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**“Speaking to My Heart”:**

**A Close Reading of Qohelet as a Literary Character**

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## Abstract

This project seeks to analyze Qohelet's first-person speech as a route to understand his character through the words spoken by himself. In scholarship, although Qohelet is recognized as a character, it is often analyzed with the Solomonic figure in Hebrew biblical history or certain social roles from the presumed historical setting of Ecclesiastes. However, Ecclesiastes' social setting, dating, and authorship are constantly debated as historical evidence are scarce. Therefore, this thesis proposes to reconstruct the Qohelet character by taking the text as literary evidence. It aims to explore the richness of this character by employing the *close reading* method proposed by New Criticism in English literary studies which continues to influence the way to read a literary text today. It focuses on providing a narrative reading and analysis of the text particularly on passages (1:12-2:26; 3:9-22; 7:15-8:1; and 8:16-9:12) where Qohelet specifically speaks to himself, to his personified *heart* (לב), or to his intended audience. Close reading suggests stripping away any historically authorial and editorial influences on the meaning of the immediate text, and in turn asks how the text may bring out meaning from its content, structure, rhetorical devices, and literary construct by taking the text as a literary unity. Through dissecting the narrative first-person components, the research should show how Qohelet's character development functions within the text, how the autobiographical voice influences or participates in the meaning of the text, and how these elements simultaneously shape the character of Qohelet and the sapiential theology of the book.

## **Lay Summary**

This project seeks to read Ecclesiastes through a narrative approach by focusing on the character Qohelet's autobiography in the book. The Qohelet character is a key to understanding the underlying meaning of the text and therefore contributes to the overall motivation behind the composition of the book. Whereas traditional commentators tend to associate Qohelet with the Solomonic identity or the historical author, this study tends to examine the text by close reading the text with a narrative scope to find out the struggles Qohelet has in his autobiography. By doing this, Qohelet's dynamic personality may shed light on the themes, topics, and wisdom of the book.

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## Introduction

### 1. Ecclesiastes and Old Testament “Wisdom Literature”:<sup>1</sup> A Brief Overview

This study focuses on teasing out the character called “Qohelet” in the book of Ecclesiastes through his first-person speech by employing a narrative reading of the text. The book of Ecclesiastes is traditionally accepted to be one of the three pivotal book of “wisdom literature” in Old Testament canon along with Job and Proverbs.<sup>2</sup> The book is also categorized under the heading “Writings” (Hebrew *kētûbîm*) in Jewish tradition which offer “a multiplicity of forms that they give the impression of a collection of exemplary ancient Israelite and Jewish literature.”<sup>3</sup> However, Ecclesiastes being categorized under the Hebrew Writings does not suggest a specific case of genre or form, unlike the “wisdom literature” category denoting a generic feature of the book.<sup>4</sup> Since this study focuses on the characterization of Qohelet and its influences from the wisdom corpus, this study will focus on the use of the “wisdom literature” genre classification throughout. Nonetheless, this decision does not clash with the Writings categorization in the Jewish tradition. The

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<sup>1</sup> The reason to put “wisdom literature” in quotation marks is due to the current debate on whether wisdom can be a label as a genre by form.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Gordis directly suggests that the three books belong to a “Wisdom collection” in OT (*Koheleth—The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes*, 3rd ed. [New York: Schocken Books, 1968], 19). Other scholars in their introduction to wisdom literature have noted that this was the common view among traditional scholarship. See Katharine Dell, *‘Get Wisdom, Get Insight’: An Introduction to Israel’s wisdom Literature* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 4; Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 2; James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: And Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 5; Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), xiii; Stuart Weeks, *An Introduction to the Study of Wisdom Literature*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 1; Craig G. Bartholomew, “Old Testament Wisdom Today,” in *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, ed. David G. Firth and Lindsay Wilson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 3-33.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Christian Gertz et al., eds., *T&T Clark Handbook of the Old Testament* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 523.

<sup>4</sup> The definition and borders of “wisdom literature,” namely “Old Testament wisdom,” is widely debated. Hermann Gunkel in the early twentieth century contributed to the base understanding of the current “wisdom literature” paradigm from his form-critical observation, suggesting that the *Sitz im Leben* of wisdom literature might have been “the counsel of the sages with old bearded men who sat at the city gates and gave advice to young men” (see Mark R. Sneed, ed., *Was There a Wisdom Tradition?: New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom*, SBL [Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015], 2; Bartholomew, “Old Testament Wisdom Today,” 3). The problem with coining “wisdom literature” and how it affects the reception of Ecclesiastes as a pivotal book in the “wisdom tradition” will be explored in later sections.

Writings mainly consists of records “of practical life and cult” during the postexilic Jewish communities.<sup>5</sup> The inclusion of Ecclesiastes as a part of the Writings within the Hebrew Scriptures seemingly came from the driving force to include “pluralistic gatherings of materials for practical use in community life, not a collection of an orthodox handbook of faith and cult,” as Erhard S. Gerstenberger observes.<sup>6</sup> While Ecclesiastes hosts topics similar to the Ancient Near East pragmatic reflections engaged in “critical questionings concerning the basics of human, divine, and natural existence,”<sup>7</sup> it perhaps became a reference along or against Torah in the communities that “harboured wisdom traditions, including critical or skeptical variants.”<sup>8</sup> Additionally, according to Julius Steinberg’s research on the canonical sequence of the Writings, the grouping of the wisdom books among the Writings in the Hebrew Bible is based on thematic considerations: wisdom thinking.<sup>9</sup> In short, Ecclesiastes’ inclusion in the Hebrew Writings is not due to its form or genre but rather its content that either affirms or questions the Torah in the Jewish community.

In terms of content within OT “wisdom literature,” the book of Ecclesiastes is presented in a unique fashion compared to the two other main titles—Job and Proverbs.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Erhard S. Gerstenberger, “Qoheleth in the Writings,” in *The Oxford Handbook of The Writings of The Hebrew Bible*, ed. Donn F. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 255.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>9</sup> Julius Steinberg, “The Place of Wisdom Literature in an Old Testament Theology,” in *The Shape of the Writings*, ed. Julius Steinberg and Timothy J. Stone (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 152-60. According to Steinberg, there are four characteristics of wisdom thinking that leads to the formation of wisdom texts: empirical epistemology, paradigmatic understanding of reality, connection between knowledge and life, and the “fear of the Lord” as the basis of wisdom (*The Shape of the Writings*, 154-55). This entails that the process to include the wisdom books among the Writings in the Hebrew bible considers contents about “wisdom” as a categorical identifier.

<sup>10</sup> Other books that were traditionally viewed as a part of wisdom literature in OT include Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus), Wisdom of Solomon, some texts in the Apocrypha (Deuterocanonical Books), and occasionally some wisdom Psalms and Song of Songs. See categorization by Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 17; Dell, ‘*Get Wisdom, Get Insight*’, 3; Firth and Wilson, *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom*, xiv; Weeks, *An Introduction*, 1; and Samuel L. Adams and Matthew Goff, eds, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Wisdom Literature* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 4. Although Perdue does not explicitly map out which books are canon for wisdom literature in his book *Wisdom Literature*, but it can be seen from the table of contents of his work and it yields

The book of Job is constructed by dialogues and debates between Job, his friends, and God himself with a touch of narrative storytelling. In Proverbs, there are collections of wisdom sayings, namely, proverbial sayings that teach the readers the way of life in a sense that pleases God. The book of Ecclesiastes consists of a single character, “Qohelet” (קהלת), who speaks to himself and the audience in the form of a monologue, making empirical assumptions and evaluations through his sole voice about the wisdom he sees in this world. In addition, using his voice the speaker also lures the readers into his subjective world-building while weaving poetry, proverbial sayings, and parodies of ancient royal autobiography into his speech.<sup>11</sup> Simply put, the oral style of the book incorporates a narrative storytelling with didactic forms in the shape of a monologue. By speaking with a narrative first-person’s voice, Qohelet addresses his life experience and evaluates this world accordingly. The character Qohelet seeks an ultimate wisdom or understanding of life and of this world while remaining critical towards traditional Israelite wisdom.

Although the character “Qohelet” is named in Ecclesiastes, in times before and during early modernity (before 1800) the book was still commonly recognized as a work authored by Solomon the King.<sup>12</sup> This is mainly due to the opening remark, “The words of Qohelet, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Eccl 1:1), and because in the following sections it stresses on the character Qohelet’s search of wisdom and his autobiographical narrative, which speaks of his immense wealth and ludicrous life in the royal court in Eccl

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similar results. In this research, I will focus more on the books that are canon in the protestant Old Testament.

<sup>11</sup> By “ancient royal autobiography,” this research strictly points toward the cluster of ancient literature from the Ancient Near East (ANE), such as texts from Egyptian, Babylonian-Assyrian, or the general Mesopotamian cultures. These are the texts in antiquity that scholars of Ecclesiastes have frequently compared with. The definition and features of “autobiography” in modern day and in ANE literature will be discussed later in this chapter. See Georg Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD., 1950), 19-58; Tremper Longman III, “Fictional Akkadian Royal Autobiography: A Generic and Comparative Study” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1983); Y. V. Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 93.

2.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the figure “Qohelet” has been traditionally taken to be a surrogate name of Solomon. While there are scattered instances where the Solomonic authorship was questioned before 1800, such as Didymus the Blind (c. 313-98), the Babylonian Talmud (b. Baba Bathra 15a), Isaac ibn Ghiyath (1038-89), and Samuel ibn Tibbon (c. 1200), none of them gained traction throughout the history of scholarship.<sup>14</sup> According to Christianson, the shift of this paradigm came when Hugo Grotius (1644) critically examined the vocabulary used in Ecclesiastes and found similarities only in Daniel, Esdra, and the Chaldee paraphrasts.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the struggle to set apart Solomon from the author of Ecclesiastes continued until the early twentieth century. Hence, James A. Greissing in 1909 stated that “There are some who still believe Solomon wrote it. The linguists are absolutely positive it could not have been written by Solomon. But this question of authorship probably will never be settled.”<sup>16</sup> In the following years, it became more apparent that scholars have opted, from linguistic and literary evidence, to accept the fact that Solomon is not the author of the book. By the time of Gordis (1968), the view that Solomon is the author of the book has already “been universally abandoned” with “the growth of a truer recognition of the style, vocabulary, and world-outlook of Koheleth.”<sup>17</sup> With the current recognition that the book cannot be dated earlier than the fifth-century BCE due to its language and literary style heavily influenced by the Persian and Hellenistic eras, the possibility of a Solomonic authorship is simply cast out.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it is typical

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<sup>13</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth*, 5. See also Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 337. When using “Qohelet” in this research, I refer to the character in the book and not the historically assumed person, author, or narrator.

<sup>14</sup> See Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries*, 95-96.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 95. Christianson translates excerpts from Grotius’ *Annotata ad Vetus Testamentum* (Paris: 1644).

<sup>16</sup> James A. Greissing, “The Worst Understood Book,” *Methodist Review* 91 (1909): 734.

<sup>17</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth*, 5. “Ecclesiastes” will be used to refer to the title of the book throughout this research. In quotations, scholars may use “Qoheleth” or “Koheleth” as alternative transliterations to refer to the character or the name of the book, but both are the same as “Qohelet” here.

<sup>18</sup> Weeks, *An Introduction*, 71. The dating of the book no earlier than the fifth-century BCE incorporates a wider spectrum of views among contemporary scholarship, or else in many cases the book is said to be written no earlier than the third-century BCE and no later than Ben Sira, which is around 180 BCE (Gertz et al., eds., *T&T Clark Handbook*, 611; Dell, *Get Wisdom, Get Insight*, 50; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 62). C. L. Seow provides an in-depth socioeconomic analysis that due to the linguistic evidence in the text, the book should be dated between “the

for recent commentators to consider the book of Ecclesiastes to be a “work of imagination”<sup>19</sup> by an unknown author who created “the speech that is attributed to Qohelet—a fictional or fictionalized character.”<sup>20</sup> Hence, to understand the role and character of Qohelet in the book, it is best to take Qohelet as “*the literary persona of a radical philosopher* articulating, in an evocative rhythmic prose that occasionally scans as poetry, a powerful dissent from the mainline Wisdom outlook that is the background of his thought” as Alter suggests.<sup>21</sup> Taking traditional wisdom into the process of reconsideration and reevaluation, the fictional character Qohelet allows the author to express his contemplations through and through without the burden of his own presence.

The significance of the Solomonic shadow casting either over the author or the character begs the question: how should one read and understand the book of Ecclesiastes? When presented with a piece of advice from Qohelet in the book, does one take that knowledge as simply a piece of wisdom, or should the readers understand that Solomon, his social status, and the setting he lived in are the world behind the text that actively and definitively influence that wisdom? It is often risky to associate the wisdom advice from Qohelet with the traditional wisdom of Solomon or the Hebrew faith since Qohelet’s tone is widely recognized as skeptical, and “the most shocking is his questioning

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second half of the fifth and the first half of the fourth centuries B.C.E.” See Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 21-36. His views are influential among contemporaries in a socio-historical manner, and thus should be considered. Contrarily, although Daniel C. Fredericks’ grammatical analysis of the Hebrew usage in Ecclesiastes attempts to justify the dating as far as the eighth or seventh-century BCE, it overlooks the words borrowed from the Persian period that cannot be earlier than the fifth-century BCE. See Fredericks, *Qoheleth’s Language: Re-Evaluating Its Nature and Date*, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies, vol. 3 (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988). For a thorough reception of the dating and authorship of the book of Ecclesiastes since the Jewish *Midrashim*, see George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, Latest Impression, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980), 18-31.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin J. Segal, *Kohelet’s Pursuit of Truth: A New Reading of Ecclesiastes* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2016), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1-5: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 1st ed., International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 337. My emphasis.

of the doctrine of retribution” that goes very much against traditional teaching.<sup>22</sup> Hence, is the book categorized as “wisdom literature” because due to the hints toward Solomon who, in the scope of Hebrew biblical canon, is considered the key figure embodying Israelite wisdom itself? Or is it because this Qohelet speaker in the text simply uses Solomon as a disguise to challenge the conventional wisdom in Israel? These questions have perplexed commentators since the days of the early church fathers, and they also highlight the problem of the genre classification of Ecclesiastes and where it stands among the clusters of books in OT (e.g. categories like “wisdom literature” or “Solomonic Corpus”).<sup>23</sup> It is therefore imminent to distinguish the voices of the author, the narrator, and the character (i.e. Qohelet) and where the specter of Solomon stands among these possibilities.

## **2. The Voices *in* and *of* Ecclesiastes**

Like any book, a historical author must have written Ecclesiastes. The issue at hand, however, is that the author cannot be identified through the passing of time and the lack of external historical evidence as of the current state of scholarship. As much as early interpreters try to force the impression of the Solomonic authorship,<sup>24</sup> the current proposed dating has proven it unlikely. Yet, by the design of the literary styles and contents, the author was clearly creating a royal status for the speaker “Qohelet,” even indirectly hinting at Solomon the king (Eccl 1:1, 12; 2:1-11). Speaking about the author, since the dating and setting of the book cannot be confirmed, readers are left without any substantial knowledge and background of the author to understand the text through his

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<sup>22</sup> Mark R. Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social-Science Perspective*, Society of Biblical Literature Ancient Israel and Its Literature v. 12 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 4.

<sup>23</sup> In terms of the “Solomonic corpus,” for instance, Dell observes King Solomon to be “at the heart of the ‘wisdom’ conundrum” and is the figure that Ecclesiastes “strongly alluded in its ‘royal autobiography’ section (Eccl. 1:12-2:24).” Dell, *The Solomonic Corpus of ‘Wisdom’ and Its Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 3.

<sup>24</sup> For examples of early Christian and Jewish commentators up until Martin Luther, see Barton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 19-21.

lens.<sup>25</sup> If the author is proven not to be Solomon and that his social setting is centuries after Solomon's royal court, why is he painting a royal or Solomonic guise over the character, "Qohelet," in the book? What is the purpose of revealing Qohelet's quest for wisdom for the book's intended audience? Additionally, why does the Solomonic and royal guise drop off halfway through the book? These are pivotal questions that shroud Ecclesiastes in mystery, especially in the framework where wisdom is set as a mode of teaching in the Jewish tradition. While the Solomonic implication or guise will be explored throughout this research, this section seeks to distinguish the different voices of the character in the book.

First, the role of the author is apparent: he is the writer of the book regardless of narrative positions and voices in the text. He is beyond the narrator and the character—the protagonist Qohelet—of the book. The author has total authority over the motivation of writing the text. Yet, as shown earlier, the author's location and role in history are lost to modern readers. In fact, not only modern readers find it difficult to interpret the book through the mysterious author, in *Midrash Qoheleth* the authorship of the book is deemed "unimportant" because "the more pressing concern is to create a forum for rabbinic discussion on a vast array of topics," and the significance of the Solomon's authorship is inconsequential to their discussion.<sup>26</sup> Although the author's intention to compose this book may show through the different voices presented throughout the text, namely the narrator or the character, his role in the overarching world-building within the text itself becomes rather peripheral. The key to understanding the world within the text instead lies with the speech of Qohelet and the narrator. Considering Ecclesiastes belonging to the corpus of "wisdom literature," through the author's composition he is not necessarily

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<sup>25</sup> As Seow notes, "we know practically nothing about the author personally" (*Ecclesiastes*, 37).

<sup>26</sup> Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries*, 94.

exposing his true self or his social setting since the text is presumably written with an instructional purpose.<sup>27</sup> In other words, any kind of evidence that can point towards the historical author is lost with the lack of external evidence, and the internal literary designs are most likely structured deliberately for teaching. At most, reading and interpreting a wisdom text allows the readers not to reconstruct the true author but the *impression of an assumed author by the reader*: “When a person reads a story, he or she will inevitably form some impression about that story’s author. The story itself conveys a sense of the author’s values and worldview.”<sup>28</sup> In the case of interpreting Ecclesiastes to find the intention of the author, the interpreter is in fact reconstructing the image and worldview of an assumed author who is pieced together *from* the textual evidences. Considering that Ecclesiastes consists of large chunks of Qohelet narrating his own story, the assumed author will turn out to be very similar to the character Qohelet himself.

Therefore, turning attention to the voices within the text, the book of Ecclesiastes can be seen as a story in the sense that it is an autobiography of the character Qohelet who goes on a journey in search of wisdom. Qohelet’s social status is introduced by the narrator who announces, “the words of Qohelet (קהלת), son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Eccl 1:1), and who proceeds to quote Qohelet’s famed utterance, “Illusion of illusions! All is but an illusion!” (1:2).<sup>29</sup> The key to the narrator’s presence is the third-person stance “says Qohelet (אמר קהלת)” (1:2) as opposed to Qohelet’s first-person storytelling

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<sup>27</sup> According to Crenshaw, the general goal of wisdom from the ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian literatures (commonly known as Ancient Near East [ANE] literature) and Israelite wisdom “was the formation of character and to make sense of life’s anomalies” (*Old Testament Wisdom*, 4). The sages that compose wisdom literature use styles that “alternates between brief maxims and sayings, instructions, and dialogue,” and the “perspective of teachers also carries from parental admonitions to courtier’s political counsel and ultimately to religious dogmatism” (*Old Testament Wisdom*, 12). It is therefore clear that wisdom literature was founded heavily on its didactic purpose towards the intended audience.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 5. Ecclesiastes can be categorized as a biblical narrative in an autobiography form, which I will elaborate more in the following sections.

<sup>29</sup> For the choice to translate הבל as “illusion,” see §4.3 of the Introduction. This is following Weeks’s rationale on the function of הבל in Qohelet’s discourse.

throughout the book. The narrator's presence is in fact minimalized throughout the text, only resurfacing briefly with "says Qohelet" in 7:27 and 12:8. Then there is the epilogue (12:9-14) which is considered by many scholars as an editorial addition, "an appendix of some sort."<sup>30</sup> Some scholars coin this section spoken by "the epilogist," i.e. the "frame narrator,"<sup>31</sup> who "commends the wise Qohelet, generalizes about the words of sages," and "addresses the ostensive audience of his remarks as *b<sup>e</sup>ni*, 'my son,' in the customary Wisdom fashion, thus implying the discourse-setting almost universal in didactic Wisdom Literature: a father giving instruction to his son."<sup>32</sup> While historical critics suggest that the epilogue is "at odds with Qohelet and thus as a later addition providing an orthodox correction to his unorthodox teachings," narrative critics who read the book in its totality try to "discern how the voice of the narrator relates to the voice(s) of Qohelet."<sup>33</sup> For instance, Martin A. Shields follows the former camp to suggest that the epilogist uses Qohelet's words "to disclose the failings of speculative wisdom" and concludes the book with the epilogue in order to redirect the students of speculative wisdom "to their religious heritage."<sup>34</sup> Arguing against Shields, Katharine J. Dell sees the epilogue as a confirmation of the quest that Qohelet embarks on, just as much as a more general statement: the collecting of wise words and many proverbs as the ultimate action of Qohelet's pursuit of wisdom.<sup>35</sup> In either case, the so-called "frame narrator" or epilogist still exists as the narrator that provides the third-person interference (the one stating

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<sup>30</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 391.

<sup>31</sup> See Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 363-66; Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 283; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 362. For an extensive analysis of the frame narrative strategy first proposed by Fox in 1977, see Eric S. Christianson, *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes*, JSOTSup 280 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1998).

<sup>32</sup> Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 363.

<sup>33</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 362.

<sup>34</sup> Martin A. Shields, *The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 239.

<sup>35</sup> Dell, "A Wise Man Reflecting on Wisdom," *Tyndale Bulletin* 71.1 (2020): 137-52.

“says Qohelet” in the text) in Qohelet’s tale while offering a final didactic commentary at the end of the book. Hence, as Christianson stresses, Ecclesiastes should be seen as a frame narrative, which is a text where “an external narrator narrates an inner story at its beginning and end, thereby framing (highlighting, privileging, delimiting etc.) the story that it narrates.”<sup>36</sup> The reason why the narrator is seen as the same as the epilogist is because the epilogue is the only section that provides the most information about the narrator himself.

