Chapter 3

Contextualizing the Voice of Qohelet: The Editors React (Ecclesiastes 12:9-14)

Following the verbal rumble of חָיָה חָוֶלֶת (vanity of vanities or futility of futilities) in Ecclesiastes 12:8, readers hear a shift in speaker. Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 provides a frame for understanding the location of the entire series of remarks from Ecclesiastes 1:1 on. As Tyler Atkinson notes, this speaker’s voice “remains in the background, as a transmitter of the protagonist’s words, not the creator of them.”¹ Gary D. Salyer suggests that the tone of the Epilogue is that of an “obituary.”² In a way, that tone makes particular sense, given that readers have just moved into chapter 12 through the process of aging and death—maybe even Qohelet’s own death. If, as this study contends, Qohelet speaks the whispers of a postcolonial discourse—a discourse primarily for the mind and heart and not for liberation in a political sense—then we might expect the framing device that ends the book in some way to provide an understanding of the entire book.

Is Qohelet orthodox? Is Qohelet revolutionary? Is Qohelet to be taken seriously? Did Qohelet go too far or not far enough? Has this quest been an empirical exploration into the nature of survival under the administration of the Ptolemaic officials and their Jewish counterparts? All of these are valid questions. One aspect that is clearly missing in the material, however, is the reference to מלך בירושלם (king in Jerusalem) as noted in 1:1. Here the speaker—whether simply a variation on the Qoheletian voice or another

detached voice—merely uses the phrase קהלת חכם (wise teacher) in 12:9. The switch from first-person singular to third-person singular is significant as is the tone. Scholars are divided about the number of voices in 12:9-14, and several possibilities have been offered. Some contend the entire selection is the product of a single voice, while others have one voice represented in 12:9-12 and another in 12:13-14. Others have suggested two voices: 12:9-11, and 12:12-14, and each particular designation has its particular virtues and rationality.

For this present study, the theory of the number of voices that is rejected is the one that contends there is merely a move from first person to third person and that Qohelet is actually the speaker throughout. The study suggests that 12:9-12 and 12:13-14 have the most obvious possibility in a postcolonial setting, for while the first segment seeks to explain the nature of the message, the second segment attempts to assert a colonializing voice that threatens to stamp out or to thwart the Qoheletian discourse by reasserting the primacy of ציוו (his [God's] commandments) in 12:13. What does seem clear is that including a phrase such as בני (my son) in 12:12 connects it with larger traditions both in Israelite wisdom literature and other wisdom forms in the Ancient Near East. Given that the phrase “my son” is found in the book of Proverbs—typically in

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5. Lohfink, Qoheleth, 142-44.

6. Pinker, “The Epilogue in the Book of Qohelet,” 204-32. Pinker’s article provides a masterly examination of the entire range of opinions relative to the number of speakers and the nature of the speaker in the Epilogue.
chapters 1 through 9—that already has scribal comments such as מְשָׁלֵי שָלומָה (the proverbs of Solomon), we have another attempt on the part of the writer/collector to connect the book of Ecclesiastes to a legendary king of Israel. Such identifications of Solomon and wisdom composition and collection along with 1 Kings 4:32 that mentions three thousand proverbs that he composed further underline the literary fictional voice that has been created in the book.

What seems clear is that the writers of the Epilogue of the book try to establish a historicity for the book, but at the same time to establish a kind of skeptical distance from the words of Qohelet. That the words are allowed to stand as the whisper of the voice of descent is nothing short of a miracle, but at the same time, it may well demonstrate a significant point. If as this work asserts, Qohelet often uses hidden transcripts to present his message, the final voice represented in 12:13-14 may not be completely aware of that voice.

The Precision of Language, the Attention to Meaning (Eccles. 12:9-12)

The first speaker in the Epilogue believes he knows the historical person, his writerly practices, and his methods:

Besides being wise, the Teacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs. The Teacher sought to find pleasing words, and he wrote words of truth plainly. The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings that are given by one shepherd. Of anything beyond these, my child, beware. Of making many books there is no end, and much study in a weariness of the flesh. (Eccles. 12:9-12)

This second writer notes the professional code behavior that Qohelet uses in composition and arrangement. Sayler says that “He is depicted as the consummate professional sage
who labored hard for the public.” He is aware that Qohelet works in a particular way that suggests the words themselves are important and that they carry the messages effectively. For a wisdom writer, the correspondence between proverbs and life experience was always measured in terms of the empirical. In that way, Qohelet has been highly successful. If Lohfink, Krüger, and Perdue are correct, the material found in this book may have been used in the Jerusalem Temple school; thus our second author/editor suggests the importance of the material itself simply by virtue of its Sitz im Leben. Seow suggests that the writer of 12:9-12 may be one of the students of Qohelet; thus we might be able to understand the highly favorable and exalted role of this teacher and his words.

