judah, then how the text ends may suggest how readers are to understand the entire undertaking of the text. Has Qohelet spoken in orthodox or heterodox ways? Has he been helpful to others? Since he is a teacher, did his students value him? Assuming that the first voice in 12:9-12 is an affirming voice that lends credit to the Qoheletian advice by suggesting the depth of his work and the powerfulness of his remarks, readers find that the final two verses mute and transform in some way the
message. Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 does attempt to reimage the Qoheletian event of the book, but this writer is no match for the Qohelet who knows how to assess, advise, and goad. It is very unlikely that a small curbing of Qohelet at the end undermines his rhetoric; in fact, it more likely highlights that the message of the book has hit upon the reality of life. Angry Judeans cast Jeremiah in a well/cistern; a weary “editor” can only provide a few brief reminders of the nature of Torah, judgment, and obedience. The postcolonial whisper was heard loud and clear by the second editor/writer. It was simply too powerful; he had to try to curb it.

Without question, James L. Crenshaw has provided readers some of the most perceptive comments on Ecclesiastes over the last third of twentieth century and first decade and a half of the twenty-first century. The following words from the opening of a chapter on Ecclesiastes provide not only an important summary to this work but also a challenge for moving forward with increasingly penetrating postcolonial readings of the text:

With Qoheleth the ultimate goal of wisdom becomes considerably more ambitious than it was in Proverbs or Job. The sages who composed canonical proverbs undertook a modest task—the discovery of life-searching knowledge by which they could demonstrate fidelity to the divine will as it penetrated the universe itself. For the unknown author of Job, the single purpose that enabled the innocent sufferer to endure excruciating agony was the hope of recovering an earlier relationship with God who had withdrawn into impenetrable silence. Both quests were accomplished by faith in the universe and its creator even if Job’s case the basis for such trust had crumbled. In addition, both Proverbs and the book of Job are products of a wisdom ethos that placed enormous confidence in the human intellect. The author of Ecclesiastes lacked trust in either God or knowledge. For him nothing proved that God looked on the creation with favor, and the entire enterprise of wisdom had become bankrupt. The astonishing thing is that such skepticism did not prevent Qohelet from asking the question of questions: Does life have any meaning at all?3

Crenshaw’s observations here are profound on any number of levels, but constructing a narrative here about the way of knowledge may actually miss part of the point of Ecclesiastes. As this study has shown, Qohelet does, in fact, believe that life has meaning as he holds out the possibility of dealing with life in the moment with feasting as a resistance activity and with self-monitoring that will protect an individual and a people who labor under the oppressive hand and eye of the Ptolemies and their selected Judean persons who enact that power upon the ordinary, average Judean. To ask the question about whether or not life has meaning is, as has been demonstrated, to whisper the postcolonial through hidden transcripts for a future and potentially unborn era.

The book of Ecclesiastes, with the monologue of Qohelet constituting the majority of the text, will no doubt remain an enigma in the canon of the Hebrew Bible or Christian Old Testament. For too long readers focused on the rather obvious pessimism of the book without thinking about the text’s voice. For some who fancied Qohelet on the margins of the faith community, it might even serve as a critique of the entire enterprise of participating in the community. Both of those approaches suffer from the kind of presentism that fails to look at context. Qohelet lived in what he perceived as a dangerous world. He lived in a world where there was significant knowledge of an Israelite and Judean past. He does not invoke Abraham or Moses or David, but he sets his voice in the literary fiction of the legendary Solomon. Can a voice from long ago speak? When the medium at Endor summoned Samuel for Saul in 1 Samuel 28, he spoke to Saul as he had spoken to Saul before he died. Solomon spoke to the Ptolemaic community through remarks and events noted in the Dueteronomistic voice in 1 Kings and the voice of the Chronicler in II Chronicles and through some of the collected materials of Proverbs.
Qohelet chose to “channel” another voice of Solomon. Living in Ptolemaic Judah, probably as an aristocrat who understood the circuits of power and the way in which external forces have an impact on the lives of people, Qohelet perceived the authority that donning the voice of Solomon and creating a seemingly convincing autobiography of 2:4-8 would lend to his enterprise. Qohelet’s Solomon is not the Solomon of old, nor is he Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner” whose experiences have made him “sadder and wiser” and is compelled to share them with others. Qohelet’s reimagining of Solomon as himself provides just the kind of figure who can speak to the late third century BCE. He notes Solomonic failures, always tinged with הַבָּל (vanity or futility). More than regretting the past, however, this Qohelet/Solomon understands that the postcolonial remains in its infancy stages and that the signs of change first must be internal. There is little question why the text spends so much time on self-monitoring and self-assessment. These are the keys to a postcolonial future that is yet to be born out in Ptolemaic Judah. Qohelet gives the keys to survival and maybe a bit more. Qohelet may have given Ptolemaic Judah the most important text it could receive—a hidden transcript—to go along with the recorded texts of their Hebrew/Jewish ancestors. Qohelet speaks to crisis and its management, whether we are speaking about Ptolemaic Judah or twenty-first century America. That enterprise is not rooted in הַבָּל (vanity or futility).