Finally, if one were to understand how wisdom is portrayed and explored in the book, it is inevitably the first-person speech that presents the wisdom observations, namely, the speeches presented by Qohelet *himself*. Whereas Fox and Christianson focus on examining the frame narrative in the book and its relationship with Qohelet’s tale, this research takes a deeper dive into examining the words spoken by Qohelet in first person. The first-person speech in the book is abundant and dynamic in its design. Through a narrative scope, although it is clear that Qohelet is the protagonist/character in the tale, it is also evident that Qohelet *narrates* his own life through the form of an autobiography.<sup>37</sup> In other words, Qohelet is the internal narrator, the narrator who narrates his own character into being within the text, as opposed to the external narrator (i.e. “frame narrator”) of the epilogue. Qohelet brings himself into existence by naming himself קהלת, and introduces his royal identity by announcing himself as a “king over Israel in Jerusalem” in 1:12. Yet, there is no king in biblical history named “Qohelet” even when the frame-narrator introduces him as “the son of David” (1:1). Qohelet introduces his quest for the search of wisdom and the meaning of life (1:12-2:26) using the inner dialogic idiom “I spoke with my heart,” which also appears later in the text.<sup>38</sup> He employs personification

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<sup>36</sup> Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 56-57.

<sup>37</sup> Misch (1907), expert in autobiography in antiquity, defines autobiography as “the description (*graphia*) of an individual human life (*bios*) by the individual himself (*auto-*)” (*History of Autobiography*, 5).

<sup>38</sup> See Eccl 1:16; 2:1, 15; 3:17, 18.

not only to “my heart” (לִבִּי)<sup>39</sup> but also “my wisdom” (חִכְמָתִי) (2:9), “my eyes” (עֵינַי) (2:10), and “my hands” (יָדַי) (2:11) to create space for his inner dialogues. He emphasizes on his selfhood by using the first-person pronoun “I” (אֲנִי) which is uncommon in other biblical literatures but many in Ecclesiastes.<sup>40</sup> Notable to scholarship, Qohelet’s style of speech is reminiscent of ANE royal instruction, if not a direct imitation (perhaps a design by the author).<sup>41</sup> Adding that there are several clusters of text that justify Qohelet’s monologue through a narrative reading,<sup>42</sup> I find this a strong case to say that Qohelet’s first-person speech is very aligned with the self-portrayal in ancient royal autobiography.<sup>43</sup> As Misch observes in ancient self-portrayal, the subject of the autobiography reviews his life

. . . entirely to the moments when, in his judgment, he was at his best,  
and these moments are projected on to a single plane, so that he

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<sup>39</sup> לֵב appears a total of 42 times in Ecclesiastes (see 1:13, 16, 17; 2:1, 3, 10, 15, 20, 22, 23; 3:11, 17, 18; 7:2, 3, 4, 7, 21, 22, 25, 26; 8:5, 9, 11, 16; 9:1, 3, 7; 10:2, 3; 11:9, 10), and seemingly have different meanings according to their texts (Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 193-200).

<sup>40</sup> אֲנִי appears a total of 29 times in the book (see 1:12, 16; 2:1, 11, 12, 15, 18, 20; 3:17, 18; 4:1, 2, 4, 7, 8; 7:25, 26; 8: 2, 15).

<sup>41</sup> From a form-critical perspective on autobiography, see Seow, “Qohelet’s Autobiography,” in *Fortunate the Eyes That See: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Astrid B. Beck et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 278-79; Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography: A Generic and Comparative Study* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1991) 120-23; Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 17; Lelan Ryken and Tremper Longman III, eds., *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 268-80; Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 66-69. These scholars are just a fraction of scholarship who provide an identification of Ecclesiastes as an imitation of ANE royal fictional autobiography rooted in antiquity. I will examine this view in detail in later sections.

<sup>42</sup> See Eccl 1:12-2:26; 3:16-4:8; 5:13-6:6; 7:15-29; 8:9-9:3; 11:9-10.

<sup>43</sup> From a literary-critical perspective on autobiography, Christianson stresses that “without a constant ‘I,’ Qoheleth’s narration would lack the cohesive power that enables us to speak of Qoheleth as a unified, although multifaceted, persona” (*A Time to Tell*, 37). Similarly, Mary E. Mills who reads Ecclesiastes through the lens of narrative criticism and cultural exegesis observes that “a case can be made for describing the ‘I’ who speaks as a character within the book, which in turn can be labelled as an autobiography” (*Reading Ecclesiastes: A Literary and Cultural Exegesis*, Heythrop Studies in Contemporary Philosophy, Religion & Theology [Hants, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2003], 17). On the other hand, Jennifer L. Koosed who applies a deconstructive reading to Qohelet the character refuses to pin down the book as Qohelet’s “autobiography,” because scholarship has so conveniently confined this “autobiography” within the form of ANE royal instruction: “Once Qohelet connects to other works, the genre boundaries are drawn, and interpretation can commence” (*[Per]mutations of Qohelet: Reading the Body in the Book*, LHBOTS 429 [New York: T&T Clark, 2006], 30-33). Koosed is cautious in approaching Ecclesiastes as an “autobiographical” text, yet her investigations remain as close to an autobiographical analysis of Qohelet as ever while examining the repetitive notion of “I” within the text. Consequently, Koosed is conducting an investigation of Ecclesiastes as Qohelet’s own autobiography, stripped of the conventional genre identifiers in biblical studies and histories to maintain the pure definition of “autobiography” in modern understanding: “The reader does not know who Qohelet is beyond the words on the page” (*[Per]mutation of Qohelet*, 33). In other words, Qohelet speaks for himself through the text.

emphasizes that part of his particular existence which he considers worthy of permanent record, whether a sum-total of power and glory and pleasure or, as in later times, his character.<sup>44</sup>

Hence, although Qohelet exists as a character created by the author of Ecclesiastes, this research will treat Qohelet's action and words as the character's own, separate from the author. As Weeks stresses, "Qohelet himself need not be treated merely as a cypher for the author," but "we should also be conscious that the use of Qohelet's voice permits the author of Ecclesiastes to express provocative opinions that may likewise not have been his own."<sup>45</sup>

### **3. Purpose and Research Question**

Following the observations from the previous section, this research aims to demonstrate that the book has "a character who creates his own character: whether Qohelet is the author or, in some sense, a persona of the author, he is presented as the principal speaker."<sup>46</sup> Although the true author is lost in antiquity, it is likely that the character Qohelet served as a surrogate identity (persona) in which the author teaches his theology and worldview. Pre-modern and early modern interpreters see the character—without a clear distinction from author—heavily associated with historical roles: Solomon, sage, preacher, gatherer, old man... etc. The premise towards Qohelet was to identify him *as* a historical figure in certain settings in order to establish authority *through* that recognition of the Solomonic figure and/or the roles in the community, mainly because the content of the book was deemed controversial at the time. Consequently, the character is often examined and recognized through the identity or role of certain historical figures, so much so that it renders the character lifeless and devoid of the personal weight in his

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<sup>44</sup> Misch, *A History of Autobiography*, 20.

<sup>45</sup> Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1-5*, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, LHBOTS 541 (New York; London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 21.

speeches. There are few investigations that focus on the first-person speech of Qohelet that portray him as a dynamic and ever-adapting character. As Eunny P. Lee observes, “the language of first-person reflective speech gives way to speech that is increasingly weighted toward imperatives and admonitions, until it culminates in the formal address to a ‘youth’ in 11:9. The progression is distinctively theological and pedagogical in its thrust.”<sup>47</sup> Hence, I propose that Qohelet’s personal speech should be sought out and revisited as the focal point to understanding and reconstructing this character and his pedagogical purpose by using a literary-narrative approach.

This project seeks to explore the literary construction of Qohelet as character. It aims to analyze the autobiographical elements in the book by asking how the fictional autobiography of the character—mainly the first-person voice—contributes to the wisdom and theological reflections in the book. Through Qohelet’s speech, my analysis will use narrative criticism through close reading of the text,<sup>48</sup> to demonstrate that letting the character “Qohelet” speak of his self-evident understanding of life and the world will contribute to the understanding of his character and his theology within the text. In other words, by deciphering the literary hints in text and acknowledging locations where Qohelet reveals his personal contradictions, this study allows the character to speak for himself. While scholarship tends to focus on the content provided by the character’s speech, this research focuses specifically on the literary designs for Qohelet’s self-characterization. The contradictions in Qohelet’s speech are not to be taken lightly, as they are often the subject of dispute within scholarship. As Lee argues:

the contradictions in Ecclesiastes led to the expedient of historical criticism that the current form of the text must be the result of a

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<sup>47</sup> Eunny P. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet’s Theological Rhetoric*, Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 353 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 16-17.

<sup>48</sup> I will elaborate more on the close reading method in the methodology section. In short, it is an approach that is fundamentally grounded in New Criticism from literary studies in English literature.

complex compositional-redactional history. This approach allows readers to dismiss certain aspects of the book—including the themes of enjoyment and fear of God—as the product of editorial activity, and thus tangential to the message of the book. I argue, however, that the contradictory strains in Ecclesiastes are integral to Qohelet's discourse; they are part and parcel of the author's observations concerning the human condition. If the text is read as a unified composition, then neither the commendations of enjoyment nor the injunction to fear God may be dismissed as a secondary or peripheral concern. Instead, the interplay between these two important motifs must be interpreted anew.<sup>49</sup>

Hence, following the order of such unified reading of the book, this project will shed light on wisdom discourse's representation by understanding how stylized speech by the character or narrator in the text influences the meaning of wisdom topics without sacrificing the narrative hints within the text. The ultimate goal is to understand how through reconstructing the "Qohelet" character from his own first-person narrative and voice can the character himself contribute to the understanding and interpretation of Ecclesiastes. This research acknowledges the existence of Qohelet's self-contradictions and will seek to understand them through the character analysis. However, since Qohelet is treated as a character who is faced with real world issues, some contradictions are not meant to be solved but rather left as a literary device to demonstrate a certain theme.<sup>50</sup> Although there might be speculations during the process when dealing with

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<sup>49</sup> Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Weeks warning serves as a crucial reminder for scholars who intend to apply a purely literary approach to Ecclesiastes: "without any external evidence or objective criteria to control them, attempts to establish coherence in the text can very rapidly become attempts to make the text say whatever each commentator believes it should say" (*Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 10).

contradictions, the investigation will mainly focus on teasing out the literary and syntactic elements in the passage that point towards Qohelet's speech.

Commentaries often seek to categorize Ecclesiastes by themes, vocabularies, tones (e.g. pessimistic vs. optimistic), ideas, or in a broader sense, a generic theology of OT wisdom in comparison to those of Torah or the prophets. Potential social roles are often assigned to Qohelet—both as character or as a historical figure—based on the textual and formal similarity between Ecclesiastes and ANE royal testimony. However, these form-critical and genre-based categorizations break the dynamic unity of Qohelet as a *person* and limit the understanding of his speech. Even with the popular thematic and vocabulary-based analysis it is crucial to acknowledge the unity of the text so that these elements may serve as the links between the units of a seemingly redacted text that the historical-critical camp suggests. The repetition of keywords in the book “is not haphazard but purposive, occurring at critical junctures to connect the author's thoughts and advance his argument. When the repetition of a particular word or phrase appears at the outer edges of adjacent units, they form a series of ‘hinges’ that effectively link together various facets of Qohelet's reflections.”<sup>51</sup> Contrarily, analyzing the ever-transforming character of Qohelet will broaden, connect, and open possibilities where fragmented interpretations of the past come together and merge. Through dissecting the narrative first-person components, the research should show how Qohelet's character development functions within the text, how the autobiographical voice influence or participate in the meaning of the text, and how these elements simultaneously shape the character of Qohelet and the “wisdom” theology of the book. Qohelet is not a one-dimensional character but a growing, dynamic, and round character that transforms through his thoughts the more he ponders Wisdom. Hence, as Fox stresses in his

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<sup>51</sup> Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 18.

commentary, “the contradictions in the book of Qohelet are real and intended. We must interpret them, not *eliminate* them.”<sup>52</sup>

#### 4. State of Research

##### 4.1 “Wisdom Literature” since the Twentieth Century

Before embarking on the investigation of Qohelet’s character in the book of Ecclesiastes, how the categorization of “wisdom literature” in the Old Testament came into being should be examined first. It was initially established according to methods within historical criticism, namely form criticism. The reason “wisdom literature” is put in quotation in this research thus far is due to the fact that it has been a loosely defined category albeit being used for decades. Hermann Gunkel (1906) set the stage for the later categorization of “wisdom literature” within OT studies with his form-critical approach in his essay “*Die Israelitische Literatur*.”<sup>53</sup> He marked the modern paradigmatic position by citing Jer 18:18 and demonstrating that the *Sitz im Leben* for the wisdom sages “were long-bearded men who sat together in open squares or in the gates (Prov. 1.20-21) exchanging the sayings they learned in their youth, while the young were to listen and to learn wisdom.”<sup>54</sup> Gunkel observes that the distinction between the form of OT wisdom versus prophecy and Torah are vastly different, especially in Proverbs, and therefore argues that OT wisdom forms a category of its own, “secondary, derivative and late.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 3. His emphasis.

<sup>53</sup> According to Armin Siedlecki who translated this piece, this essay by Gunkel was first published in *Kultur der Gegenwart*, which was later reprinted in 1925 and 1963. It was heavily cited but had not been fully translated into English, which one can assume that its influence trickled into the English scholarship later than its published date. But the essay is influential in a sense that it marks “the first text in which Gunkel uses the now famous expression *Sitz im Leben* (‘setting in life’, translated ‘social context’ here) to describe the application and use of biblical texts in their ancient contexts,” and that it is “the first comprehensive classification of biblical genres and literary forms presented within a historical framework” (“The Literature of Ancient Israel by Hermann Gunkel,” introduced and translated by Siedlecki in *Relating to the Text: Interdisciplinary and Form-Critical Insights on the Bible*, 26).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70. See also Bartholomew, “Old Testament Wisdom Today,” 7; Sneed, *Was There a Wisdom*, 2.

<sup>55</sup> Bartholomew, “Old Testament Wisdom Today,” 7.

Crenshaw, who can be viewed as a successor to Gunkel's line of thought, also suggested since the first edition of his *Old Testament Wisdom* (1981) that wisdom sages might be "a professional class" of its own that disregards the "dominant themes of Yahwistic thought: the exodus from Egypt, election of Israel, the Davidic covenant, the Mosaic legislation, the patriarchs, the divine control of history and movement toward a glorious moment when right will triumph."<sup>56</sup> Indeed, even for modern scholars like Dell (2000), OT wisdom literature still carries that feeling "to be a strange companion to the rest of the Old Testament because it does not concern itself with the covenant or the saving history of Israel."<sup>57</sup> Hence, the view that the wisdom sages in Israel belong to a separate class or school was heavily influential throughout the twentieth century.<sup>58</sup>

Gunkel, being the pioneer of form criticism in early twentieth century, led to the result that form critical approach also became dominant in OT wisdom literature studies and diminished other approaches used by commentators. His major contribution to form criticism is the establishment that "a genre is made up of three elements—form, content and context."<sup>59</sup> Two dominant views derive from the form-critical tradition: besides Gunkel's hypothesis that wisdom sages are a class/school of its own, there is also the popular view that the form and genre in the textual evidences in wisdom literature are

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<sup>56</sup> Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 24.

<sup>57</sup> Dell, *'Get Wisdom, Get Insight'*, 2.

<sup>58</sup> In terms of the social location of such class, see John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue, eds., *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 95-181; Perdue, ed., *Scribes, Sages, and Seer: The Sage in the Eastern Mediterranean World* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 1-34; G. I. Davies, "Were There Schools in Ancient Israel?" in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton*, eds. John Day, Robert P. Gordon and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 199-211. However, Whybray had long stood against this position, arguing that there is no proof that an institution of class of wise men existed, and rather the group consists of educated citizens "who were accustomed to read for edification and pleasure" (*The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament* [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974], 69). Fox is the most recent skeptic against a distinct faction of wisdom sages, suggesting that there simply is not enough evidence to prove such a fact since "most of Israelite wisdom is anonymous" with the exception of the "archetypal sage Solomon" (an assumed figure) and Ben Sira ("Three Theses on Wisdom," in *Was There a Wisdom*, 73-74).

<sup>59</sup> Dell, *Solomonic Corpus of 'Wisdom'*, 2. Dell quotes from Gunkel's *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*, translated by Thomas Horner (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) with the original publication in German (1926). This is also the approach that Dell uses in her book *'Get Wisdom, Get Insight'*.

parallel to that of many ancient Near Eastern literature.<sup>60</sup> The result of the latter leads to the hypothesis that authors of OT wisdom literature must have immense knowledge of those ANE text, and in the case of Ecclesiastes, the author *must have* imitated the form and styles of ANE royal autobiography. However, there is simply not enough historical evidence that can prove this directly, let alone the difficulty of pinpointing the dating and social setting of ANE literature. Using Ecclesiastes for example, commentaries by Barton (1980), Crenshaw (1988), R. N. Whybray (1989), Roland E. Murphy (1992), Seow (1997), Fox (1999), Norbert Lohfink (2003), Thomas Krüger (2004) and so forth have all been influenced by such thought and reported on the parallelism in content between the *Gilgamesh Epic* and Eccl 9:7-10, with some further attempting to link the form and content of Ecclesiastes with ancient Egyptian literature. This habit of making connections with ANE literature become even more evident when the opening of the book gives Qohelet a royal autobiographical introduction in 1:1 and 1:12, which are claimed to be similar to the self-announcing kings in ANE royal testimonies. However, (1) the “I, Qohelet, king over...” statement in 1:12 is simply too short to prove that it is a direct imitation of ANE royal autobiographical openings, and (2) Qohelet’s kingly identity does not carry throughout the full length of the book, and his true historical identity lacks any evidence. Such a parallelism does not guarantee that the book is shaped accordingly to ANE literatures, and diachronic analysis of the book linking to ANE sources are nearly nonexistent in historical evidence.

As such, genre history within form criticism is too often relied on to define OT wisdom texts as a direct successor of ANE literature even though the similarities are found in small portions of the text, sometimes even as short as a formulaic sentence usage.

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<sup>60</sup> Dell, *‘Get Wisdom, Get Insight’*, 10-11. In “wisdom literature,” it is the connection between the given text and ANE literary sources that is often exploited. However, this is not to say that it is not useful in its own right but rather as a point of reference in cooperation with other exegetical methods.

Hence, although it is rightly so that wisdom literature in OT should be accounted for its formal similarities with its ANE literature counterparts, current scholarship around and after the twenty-first century have become more cautious in case it tries to “shape it [Israelite material] into the concerns of extra-biblical material” that may distort the nature and contexts of OT wisdom texts.<sup>61</sup> As Weeks (2015) critiques,

We cannot usefully insist that such works must correspond in their totality to any single set of generic conventions, and it is famously difficult to describe the characteristics of specific genres in a way that neither excludes many tests commonly supposed to belong to that genre nor abandons any pretense of precision. Generic classification has to deal, furthermore, with the problem that there are different types of convention and expectation involved in the interaction between text and reader, and it would clearly be unhelpful to insist that all our generic descriptions must relate to some single aspect of texts, be it structural, contextual, or thematic, when the ways in which we naturally link or distinguish texts relate to no such single aspect. . . . A work may in principle, therefore, belong in one genre according to its form, another according to its content, and yet another according to the context in which it is used.<sup>62</sup>

As shown, solely relying on form-critical methodologies is not without its limitations, even though the practice has continued throughout OT wisdom scholarship in the twentieth century. It is urgent, therefore, to seek out other approaches than simply relying on form criticism to understand the categorization and understanding of the essence of

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<sup>61</sup> Dell, *‘Get Wisdom, Get Insight’*, 12.

<sup>62</sup> Weeks, “Wisdom, Form and Genre,” in *Was There a Wisdom*, 162-63.

“wisdom literature” within the Old Testament. Form criticism and genre analysis must cooperate with other literary methodologies to tease out the literary details and genealogy hidden within the text itself.

Alternatively, there have been quite a few scholars who have engaged in the literary approach to wisdom literature in the OT. For instance, Alter acknowledges the wisdom school hypothesis from the form-critical perspective but remains distant from its influence; he maintains a literary reading of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes with remarkable treatment on their poetic features in his translation and commentary *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (2010).<sup>63</sup> Earlier in 1987, Meir Sternberg delivered one of the most recognizable research on a literary reading to the Old Testament where he immediately poses the questions, “What goals does the biblical narrator set himself? What is it that he wants to communicate in this or that story, cycle, book? What kind of text is the Bible, and what roles does it perform in context?”<sup>64</sup> These questions emphasize the importance of reading biblical texts through the lens of the narrator. Both Job and Ecclesiastes have been included in his investigation since both include narrative dimensions in the texts. What the literary camp—like Alter and Sternberg—facilitates in relation to its form-critical counterpart is the capacity to “move from a focus on the composition of Old Testament wisdom books to close attention to *the literary shape of the books as we have received them*.”<sup>65</sup> Literary approaches on OT wisdom literature brought forth various methods from literary studies, such as New Criticism,<sup>66</sup> structuralism, as

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<sup>63</sup> See Alter, *The Wisdom Books*. Alter has been active in the camp of the narrative readings of the bible as early as 1981, with his two major works: *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Revised and Updated ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011); Alter and Frank Kermode, eds, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (London: Fontana Press, 1987).

<sup>64</sup> Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 1.

<sup>65</sup> Bartholomew, “Old Testament Wisdom Today,” 14. His emphasis.