Ecclesiastes 12:9 begins with these words: “Besides being wise, the Teacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs.” As Mark J. Broda asserts, the word ויתר (in addition or besides) suggests “its role as additional material following the climatic presentation of Qohelet’s key statement in 12:8.” Further, he suggests that the verse “affirms this evaluation at the end of Qohelet’s testimony.” The suggestion appears to be one in agreement with what has gone before as this voice strives to build up a tradition to which the speaker coheres.

7. Salyer, Vain Rhetoric, 373.


11. Ibid., 265.
Words are important, and Qohelet knows exactly what he is doing. Three verbs are used here for “weighing,” “studying,” and “arranging,” with all three being piel perfect third masculine singular verbs. Whether Qohelet is a composer of proverbs or merely someone who collects and arranges them, the sense is that the activity is intentional from the beginning. From the literary critical perspective, what this editor/second writer is doing is to ascribe intentionality to Qohelet. Whether he is referring merely to the book of Ecclesiastes or is extending the traditional lore about Solomonic wisdom remains a matter of scholarly dispute, or whether he is referring to a collected experiential wisdom for living instead. What does seem clear is that Qohelet commands the respect to this second voice in the text—apparently the one who organized and presented the materials. That would mean, of course, that this second writer/speaker approves at some level of the postcolonial discourse of Qohelet.

What the words suggest is that indeed Qohelet knew exactly what he was doing in his teaching and in his writing. At the same time, he places the words of Qohelet in company with דברי חכמים (words of the wise ones, 12:11). That these words are like goads, Fox suggests, means that they “sting and provoke.” Broda, in contrast to some commentators he notes, sees the use of the word “goads” as not negative and actually a part of the “disciplinary method of the wisdom tradition.” The words of the prophets


often have a caustic quality; why should wisdom be any less verbally powerful? Clearly, the writer understands that words are weapons.

In a sense, a teacher should always provide that quality event, but if readers scan some of the challenging selection of Ecclesiastes involving behavior before the king or government officials or the continual assertion of the importance of feasting and enjoying work in the midst of adversity, those wise words are actually ones that provoke action and understanding. They identify oppression. The complexity of voice that is Qohelet’s combining both the assumed voice of the tenth-century BCE king and the third-century protagonist called “Qohelet” seems apparent. Fox suggests that this voice may be the same as the voice throughout the book, only through a different aspect of grammar—first to third person—found typically in Egyptian wisdom texts procedures.16 While the suggestion is an intriguing one, there is little reason to suggest that in this case, given that the writer inserts some additional elements that more than anything else connect this text with a larger canon of writing and procedures that suggest a professional code. Qohelet’s words are important because they reflect the tradition of the sages. It is true that passages in Ecclesiastes 7:1-13 and 10:1-20 bear striking resemblance to typical wisdom literature passages in other texts, but these small elements would not be significant enough for the kind of lavish praise given to Qohelet.

If the intention is to establish Qohelet’s connection to the legendary information of 1Kings 4:32 of the tenth-century BCE monarch, and if the book of Proverbs has reached its final form late in fourth century BCE, then the intention is to mimic not only

16. Ibid., 82-83.
form, but also to establish a royal fictive connection. Clearly, the book of Proverbs itself attests to material from the time of Solomon, including materials added during the reign of Hezekiah attributed to Solomon (Prov. 25:1). These proverbs probably took their final form during the post-exilic period during the period of Ezra and Nehemiah. We should probably keep in mind, however, that any notations in the collection are more about legendary attribution than actual historical fact. That the wisdom tradition associated Solomon with proverbial expressions is beyond dispute just as the attribution in I Kings attests.

Readers would have had the sense that these words of Solomon, contained in the book of Proverbs, were available to Ptolemaic Judah with a textual authentication reaching back to the legendary monarch. Qohelet would tap into that tradition. That the second writer would continue the association does two things. First, the references would bespeak the cosmopolitan quality of Israel at its height through not only its elaborate series of international connections, but also with texts of those traditions that have been brought into the voice of Israel by Solomon. In book form, the book of Proverbs would have reasserted that legendary place of Solomonic wisdom without respect to how we might interpret the sense of the Solomonic composition of them. Second, they would establish a form and tone of what Solomonic wisdom sounded like. Given that only in certain parts does the book of Ecclesiastes sound like that literary form of the proverb, what we do get is a real sense of undercutting the certainty of that tradition with

17. For a discussion of the dating of the material in the book of Proverbs, see Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 37-76. While he contends the text took shape during the Second Temple period, he suggests that some materials likely came from the monarchic period in the history of Israel/Judah. The late 5th century may be an appropriate date.

Qoheletian discourse. In effect, Qohelet rewrites Solomon. He rejects the covenant theology tradition rooted in the book of Proverbs. If words here in Ecclesiastes are “goads,” they are directed not only at the hearers, but also against the very tradition in writing that is represented in Proverbs. The postcolonial Solomon—Qohelet—rejects that very tradition in writing through his own careful writing of proverbs and wisdom sayings. Parody is good, but a whisper of the postcolonial voice that rejects the imperial voice which was associated with Solomon in those proverbs should be clear. His yawp, almost Whitman-like, is that voice that breaks free and provides third-century BCE hearers with a new Solomonic voice. One gets the sense that this first compiler/writer is in no way attempting to undercut the role of the Qoheletian voice.

With Ecclesiastes 12:12, readers are introduced to the voice of proverbial mimic, not only within Israelite tradition, but also found in wider traditions of the Ancient Near East. The writer begins, “Of anything beyond these, my child, beware.” Boda suggests that “these” relates to Ecclesiastes 12:9 and probably suggests the “son” is “being warned about the limits to wisdom.” Why would a warning need to be given? Fox suggests that we might interpret the remark as a warning against reading wisdom texts in and of themselves. Given that this writer also calls the remarks “goads,” it is easy to see how, using the idiom of wisdom discourse, he encourages caution. Is it based on an idea that the whispers of a postcolonial world that Qohelet envisions are dangerous? Is it based on


20. Fox, Ecclesiastes, 84-85.
the idea that the reader, called “my son,” may not be ready for the grandiose remarks of Qohelet? Is this perhaps a warning to a student?²¹

There is another possibility that still remains. If “my son” (12:12) is actually a very typical expression in the book of Proverbs, perhaps this is a warning not to undercut the voice of other wisdom texts to exalt the words of Qohelet out of a context. Throughout our study, we have been concerned with the concept of Sitz im Leben in this book. Perhaps the message is a warning not to engage in reading only a single discourse in this tradition, but to calibrate the response. In one sense, that blunts aspects of the postcolonial discourse; in another sense, it recognizes just exactly how powerful this discourse of “goads” really can be. Since this material in the Epilogue is in the voice of the professional code—a voice that has controlled the shaping of the entire narrative—the assertion of that voice here is merely an attempt to fix meaning.

The section ends with “Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh” (Eccles. 12:12). In one sense, this seeming reversal from the importance of wisdom and what Qohelet has left us actually finds a parallel to the suggested moderation of Ecclesiastes 7:15-18, for anything can be overdone. At the same time, if this second writer’s intent is to establish Qohelet with the legendary king of Israel of the tenth century BCE, there would have been an expectation of “many book” whether carefully made or not; it would take many books to contain the 3500 proverbs of 1 Kings 4:32. Qohelet’s book, Ecclesiastes, would merely be another volume in that tradition, but a volume of difference—one that starts to recognize oppression and to push back against it in its very form, content, and expression. For the second writer and for Qohelet to

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speak back against that early monarchical voice and for them to speak against the rhythms of Ptolemaic Judah would have required considerable study. Qohelet is not a “slacker” when it comes to study. This second writer expects his readers or hearers to understand the difference in all this material. Such could indeed bring on the weary aspect of study. Unlike his exemplar Qohelet, however, he does not label any of these activities as הָֽאָדַר (vanity or futility).

**A Third Voice that Reacts Against Qohelet (Eccles. 12: 13-14)**

Scholars of all critical and historical perspectives have found some elements within the texts of Ecclesiastes to be potentially heterodox, but the final two verses, representing a third voice in the text, present the clearest evidence of reaction against Qoheletian discourse:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil. (Eccles. 12:13-14)

Krüger and Crenshaw suggest that the last two verses may be a kind of “summary” of the entire book, or that they may be a “signal for closing.”22 Further, Crenshaw notes that “The summary is alien to anything Qohelet has said thus far. The combination of fear toward God and observance of the divine commands would fit better elsewhere, particularly in Sirach.”23 The notion of fearing God can be found in Ecclesiastes, and the notion of fearing God is a standard *topos* in wisdom literature. What readers have to ask is why the text seems to come to such a quick and authoritative conclusion. Does the statement, “All has been heard” cut short the book’s message, or is there no more to say?


The writer clearly intends to forestall any further speculation with an absolute statement that carries with it the hegemonic voice of magisterium and the voice of Torah obedience.

The ending leads readers to ask the question about whether or not the traditions of wisdom and postcolonial discourse subvert the Torah and thus require for such an abrupt and dominant expression. Some have suggested that the text may have been added in order to secure the place of Ecclesiastes in the canon of the Hebrew Bible.\(^{24}\) Scholars have been quick to point out that while Ecclesiastes has not been antagonistic to Torah, to some notion of the eschatological, and to the connection between the fear of God and obeying the commandments; judgment had been mentioned in Ecclesiastes 11:9.\(^{25}\) Readers may thus conclude that this last voice in the text wanted to underline that concept with a repetition.