<sup>66</sup> New Criticism is a school of literary critics in English literature that is rooted in English Romanticism since the 1940s. The New Critics argue that in order to approach a text, “readers need to focus on the ‘system of relationships’ that are operating within the text, rather than on those that may operate between the text and the world beyond its boundaries” (Stephen Matterson, “The New Criticism,” in *Literary Theory and Criticism*:

well as postmodernism. For instance, J. A. Loader would be the structuralist representative of wisdom scholars, with his *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (1979) and *Ecclesiastes: A Practical Commentary* (1986).<sup>67</sup> Lohfink (2003), although continuously working with traditional historical critical scholars, is also an advocator for the New Criticism approach and incorporates the method into his commentaries.<sup>68</sup> Then there is Fox, who has always been on the side of the literary and narrative reading of Ecclesiastes since his groundbreaking article “Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qoheleth” in 1977.<sup>69</sup> Postmodern readings of OT wisdom include figures like David J. A. Clines (1998), the one who initiates and provides dialogues between postmodernism and OT wisdom literature, particularly Job.<sup>70</sup> In addition, Mills applies a narrative criticism and cultural exegesis in *Reading Ecclesiastes: A Literary and Cultural Exegesis* (2003), and Koosed reads Ecclesiastes through a deconstructive scope in *(Per)mutations of Qohelet* (2006). To use Lohfink as a brief example against the ANE parallelism, he draws a distinction between the literary composition of Ecclesiastes and the ANE forms as follows:

The whole book is laced together by an artful use of key words, in a manner that is not otherwise to be found in the ancient Near East. There results a mysterious web in which every element is connected with all the others, and all interpreters who attempt to find a single

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*An Oxford Guide*, ed. Patricia Waugh [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 170-71). It gave birth to the so-called “close reading” method that is widely used in teaching literature in the English-speaking world. Simply put, New Criticism is an approach that focuses on the world within the text, not before or after the text.

<sup>67</sup> J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979); *Ecclesiastes: A Practical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986).

<sup>68</sup> Lohfink recalls in his commentary on Ecclesiastes that he was exposed to and was fascinated by “that school of literary criticism called the ‘New Criticism’ in England and North America” which taught him “to pay attention to the concrete form of the text and its structures much more than the previous generation [of German scholars] had” (*Qoheleth*, trans. Sean McEvenue, CC [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003], viii).

<sup>69</sup> Fox, “Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qoheleth,” *HUCA* 48 (1977), 83-106.

<sup>70</sup> David J. A. Clines, *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays 1967-1998*, JSOTSup 292 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 719-822.

linear line of thought become helplessly tangled in this subtler universe of discourse. Yet there is an organization to the whole.<sup>71</sup>

As shown, Lohfink employs the close reading method used by the New Critical approach. Notably, he takes the text as a complete unity rather than chunks of editorial material. These are examples of scholars who have favored methodologies attached to literary studies to examine the texts in OT “wisdom literature.”

Therefore, one of the key factors to reading OT wisdom texts as literature is the commitment to reading the text in its totality and unity. In short, throughout the decades that the corpus of “OT wisdom literature” has developed, form criticism and historical criticism have been the major perspective in forming such a wisdom “genre.” However, these methods have been tackled and critiqued since the definitions and boundaries of the so-called “wisdom literature” are inconsistent and blurry. In fact, it is this exact vagueness, “abstract, ill-defined, circularly justified, modernly developed, and extrinsically imposed definition of the category [of Wisdom Literature]” that allowed “scholars to extend the boundaries of Wisdom Literature indefinitely, leading to a pan-sapiential epidemic in biblical scholarship,”<sup>72</sup> as Will Kynes critiques. This debate has been ongoing in modern scholarship a little less than the recent decade where scholars attempt to answer the question about the nature of the wisdom “tradition.” Take Sneed’s collection of essays *Was There a Wisdom Tradition?* (2015) for instance, the contributors fit a spectrum of positions on this issue:

Some contributors radically question the notion of a wisdom tradition, at least in the sense that this has been understood (Weeks, Sneed, Saur, Heckl, Kynes, Shupak). Others question the paradigm but not in radical

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<sup>71</sup> Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 7.

<sup>72</sup> Will Kynes, *An Obituary for “Wisdom Literature”: The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.

ways (Fox and Hamilton). Others occupy more a middle position of sorts, affirming the paradigm but qualifying it in new ways (Dell, Miller, Schellenberg). Forti stands alone as affirming the paradigmatic position without modification.<sup>73</sup>

As shown, there is a notable movement towards the skeptical about how the wisdom tradition should be viewed, with urges that new criteria be established. Weeks sums up why the debate on the “wisdom tradition” as genre is so problematic: “biblical scholars tend to import form-critical assumptions into discussions of genre, even when they are not seeking explicitly to undertake form-critical examinations.”<sup>74</sup>

The recent critiques on the traditional assumption on OT wisdom literature thus opens new grounds to involve more approaches and methods to provide different ways of reading the texts. Besides using methods stemming from literary studies, such as New Criticism or postmodernism, intertextuality has risen up as an approach that specifically tackles the generic assumptions within wisdom. Dell and Kynes are the leading figures who apply such an approach which results in “more integration across the canon of scripture (in its broadest sense) and less of a piecemeal approach to texts.”<sup>75</sup> Indeed, it is through this reexamination of the “wisdom corpus” in modern scholarship that allows

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<sup>73</sup> Sneed, *Was There a Wisdom*, 3. Sneed’s collection of essays marks a crucial point in wisdom scholarship where the established foundation of the wisdom corpus is critically examined as opposed to the traditional view that OT wisdom is a “genre” on its own.

<sup>74</sup> Weeks, “Wisdom, Form and Genre,” in *Was There a Wisdom*, 165. For Weeks, it is important to realize that generic classification has to deal “with the problem that there are different types of convention and expectation involved in the interaction between text and reader, and it would clearly be unhelpful to insist that all our generic descriptions must relate to some single aspect of texts, be it structural, contextual, or thematic, when the ways in which we naturally link or distinguish texts relate to no such single aspect” (“Wisdom, Form and Genre,” 162-63). This phenomenon is noticeable among Ecclesiastes scholarship as many tend to take sections of the text and directly relate them to ANE literary genres i.e. royal autobiographies. It is with this view that traditional scholars tend to take Solomon as the author of the book and that the dating of the book is far more ancient than it really is (3-5 century BCE). See Weeks critique also in his *An Introduction*; also Dell in *The Solomonic Corpus*.

<sup>75</sup> Dell, *Solomonic Corpus*, 31. For intertextuality as an approach to read and examine wisdom, see Dell and Kynes’ *Reading Job Intertextually* (2013), *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually* (2014), and *Reading Proverbs Intertextually* (2017).

more diversity in the readings of wisdom texts. It is crucial to acknowledge the warring state of methodologies within wisdom literature because it opens spaces where the once marginalized perspectives in wisdom studies are invited to sit along the long-upheld form-critical perspective. The benefit of applying literary analysis as a counterpart of the traditional form criticism is that it allows for different “readings of aspects of wisdom texts that have often been seen as contradictory, with its arsenal of approaches to irony, paradox, contradictory juxtaposition, ambiguity and so on.”<sup>76</sup> Hence, this research builds on this ground to provide a narrative perspective on the book of Ecclesiastes through the voices in the text.

#### **4.2 The Reception of “Qohelet” in Scholarship**

To begin with, in the book of Ecclesiastes, remarks and evaluations by Qohelet are often very personal, inconsistent throughout the text, and speak against traditional Hebrew wisdom. Although interpreters in the past tend to associate the figure<sup>77</sup> with King Solomon, this Solomonic identification seems to fade away as one reads further and later into the text. Due to the figure’s inconsistent evaluation of life and wisdom, it can be assumed that this is a figure that is thinking among himself with a troubled mind. As a result, Qohelet’s strong individualism must be read along the lines, serving as a reminder that this is not any one-dimensional figure but a person who is battling with his own indecisiveness according to what he observes in this world. Hence, since the early days there has been trouble within the rabbinic circles questioning “its [the book’s] suitability for public instruction and circulation.”<sup>78</sup> In this section, I will focus on how “Qohelet” is viewed by scholarship throughout history, particularly in terms of autobiography.

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<sup>76</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 18.

<sup>77</sup> Here I am using “figure” to maintain the ambiguity of Qohelet’s role in reception history. In the following it will be stated whether he is seen as the author, the narrator, or the character.

<sup>78</sup> Koh, *Royal Autobiography*, 2. For intertextual evidence on the topic of Qohelet’s role in the Hebrew Bible, see Longman, “Qoheleth as Solomon: ‘For What Can Anyone Who Comes After the King Do?’ (*Ecclesiastes* 2:12),” in

#### 4.2.1 “Qohelet” as Solomon and the Author<sup>79</sup>

For a long time in history, the figure “Qohelet” in the book had been synonymous with King Solomon. For instance, Targum identifies “Qohelet as Solomon and regards the book as Solomon’s words of prophecy.”<sup>80</sup> During the pre-modern era, there was no distinction between Qohelet’s voice and the author’s voice, so Solomon being the likely candidate associated with the description in Eccl 1:1 “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” allowed early interpreters to unquestionably take the statement as the “proof” that Solomon is the book’s author. This view extended to Origen (185-254) as well, who notes that “in proverbs Solomon teaches moral science, in Ecclesiastes he teaches natural science,” and “in the Song of Songs Solomon teaches inspective science.”<sup>81</sup> Similarly, the early church fathers like Augustine or Chrysostom took it as a fact that Solomon was the author of the book.<sup>82</sup> Jerome although influenced by Origen, did not yield to the Solomonic authorship, but it was only due to his reluctance to attribute “any sinfulness or wrongdoing in the constructed Solomonic author he uses to read Ecclesiastes,” particularly on Solomon’s sexual transgressions.<sup>83</sup> Jerome still acknowledged the view from Jewish readers that the book was “written by a repentant Solomon after he had wrongly relied on his wisdom and wealth, offending God by his attachment to women.”<sup>84</sup> It wasn’t until Martin Luther during the Reformation that through the critical examination of the text he began to

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*Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, eds. Katharine Dell and Will Kynes, LHBOTS 587 (London, New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 42-56.

<sup>79</sup> See detailed synopsis of the historical development of Ecclesiastes interpretations in Koh’s work (*Royal Autobiography*, 2-17).

<sup>80</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 43.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. See also Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson, Ancient Christian Writers 26 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957), 41. For Origen, Ecclesiastes teaches “natural philosophy because the book reveals the true nature of material things to be vanity and shows us that the only worthwhile things are spiritual” (Thomas M. Bolin, *Ecclesiastes and the Riddle of Authorship*, BibleWord [New York: Routledge, 2017], 29).

<sup>82</sup> Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries*, 93.

<sup>83</sup> Bolin, *Ecclesiastes and the Riddle of Authorship*, 31.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

question the Solomonic authorship.<sup>85</sup> Simply put, the pre-critical commentaries of the book preceding the Reformation were basically confined to the belief that Solomon was the author *and* the speaker of the book, which meant that “Qohelet” is just a surrogate name for Solomon and also as the title of the book.

Although Luther contributed somewhat to the disavowal of Solomon as the author, the interpretations among pre-modern scholarship mostly kept with the same tradition, until Hugo Grotius in 1644 reaffirmed the position that Solomon is not the author of the book.<sup>86</sup> Grotius argued that “I do not believe it was Solomon, but [Ecclesiastes] was written in the name of the king, as being led by repentance to do it. The proof is that it contains many words which can only be found in Daniel, Esdras [i.e. Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah] and the Chaldee paraphrasts [i.e. targumim].”<sup>87</sup> Already Grotius is employing intertextual evidence to sift out the impossibility of the Solomonic authorship. His method proved convincing, and more and more did scholarship agree that the Solomonic authorship should be ruled out, even though exceptions persist. Grotius’ contribution to his “Qohelet” figure was to distance him from the Solomonic assumption and to hypothesize that the book was merely written with the Solomonic persona: “in the name of the king.” Finally, in 1875 Franz Delitzsch delivered the final blow to the Solomonic authorial assumption by providing “a full list of the *hapax legomena* as well as idioms and forms in Ecclesiastes” that can only occur in mishnaic Hebrew.<sup>88</sup> Although some late nineteenth century scholars continued to struggle to accept this linguistic approach due

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<sup>85</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 44. See Martin Luther, *Tischreden*, in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1 (Weimar: Böhlau), 1883-1993. Although this assessment of Luther’s contribution to the view is generally welcomed in scholarship, Luther’s works, especially early editions of his *Table Talk*, have been heavily revised and edited. In addition, Luther’s remarks on the Solomonic authorship have been contradictory, such as in this *Notes on Ecclesiastes* (1532) he suggests that Solomon spoke the contents of Ecclesiastes to prominent men after dinner, and these people put down and assembled his words into this book, which affirms the notion of a Solomonic authorship. See Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries*, 95.

<sup>86</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 44.

<sup>87</sup> Quoted and translated by Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries*, 95.

<sup>88</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 46.

to the traditional stance of the Solomonic authorship,<sup>89</sup> gradually this linguistic approach became widely quoted in scholarship and solidified the grounds where Qohelet can be seen only as the author's attempt to display a Solomonic guise.

#### **4.2.2 "Qohelet" as the Implied Author, Not Solomon**

Already in Grotius' argue in the last section, he opened a different possibility: that the book of Ecclesiastes was written *as if* it were by Solomon, but not really. Now the question emerges: who is Qohelet then? After Delitzsch had denounced the Solomonic authorship near the end of the nineteenth century, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that critics began to critically consider Ecclesiastes as the imitation of ANE royal autobiography, during the time when form criticism was more relied on than before. Robert Gordis (1951) is one of the early scholars in modern scholarship suggesting that Qohelet is a figure free for interpretation and not bogged down by the historical weight of the true author anymore.<sup>90</sup> His thoughts shed light on reading Ecclesiastes with a twist: instead of thinking that Solomon was the author, Qohelet now represents the voice of that anonymous author in antiquity which cannot be known, and therefore open for implications (i.e. the beginning of the implied author). Gordis pictured Qohelet as a wealthy aristocrat or a country gentleman residing in Jerusalem and could perhaps be "a teacher in one of the Wisdom academies."<sup>91</sup> He could also be a bachelor or an old man.<sup>92</sup> Gordis shows that it is possible to imagine Qohelet's social role once he has dropped the

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<sup>89</sup> For instance, James Bennet (1870) writes, "Though there are great difficulties in acknowledging Solomon as the author, we may still, in accordance with ancient Jewish and Christian usage, speak of him as the writer. We would not despoil the great monarch of a crown which we can place only on some vague, imaginary brow. It fits no head so well as that of the wise Solomon" (*The Wisdom of the King: Studies in Ecclesiastes* [Edinburgh: William Oliphant and Co., 1870], 4-5). See Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries*, 96-98.

<sup>90</sup> In his work, Gordis identifies a variety of Qohelet's identity through textual evidence while consistently referring to the man by his own name, and although he agrees that Qohelet should be understood "within the framework of the intellectual life of ancient Israel, ... his vision of life is definitely his own, the reaction of his personality to the world about him, individual in content and unique in expression" (*Koheleth*, 75).

<sup>91</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth*, 75-77.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

ties of the Solomonic label. Hence, for Gordis it is key to recognize that Qohelet “is merely adopting the role of King Solomon as a literary device” in the autobiographical introduction in Eccl 2.<sup>93</sup> Coming from the same stream of thought, Gerhard von Rad (1972) thinks that Qohelet in the book *is* the representation of the author, and by saying so, this concerns both authorship and literary construct.<sup>94</sup> In addition, von Rad employs form criticism to hint at royal autobiography’s similarity with the Royal Testament literary type. The contact point of autobiographical literature, therefore, is deeply rooted in the historical observation about the similarities between the form of the book with ANE testimonial literatures.

Gordis’ and von Rad’s view were in a way influential to the scholarship that followed. From this form-critical perspective, Seow notes that the “I am Qohelet” (אני קהלת) remark (1:12) is identical to the personal pronoun + personal name formula in West Semitic and Akkadian royal inscriptions, which suggests an autobiographical imitation through the Solomonic guise.<sup>95</sup> Longman agrees by comparing the genre and form of Ecclesiastes with multiple ANE literatures,<sup>96</sup> arriving at his conclusion that Ecclesiastes is a “framed wisdom autobiography.”<sup>97</sup> Lelan Ryken also stands with this argument.<sup>98</sup> Christianson has also compared the similarities between Ecclesiastes and ANE texts, such as *Hardjedef*, *Kagemni*, and *Amenemhet*.<sup>99</sup> Koh’s work also firmly believes and stresses that the author seemingly imitated West Semitic and Akkadian royal inscriptions. The author’s act of

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<sup>93</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 75-76.

<sup>94</sup> Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 226-27.

<sup>95</sup> Seow, “Qohelet’s Autobiography,” 278-79.

<sup>96</sup> Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*. In fact, Longman’s *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography* is a work purposed to prove that there is a generic similarity across ANE royal testaments, in which he defines fictional autobiography as “a composition where the life of an individual, real or imagined, is written by a second individual under the name of the first individual at a later period of time. Fictional autobiography is thus pseudonymous” (*Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 41).

<sup>97</sup> Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 17.

<sup>98</sup> Ryken and Longman, *A Complete Literary Guide*, 268-80.

<sup>99</sup> Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 66-69.

imitating ANE royal testimony, is why Ecclesiastes is coined a *fictional* royal autobiography in many commentaries. In a way, Qohelet becomes the agent of the author who writes as if he had lived the life of Qohelet before the reader's eyes.

It seems that in this range of Ecclesiastes research, there is no escape for autobiography from the discussion of the formal or generic similarities with ANE royal inscription. However, the confusion is that these scholars tend to talk about Qohelet's autobiography through form criticism in relation to the ancient "royal autobiography" styles as though Qohelet was *definitively* influenced by these genres and literatures, seemingly unaware that their observations often lead back to the discussion of the author's form, genre, and writing style instead of Qohelet as a fictional character. For instance, Longman would admit that he is unsure whether to treat Qohelet merely as a literary persona (i.e. not a real person) or a real person.<sup>100</sup> Undecided, he goes for the latter without giving more theological thought. It seems that this tendency to treat Qohelet as an equivalent to the real authors of ANE royal autobiography lacks a layer in the first-person voice presented by the character in the book itself, and "Qohelet" unfortunately becomes an agent of any historical author or editor of the book whom scholars are more interested in his writing style. This sacrifices the space to explore Qohelet as a fictional character. Perhaps there was not a distinction at all, for the interest of this stream of thought lies in the form of the book, and thus "Qohelet" becomes a convenient nickname for the assumed historical author.

Nonetheless, this type of viewpoint is not without its benefits, such as Jennie Barbour who observes that "in the mysterious name 'Qohelet' there is a backing away from a strict correspondence with Solomon," and thus she argues that through Qohelet's narrating presence his persona is cast "not as Solomon alone but as a pastiche of Israel's kings"

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<sup>100</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 9.

which carries the weight of Israel's national historical memory.<sup>101</sup> For Barbour, Qohelet carries the identity of not only one implied author but a collective identity that expresses values more inclined to the nation's past as opposed to the settings of ANE royal autobiographies.<sup>102</sup> Barbour's assessment of the royal voice of Qohelet departs from the obsession to link the opening of the book directly with ANE influence, and thus opens up a possibility to handle Qohelet's royal voice separate from the Solomonic entitlement while still falling in line with Israel's cultural memory. Indeed, in the sense of a royal discourse, Qohelet's words mark his regret as a king (e.g. Eccl 2:11-23) and this is distinctively different from the celebration of kingship in ANE royal inscriptions. After all, as Thomas Bolin suggests, "plausible scenarios for a Jerusalem author writing in Hebrew sometime in the 4th to 3rd centuries BCE to have had access to a 17th-century BCE Akkadian composition are hard to come by."<sup>103</sup>

#### **4.2.3 "Qohelet" as the Character on His Own**

Breaking the tradition with the scholars who focus more on style than character, Fox (1977) paved the way to argue that Ecclesiastes is both wisdom literature *and* narration.<sup>104</sup> This perspective comes from the New Criticism in literary studies and brings about the narrative approach to Ecclesiastes, with Fox as the pioneer. He agrees that the book is a royal testament because it "is an Egyptian Wisdom genre in which the speaker, a king, relates his experiences to his son and gives advice applicable to him in

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<sup>101</sup> Jennifer Barbour, *The Story of Israel in the Book of Qohelet: Ecclesiastes as Cultural Memory*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 10.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 16. Barbour makes the following questioning, "the more realist comparisons with ancient Near Eastern texts and artefacts all hypothesize a strangely direct route of literary genesis across long stretches of time and place: did Qohelet really know and copy Assyrian stela, Egyptian tomb texts, or Greek statue-inscriptions?" (*The Story of Israel*, 16.)

<sup>103</sup> Bolin, *Ecclesiastes and the Riddle of Authorship*, 47. See also Joseph Ryan Kelly, "Sources of Contention and the Emerging Reality Concerning Qohelet's *Carpe Diem* Advice," *Antiguo Oriente* 8 (2010): 117-34.

<sup>104</sup> Bartholomew, "Old Testament Wisdom Today," 20. See Fox, "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qoheleth," *HUCA* 48 (1977).

particular.”<sup>105</sup> Fox sets apart the character Qohelet’s speech from being merely the composition of the real author and allowing it to break away from the pitfall of taking Qohelet as an associated identity of the author. Fox identifies three layers in the narrative structure of the voices in the book: (1) the “frame-narrator” (i.e. the epilogist) who is the teller of the tale, who then tells about (2) “Qohelet-the reporter, the narrating ‘I,’ who speaks from the vantage point of old age,” and reflects on (3) “Qohelet-the-seeker, the experiencing ‘I,’ the younger Qohelet who made the fruitless investigation.”<sup>106</sup> This layering of the narrative voices within the book allows new look into Qohelet *as* character, where new meanings can now be read through the lens of both the frame-narrator and Qohelet. In addition, Qohelet’s character becomes more dynamic than one-dimensional since every reflection he makes in the story is a reflection on his past self. In other words, readers are looking at a Qohelet who is pondering the life of his former self. The dynamic layering of the same character in monologue creates space for inconsistencies to exist, and it explains why the text itself has so many contradictions against itself. For Fox, “the author creates an ambiguity which allows readers freedom to choose which position they will align themselves with.”<sup>107</sup>

Following in Fox’s footsteps, Christianson straightforwardly acknowledges Ecclesiastes as an autobiography given its concern “with the events of the life of the primary *narrator*.”<sup>108</sup> He accredits Qohelet’s self-presentations by suggesting to recognize the “I” voice in the text, or else “Qoheleth’s narration would lack the cohesive power that enables us to speak of Qoheleth as a unified, although multifaceted, persona.”<sup>109</sup> Here is a transition in which the consideration of Qohelet’s autobiography

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<sup>105</sup> Fox, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004), xiii.

<sup>106</sup> Fox, “Frame-Narrative,” 91.

<sup>107</sup> Bartholomew, “Old Testament Wisdom Today,” 21.

<sup>108</sup> Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 36. My emphasis.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

has shifted away from representing the author's style of writing to seeking the narrative evidences through the character's own voice. In other words, the character Qohelet is fully freed from the burden of the authorial assumption. Christianson's view initiates the possibility that Qohelet is a multi-faceted character instead of just a one-dimensional persona. In line with this view is this research, which proposes that the voice of the "I" within the book is from the same character Qohelet. Different from Fox who takes Qohelet-the-reporter (the old Qohelet) and Qohelet-the-seeker (the young Qohelet) as two characters, this research sees both belonging to the same character, just constantly in a monologue through memory and unique literary designs. However, Weeks warns that labeling Qohelet's monologue as autobiography is not without its limitations, since "whatever we may glean about him from the way he is portrayed, Qohelet shows hardly any interest in telling us about himself, or about any aspect of his life that lies outside his reflections, his enquiries, and his development as a consequence of those enquiries."<sup>110</sup> I tend to disagree since Qohelet's monologue is all about his evaluation of wisdom and the world he lives in, and his monologue is littered with the consequences of his pursuit as his character develops through heavy self-questioning. For Weeks, the lack of autobiographical remarks might lead the readers to "look more toward instructions as a parallel" and to arrive at the assumption that the words of Qohelet belongs to "tomb autobiographies or to instructions."<sup>111</sup> It is reasonable that Weeks offer such a warning given that scholarship like Longman or Seow observe Qohelet's monologue under the label of fictional autobiographies, but if one can see Qohelet's autobiography on its own without such parallelism, it may offer a route to understand the dynamic capabilities of a man trying to grasp at a life that he could not understand fully. Weeks worries that genre

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<sup>110</sup> Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1-5*, 95.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

labels “might be too loaded a description for some of its associations with other literature,”<sup>112</sup> but in fact, labels like autobiography for Qohelet’s first-person narrative may provide, in Weeks’s own words, “both thematic and compositional aspects” that are supplementary to other genre labels associated with the text.<sup>113</sup> Using a variety of genres as “tools” to approach the text allows readers to gain closer distance to the original intention of the composition.

Other scholars like Mills and Koosed incorporate rhetorical and postmodern literary critical reading to identify the fictional autobiographical “I” of Qohelet.<sup>114</sup> For Mills, Qohelet’s autobiography from the literary standpoint serves as “a form of social commentary.”<sup>115</sup> Autobiography for her is no longer attached to authorship but

... a tool of biblical imagination through which the concept of selfhood is explored. ... “Qohelet” is both a single figure whose identity is determined by the content of an original text, and a self whose identity is composed of all the readers of Qohelet’s words, who empathize with this character in such a way as to add new layers of meaning to a “Qoheletic self.”<sup>116</sup>

That is, the selfhood of the Qohelet persona is constructed in a way that reflects the interaction between the original text and its reader. Therefore, the voice of the narrator becomes exceptionally important for the understanding of the text. This mode of tackling the autobiographical Qohelet through analyzing the literary unity of the text comes from the readily complete discourse and theories that come from English literary criticism and postmodern reading of literature. Koosed’s deconstructive analysis of Ecclesiastes

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<sup>112</sup> Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1-5*, 90.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Mills, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 30; Koosed, *(Per)Mutations of Qohelet*, 16.

<sup>115</sup> Mills, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 31.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

proposes “to read Qohelet as a fictional autobiography but not in a manner that (ab)uses the text to get to the author behind it.”<sup>117</sup> She points out the importance of understanding autobiography through the existing text and not through the author, who gradually fades into the background of the text. We see a transformation in the meaning of “author” as it may refer to the character that speaks oneself into existence through the text. The appeal of this understanding is that Ecclesiastes is a kind of stylized autobiography where the author is intentionally hidden but the autobiographical character is vivid in the text. Similarly, Mette Bundvad, who has also employed a narrative reading to tease out Qohelet’s idea on time, suggests that the author’s choice to obscurely allude King Qohelet to Solomon is an “elegant balancing act... to emphasize his [the author’s] point about the unreliability of memory, while also making use of the legendary reputation of Solomon.”<sup>118</sup> Hence, by reading Qohelet as a character who uses royal fiction as an attempt to “get past the limitations placed on human life and cognition in time,” the author is able to use Qohelet’s troubled worldview to prove that there is a mismatch between humanity’s continuity with the continuity of natural history.<sup>119</sup> To sum up, these narrative and literary readings of Ecclesiastes have emphasized the individuality of Qohelet—as a character of his own right—through his own narrative first-person voice, which is a break from those form critics who take the character as a direct representation of the author.

Alternatively, Sneed reads Qohelet from a social-scientific perspective to examine the skepticism and pessimism in Ecclesiastes. He suggests that the book is consistently pessimistic, and therefore, for theologians Ecclesiastes often “merely occupies the negative and secondary role of corrective for traditional wisdom or the demonstration of

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<sup>117</sup> Koosed, *(Per)Mutations of Qohelet*, 16.

<sup>118</sup> Mette Bundvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 173.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

wisdom's liabilities."<sup>120</sup> Arguing from this position, he claims that the majority of scholars see Qohelet's heterodox character "as a strictly mental accomplishment or natural development of ideas," depicting the books "as a polemic against traditional wisdom (as represented by Proverbs and the friends of Job) and its unwarranted optimism and dogmatism" without truly engaging the sociological aspects in the book.<sup>121</sup> Hence, he sees Fox's choice to consider Qohelet as a persona an act to distance the author and frame narrator from their heterodox tendencies, a path which Longman and Christianson follow suit.<sup>122</sup> For Sneed, these scholars from the literary approach fail to acknowledge the historical importance of Qohelet's discourse. Ironically, while Sneed attempts to bring in a new sociological reading with the aid of Marxism and Weberian perspectives, his examination of Qohelet's social location is still anchored to Qohelet's speech—a path that is deeply rooted in the literary text itself. For instance, Sneed determines that Qohelet's "ambivalence about power and wealth" places his social location at

the lowest rung of the aristocracy, a member of the retainer class, which served the higher aristocrats yet shared their privileged lifestyle, though not to the same degree. In addition, his membership in the scribal guild and identity as an intellectual are also important components of a complicated social location.<sup>123</sup>

He would argue, through textual evidence, that Qohelet's work "was not intended for the masses or even immature elite youth" and that Qohelet's audience might fit "the role of a governmental official" according to Eccl 5:10 and has the chance to appear before the king or ruler (8:2-5; 10:4).<sup>124</sup> Sneed also proceeds to identify Qohelet as "a scribal scholar,"

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<sup>120</sup> Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism*, 9-10.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16. Sneed suggests that Longman's commentaries tend to "purposefully ignore the historical background" and Christianson's reading of the book as a narrative incorrect since "the book is largely poetic."

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 131-32.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

according to the frame narrator, and provides an elaborate analysis of the scribal group of ancient Israel.<sup>125</sup> Consequently, although Sneed positions himself as opposed to the literary readers of Ecclesiastes and claims that they do not value the social-scientific evidences in the book, ultimately his analysis cannot escape the fate of using the literary text as the foundation of his sociological argument. This quite frankly shows how little historical and sociological evidence one can find beyond the book itself. Nonetheless, Sneed's social-scientific perspective proves valuable in terms of its depth into the assumed social location, background, and community where the character Qohelet might have belonged in ancient Israel. In short, Qohelet's individualistic discourse and the literary arrangements in the text provide the fundamental source for any kind of approach to decipher the book's intention or background.

Through the synopsis of scholarly research, it can be said that autobiography underlies every piece of work done on Ecclesiastes. Aside from the relatively abundant discussion about the book on its imitation of ancient royal literature, there is rather lesser discussion on the narrative side that engages with the evidence that bring forth the "I-ness" of Qohelet. Thus, the narrative reading of the text and the character presenting himself through an autobiographical fashion are the focus of this research.

### **4.3 The Problem of הבל and Its Translation**

The first words spoken by Qohelet in Ecclesiastes is his outcry, "Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (Eccl 1:2, NRSV). Although NRSV translates the noun הבל (transliterated as "hebel") as "vanity," such a connotation does

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<sup>125</sup> Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism*, 144-54. Sneed ultimately concludes Qohelet's social location as such: "Qohelet was a scribal scholar who wrote to young scribal apprentices. As a scribe, Qohelet was a member of a status group or guild. This group maintained its identity in terms of prestige or honor rather than solely in terms of economic standing. The members essentially shared the same lifestyle. They held an in-group ethic that disdained the ignorant and criticized the misuse of power by the wealthy and governing elite. Scribes served various necessary bureaucratic functions that aided both the governing elite and the masses and eased their conflicted relationship" (*The Politics of Pessimism*, 154).

not incorporate the full scale of how the word is used in Ecclesiastes, which is seemingly unorthodox compared to the word's occurrence in other OT literatures. Although scholarship from past to present has discussed in depth the possibilities of interpreting הבל in Ecclesiastes, in this section I shall draw attention to a few notable scholars of recent days who have contributed to the wider scholarship's interpretation of the term.

To understand the scope of the הבל problem in Ecclesiastes, Qohelet not only opens (1:2) and ends (12:8) his teaching with "all is הבל," concluding remarks of the likes are scattered throughout the whole book. The term הבל is used 38 times and contributes to the overarching tone of the book. However, commentators have struggled to provide an adequate English word to fit all the contexts, and there is seldom any consensus reached. Russell L. Meek provides a remarkable overview of different translations by scholars of the twentieth and twenty-first century:<sup>126</sup>

(1) הבל as *Incomprehensible, Unknowable, Mystery*<sup>127</sup>

(2) הבל as *Absurd*<sup>128</sup>

(3) הבל as *Zero, Nothing, Void, Empty*<sup>129</sup>

(4) הבל as *Vanity*<sup>130</sup>

(5) הבל as *Breath, Vapor, Transience, Ephemeral*<sup>131</sup>

These are just the main categories and not even considering the ones with various ways of translation.<sup>132</sup> Without going into too much detail into the rationales of each scholar's

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<sup>126</sup> Russell L. Meek, "Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Readings of *Hebel* (הֶבֶל) in Ecclesiastes," *CBR* 14.3 (2016): 279–97.

<sup>127</sup> Staples (1943), Ogden (1987), Seow (1997), and Bartholomew (2009).

<sup>128</sup> Barucq (1968), Pennacchini (1977), Fox (1986), Michel (1989), and Schoors (2013).

<sup>129</sup> Ginsberg (1950), Loretz (1964), Galling (1964), Ravasi (1991), Ehlich (1996), Levine (1997), and Frydrych (2002).

<sup>130</sup> Mitchell (1913), Devine (1916), Hertzberg (1932), Gordis (1951), Zimmerli (1962), Castellino (1968), Glasser (1970), Kidner (1976), Whybray (1982), Lauha (1983), Loader (1986), Murphy (1991), Perry (1993), Carrière (1997), and O'Donnell (2014).

<sup>131</sup> Scott (1965), Farmer (1991), Fredericks (1993), Perdue (1994), Lohfink (1998), Vonach (2004), Bolin (2005), Dor-Shav (2008), etc.

<sup>132</sup> Meek, "Readings of *Hebel* (הֶבֶל)," 288-91.

translation, one can see that the meaning of הבל in Qohelet's speech is met with diverse opinions.

In *BDB*, the noun הבל carries the literal meaning of “vapour, breath” with the figurative meaning “of what is evanescent, unsubstantial, worthless, vanity, as of idols.”<sup>133</sup> Christianson observes that outside of Ecclesiastes the occurrences of הבל usually entail a negative connotation or judgment.<sup>134</sup> Although it is seemingly similar in the occurrences in Ecclesiastes, Qohelet's unusually judges events, situations, and states of affairs to be הבל. To complicate things even further, Qohelet “often indicates the referent of הבל with an ambiguous ‘this’ (זה; e.g. 2:26).”<sup>135</sup> Using 2:26 as an example, although Qohelet paints a scenario where God grants wisdom, knowledge, and joy to the ones who pleases him, and the sinners given more work (an ideal scenario), he still states that this scenario is “הבל and chasing after the wind.” This scenario does not seem negative in the face of traditional worldview, so what does it mean when Qohelet judges this situation הבל? In Fox's influential thesis in 1986 which argues the meaning “absurdity” for הבל, using Albert Camus' views he proposes that Qohelet's mentality include “alienation, frustration, resentment, a stale taste of repeated and meaningless events, even resentment at the ‘gods.’”<sup>136</sup> In addition, he explains and defines “absurdity” as the following:

The essence of the absurd is a disparity between two terms that are supposed to be joined by a link of harmony or causality but are, in fact, disjunct. The absurd is an affront to reason, in the broad sense of the human faculty that looks for order in the world about us. The quality of

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<sup>133</sup> *BDB* [1979]: 210.

<sup>134</sup> Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 80.

<sup>135</sup> Sneed, “הבל as ‘Worthless’ in Qoheleth: A Critique of Michael V. Fox's ‘Absurd’ Thesis,” *JBL* 136.4 (2017): 879-94.

<sup>136</sup> Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” *JBL* 105.3 (1986): 409-10.

absurdity does not inhere in a being, act, or event in and of itself (though these may be called “absurd”), but rather in the tension between a certain reality and a framework of expectations.<sup>137</sup>

By Fox’s notion, Qohelet’s judgment of scenarios being “absurd” can be seen as Qohelet’s rant towards a world order that is unhinged from his expectations. To put it bluntly with the example of 2:26, one can say that Qohelet is protesting that traditional world order that it is “not an order at all but just by coincidence,” and scoffs at this so-called “order.” However, I do not believe that Qohelet would see the traditional worldview to be that negative, instead, he is simply puzzled by the fact that the world does not function all the time according to the traditional wisdom passed down within the community. Similarly, Weeks argues against Fox’s proposal, stating that although Fox’s thesis “captures very well the mismatch between expectations and reality that seems to be embodied in Qohelet’s use of *hebel* as a metaphor, . . . it also imports ideas that are expressed directly nowhere else in the book, and ignores some that are.”<sup>138</sup> Weeks’ argument thus places Qohelet’s stance in a more neutral way, suggesting that he “believes strongly in divine judgment, but also in divine control of events: when he sees circumstances that seem to stand in contradiction to the former, it drives him to emphasize the latter.”<sup>139</sup>

The difficulty of finding a proper English translation for the term *הבל*, lies in the fact that Qohelet’s usage of the term does not follow a strict formula and context. As shown in the example of Eccl 2:26, figurative translation of the term risk losing the nuance and neutrality of Qohelet’s judgment on certain state of affairs and *assumes* that he takes on an either positive or negative view. Literal translations such as “vapor” or “puff of breath” may maintain that neutrality but fails to convey the urgency of Qohelet’s evaluation.

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<sup>137</sup> Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel*,” 409.

<sup>138</sup> Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1-5*, 25.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

Another popular translation, “futility” or “vanity,” successfully captures the essence of Qohelet’s idea that any consequence or action is meaningless, but they risk stripping away too much of the *meaning* that Qohelet intends when he cries, “all is הבל.” After all, Qohelet’s judgmental outcry does not feel weightless in meaning, but just the opposite: the הבל expression itself carries the heavy burden of Qohelet’s observations. It is therefore important to capture the essence of Qohelet’s usage of הבל, which Weeks carefully summarizes in the following:

What *hebel* seems principally to represent for Qohelet, however, is bound up with this misapprehension by humans of the world, and of their place within it: they invest effort for things they cannot gain, or for reasons which are false, while they fail to pursue or to accomplish the only truly beneficial option which is open to them—pleasure in their activities—either because their concerns lie elsewhere, or because they have been misled into behaviour which may shorten their lives or prevent their enjoyment. What confronts humans is *hebel* because it is misleading or illusory, but what they typically do in response to it is also *hebel* because it is misguided or deluded.<sup>140</sup>

From this rationale, Weeks thus decides to translate הבל as either “futility” or “illusion” according to the context. This translation is not ideal, however it is closest to the fact that Qohelet finds it difficult to locate the works and wisdom of the divine. As much as it is tempting to simply transliterate הבל as *hebel* in my translation, it would not be helpful for readers to understand the essence of Qohelet’s הבל. Therefore, I opt to follow in Weeks’s sense to translate the term as “illusion” in this research.

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<sup>140</sup> Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1-5*, 27-28.

## 5. Methodology

Throughout the centuries of interpretation, scholars have sought ways to reconcile the contradictions in the book of Ecclesiastes with the most extreme cases ascribing the book to several redactional hands,<sup>141</sup> because “no single author would have included such inconsistencies,” as Dell observes.<sup>142</sup> Due to such inconsistencies, scholars tend to shy away from the uneasy feeling of taking “the text totally in its final form without being aware of the possibility of literary-critical stages.”<sup>143</sup> Many unsuccessful attempts to tease out a detailed structural scheme have turned recent scholarship to a macro-level reading of the book, suggesting that such “contradictions, repetition, and lack of progression may in and of themselves form part of the message which the author is seeking to convey to his readers,” as Bundvad observed.<sup>144</sup> Although the shift from the micro elements to the macro aspects of the book shows that it is “difficult to determine where a close reading of the book ends and reader response begins” due to the contradictions in Qohelet’s speech, Bundvad still argues that

it makes sense to examine whether the book’s broken, unsettling *form* rings true to some degree with what happens in the text on its *content-level*. It is plausible that the mixture of modes of narration mirrors to some extent the message of the book. This structural trait allows Qohelet to demonstrate even on a basic, compositional level that different worldviews are on a collision course in this piece of work.<sup>145</sup>

In other words, analysis of the macro elements must be supported by the micro elements of the narration in the book to achieve a better understanding of Qohelet’s discourse on a

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<sup>141</sup> Dell, “Reading Ecclesiastes with the Scholars,” in *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom*, 83.

<sup>142</sup> Weeks, *An Introduction to the Study*, 72.

<sup>143</sup> Dell, “Reading Ecclesiastes with the Scholars,” 83.

<sup>144</sup> Bundvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 14.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16. Her emphasis.

wider scale. Hence, close reading of the narrative elements in Qohelet's speech is still valuable in the sense that it bridges the gaps of the conflictual arguments littered throughout the book.

Reading the book as a literary totality contributes to the recognition of Qohelet as an active and dynamic character, which comes from the repetitive first-person "I" as opposed to the third-person voice in the epilogue. Unlike the obscure author *of* the book or the epilogist who only reveals himself as the frame-narrator in the epilogue, Qohelet is a character who creates his presence through his own speech in the first person. As Mills rightly acknowledges, "in Ecclesiastes Qohelet has no existence as a character outside of first-person speech. The 'I' attached to a verb is the means by which Qohelet's personhood emerges. It is through the act of speaking to the self that this 'I' operates. . . . These observations lead into a closer evaluation of utterance as a means of developing characterization."<sup>146</sup> The first-person speech along with the narrative elements in the book form the backbone of Qohelet's worldview and observations, as Bundvad also confirms, "they support his philosophical endeavour by offering the narrator-figure as a constant; a person with a history to whom the reader can relate, as well as a unifying presence that promises some level of coherence in the book."<sup>147</sup>

Therefore, the methods that will be used in this study is close reading through the narrative analysis of the text, and the character development of Qohelet. The selection of passages will focus on sections where Qohelet addresses his observations of the world (objective view) and his personal thoughts (subjective view) through a first-person inner-dialogue (i.e. internal monologue). The practice of close reading and the narrative approach used in this research come from the lineage of New Criticism from the English

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<sup>146</sup> Mills, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 42.

<sup>147</sup> Bundvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 159.

Literature department. The call to incorporate literary study's literary criticism into biblical studies has never stopped since the rise and merge of New Criticism in the Anglo-American scholarship of literary studies and the British practice of Practical Criticism<sup>148</sup> between the 1920s to the 1960s, pioneered by English critics I. A. Richards (1924, 1929), Cleanth Brooks (1938), Robert Penn Warren (1938), and John Crowe Ransom (1938), and advocated by poets and critics like T. S. Eliot as early as the 1920s.<sup>149</sup> New Criticism was influential in a pragmatic way due to its spread across the English pedagogical circle as an empirical methodology that essentially was "a reading practice" in the classrooms.<sup>150</sup> This reading practice would later be coined the *close reading* practice of literary texts. Close reading is "a method of literary analysis that privileges literary form over questions of history, intention, politics, or psychology" that pays "close attention to literary expression and especially to moments of irony, ambiguity, and paradox in a text."<sup>151</sup>

According to David Greenham (2019), there are six contexts of close reading:

1. The semantic: what individual words can mean;
2. The syntactic: how words mean things when they are put together;
3. The thematic: how themes emerge and affect meanings when we read;
4. The iterative: the ways that repetition and patterning affect textual meanings;
5. The generic: how the kind of work we are reading changes our approach to its meanings;
6. The adversarial: how historical, political and theoretical concerns reshape meanings.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Practical Criticism later assimilated and belonged to the same movement of New Criticism.

<sup>149</sup> For a comprehensive introduction of New Criticism see Matterson, "The New Criticism," in *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 166-76. For an extensive survey on where New Criticism begun and came to being, see Donald J. Childs, *The Birth of New Criticism: Conflict and Conciliation in the Early Work of William Empson, I.A. Richards, Laura Riding, and Robert Graves* (Québec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013).