Scholars have also suggested an alternative reading to Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 that merits some consideration. Boda suggests that “the epilogist moves beyond an evaluation of Qoheleth and the broader wisdom tradition and explicitly articulates his own core values. As already noted, his rhetorical strategy is to bring closure to the book as a whole.”\(^{26}\) In that way, the second epilogist is merely asserting the right to establish an additional professional code related to the writing of the book itself. Further, Boda suggests that rather than undercutting the words of Qohelet with the assertion of Torah obedience, he is merely picking up on a “minor element” that is present in Qohelet’s work.\(^{27}\) In that sense, the second epilogist presents us with some interesting questions.


\(^{26}\) Boda, “Speaking into the Silence,” 276.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 276-79.
Did he understand the full import of Qohelet’s discourse? Did he reject the idea of feasting as an important resistance against ennui or against death itself? Did he find the concerns of self-monitoring futile in the Ptolemaic world? While we cannot answer any of these questions authoritatively, there is another possibility. The third speaker/editor could certainly have removed some of the potentially heterodox material, but that would actually undercut a concept that readers often find throughout the texts that became the Hebrew Bible. Over and over again, readers are confronted with texts whose “contradictions” sit side by side in quiet testimony: the two creation stories of Genesis, the fused traditions in the Flood story, different testimony about the death of Saul, different persons noted as killing Goliath, a Jahwist and an Elohist psalter, and the list could certainly continue. Allowing the play of voices to exist in the text along with those that perhaps are less pleased with the implications of a revolutionary postcolonial text and its theological/political implications suggests how the traditional and postcolonial live together in an uncertain world. Of course, it is also possible that the editors might not have realized the full range of meaning of the text that exists.

That the Masoretes also actually repeated verses 13 and 14 of Ecclesiastes 12 is indicative that interpreters also wanted a strong sense of conclusion, one that was forced onto the text by those professional writers of a later period.28 At the same time, that act shows a very overdetermined quality that may show fear of the heterodox with a double voice of hegemonic code orthodoxy. If there is nothing left to say on the matter, then one may wonder why it is necessary to say anything at all. Elsa Tamez observes that these

two verses are quite similar to material in Sirach 1:26-28; 2:15-16.\textsuperscript{29} She contends that the ending provides a kind of “certainty” that has been missing from the rest of the book.\textsuperscript{30} Uncertainty and the limitations of human knowledge have been common themes expressed throughout the book.

If this more traditional ending is a product of someone worried about the postcolonial message of Qohelet, then the addition of the verse is an attempt to manage interpretation, in essence an attempt to curb the message of the text. That the text ends with hegemonic code material is not a surprise. Its presence actually does suggest that the writer understands just how subversive Qohelet’s words are. There are, however, other ways to read the addition. If the intention of this last writer is to secure canonical status for the book of Ecclesiastes, then the addition, while not disturbing the subversive elements of the text, would secure that place of acceptance. Whatever the case may be, this hegemonic-sounding voice at the end of the book calls attention to the differences in ideas in the text. Qohelet would certainly have recognized the fear of God, but what remains unclear is what kind of judgment the text envisions. Is this the “Day of the Lord” when all will be judged and the righteous vindicated in the construct of covenant theology? Given the meditation on death in the first portion of Ecclesiastes 12, the sense of ending is actually just death itself. In the final assessment, the point may be a reinforcement about the self-monitoring tendencies laced throughout the book. In that way, it serves as another kind of warning. In that sense, the postcolonial is pushed to the ending of human history, reinforced through repetition, and suspended with questions as

\textsuperscript{29} Tamez, \textit{When the Horizons Close}, 141-42.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 142.
to when, where, and how such an ending will happen. Still readers cannot forget the text’s postcolonial whispers that speak to the needs of Ptolemaic Judah.

Conclusion

It is too easy to read the Epilogue to the book of Ecclesiastes as an add-on to create orthodoxy or to assist in recreating the speaking voice of the text in a context. In reality what the Epilogue does is to call into question exactly what the entire text has been about. Are these words to convict? Are these words that provide a kind of secret path to knowledge, not in a gnostic sense? Do these words contain a message that the writers are trying to control? Is the entire enterprise of the Epilogue a preparation for a next stage of the entire text? The questions will likely continue to tease readers as long as they encounter the book of Ecclesiastes. What must be said is that the postcolonial impulse can be seen in the remarks; otherwise, there would be no reason to control them or to provide a context for understanding them. Qohelet lives on because he has survived; Qohelet lives on because he has provided those goads for future generations whose minds, hearts, and bodies he will liberate.