<sup>150</sup> Matterson, "The New Criticism," 166.

<sup>151</sup> Anne H. Stevens, *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Introduction* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2015), 145.

<sup>152</sup> David Greenham, *Close Reading: The Basics* (London; New York: Routledge, 2019), 7.

These are the elements that the close reading method is concerned with when reading a literary text. It should be noted that, since the setting and the author of Ecclesiastes is lost and hard to pinpoint, “the adversarial” aspect of the text concerns the historical, political, and theoretical meanings that arise *from* the text, not from historical evidence and its social settings.

With this spread and popularity of New Criticism, the call for a literary reading of biblical texts gained more attention in biblical studies after the 1960s when the methodology was already well-established in literary studies. While historical criticism and its various methods dominated OT wisdom studies in the late nineteenth to the twentieth century, 1970s marked a turn where methods from literary studies became a popular alternative for OT wisdom studies.<sup>153</sup> This literary turn allowed biblical scholars “to move from a focus on the composition of Old Testament wisdom books to close attention to *the literary shape of the books as we have received them*.”<sup>154</sup> This so-called “close attention to the literary shape of the books” can be understood as the practice of close reading, which conducts a careful investigation of the immediate text at hand, looking for clues where the text might reveal meanings from itself unbeknownst to earlier investigations that rely on cross-referencing external information. Perhaps in today’s reading of a biblical text, one may argue that this method risks the danger of taking away the context or background of the text which is crucial to the traditional understanding of biblical literature. However, it is also this absolute autonomy of the text that allows meanings within the text to be acknowledged and freed from its contextual bindings, which in many cases overpowers the text itself. This literary acknowledgement is especially fitting in the case of Ecclesiastes since the historical location of the text is

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<sup>153</sup> Bartholomew, “Old Testament Wisdom Today,” 4.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 14. Bartholomew’s emphasis.

mostly lost. By examining anything “literary,” close reading focuses and deciphers the meanings of the ambiguities and contradictions within the text itself.

In the case of commentaries on Ecclesiastes, both Lohfink and Krüger provide a narrative close reading and narrative criticism of Ecclesiastes in their commentaries.<sup>155</sup> Fox, in a way, also belongs to this category, although his “frame narrative” aspect brings in more insight from a structural point of view. Since the objective of this project is to locate the literary development of the Qohelet character, Fox’s and Christianson’s analysis of the frame-narrative model proves fundamental to the acknowledgment of the character’s voice. Christianson’s approach can be summed up by his own words: “*Narrative strategy is the function a narrator intends to fulfill by the use of a narrative device, technique or overall design.*”<sup>156</sup> The purpose of utilizing a narrative strategy is to decipher what might be hidden from other types of methodology that have been much exploited, for instance, form criticism. Qohelet’s discourse is not merely a first-person account of his life; it also includes his evaluation of life and wisdom, his didactic proverbial sayings toward his (perhaps fictional) audience, and multiple individualized literary devices that construct his speech. Qohelet is also a narrator of his own tale, as opposed to the frame-narrative/epilogist who only introduces Qohelet and leaves the rest for Qohelet to do his own self-revealing. Since “narrators whose voices speak in the first person as an ‘I’ reveal to readers their own observations, and conclusions about the actions in the texts,”<sup>157</sup> it is necessary to examine the narrative devices in Qohelet’s autobiography which *are* the very elements that consist of his autobiographical voice. It must be noted, though, that this research employs the aids from all commentaries on Ecclesiastes in order to understand the Hebrew text at its best. Although scholars have

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<sup>155</sup> Lohfink, *Qoheleth*; Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary*, ed. Klaus Baltzer, trans. O. C. Dean. Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004).

<sup>156</sup> Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 20. His emphasis.

<sup>157</sup> Celena Kusch, *Literary Analysis: The Basics* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), 40.

employed different methods to analyze the text, in some way commentaries in general build on the careful deciphering of certain reoccurring keywords, structures, and contents to propose the significant themes in Qohelet's discourse. Even for historical critics who propose that Ecclesiastes is a book consists of several redactions, it is inevitable to recognize the book contains in itself several thematic coherencies since "there is a significant amount of linguistic and thematic overlap at the boundaries" in which "the conclusion of one unit simultaneously segues into the subsequent unit and functions effectively as its introduction."<sup>158</sup> Hence, resources drawn from commentaries will not be confined to those that explicitly stated that they are examining from a narrative stance as thematic and keyword analyses by any commentaries will supplement benefit the translations or discussions in this research.

All in all, a close reading of Ecclesiastes for this study is not to say that the method used is solely close reading, but rather close reading to seek out the development in the autobiographical tone, the character growth of Qohelet within the text, the inconsistencies in the text, and then to continue the dialogue with existing commentaries and studies that very likely apply multiple other methods from both biblical field and literary studies. The research does not rule out the importance of historical criticism and its methods; instead, it seeks cooperation and bridging between the main narrative method and the previous scholarly historical-critical discoveries. The MT will be the main text for translation and analysis. Textual analysis is employed throughout the research to identify grammatical and syntactical elements relating to the first-person voice. The method will then be employed to help analyze the structures, outlines, and forms of the text. After this basic step in textual analysis, I will close read the text through the narrative approach to discuss the literary devices of the first-person narrative. Precisely because

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<sup>158</sup> Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 18.

Ecclesiastes is the autobiographical account of Qohelet, a narrative approach is the seemingly appropriate methodology to deal with Qohelet's narrative reflection of his own life. The end result aims to bring to light how the character characterizes himself through his own speech, the didactic function of his first-person voice, and to show the didactic strategies within and between each autobiographical section.

## 6. Outline of the Research

While the first-person "I" is not unique to Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Bible, the way it is used by Qohelet is one of a kind, or in Christianson's words, a "relentless individualism."<sup>159</sup> It is the goal of this research, thus, to seek out such a unique individualism of Qohelet and to use this character as the scope to understand the wider theology and purpose of the book. The research will focus on the texts that include Qohelet's autobiography, and will examine the first-person literary devices within his speech.

The book of Ecclesiastes is abundant in its account of Qohelet speaking to himself and pondering with an imaginary dialogic partner: the "heart" (לב). Many scholars have viewed the relationship between Qohelet's "heart" and his self, the "I", as an internal monologue. This research will examine in detail this "I"-Heart relationship to see how it relates to Qohelet's self-revelation. Hence, passages that have the appearance of both Qohelet's first-person "I," whether it be the pronoun אני or as verbal suffix, with the "heart" (לב) will be examined at proximity. These passages include Eccl 1:12-2:26; 3:9-22; 7:15-8:1; and 8:16-9:12. The selection of these four passages marks the texts where Qohelet either announces his personhood or wrestles most with himself. In other words, the "I"-Heart relationship signifies an inner dialogue between Qohelet and his heart, where sometimes the evaluating criteria of Qohelet's conscious vs. his heart is different. The more Qohelet realizes this difference, the more he struggles to understand the "wisdom"

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<sup>159</sup> Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 34.

before his very eyes. Using these four passages as the chapter reference, the research consists of four main body chapters. In each chapter, a translation with text-critical notes will be provided, followed by a textual analysis and rationale of the passage. Afterwards, key observations from Qohelet's inner dialogue will be examined through close reading, focusing on elements in the literary evidence that contribute to the character building of Qohelet and his shifts of tone.

Chapter One deals with the literary strategies for Qohelet's autobiographical setup in Eccl 1:12-2:26, where Qohelet launches his quest for wisdom. This chapter lays out the groundwork for Qohelet's first-person speech, including the use of a Solomonic kingly persona, the "I spoke with/in my heart" formula, the excessive use of the first-person pronoun "I" (אני), and the evaluation of the "heart's" (לב) function in Qohelet's dialogic speech. The purpose of selecting this passage is to show how Qohelet builds his initial didactic authority through the setup of an experienced royal figure who hosts the likeness of Solomon the Wise.

Chapter Two deals with Qohelet's pseudo-divine voice in Eccl 3:9-22. The chapter examines Qohelet's speech that seem to suggest he has a higher authority due to his immense knowledge of the world and the work of God. It examines literary elements such as the use of "I have seen" (ראיתי) and "I know" (ידעתי), the distance between Qohelet himself and the common people through the use of "in them" (בם), the double function of the heart, and a glimpse of Qohelet's authoritative fallacy through the use of Hebrew interrogatives. This passage highlights the shift in Qohelet's didactic voice from a royal figure to a wise man whose knowledge and experience is beyond earthly realm. The height of his wisdom reaches the peak when he begins to address humankind in the third person. Yet, he sacrifices this ultimate authority by showing his humanly weakness when

faced with divine knowledge that he fails to seek. In this way he shows his audience that he is still human and that his teaching is still relevant to them.

Chapter Three focuses on Qohelet's voice of the teacher of experience in Eccl 7:15-8:1. The chapter ponders Qohelet as the experienced elder with a Solomonic guise, as the everyday teacher of his community, the hints that he is a flawed wise, and an investigation of the abrupt frame-narrator's intervention in 7:27 and its function in this passage (if there ever was). This section marks the end of the Solomonic guise as Qohelet addresses the danger of extremism. The royal grandeur of his previous life is shown, but Qohelet uses it as a tale of warning. The figure of a waning old man is vivid, and his teaching is backed by series of proverbial wisdom.

Finally, Chapter Four deals with the highly debated tone of the book in scholarship (pessimistic vs. optimistic), where I suspect that Qohelet carries a hybrid optimistic pessimism in his discourse presented in Eccl 8:16-9:12. The key components examined in this chapter are the identification of the optimistic vs. pessimistic tones, a reexamination of the literary function of the "heart," the imperative command as a blessing/benediction in disguise, and the confidence of Qohelet after his growth. This passage marks the beginning of an end of Qohelet's teaching where he summarizes his findings of his quest for wisdom and blesses his audience with the teaching of enjoyment. The significance of this passage lies in the tonal shift of his teaching: whereas previously his words are full of skepticism, now they are encouraging the audience to accept the fate that is laid out for all by God.

## **Chapter One**

### **“I Spoke with My Heart”:**

#### **Literary Strategies for the Autobiographical Setup in Eccl 1:12-2:26**

##### **1. Introduction**

The defining moment in Ecclesiastes is when the speaker, Qohelet, presents himself as a king who goes about investigating life with the wisdom he obtains. Aside from his unusual name “Qohelet” (קהלת), the only other identity related clue provided to the audience is Qohelet’s kingly identity that ruled “over Israel in Jerusalem” (הייתי מלך על־ישראל בירושלם) in Eccl 1:12. Crosschecking with other Hebrew biblical texts, the historical king that fits with this description is none other than Solomon. Thus, many traditional rabbis and commentaries have attributed Solomon to be the speaker in the book. Nonetheless, reading from a narrative perspective, one cannot ignore the fact that Qohelet is the figure that names himself, presents himself, and shares his own investigations while the name “Solomon” is never mentioned in the text.

Therefore, the first question that should be addressed is what is the relationship between Qohelet and the Solomonic identity? How is Qohelet characterizing himself and is he posing as Solomon? The short answer is that with the Solomonic voice Qohelet adopts in the opening of the book, he speaks as a well-experienced king who has accumulated massive knowledge, wealth, and experience to train and increase his wisdom. This leads to establishing the authority of his experience-sharing and evaluations. However, the self-proclaiming speaker is not only persuasive by employing this royal identity for the sake of authority. The key to persuasiveness in Qohelet’s discourse lies in the fact that he adopts the first-person voice to maintain an intimate relationship with the audience through the usage of the first-person pronoun “I” (אני) and the first-person verbal suffixes. In addition, he effectively uses the conversations with “the

heart” (לב)—some call this his “inner dialogues”—to create a space for an objective evaluation of himself and of his experiences. These literary designs are most evident in the section where Qohelet introduces himself and his quests of life in Eccl 1:12-2:26.

In the task of understanding his mode of speech according to his own words, this chapter seeks to explore the construction of the Qohelet character as the main figure who addresses life-worthy questions, particularly in Eccl 1:12-2:26 where he initiates his speech from a first-person stance. In the conversations with his heart (or his monologues), he sets the stage for a self-revealing act that showcases his undeniable knowledge and experiences which cover the majority—if not the entirety—of the human experience. Thus, without a historical consensus in scholarship about who Qohelet really is in real life, Qohelet’s speech can be revisited as a path to understanding and reconstructing his character through analyzing these literary markers: (1) establishment of the kingly Solomonic voice, (2) imitation of the opening of ANE royal autobiographies, and (3) the design of the dialogue between the first-person self and the heart to enrich his character. This chapter aims to understand how these literary devices lend power to Qohelet’s speech as well as how they set the stage for a fundamental basis of Qohelet’s presence, allowing him to speak of the human experience at ease in the chapters following 1:12-2:26. Perhaps, it may very well be a mode to speak the generality of the human experience through an autobiographical and intimately personal stance.

## 2. Eccl 1:12-2:26 Translation and Critical Notes

1:12 I, Qohelet<sup>160</sup>, have been<sup>161</sup> a king over Israel in Jerusalem, 13 and I set my heart to care and to investigate, with wisdom, over all that is done under the heavens<sup>162</sup>. It is a task of evil God has given to man to be concerned about. 14 I have seen all the works that were carried out under the sun, and look, everything is an illusion and a pursuit of emptiness.

15 What is bent cannot be straightened;  
what is missing cannot be counted.

16 I spoke with my heart, saying, “I, look, had made myself great and gained wisdom over all who were before me over Jerusalem<sup>163</sup>.” And my heart has greatly seen wisdom and knowledge.” 17 So I put my heart to understanding wisdom and to understanding delusion<sup>164</sup> and foolishness<sup>165</sup>. I observed that

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<sup>160</sup> H.-J. Fabry observes that the meaning of word or appellative קהלת is debatable as whether it is “rooted from *qal/qwl/qôl* ‘calling’”, a “rare Assyrian root *ku’ulu* ‘assemble’”, or simply as a translation error from Aramaic. He also advises to follow the LXX Ἐκκλησιαστής, “member of the ἐκκλησία” (Fabry, “קֹהֵל,” *TDOT* XII: 547). However, if it is true that Qohelet is speaking with a Solomonic persona, according to 1 Kgs 8:1 Solomon “assembled” (יקהל) the elders of Israel, all the heads of the tribes, and leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites. The root קהל here in Eccl 1:12 is altered to resemble a name with the connotation “assembler,” which coincides with the verb “assemble” in 1Kgs 8:1 and suggests the Solomonic identity. In this sense, it is suitable to understand the meaning of the name קהלת as “the assembler.” For identification purposes though, using “Qohelet” to identify the speaker is preferred in a narrative reading.

<sup>161</sup> The perfect *Qal* verb הייתי (“to be”) used as a stative function can denote both a present-time state (see analysis in Robert D. Holmstedt, John A. Cook, and Phillip S. Marshall, *Qoheleth: A Handbook on The Hebrew Text*, BHHB [Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017], 69) or a past fact. Gordis observes that traditionally this use of the perfect tense, “implying that Koheleth no longer was king, served to create the later Jewish legend about the deposition of the arrogant monarch, his replacement on the throne by Asmodeus and his subsequent repentance and restoration” (*Koheleth*, 209). Nowadays by recognizing the Solomonic persona rather than Solomon himself, scholars have suggested that perfect stative verbs “need not indicate past realities... [but] a reality that began in the past but continues into the present” (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 119). Thus, instead of translating the verb הייתי as “I was,” scholars rather use the present perfect “I have been” (so Seow, Longman, Fox, Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall; cf. Murphy, 11 and Crenshaw, 71). It is the easiest result to imply that the speaker “is still on the throne but has been for a long enough time to give a retrospective on his experiment and life in general” (Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 69). Furthermore, it extends to the idea that the speaker, Qohelet, is in his elderly age when he speaks about his life experiences.

<sup>162</sup> The Geniza Fragments and further Hebrew manuscripts read the variant השמש “the sun”; see also the corresponding variants in the Peshitta, Targum, and Vulgate. The LXX, instead, confirms the MT. The variant השמש in fact has more occurrences (29 times) than השמים (3 times) in the book, which makes it a *lectio facilior* to the more common formulation in the context. This suggests, though, that the MT reading is the more original one and should be kept. See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 120; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 80.

<sup>163</sup> Many manuscripts read בירושלם (“over Jerusalem”). It is most likely an assimilation with בירושלם in 2:7, 9, and thus, it is the *lectio facilior*. Hence, the MT should be kept for the more original reading.

<sup>164</sup> The form הוללות in some manuscripts is an Aramaic formation equivalent to הוללות (“הוללות,” *BDB* [1979]: 239). This would be a preference of language usage, therefore there is no need to change the MT form.

<sup>165</sup> “Foolishness” here is written as שכלות, which is odd when all the other appearances in the book uses the form סכלות (2:3, 12, 13; 7:25; 10:1, 13). Adding that some manuscripts have סכלות, it is reasonable to think that the MT form שכלות was a misplacement and should be replaced with סכלות. Many scholars such as Charles F. Whitley have shown that ס and ש are commonly interchangeable for Late Biblical Hebrew (thus Seow,

even this itself is a striving of emptiness.

18 For in much wisdom is much annoyance<sup>166</sup>,  
and one who enhances knowledge will increase agony.

2:1 I said with my heart, “Go now, I should test you with joy, so observe pleasure!” But look, that was also an illusion. 2 Regarding laughter/(fun), I say it is befooling; regarding joy, what can this do? 3 I investigated with my heart, leading<sup>167</sup> my body with wine—though my heart still guided by wisdom—and grasping on to foolishness until I should see what is good for humankind who labor under the heavens throughout their (short) lives.

4 I made great my achievements: I built for myself houses, I planted for myself vineyards; 5 I made for myself gardens and orchards, and I planted in them trees of all fruit. 6 I made for myself pools of water, from which to water a forest sprouting trees. 7 I acquired/bought<sup>168</sup> slaves, maidservants, and house-born slaves. I also had<sup>169</sup> for myself livestock of cattle and sheep greater/more than all who were<sup>170</sup> before me in Jerusalem. 8 I also gathered for myself silver, gold, and treasures/properties of kings and of the provinces. I appointed for

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*Ecclesiastes*, 125; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 73). However, since the variant in MT is the *lectio difficilior*, it should be preserved. The confusion between ט and ש may have led to LXX misreading παραβολάς “parables/proverbs” by mistakenly taking שכל (“understanding”) as the origin of שכלות (thus Gordis, *Koheleth*, 212; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 75; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 57).

<sup>166</sup> LXX reads γνώσεως (from דעת, “knowledge”) instead of “annoyance,” which is an anticipation of דעת in the next line. This suggests that LXX assimilates בעס (“annoyance”) for the easier reading. In addition, MT’s בעס is supported by Aquila, Theodotion, Symmachus, Vulgate, Peshitta, and Targum. Thus, MT should be preserved for the more difficult and original reading.

<sup>167</sup> In the *BHS* critical apparatus, Ginsburg suggests reading the verb למשוך (“to draw/pull”) as לשמוך (“to support”) according to Song 2:5 due to the difficult interpretation. However, none other ancient manuscripts read differently from MT, and therefore the MT must be preserved. The problematic translation sparks a variety of interpretations: Delitzsch, Gordis, and Lauha “conjecture from the context that it means ‘to refresh’” (quoted in Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 127); Seow, drawing parallelism with the LXX text of Ps 28:3 and Ugaritic *mtk*, understands it as “to lead/induce” (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 127); Crenshaw draws attention to Ps 36:11 to translate it as “to prolong/sustain” (Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 77); and Krüger, observing that the verb משך “is often understood in the sense of ‘refresh, give refreshment to,’” translates it most dramatically as “bathing my body in wine” to express the excessive enjoyment of human desire (Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 57; also Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 51). Whichever the verb may mean, it denotes a state where the body is controlled and taken over by wine in contrast with the following line in which the לב is still guided by wisdom. I therefore use “lead” as a synonym along with the following “guide” (נהג).

<sup>168</sup> Many Hebrew manuscripts and the Peshitta read an additional לי (“for myself”). However, it is likely under the influence of vv. 5-6 and v. 8 for consistency. Thus, it is clearly an addition to clarify that Qohelet bought the slaves “for himself” (Aarre Lauha, *Kohelet: Biblischer Kommentar*, Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament – Studienausgaben [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011], 41).

<sup>169</sup> While few Hebrew manuscripts, LXX, and Peshitta read the plural form היו (“they have”), resulting in the literal translation “there were to me,” the MT reading is the *lectio difficilior* and is therefore preferred over the latter. In translation, however, the third-person should be understood as the first-person to maintain coherence in meaning.

<sup>170</sup> Both plural שהיו (“who were”) and singular שהיה (“who is,” as in many Hebrew manuscripts and versions) are acceptable when used with כל, which can be read both as plural or collective singular.

myself male and female singers, and delights of humankind (in) mistresses<sup>171</sup>. 9 So I became great and exceeded (from) all who were before me in Jerusalem; moreover, my wisdom stood by me. 10 So all that my eyes demanded I did not restrain from them. Nor did I hold back my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was glad from all my labor, and this was my share/portion from all my labor. 11 Then I turned to observe all my works that my hands had done. So in the labor that I had striven to accomplish, look! All is an illusion and a pursuit of emptiness! And there is no benefit under the sun.

12 Then I turned to observe wisdom and delusion and foolishness, since what will the man do<sup>172</sup> who comes after the king with what he (the king) has already achieved<sup>173</sup>? 13 So I saw that there is a benefit to wisdom over foolishness as a benefit of light over darkness. 14 The wise has his eyes in his head, and the fool walks in darkness. Yet I also realize that one/the same fate will happen to all of them. 15 And I said with my heart, “like the fate of the fool that will also happen to me, (so) why/for what have I acted excessively wise then?” So I spoke to myself in my heart that this is also an illusion<sup>174</sup>. 16 For there is no forever

<sup>171</sup> The meaning of the noun  $\text{שְׂדֵה}$  is extremely unclear since it is a *hapax legomenon*. Longman suggests that LXX having  $\text{o\u00ednoch\u00f3on kai o\u00ednoch\u00f3as}$  (“cupbearers”) “started things off on the wrong track by taking the word from an Aramaic root (*šdy*, ‘to pour out’)” which may have affected the Peshitta, Vulgate, Targum, and Aquila (Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 92; Aquila reads  $\text{κυλ\u00edk\u00edon kai kul\u00edkia}$ ). Seow (*Ecclesiastes*, 131) gives the following observations: (1) C. D. Ginsburg (*Coheleth*, 285-86) suggesting the noun a derivative from *šdd* “seize,” arriving at the meaning “ones seized in war;” (2) Gordis’s (*Koheleth*, 219) suggested derivative from *šad* “breast,” taking the phrase as a synecdoche for “concubines;” (3) W. L. Moran’s (“Amarna Glosses,” *RA* 69 [1975], 151 n. 4) suggestion of the Amarna gloss *ša-q\u00ed-tu* which interprets as “cup-bearer;” and (4) others citing Ugaritic *št* “lady” or vulgar Arabic *sitt* “concubine.” Either way, Seow suggests that the key is how the phrase “delights of humankind” ( $\text{תַּעֲנוּגַת בְּנֵי הָאָדָם}$ ) is interpreted. If it dubiously refers to women, then the sexual connotation is obvious ( $\text{תַּעֲנוּגַת}$  as the “delight for love”); if it refers to treasures ( $\text{תַּעֲנוּגַת}$  as “luxuries”), then  $\text{שְׂדֵה וְשִׂדּוֹת}$  may relate to Postbiblical Hebrew *šiddâ* “chest, box,” as suggested by Jastrow. Cf. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 1558; *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* XVII/1, 42-43; Jerome: *sadda et saddoth*. Since the majority of scholarship lean towards the phrase having sexual connotation, it is preferable to understand the phrase as “mistresses” (literally “a woman and women”).

<sup>172</sup> The continuation of  $\text{עֲשֵׂה}$  (“do”) after the interrogative  $\text{מָה}$  (“what, who”) is common in the Hebrew Bible. It is presumed that the missing of  $\text{יַעֲשֵׂה}$  is a *lectio brevior* (see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 134; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 96). The missing of  $\text{עֲשֵׂה}$  does not necessarily render the text unreadable; it can be read “what is the man...” in addition to “what will the man do...”, denoting the quality of the successor after the king. However, in order for v. 12 to make sense at its ending,  $\text{יַעֲשֵׂה}$  would have to be added.

<sup>173</sup> Many Hebrew manuscripts have amended the plural reading of  $\text{עֲשֵׂהוּ}$  to a singular reading  $\text{עֲשֵׂהו}$ . The verse ending is a *crux interpretum*. The LXX reflects the MT except for the plural form, and the singular is well attested in LXX ( $\text{\u0395\u03c0\u03cc\u03b9\u03b7\u03c3\u03b5\u03bd \u03b1\u03c5\u03c4\u03b7\u03bd}$ ), Peshitta, Vulgate, and a large number of Hebrew manuscripts. A. Schoors refers to D. Lys’s commentary, suggesting that: “The least strained interpretation is to understand vs. 12b\u03b2 as the answer to the question in 12b\u03b1: ‘What can the man do [ $\text{יַעֲשֵׂה}$ ] who comes after the king?’ In the line of the general context the answer is ‘Nothing new’. If the singular  $\text{עֲשֵׂהו}$  is the original reading, then the subject is the king: ‘Only what he (the king) has already done’ (*RSV*); if, however, we stick to the plural, then the verb has a general subject: ‘Only what has been done already’. In the general context of the Solomonic role assumed by Qoheleth, the former solution seems preferable” (Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth* I, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 41 [Leuven: Peeters Press and Departement Orientalistiek – Leuven, 1992], 156-157; referencing Lys, *L’Eccl\u00e9siaste*, 230-37). Schoors analysis draws attention to several scholars such as Whitley, Hertzberg, Lauha, Gordis, Loretz, Zimmerli, etc., therefore it is preferred to follow this train of thought.

<sup>174</sup> LXX adds  $\text{\u0394\u03b9\u03c9\u03c4\u03b9 \u0391\u03c6\u03c1\u03c9\u03bd \u0395\u03ba \u03a0\u03b5\u03c1\u03b9\u03c3\u03c3\u03b5\u03c5\u03bc\u03b1\u03c4\u03bf\u03c2 \u03bb\u03b1\u03bb\u03b5\u03b9}$  (“because the fool speaks of abundance”) prior to the final

remembrance for the wise as well as the fool, since the days to come will all already have been forgotten. O how can the wise die just like the fool! <sup>17</sup> Therefore I hated life because annoying/grievous/evil to me is the work that is done under the sun, for everything is an illusion and a pursuit of emptiness.

<sup>18</sup> Therefore I hated all the labor that I had made/labored under the sun, which I will leave behind for the man who will come after me. <sup>19</sup> And who knows if he will be wise or a fool? Yet, he will have dominance in all the labors that I had made/labored and had acted wisely under the sun. Such is an illusion as well. <sup>20</sup> Thus, I turned my heart to despair over all the labors that I had made/labored under the sun. <sup>21</sup> For there is a person who had striven in wisdom, in knowledge, and in skill/success, but to a man who has not striven in it, he gives it (the achievements) as his share. This is also an illusion and a great evil. <sup>22</sup> For what is to the man in all his labor and in the striving of his heart with which he had striven under the sun? <sup>23</sup> For all his days are sufferings and his work frustration. Even in the night, his heart does not rest; this also is an illusion.

<sup>24</sup> Nothing is better with the man (except) that he should eat<sup>175</sup> and drink and to make his soul experience pleasure in his work. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God. <sup>25</sup> For who will eat and who will worry<sup>176</sup> except/apart from me<sup>177</sup>? <sup>26</sup> For to the man who pleases before Him (his face)/God, he gives wisdom and knowledge and joy. And to the sinners he gives work to gather and to collect, in order to give pleasure before God. This also is an illusion and a pursuit of emptiness.

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statement. This is clearly a rendition by the scribe, and thus, MT as the *lectio brevior* is preferred.

<sup>175</sup> In the Peshitta and Targum it is assumed that haplography has occurred with the missing מ before שיאכל ("that...to eat"). However, the interrogative מן ("what?/than") is not present in all cases of comparative statements in the book. Referring to 3:12 and 8:15, it is evident that Qohelet leaves out the מן but introduces the comparison with כי אם ("but if"). Thus, a simpler solution aside from emending the text is that "ש" in this verse nominalizes the finite verbal clauses so that syntactically they function as the point of comparison... and the comparison itself is unmarked" (Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 115). Also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 139.

<sup>176</sup> The verb יחוש here is difficult to interpret. The root חוש means "haste/hurry" or "feel" with the former meaning most in the Hebrew Bible. LXX uses *φείσεται* in equivalent to an alternative root חוס meaning "spare," but scholarship mainly follows the root חוש. A good number of exegetical traditions render the verb as "enjoy" but this has been refuted (See Schoors, *Preacher* II, 385). Gordis observes that the root חוש and חשש "which are common in Mishnaic Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac, are used only of feeling pain, suffering, ... or of fear and apprehension" (Gordis, *Koheleth*, 226). Schoors, drawing from F. Ellermeier, Levy, Jastrow, Brockelmann, observes that חוש meaning "worry" "has good Semitic cognates: Aram/MH חשש, 'suffer, concern oneself, worry' (cf. חששא in TgQoh 2,25), MH חוש with the same meaning, Syr... 'experience, suffer', Akk. *hâšû*, 'worry' to be distinguished from *hâšû*, 'move quickly'" (Schoors, *Preacher* II, 386; similarly, Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 139-40). Krüger also follows the Mishnaic rationale, understanding the root חוש as "be worried, consider" (Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 59). Therefore, scholarship tends to agree that the verb יחוש denotes a negative emotion related to feeling pain; after all, "the logic of the statement is that if one does not eat, or if one is unsure if and when the next meal will be had, one is troubled or suffers" (Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 116).

<sup>177</sup> The majority of manuscripts have the first-person suffix ממני which would translate to "except/apart from me." The first-person would therefore indicate the speaker in this text, namely Qohelet. However, with the fewer instances of the third-person ממנו "except/apart from him," this reading following v. 24 would entail God. Since the context of this passage is speaking about the Qohelet's personal evaluation of life, adding that the majority of manuscripts attest the first-person, ממני is preferred.

### 3. Textual Analysis

#### 3.1 Context

Eccl 1:12-2:26 is often seen as a distinctive passage that leads into the following sections of the book, not as a prologue but a personal introduction by Qoheleth. Due the high frequency of the first-person pronoun אֲנִי being used and introduced here, it emphasizes Qohelet's first-person narrative speech. It supposes a specific character speaking in his own voice, whereas in the beginning section prior to v. 12 the personhood of the speaker is not clearly identified. In addition, the paragraph breaker פ at the end of v. 11 is another significant literary indicator that v. 11 and v. 12 belong to different sections. However, simply reading the content prior to 1:12 and in 1:12-2:26, there are a few reoccurring themes that may lead the reader into thinking that the bulk from the beginning of the book to 2:26 come together as a single unit. Both speak about the futility of human life (1:4, 8 and 1:14, 17; 2:11), of how the fate of different generations repeat itself (1:9-10 and 2:14-15), and the human being unable to maintain any of his/her gaining (1:11 and 2:16, 18-19). From a genre perspective, it is more distinguishable that v. 11 and v. 12 belong to different sections, for many have suggested that 1:4-11 is in a poetic prologue<sup>178</sup> while 1:12-2:26 is more of a storytelling autobiographical prose, although few may argue the former is also prose.<sup>179</sup> One way or another, scholars have all agreed that the section preceding v. 12 serves as the prologue of the book, and following this order, I see 1:4-11 written in a proverbial layout with general cosmic and ontological themes whereas 1:12-2:26 is an autobiographical recollection of a specific character. Chapter 3 begins with the

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<sup>178</sup> See Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 61; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 7; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 48; Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 54.

<sup>179</sup> Longman quotes J. Kugel's *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (1981) to argue that the distinction between poetry and prose is not a clear one. He therefore proposes that the prologue is a prose due to the lack of "parallelism, terseness, and wordplays" in Hebrew poetry (Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 59). However, his rationale is mainly based on the general synopsis of classical Hebrew poetry with no further reference to Qohelet scholarship.

poem of time with strong metrical parallelism. This poem revisits the temporal themes of human life. Thus, by examining the genre shifts, poem (1:4-11), prose (1:12-2:26), to poem (3:1-8), 1:12-2:26 is evidently a section on its own.

### 3.2 Outline and Summary

In scholarship, Eccl 1:12-2:26 is often referred to as Qohelet's Self-Introduction,<sup>180</sup> The Royal Experiment/Investigation/Quest,<sup>181</sup> Reflection of the King,<sup>182</sup> and mostly a combination of any two. In order to examine the details of Qohelet's quest, one may ask the key question: who is speaking? And how does he speak towards his audience? At the beginning of this passage, Qohelet introduces himself with the first-person pronoun אני, positions himself as a king, then proceeds to narrate the account of the quests he experienced. The first-person pronoun and verbal suffixes are decisive in the literary units within this passage. Using these criteria, the passage can be outlined as follows:<sup>183</sup>

- A. 1:12-15. Autobiographical introduction
  - a. 1:12. Royal self-introduction

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<sup>180</sup> Murphy (1992), Longman (1998), Fox (1999), Lohfink (2003), Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall (2017).

<sup>181</sup> Gordis (1968), G. Ogden (1987), Crenshaw (1988), Longman (1998), Fox (1999), Shields (2006), Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall (2017).

<sup>182</sup> Murphy (1992), Seow (1997), and Krüger (2004).

<sup>183</sup> The outline of this passage is quite different from scholar to scholar. Murphy suggests that 1:12-18 is broken into vv. 12-15 and vv. 16-18 according to "an unmistakable symmetry," but for chapter two he does not provide a distinctive outline (Murphy, *Wisdom Literature*, 134; therefore, Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 78). Lohfink views 1:12-2:2 as a unit apart from 2:3-26 using "the recurrence of a specific sequence of words" with a total of eleven specific terms (Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 45). However, by simply using the word sequence to determine the sections undermines the content of Qohelet's speech. Seow proposes 1:13-2:3 as a unit due to the high frequency of the character's actions with "the heart," and also because the section forms an "inclusio" with the phrase "under the heavens" at the beginning (1:13) and the end (2:3) (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 142-43). For Seow, 1:13-2:3 serves as the introduction of a theological framework that ends with the concluding 2:24-26 where "God is portrayed again as one giving a preoccupation to some, but to others are given wisdom, knowledge, and joy" (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 143). divides the whole section into three: 1:12-2:11 (the king demonstrates and measures the absurdity of his accomplishments against his predecessors), 2:12-21 (the king measures his death and its consequence in the face of his successors), and 2:22-26 (the king generalizes his own experiences and reflections into statements about all people) according to the themes (Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 59-60). Finally, Fox separates 1:12-15 and 1:16-18 in light of their contents, suggesting that the second unit is "looking back at the inquiry described in the first, reflecting upon it and reacting to its results" (Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 170). For chapter two, he takes the whole chapter as one literary unity with three main topics: vv. 1-11 (pleasure and toil), vv. 12-17 (wisdom and folly), and vv. 18-26 (toil and pleasure, wisdom and folly) (Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 174).

- b. 1:13-14. Setting his heart (לב) to investigate life in general
- c. 1:15. Proverbial summary of investigation
- B. 1:16-1:18. Investigational introduction (“I spoke, I with my heart”/performative relationship)
  - a. 1:16. The heart picks up the reflexive command to the self (אני)
  - b. 1:17. The heart investigates while the “I” is reluctant
  - c. 1:18. Proverbial summary of the evaluation
- C. 2:1-11. Investigating pleasure and achievements (performative dialogue)
  - a. 2:1-2. Instructing the heart to investigate while the “I” is reluctant
  - b. 2:3-9. Using the heart as reasoning (“my heart still guided by wisdom”) while the “I” performs the investigation
  - c. 2:10. Feedback from the heart: “my heart was glad”
  - d. 2:11. Feedback from the “I”: all is emptiness
- D. 2:12-17. Investigating wisdom and foolishness
  - a. 2:12-14. The “I” investigates with preliminary assumption
  - b. 2:15-16. Using the heart as a reflexive companion to yield contradicting results (reflexive dialogue)
  - c. 2:17. Emotional pessimistic conclusion
- E. 2:18-23. Conclusion
  - a. 2:18-19. Grievance of surrendering achievements to the uncertain successor after death
  - b. 2:20-23. The “I” overpowering the heart’s former content with laboring (performative relationship)
- F. 2:24-26. A solution
  - a. 2:24-25. Experiencing pleasure through the labors
  - b. 2:24&26. God has full judgment of personal fate (pessimistic tone)

Beginning with section A, Qohelet adopts the introduction formula of fictional royal autobiography with his “I, (am) Qohelet” remark, which is observed to be an imitation of ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian inscriptions by O. Loretz, Longman, and Seow.<sup>184</sup> Introducing himself as “a king over Israel in Jerusalem” (v. 12) and adding his urge to pursue “all that is done under the heavens” (כל־אשר נעשה תחת השמים) (v. 13), he seems to be tying himself closer to the Solomonic figure. Intentionally, he uses this notion to establish himself as the all-knowing human being—namely a great king—that possesses

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<sup>184</sup> See Loretz, *Qohelet und der alte Orient: Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des buches Qohelet* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), 62-63; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 76; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 144.

the authority to justify his experience and evaluations in the sections to come. Moreover, Qohelet uses God as the active justification who sets him in a passive state (“a task of evil”) towards a life of investigation at the end of v. 13. Apparently, Qohelet uses this kingship identity under God to suggest that he is the one under God but above all humankind.

While vv. 12-13 discloses Qohelet’s identity-building through his own voice, vv. 13-14 concludes briefly a general summary of his findings in the investigation: “everything is an illusion and a pursuit of emptiness” (v. 14). The key here is identifying the heart (לב) as the subject made to investigate (v. 13) instead of simply stating “I investigated.” This distinction between the heart and the “I” (אני) is crucial for understanding how Qohelet constructs his autobiographical reflection. Verse 15 is a poetic parallel in the form of a proverbial saying, which is echoed in 7:13 and sums up the incapability of the human being to change anything that has been done in the past. The first-person suffix is seen in the beginning verbs of v. 12 “I have been” (הייתי), v. 13 “I gave” (ונתתי), and v. 14 “I have seen” (ראיתי). It is only lacking in v. 15 in this section and resumes in v. 16, but in v. 16 the first-person suffix is used along with the pronoun “I” (אני). Moreover, v. 16 is written in the form of a dialogic speech, which signifies a break from the poetic form in v. 15.

Section B is structured similarly as section A, just without the self-introductory remark in v. 12. This section begins with Qohelet’s signature conversation with his heart, or inner dialogue, using the idiom “I spoke with my heart” (דברתי אני עם-לבי) (v. 16).<sup>185</sup> While some have understood this idiom as an inner dialogue formula, Qohelet peculiarly uses “with” (עם) in v. 16 whereas in later appearances of the formula it is mostly the preposition “in/at/with/among” (ב).<sup>186</sup> Immediately, the heart and the “I” control

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<sup>185</sup> Although not using the exact same wordings, similar expressions are found in Eccl 2:1; 3:17, 18. This conversational formula is recognized as a feature in Qohelet’s speech and is mostly received as his inner dialogue, although there are scholars who hint that the heart is more of a separate entity aside from the “I.” Most obviously: Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 123; Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 195-96. Obscurely and not always consistent: Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 76; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 78.

<sup>186</sup> Whether the preposition ב should be translated according to biblical tradition or merged with the meaning

different aspects of the investigation: while the heart is set to have seen wisdom and foolishness, the “I” gives the final verdict of this experience (vv. 16-17). This would eventually lead to the gap between what the heart experiences and what the “I” judges in the end. Whereas section A serves as Qohelet’s autobiographical introduction, section B sets up the main investigation of his life. It is a general overview of Qohelet’s evaluation of life which serves as an introduction to the details provided in the following section C (2:1-11) and D (2:12-17). Like v. 14 in section A, v. 17 ends with the “striving of emptiness” evaluation, followed by a proverbial equivalence of the evaluation (v. 18). Thus, similar to Murphy’s remark,<sup>187</sup> section A and B are in a symmetrical fashion.

Section C begins with the conversational idiom “I said with my heart” (אמרתי אני בלבי) in 2:1, then proceeds to give further details about the investigation of life. In 1:16, “I had made myself great” refers to a quest that has been completed, leading to the heart greatly seeing “wisdom and knowledge”; in 2:1a, the command “Go now, I should test *you* (אנסכה) with joy” is instructed directly at the heart by the “I,” but once again, the “I” immediately shows its distaste against this pursuit in 2:1b-2. This could be a sequential result but the awkward insertion of v. 2 seems to suggest otherwise: the “I” assumes the thought of befooling instead of experiencing it beforehand with the interrogative (מה־זה עשה). Like the previous 1:15 and 1:18, v. 2 functions as a short proverbial summary of Qohelet’s “I” reflection on this section’s findings. Given that vv. 3-9 go to great lengths to disclose the details of Qohelet’s strive for greatness (emphasized in v. 4), a goal that is shared with section B, it is evident that section C is the detailed description of section B. The purpose of this quest is to “observe pleasure” with the heart (v. 1) by physically achieving greatness (v. 4). The full reflection is presented in vv. 10-11 where Qohelet first reflects

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of the preposition ׀ is a matter of discussion in later sections of this work.

<sup>187</sup> Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature 13 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 134; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary 23A (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 13.

and evaluates the state of his heart during the process (v. 10) then realizes that outcome is “a pursuit of emptiness” and that “there is no benefit under the sun” (v. 11). So far the quest is fully dedicated to the evaluation of the reflexive self, whether it is presented as purely a monologue or by using the heart (לב) as the conversational partner. No other persons are present in this section and Qohelet focuses solely on his own achievements and experiences. In addition, it is now evident that the theme of “emptiness” (ריוח) marks the ending of the quest sections (1:17<sup>188</sup>; 2:11, 17).

By observing the repetition of “then I turned to observe” ([לראות] אני ופניתי) at the beginning of 2:11 and 12, one could identify a topical difference in what follows. In v. 11, the phrase is followed by the evaluation of “the labor that I had striven to accomplish,” and as shown previously, it is a complete evaluation of 1:16-2:10. On the other hand, in v. 12 the phrase is followed by a new observation towards “wisdom, delusion, and foolishness” (חכמה והוללות וסבלות), with also a new attention towards “the man that comes after the king” (v. 12). Judging by content, v. 11 and v. 12 belong to different topics Qohelet seeks to examine. Thus, v. 12 marks the beginning of section D (2:12-17). Section D deals mainly with Qohelet’s evaluation between wisdom and foolishness, but more importantly the evaluation of the fate that befalls the wise and the fool. The evaluation is initiated from the “I” stance here. Once again like the previous sections, v. 13 quickly gives a brief preliminary assumption, although this time not in a proverbial format but a simple praise of “wisdom over foolishness.” The pattern is similar to section C where a short conclusion is presented right after the purpose of investigation is stated. Yet, in vv. 14-16 Qohelet realizes that due to the same fate that the fool and the wise (which he identifies with in v. 15) should meet, what is the purpose of being wise after all? The reflexive effect is

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<sup>188</sup> Eccl 1:17 and 18 both serve as the ending to section B, the former being the narrative ending and the latter the proverbial ending that supplements the idea of v. 17.

increased even more when he sets up the heart for a conversation in order to express his inner thoughts in v. 15. Verse 16 stands out particularly due to his revelation that the fate he considered was that “the wise die just like the fool” (v.16). The tipping point for Qohelet is when he realizes that no matter how wise the wise becomes, the pursuit of perfection is relentlessly downplayed by the fate of death, much like what would happen to the foolish. This theme of death will continue to drive his thought process all the way to the end of chapter two. Through this pessimism that rises with the realization with the comparison of himself (as the wise) to the other (the fool), he concludes this section that the pursue of wisdom is also a “pursuit of emptiness” (v. 17), a similar break mark used in previous sections.

In brief, section C (2:1-11) and section D (2:12-17) demonstrates the two main quests of Qohelet’s experience. While section C focuses on his personal evaluation of achievements, section D turns to measure these achievements against other individuals—namely the fool—under the circumstances of the general human fate: death. Having investigated the mortal life “under the heavens/sun,” in the coming section E (2:18-23) he proceeds to grieve over the unfruitfulness of the human life. Qohelet opens by saying “I hated all the labor (עמלי) that I had labored (עמל) under the sun” (v. 18), a statement that contradicts his previous evaluation that “my heart was glad from all my labor (עמלי)” (v. 10). The key of this outcry is undeniably the irrelevance of “the work” (המעשה) that the wise had strived so much to achieve (v. 18). Moreover, the pain comes as he realizes all of his lifelong achievements will fall into the hands of the successor that he does not know whether “is wise or a fool” (החכם יהיה או סבל) (v. 19). This emotional remorse carries all the way until v. 23, ending similarly on the conclusive marker “an illusion” (הבל) which suggests emptiness. The peak of Qohelet’s emotional turnover comes at v. 20 where he shifts his evaluation from originally “my heart was glad from all my labor” (v. 10) to “I

turned my heart to despair” (v. 20), while also complaining that the heart “does not rest” (לא־שָׁכַב) during his laboring (v. 23). Moreover, with the reevaluation of the purpose of laboring in life, the “I” overpowers the heart’s genuine appreciation of laboring, forcefully turning it to feel “despair.” This evidently suggests that the “I” could maintain a different attitude towards a subject in comparison to the heart’s. Truly, section E is clearly an emotional downfall for Qohelet which also serves as the final conclusion for his investigation of mortal life.

Peculiarly, although with the pessimistic conclusion Qohelet seemingly has not lost hope yet. In the final section F (2:24-26), he repositions himself by evaluating from the Human-God relation perspective. While section C and D has proven that Qohelet’s evaluation of both self-oriented experience and human-associated experience have yielded emptiness (2:11,17), in order to search for an alternative solution, he draws attention to God’s interference of the mortal human. In v. 24, he suggests that the human capability to enjoy eating and drinking (יאכל ושתה) comes from God. Also notable is the first time “soul” (נפש) is used in Qohelet’s speech to point to the mortal being, a term often used to show life’s divine origin. But the expression “to make his soul (נפש) experience pleasure” is somewhat similar to how the “I” makes or instructs the heart to pursue certain experiences. Thus, a further analysis of how Qohelet uses the “soul” (נפש) along with the “heart” (לב) throughout the book is desirable. In short, section E suggests that Qohelet is no longer thinking in the mortal sense concerning the human experience but rather bringing the spirituality of the being into dialogue with God’s interference. This section ends with the account that judgment belongs to God, although Qohelet still believes that wisdom, knowledge, and joy is given to the man “who please before Him (God)” (שטוב לפניו), and that sinners are given the task “to gather and to collect” (לאסוף)

וּלְכַנּוּס (v. 26). But perhaps realizing that this is merely his assumption, he closes the whole passage with all “is an illusion and a pursuit of emptiness” (v. 26).

#### **4. Qohelet’s Narrative Strategies in Eccl 1:12-2:26**

The Hebrew Bible has not fallen short of texts that is written in first-person speech, and a good portion of that belongs to the prophets. Usually, the main speaker would be introduced by an omniscient third-person narrative voice who properly introduces the speaker, then hands it off to the speaker to do the rest. In most cases, the narrative voice intervenes once in a while to supplement the speech with additional information. When it comes to Ecclesiastes, however, this third-person narrative voice is nearly minimized and marginalized, reduced only to reveal the identification of Qohelet at the beginning and to place a verdict at the end of the book (1:1-2; 7:27; 12:8-14).<sup>189</sup> Moreover, in terms of 1:12-2:26, the unusual high frequency of the first-person pronoun אֲנִי here is unmatched in other Hebrew texts, where normally the first-person suffix is sufficient. The indication of a dominant first-person narrative voice is therefore strong and evident. In this section I would like to seek out the literary devices used to promote Qohelet’s first-person autobiographical voice.

##### **4.1 Adopting the Solomonic Voice**

In the days when the royal court signifies the centralization of power and the kingdom, the most direct and quickest way to establish an authoritative voice among a less educated audience, is to attach power, fame, wealth, and royal kinship to one’s self-introduction. In the beginning of Ecclesiastes, Qohelet does not dedicate much to his identity building since the whole book is more fixated towards the evaluation of his experiences in life. However, the moment he delivers his self-presentation to the audience,

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<sup>189</sup> Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 46-48. Also, see Fox’s “Frame-Narrative,” *HUCA* 48 (1977): 83-106 for a pioneering analysis of the narrative framework of Ecclesiastes.

it is already a statement that brings attention to such a power, fame, and a name so well-known that the implied audience (most probably the Jewish community) would have immediately understood his reference. Eccl 1:12 is the first time in the book where Qohelet addresses his identity, and that is: “I, Qohelet, have been a king over Israel in Jerusalem” (v. 12). The self-proclaimed identity should be viewed in retrospect of the superscription in 1:1 which announces “The words of Qohelet (קהלת), the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” These two verses provide two bases for Qohelet’s self-proclaimed identity: (1) he has been a king in Jerusalem ruling over Israel, and (2) he is from the Davidic lineage, if not the direct son of David. More clues of the Solomonic identity can be drawn from this section through Qohelet’s mentioning of his quest. Qohelet specifies that he is to carry out his investigation not only “with wisdom” (בְּחִכְמָה) in v. 13, but also that he himself is a possessor of great wisdom in v. 16: “I, look, had made myself great and gained wisdom over all who were before me over Jerusalem.” If this is not enough of a justification, Qohelet also enjoyed a significant amount of wealth in his lifetime, as stated in vv. 2:4-10, which is equally fitting with Solomon’s depiction in 1 Kgs 3:1-10:29. Hence, through the description of Qohelet’s quest of wisdom, wealth, and all experiences under the heavens, he has deliberately linked his identity to Solomon the king and the Wise.

Adopting the Solomonic guise for Qohelet has several benefits, the most important being the reputation that Solomon is *the* iconic king in Judaic history, ruling during the most glorious days of the kingdom, and is the one who is blessed with immense wisdom by God. Using Solomon as the underlying tone quickly establishes Qohelet as the authoritative voice whose speech should not be contested and whose experience should be taken with respect. Thus, similar to Gordis’ observations, “the book of Koheleth is not a pseudepigraph, which the author seeks to attribute to Solomon,” but rather that Qohelet impersonates Solomon because he wishes to examine wisdom and pleasure since

“Solomon had the reputation of possessing both in superlative degree.”<sup>190</sup> Establishing such an authoritative presence is crucial in the beginning of Qohelet’s speech. Lohfink suggests that the use of this “masquerade in which a person is presented in a higher social level, it is possible, without forfeiting the advantages of narrative presentation, to base an anthropology not on the experiences of people who fail to grow or to achieve anything in life, but rather on the experiences of the highest human possibility.”<sup>191</sup> Krüger sees this notion to be a royal travesty, and in fact, a “travesty at the top.”<sup>192</sup> Indeed, the purpose that Qohelet chooses to pose as a king is not aimed at boasting his social status or power, but in order to present a full survey on the human experience without having to wrestle with the “who is this stranger speaking” issue that others may question throughout his exploration. However, just posing as any king does not help him establish this authority to examine life, because in OT traditions it is frequent that “a king, more than the ‘little man,’ runs the risk of overestimating himself and his possibilities for shaping life and the world—and that such hubris is often followed by a great fall.”<sup>193</sup> In order to avoid such a fallacy in his self-imposed kingly identity within the Jewish community, Qohelet points his kingship specifically at a renowned figure in the OT tradition: Solomon of the Davidic lineage.

Therefore, the second part of Qohelet’s identity is dedicated to stating that he “has been a king over Israel in Jerusalem” (הייתי מלך על־ישראל בירושלם) in 1:12. Although Qohelet does not state directly that he is Solomon the king, in the Hebrew Bible this is the only figure that fits with this description. It is peculiar to define the realm of sovereignty to be “over Israel” but also “in Jerusalem” since this entails a period prior to the split between Judah and Israel during the united monarchy. The kings that have been identified

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<sup>190</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth*, 204.

<sup>191</sup> Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 44.

<sup>192</sup> Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 62.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

as “king over Israel” (מֶלֶךְ עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל) are Saul, David, and Solomon (1 Sam 23:17; 2 Sam 5:2-5, 11, 17; 1 Kgs 1:34; 3:28). Kings who have ruled “in Jerusalem” during the united monarchy narrow down to only David and Solomon. However, taking into consideration of the opening verse (1:1) of the book, it is stated that Qohelet is “son of David” (בֶּן־דָּוִד), which rules out David and leaves only Solomon. Evidently, Qohelet is posing with association to the Solomonic kingship as he explores further into his investigations of life. This identity follows through 1:12-2:26 as Qohelet accumulates great wealth and explores wisdom, both are themes that highlight Solomon’s achievements during his reign at Gibeon in 1 Kgs 3:3-15.<sup>194</sup> This is more evident particularly when Qohelet emphasizes that he had always kept wisdom as his reference of evaluation, and so does Solomon when he asks God for wisdom above all wealth in 1 Kgs 3:9. It is as if Qohelet is examining the human experience after the moment God had given him—using the Solomonic identity—the wisdom that he had asked for. Of all the kings of Hebrew biblical history, Solomon is the one who is known for his great wisdom (1 Kgs 3:28) and as a king with great wealth and influence. These features fit nicely with Qohelet’s depiction of himself during his quests. As a result, the Solomonic kingly identity not only resolves the issue with Qohelet’s empirical authority, Solomon’s strong ties with wisdom enables Qohelet to evaluate every aspect of the human experience with intellectual authority. In addition, Solomon is perhaps the least controversial kingly figure of biblical tradition in terms of his wisdom and experience. Therefore, although the name “Solomon” has never been mentioned once in Ecclesiastes, there is no doubt that one should see Qohelet posing as the respectable king.

## 4.2 Imitating the Opening of ANE Royal Inscriptions

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<sup>194</sup> For a more detailed discussion on Qohelet’s engagement with the Solomonic identity, see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 98, 119; Christianson, “The Solomonic Guise,” *A Time to Tell*, 128-72.

Without announcing his identity directly as Solomon, Qohelet still successfully established his connection to the king himself, drawing attention and speculation to his presumed royal background. Although the name “Qohelet” (קהלת) is highly debated in modern scholarship, it has been proven that commentaries in antiquity have very fondly accepted the Solomonic role for this “Qohelet” character. Indeed, it is not just due to the character’s announcing of his royal identity in Eccl 1:12 that contributed to the real-life recognition of Solomon’s role within this book. First of all, “I... have been king” (אני הייתי מלך) is an obvious self-proclaiming statement about his significant role in the society. In most commentaries, scholars use this statement to show the book’s similar pattern with ancient fictional Akkadian autobiography or an imitation of the “self-presentation formula of kings in the royal inscriptions of the ancient Near East.”<sup>195</sup> For instance, Seow observes that “the *’nk/’nh* RN formula is a typical way of introducing the king in whose name the inscription is issued.”<sup>196</sup> Turning the attention back to Qohelet’s introduction, Qohelet’s self-introduction in this passage also shows a stylistic similarity with the openings of ANE Royal Inscriptions.

Beginning with the statement in 1:12, Qohelet adopts the introduction formula of ANE fictional royal autobiography with his “I, Qohelet, was a king” remark.<sup>197</sup> Shield has translated and demonstrated the similarities between 1:12 and a few openings from ANE royal inscriptions:<sup>198</sup>

I am Sargon the great king, king of Agade.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 119. Many earlier scholars have also confirmed this finding, therefore: Loretz, *Qohelet*, 62-63; Bo Isaksson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth: With Special Emphasis on the Verbal System* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1987), 50-51; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 71. Later scholars follow suit, such as: Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 76; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 170-71; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 46.

<sup>196</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 119. Seow compares the line with KAI 10.1; 13.1; 24.1; 26.1.1; 181.1; 214.1; 216.1; 217.1.

<sup>197</sup> See Loretz, *Qohelet*, 62-63; Longman III, *Ecclesiastes*, 76; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 144.

<sup>198</sup> Martin A. Shield, “Qohelet and Royal Autobiography,” in *The Words of the Wise Are Like Goads: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century*, eds. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III, and Cristian G. Rata (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 118.

<sup>199</sup> “The Birth Legend of Sargon of Akkad”; see W. W. Hallo, *The Context of Scripture* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 1.461.

I am Mesha, the son of Kemosh[-yatti], the king of Moab, the Dibonite.<sup>200</sup>

I am *Yehawmilk*, king of Byblos/Gubal . . .<sup>201</sup>

I am Zakkur, king of Hamath and Lu'ash.<sup>202</sup>

Comparing these ANE inscription introductions with Qohelet's statement in 1:12:

I, Qohelet, have been a king over Israel in Jerusalem. . . (Eccl 1:12)

Similarly, Qohelet's introduction uses the first-person "I" to introduce the speaker himself, followed by the name of the speaker, then the region of his rule. This is the most vivid evidence in the book of Ecclesiastes that alludes to the author knowing and understanding the structures of AND royal inscriptions. Although 1:12 alone cannot account for the author's full imitation of ANE literature, it can be seen as an influence in his writing style. This imitation, in turn, contributes to the implied audience's knowledge and recognition of Qohelet character as one who owns up to that royal lineage from far, far away in time.

As such, it is likely that this type of literary construction is purposefully designed in Qohelet's speech to further emphasize that the knowledge he shares come from ancient times. The function of Qohelet's adoption of the formulaic expression, according to Koh, is to create "the impression that the narrative to follow belongs to a king,"<sup>203</sup> from antiquity. Longman further suggests in his research on ancient autobiography in Akkadian literature that the majority of Ecclesiastes adopts the three-part structure of the "fictional autobiography" genre: (1) a first-person identification, (2) contains a personal narration "where the first-person speaker recounts his or her exceptional acts," and (3) endings with "wisdom admonitions, instructions on how to behave."<sup>204</sup> This fits

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Shield's translation.

<sup>200</sup> From "The Inscription of King Mesha," *COS* 1.137. Shield's translation.

<sup>201</sup> From Phoenician, "The Inscription of King Yehawmilk," *COS* 2.151. Shield's translation.

<sup>202</sup> From Old Aramaic, "Inscription of Zakkur," *COS* 2.155. Shield's translation.

<sup>203</sup> Koh, *Royal Autobiography*, 28.

<sup>204</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 18. See also his *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns,

with Qohelet’s elaborate depiction of his achievements in Eccl 2:1-11, ending with an evaluation that “all is an illusion and a pursuit of emptiness” (v. 11). By using this archaic style, Qohelet is mimicking the tone of those kings of the past, lending more authority to his voice. Hence, as Koh points out, Qoheleth’s language “highlights the extent to which the language and content of 1:12-2:26 are rooted in ancient Near Eastern royal ideology and literary practice.”<sup>205</sup> In other words, through Qohelet’s self-introduction, he is not only indirectly linking his royal background to the Solomonic figure (§4.1), he is also stretching the influence of his royal identity beyond the time and space of the implied audience of the tale. The purpose of this double imitation—the subtle likeliness to the Solomonic figure and the similarity of Qohelet’s spoken style to ANE royal inscription openings—is to establish a sense of didactic authority that gathers attention for Qohelet’s further reflections.

#### 4.3 The Self’s (אני) Dialogue with the Heart (לב)

With the establishment of an authoritative voice, namely through the Solomonic recognition, Qohelet sets off to demonstrate his experiments through his first-person narrative. There are several features here to build towards the first-person voice, the most notable being the relationship between “I” (אני) and the heart (לב). Minor but crucial details also include how “with” (עם) is translated in 1:16 (lit.: “I spoke *with* my heart, saying...”) versus “in/at/with/among” (ב) in 2:1 (lit.: “I said *in/with* my heart”).<sup>206</sup> The proper translation of these two prepositions dominate the relationship between “I” and the heart, namely whether the heart is part of the “I” or is it a separate object/entity apart from “I.” This will be discussed and examined along in the following subchapters where

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1991).

<sup>205</sup> Koh, *Royal Autobiography*, 37.

<sup>206</sup> The discussion of the prepositions עם and ב will be incorporated into the translation footnotes, although some scholarly translations have been discussed in my following section on “The Heart (לב).”

the first person pronoun אני ("I"), the entity לב ("heart"), and their relationship will be explored in detail.

### 4.3.1 The First-Person Pronoun אני

First of all, Eccl 1:12-2:26 contains the highest frequency of first-person pronouns in the whole book. In terms of a narrative flow, this should suggest a very strong case for Qohelet's personal voice. It is peculiar that Qohelet retains the "I" (אני) while stating nearly every action in this passage which already has the first-person verbal endings.<sup>207</sup> In addition, it is also unique that in most cases the pronoun "I" comes *after* the verb. Holmstedt has observed a strikingly high frequency of the pronoun after the finite verb in Ecclesiastes compared to the rest of the cases in HB, shown in this table:

**TABLE 1: FINITE VERBS WITH 1CS INDEPENDENT PRONOUNS IN QOHELET AND THE HEBREW BIBLE**

	Qohelet (222 vv in B19a)	Rest of HB (22991 vv in B19a)
1st Person Finite Verbs	81	6924
1st Person Pronouns with Finite Verb	22	482
	2 pre-verbal <sup>3</sup>	412 pre-verbal <sup>3</sup>
	20 post-verbal <sup>4</sup>	70 post-verbal <sup>6</sup>

❖ Table by Holmstedt<sup>208</sup>

Holmstedt coins this feature the "post-verbal pronoun,"<sup>209</sup> which many have seen as a distinct feature of Qohelet.<sup>210</sup> Eleven out of the twelve times<sup>211</sup> that the pronoun אני is

<sup>207</sup> אני appears along with a first-person ending verb in 1:12, 16; 2:1, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 20, 24.

<sup>208</sup> Robert D. Holmstedt, "אני ולבי: The Syntactic Encoding of the Collaborative Nature of Qohelet's Experiment," *JHS* 9 (2009), 4.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>210</sup> While some suggest that this is a feature of later Hebrew (for instance, *BDB* suggests that the pronoun in later Hebrew is sometimes pleonastic [*BDB*, 59]), Schoors observes no apparent parallels in the Hebrew texts of the written period of Ecclesiastes (*Preacher* I, 160). Besides, in most cases in the other books in HB, the verb ending is sufficient to express a first-person point of view. In this sense, Qohelet could be stressing the importance of the "I." Indeed, in cases when the pronoun אני follows a verb participle as its subject or is used prior to the verb, it is often used to emphasize the subject (Koosed, *(Per)Mutations of Qohelet*, 26).

<sup>211</sup> Excluding the pre-verbal אני in 1:12 and the second time אני appears in Eccl 2:18 which follows the relative

used in 1:12-2:26, it is placed after a verb which already has the first-person ending. In short, the only possibility is that the post-verbal pronoun is used with an “emphasis-based” notion.<sup>212</sup> Thus, Qohelet repeatedly stresses the first-person pronoun אֲנִי as a way to emphasize that the things he shares is solely his own. Qohelet may still hide behind the Solomonic guise, but whenever he highlights himself through the pronoun “I,” he is redirecting the authority of his discourse to himself. Thus, the persuasiveness of Qohelet’s speech now adds a layer of intimacy. This allows the distant Solomonic figure—as an unreachable royalty—to transform into a personal advisor and teacher for the common audience.

Qohelet uses the short form of the first-person pronoun “I” (אֲנִי) 29 times in the book instead of אֲנֹכִי, which noted by Crenshaw, shares “this feature of style with other late biblical works (Ezra, Esther, Haggai) and Mishnah.”<sup>213</sup> Ecclesiastes in Qumran also attests אֲנִי over אֲנֹכִי. According to Longman, the late dating of the book with the first-person pronoun has also been suggested by D. Lys but drawing from grammatical and statistical intertextual evidence Daniel C. Fredericks opposes later dating by suggesting that this could be “just as indicative of a regional, stylistic, or vernacular preference.”<sup>214</sup> In closer view, Eccl 1:12-2:26 contains the highest frequency of first-person pronouns in the whole book. With the emergence of Qohelet’s own voice with the first-person pronoun “I” (אֲנִי), the passage suddenly becomes very intimate with Qohelet himself in narrative terms, thus, setting apart 1:12 from the opening of the book which has a third-person narrator introducing Qohelet as the narrative framework. However, in terms of a narrative perspective, the first-person אֲנִי is the term that makes a very strong case for Qohelet’s

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particle ׀.

<sup>212</sup> Holmstedt, “אֲנִי וְלִבִּי The Syntactic Encoding,” 7.

<sup>213</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 71.

<sup>214</sup> Longman refers to Fredericks (*Qoheleth’s Language*, 141-46) in his *Ecclesiastes*, 76; see Lys, *L’Ecclésiaste ou Que vaut la vie?*, 143.

personal voice. Even if the expression “I, Qohelet, have been king” is an imitation of ancient autobiography, it does not take away the fact that the stress is on the “I”—the king who introduces himself along with the achievements he has made.

It is indeed peculiar that Qohelet retains the “I” (אני) in nearly every action he has made in 1:12-2:26 along with the first-person suffix of the corresponding verbs.<sup>215</sup> Most cases in other books of the Hebrew Bible, the suffixed verb is sufficient to express a first-person point of view. However, in cases when אני follows a verb participle as its subject<sup>216</sup> or is used prior to the verb, it is often used to emphasize the subject.<sup>217</sup> Thus, twelve out of the thirteen times<sup>218</sup> the word אני is used in 1:12-2:26, the pronoun is placed after a verb which already has the first-person suffix in all cases. While some suggest that this is a feature of later Hebrew,<sup>219</sup> Schoors observes no apparent parallels in the Hebrew texts of the written period of Ecclesiastes.<sup>220</sup> Unless, of course, the speaker would like to stress the importance of “I?” Such an excessive use of the personal pronoun is rarely found in other books in the MT. Therefore, the emphasis on the first-person narrative is evident after Qohelet announces his name in 1:12.

#### 4.3.2 The Heart (לב) as the Dialogue Partner and the Seat of Evaluation

Similar to the first person pronoun “I” (אני), the heart (לב) is used excessively in 1:12-2:26 with a total of twelve appearances. However, the meaning of the term לב in the HB must be clarified in order not to be confused with our modern understanding of the heart as a bodily organ. In short, the usages of the “heart” can be categorized into the following: the

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<sup>215</sup> אני appears along with a first-person suffixed verb in 1:12, 16, 17; 2:1, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 20, 24.

<sup>216</sup> *BDB*, 59. Peculiarly, both *NIDOTTE* and *TDOT* lack an entry for the Hebrew pronoun “I” (אני). In *TLOT*, it states that “the independent 1st sg. per. pron. is used no differently in the divine speeches [I Am Yahweh] than in the human speeches. The presentation formula can begin divine speech that makes statements concerning God’s being and his behavior toward individuals or a community” (Günther, אני, *TLOT*, 165).

<sup>217</sup> Koosed, *(Per)Mutations of Qohelet*, 26.

<sup>218</sup> Excluding the second time אני appears in Eccl 2:18 which follows the relative particle ך.

<sup>219</sup> For instance, *BDB* suggests that the pronoun in later Hebrew is sometimes pleonastic (*BDB*, 59).

<sup>220</sup> Schoors, *Preacher I*, 160.

subject of conversation from the “I” (1:16a; 2:1, 15[x2]), the instrument of investigation (1:13, 17; 2:3[x2]), and the receiver of investigational outcome or emotional feedback (1:16b; 2:20, 22, 23).<sup>221</sup> Since the interest here is to demonstrate how the usage of לב contributes to the autobiographical voice, the “I spoke with my heart” formula is the main concern, so how does scholarship understand this formula?

The two distinct appearance of the dialogic formula between the “I” and the heart occurs in 1:16 “I spoke with my heart, saying...” (דברתי אני עם-לבי לאמר) and 2:1 “I said with my heart” (דברתי אני עם-לבי). Crenshaw translates both sentences as “I said to myself,” suggesting that the former is the author carrying “on a conversation with himself, thinking aloud, weighing the present situation and his own intellectual accomplishments”<sup>222</sup> while the latter that “the Hebrew image is that of rational deliberation, a conversation with one's personified mind”<sup>223</sup> without having translate לב as the “heart.” Fox distinguishes the former as “I spoke with my heart” and the latter “I said *in* my heart.” He suggests in 1:16 that “since the heart is the seat of wisdom/reason (1:13, 16, 17; 2:3), it can assimilate and evaluate the sensations it perceives, in order to produce knowledge and report this knowledge to the person,”<sup>224</sup> whereas in 2:1 by taking consideration of the cohortative (אֲנִי־סֹכֵךְ) and imperative parallel (וְרָאָה) he sees Qohelet “addressing his heart as ‘you’ and giving it a command.”<sup>225</sup> In addition, he takes note of how Qohelet’s “heart is treated as a distinct ‘person’ in 1:16 and 7:25.”<sup>226</sup> Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall’s translation of 1:16 is more wooden—“I spoke, I, with my לב”—stating that

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<sup>221</sup> See Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 193-200 for an in-depth categorization of all the appearance of לב in the whole book.

<sup>222</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 74.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>224</sup> Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 78.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

Qoheleth elaborates on the commissioning of his לֵב in v. 13: he and his לֵב are conversation partners in the experiment. Recounting his greatness and wisdom—including the abundance of wisdom and knowledge shared by his לֵב (note how Qoheleth distinguishes what is true about just him from what is true of his לֵב apart from him by using אֲנִי within the quote)—establishes his and his לֵב’s ability (resources) and authority (wisdom) to conduct the experiment and draw conclusions.<sup>227</sup>

Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall clearly see a distinction between the “I” and the heart as both represent different aspects of the same character, and that “I” addresses the heart directly in 2:1.<sup>228</sup> Christianson translates 1:16 as “I said with my heart/I said to myself,” suggesting that the לֵב in 16a is the “seat of reasoning, inner-dialogue” and in 16b “it is the לֵב itself that often does the observing.”<sup>229</sup> Christianson also notes that “because Qoheleth invokes his לֵב as a *separate* entity, he invites the reader to explore and observe his inner person as he does,” and that “the לֵב enjoys this privileged place as Qoheleth’s intellectual centre, and it is from here that all of his observations will flow.”<sup>230</sup> For him, Qoheleth’s לֵב justifies its own private existence as a narrative character and, along with the ‘I’, the student and the frame-narrator, serves to fill out Qoheleth’s tale.”<sup>231</sup> As for 2:1, Christianson translates as “I said in my heart,” therefore he observes that “it is in ch. 2 that this inner dialogue culminates and the heart is established as Qoheleth’s fixed position of reference for the experiences of this youth upon which he reflects, and yet the intense inner-dialogic language persists throughout Qoheleth’s narration.”<sup>232</sup> Commenting on

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<sup>227</sup> Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 75.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>229</sup> Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 194.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 195-96.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

the dialogic formula, Seow observes that

There are analogous expressions elsewhere in the Bible: *'āmar 'el libbô* 'speak to one's heart' (Gen 8:21; 1 Sam 27:1) and *'āmar bēlibbô* 'speak with one's heart' (Gen 27:41; 1 Kgs 12:26; Obadiah 3; Pss 10:6, 11, 13:14:1; 53:2; 74:8, Esth 6:6; Zech 12:5). In no other instance, however, is the thing said introduced by a quotation marker (*lē'mōr* or *kî*), as is the case here. Nor is the heart ever addressed directly in the second person, as it is in 2:1.... It is likely, therefore, that the heart is personified here.

This is a literary device used in Egyptian pessimistic literature.<sup>233</sup>

Whether the heart is seen as a literary function for Qohelet's inner-dialogue or a completely separate entity, it is proven that the majority of scholars have noted that לֵב is personified in this conversational relationship with the "I" (אני), either from a literary perspective or historical-critical perspective.

### 4.3.3 The "I"-Heart Formula

Two notable appearances of the dialogic formula between the "I" and the "heart" occurs in 1:16 "I spoke, I with my heart, saying..." (דברתי אני עם-לבי לאמר) and 2:1 "I said to my heart" (אמרתי אני בלבי).<sup>234</sup> Although some scholars have recognized that this is an internal monologue in which Qohelet speaks to himself,<sup>235</sup> I understand this as Qohelet projecting the heart as a different entity. The distinction paints two picture of the relationship between the "I" and the term לֵב: one is a reflexive usage of the heart which mirrors the

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<sup>233</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 123.

<sup>234</sup> In terms of how to translate the preposition –ָ, Holmstedt has provided his rationale here: "Elsewhere –ָ prepositional phrases are spatial or temporal adjuncts when collocated with the verb אמר. Qohelet, however, is manipulating the idiom אמר בְּלֵב, and so the nuance of the preposition must be taken from context. Here in 2:1 and also in 2:15; 3:17, 18, the preposition –ָ marks the goal ('with X') or the indirect object ('to X') of the speech activity" ("אני ולבי" The Syntactic Encoding," 16).

<sup>235</sup> For instance, Crenshaw translates both sentences as "I said to myself," suggesting that in 1:16 it is Qohelet carrying "on a conversation with himself, thinking aloud, weighing the present situation and his own intellectual accomplishments" (*Ecclesiastes*, 74) while in 2:1 "Qohelet urges his heart to launch yet another test" (*Ecclesiastes*, 76).

thinking of the self, and the other a performative usage where the heart steps out of the self and becomes a separate entity possessing a different standard of judgment from the self.

Looking closer at Eccl 1:16a, Holmstedt highlights how Qohelet uses the second pronoun אני within the quoted words of his speech to distinguish between the experience of himself and the reception of his heart:<sup>236</sup>

דְּבַרְתִּי אֲנִי עִם־לְבִי לֵאמֹר אֲנִי הִנֵּה הִגְדַּלְתִּי ...

“I spoke, I with my heart, saying, ‘I, look, had made myself great...’”

(1:16a)

This leads to the latter half of the verse, where Qohelet restates that “my heart has greatly seen wisdom and knowledge.” There is no reason why Qohelet needed to state the same investigation twice if the heart equals to himself. Seemingly, the sequence is the heart follows and knows only after the experience of the “I” has been told to it. The heart as a separate entity becomes even more apparent when we read on to v. 17:

וְאָתְנָה לְבִי לְדַעַת חֵכְמָה ...

“So I put my heart to understanding wisdom...” (1:17a)

Since there is no reason for Qohelet to put “himself” to the task of performing an act, his usage of the verb וְאָתְנָה (“I put... towards”) with a directional הַ, proves the case that the heart is the object that is given the order by the speaker. A similar relationship between Qohelet and his heart was mentioned earlier in 1:13 as well as later in 2:20:

וְנָתַתִּי אֶת־לְבִי לְדָרוֹשׁ וְלִתּוֹר בְּחֵכְמָה ...

“And I set my heart to care and to investigate, with wisdom...” (1:13a)

וְסָבוֹתִי אֲנִי לִיאֵשׁ אֶת־לְבִי ...

“Thus, I turned my heart to despair...” (2:20a)

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<sup>236</sup> Holmstedt, “אני ולבי” The Syntactic Encoding,” 16.

This time, instead of using the directional הָ as the identifier, the heart has a direct object marker אֶת attached to it, signifying it to be the object that the “I” is making the command to. Both the directional הָ and the direct object marker אֶת are non-existent in other times when the “I” (אני) is used with the heart (לב) to suggest a simple “thinking to oneself” in the HB.

Coming back to 1:17, there is an obvious distinction between the subject that is being mentioned in v. 17a and 17b. While in v. 17a it is the heart that is being “put” (נתן) to the task, the subject has shifted back to Qohelet himself in v. 17b as he uses the term “I observed” (יִדְעֵתִי). The task of the heart and the feeling of the person is on different levels. Whereas the heart is tasked to understand wisdom and foolishness, Qohelet’s self stands on the higher ground to judge that even the act of commanding the heart to accomplish the task is in itself “a striving of emptiness.” Therefore, the “I” of Qohelet and his “heart” are functioning differently: the “I” being the one in command of the heart while the heart is the one giving the evaluation and feedback of the character’s experiences.

Again in Eccl 2:1, Qohelet himself is giving out commands to the heart, asking it to test out joy in a quoted speech:

אָמַרְתִּי אֲנִי בְּלִבִּי לְכֹה־נָא אֲנִסְכָּה בְּשִׂמְחָה ...

“I said in/to my heart, ‘Go now, I should test you with joy...’” (2:1a)

This time, Qohelet has made clear that he is addressing the heart in the second person, using the ending attached to the verb אֲנִסְכָּה (“test you”). Holmstedt observes that this is the only time Qohelet addresses the heart in the second person while other times the second person is used and “aimed at Qohelet’s audience” for the purpose of teaching.<sup>237</sup> While Qohelet commands the heart to experience joy in 2:1a, he abruptly adds his

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<sup>237</sup> Holmstedt, “אני ולבי The Syntactic Encoding,” 16. Seow has similarly stressed that the heart (לב) has never been “addressed directly in the second person, as it is in 2:1,” in comparison to other appearances in the HB (*Ecclesiastes*, 123).

judgment in v. 1b that the action of the heart is “also an illusion.” In both cases in 1:17 and 2:1, we see that Qohelet is splitting his character in two: one is the investigation that the heart takes on, the other his personal reluctant attitude towards performing that act.

The final example is in 2:3, where the role of the heart and Qohelet’s self is switched as he himself investigates while the heart judges. The connotation that the heart is the seat of understanding is self-explanatory:

... תִּרְתִּי בְּלִבִּי לְמִשׁוֹד בַּיַּיִן אֶת־בְּשָׂרִי וְלִבִּי נִהְגַּ בְּחָכְמָה ...

“I investigated with my heart, leading my body with wine—though my heart still guided by wisdom—...” (2:3a)

The message to experience wine with the flesh/body while the heart maintains guidance from wisdom is clear. With Qohelet’s stating the heart having a different task than his indulging in wine, the contrast justifies that the heart functions separately from Qohelet’s self. In other words, whereas in 1:17 and 2:1 Qohelet issues the order for the heart to perform an act of investigation, here in 2:3 it is Qohelet himself that partakes the task of investigation while the heart remains true to wisdom in order to give a final evaluation.

So far, I have tried to demonstrate examples in the passage where the heart is separate from the self in Qohelet’s speech. We see that there is a dynamic relationship between the “I” and the heart which cannot be simply understood as a reflexive internal monologue. Instead, Qohelet presents his heart (לב) as a separate entity that can receive an order from himself, act on behalf of him while having different evaluations, or remain isolated with wisdom while he himself goes on to investigate life. Since several times Qohelet speaks to this “heart,” the heart can be seen as a dialogic partner that enriches Qohelet’s character, splitting his personality in two and characterizing him as a dynamic character. In this sense, it could be understood that the literary construction between the heart and the “I” is a performative relationship. This relationship is coined the “I”-Heart

formula in this research to show the dialogic and evaluative relationship between the two entities in the book. In other words, Qohelet sets his heart—his place of judgment—apart from himself, placing it against himself as a separate persona like a stage play of a ventriloquist having a playful conversation with his puppet, where the two voices belong to the same actor. Although the heart doesn't speak back to Qohelet's frequent dialogues toward it, it has already been taken as an existing conversational object—or even person—for Qohelet. Moreover, in all the cases where Qohelet addresses the heart, Qohelet uses the formula to express the ultimate unconventional evaluation of the status quo differing from his original assumption: all is an illusion and a striving of emptiness. While the "I" experiences excessive abundance and wisdom in many occasions, when it comes to meet with the heart, the evaluation always leads back to being reminded of the vanity of existence. Hence, the heart becomes a criterion for Qohelet's reflexive understanding of life even though it never speaks back to Qohelet.

Establishing this knowledge is useful for understanding the following autobiographical narrative by Qohelet since it may be easier to spot his thought process. The personification of the heart does not mean that the "I"-Heart relationship is stripped of considering the possibility of being Qohelet's inner dialogue. After all, the heart itself is within Qohelet, although here it is likely speaking of the heart in terms of not the bodily organ but of Qohelet's conscience. The relationship between Qohelet and his לֵב is an inseparable one: it is himself yet distinctly different when it comes to performing evaluations. One can say that the "I"-Heart formula is simply Qohelet speaking to himself; nonetheless, for a narrative reading of his first-person speech, it is essential to read the לֵב as a separate yet intimate dialogic entity, ready to assist Qohelet in his evaluation of difference scenarios. For the other functions of לֵב in the text, such as the instrument of

evaluation or the receiver of emotional feedback, all will have to do with this understanding and will be discussed in a separate chapter in detail.

## 5. Summary

Eccl 1:12-2:26 is a crucial text that lays the groundwork for Qohelet's autobiographical narrative speech. Not only it is the first time the assumingly kingly character speaks in his own voice, there are many literary devices that may prove useful in understanding the remaining text of the book. Most notable in the beginning is the establishment of Qohelet's royal identity especially with hints of the Solomonic voice which lends him authority to speak as the embodiment of human wisdom and experience. He does this by imitating the style of ancient Near East royal inscriptions and autobiography, stating that he has been a king over Jerusalem and Israel through the self-introduction formula (1:12). Using this as a rhetorical tool allows Qohelet's words to become the signature of authority, in which people should listen carefully to what he shares. He presents himself as the embodiment of human wisdom and experience. In addition, he does so by imitating the style of ANE royal inscriptions in his style of speech (crafted by the design of the author) and using the style as an indicator that he is from an era before the time of his speech.

Following the establishment of his voice, he employs a continuous conversation between the first-person "I" (אני) and the "heart" (לב), namely the "I"-Heart formula, which enables him to create a critical space for evaluation. His purpose is to draw attention to the life experiences that serve a didactic purpose for his audience, who may or may not have the experience he has had but nonetheless remains intimate with his teachings. For an autobiographical narrative, it would be difficult to generate attention if the storytelling does not engage the audience. Whereas other autobiographical works would introduce secondary characters to create intriguing dialogues, this method cannot be of use for Qohelet's narrative since Qohelet solely wishes to focus on the ontological

experience of his human existence. As an alternative, using the conscience heart as a critical standpoint to interact with his personal and less rational “I” and initiating one-way dialogues with the heart, Qohelet is able to overcome the lack of dialogic elements in his autobiographical narrative. Through recognizing and examining his modes of speech in 1:12-2:26, one would be able to tease out the meaning of the remaining texts. All in all, this narrative strategy may be the way to gain better access to Qohelet’s thinking, anthropology, and eventually—theology.

## **Chapter Two**

### **“Nothing is Good in Them”:**

#### **The Pseudo-Divine Voice in Eccl 3:9-22**

##### **1. Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I have sought out the literary devices and their functions that contribute to the autobiographical voice of Qohelet in Eccl 1:12-2:26. By establishing the first-person narrative stance, the speaker is able to evaluate his experience of the human condition drawing heavily from his anthropological standpoint. While 1:12-2:26 focuses solely on his personal level of empirical understanding, in Eccl 3 he extends his evaluation to the relationship between humankind and God with the addition of the notion of time. After the poem of time in Eccl 3:1-8, the speaker resumes the topic about toil—a topic he had touched upon previously—but now under the framework of God’s appointed time in 3:9-22. He reaffirms the authority of God and acts like a mediator between God and human while teaching about God’s providence of time and the gift of enjoyment. Then he proceeds to bring in the analysis of fate and judgment using the analogy between human and animal and arrives at the conclusion that nothing is better than taking pleasure in life. What interests me is how the speaker places himself in a distinct yet distant position from humankind in general, and how this affects the way we perceive his didactic voice if we were the receiver.

Therefore, this chapter analyzes the construction of Qohelet’s character through the speaker’s pseudo-divine voice in Eccl 3:9-22. The speaker’s (i.e. Qohelet’s) evaluating voice addresses humankind’s labor and God’s judgement with emphasis on the timeliness of the world. Peculiarly, this section is a crucial text in the book where the speaker addresses humankind using the third-person indicator (such as **בם** in v. 12) while emphasizing his first-person seeing (**ראיתי**) and knowing (**ידעתי**) of God’s judgment. His

knowledgeably and pseudo-divine didactic stance is vivid. However, midway through his observations, he encounters the need to ponder upon himself (“I”-Heart formula). Moreover, near the end of the passage, his rhetorical questioning using the combination of the interrogative *מִי יוֹדֵעַ* (“who knows...”) and *אִם* (“if, whether...”) about the spirit’s destination in v. 21 seems to bring him as close to human as it gets. Is he deliberately speaking with a pseudo-divine voice? Has he shown vulnerability not knowing certain knowledge in the Godly realm? Or both? Therefore, by deciphering the literary functions of specific terms and the narrative close reading of this passage, I seek to locate where the didactic voice of the speaker is placed in relation to humankind and to God. The findings of this chapter may suggest that the literary strategies in Eccl 3:9-22 allow the speaker to establish himself above all living beings with exclusive divine knowledge while remaining personal, flawed, and “human” at the same time. Examining the literary strategies that the speaker uses in this section sheds light on how Qohelet’s speech is shaped to persuade by displaying his otherworldly knowledge while at the same time being intimate when he shows his incapability of knowing everything.

## **2. Translation and Critical Notes**

*3:9* What profit does the one who works have in which he had labored?

*10* I have seen the work that God has given to humankind to be occupied

with <sup>238</sup>. 11 He has made everything proper <sup>239</sup> in its time; yet, he has given/placed eternity<sup>240</sup> in their hearts, so that humankind will not<sup>241</sup> find out the work God has done from the beginning to the end. 12 I know that nothing is good in them<sup>242</sup>, except to rejoice and to do good/well in their lives. 13 And also

<sup>238</sup> Cairo Geniza (C) has the verb לְעָנָה meaning “to be humble with/afflicted with” instead of לְעָנָה. Both usages derive from the root עָנָה which could mean both “be occupied” and “be afflicted.” The appeal to understand the term as “be afflicted” is due to the negative connotation that Qohelet expresses about work/labor (הָעֵינִי) that is given to humans by God. However, this is not conclusive. Crenshaw suggests that the noun for “work” (הָעֵינִי) “retains an oppressive connotation throughout Ecclesiastes, even when the translation appears neutral (task, business)” (*Ecclesiastes*, 97), but even so he follows MT and translates the verb לְעָנָה as “to occupy” (*Ecclesiastes*, 91). A. Lange suggests this meaning by the rule of *lectio difficilior* (*Weisheit und Torheit bei Kohelet und in seiner Umwelt* [Frankfurt 1991], 98), but this is disputed by Schoors, saying that the rule is “not a law of Medes and Persians” and that “the idea that God afflicts people is not expressed by Qoh” (*Preacher* II, 429). Seow also translates the verb according to MT (“to be preoccupied”) but emphasizes that there might be “the possibility of wordplay” between the two meanings (*Ecclesiastes*, 121). The meaning, thus, remains open. Nonetheless, according to the context of Eccl 3, the speaker does not explicitly express a negative view towards “work” and that the following v. 11 speaks about God making everything proper. To say that the verb עָנָה shows God “afflicting” work onto humankind seems unfitting, and therefore it is better to translate it as “to be occupied with.”

<sup>239</sup> While *BDB* suggests the adj. form יָפָה means “fair, beautiful” (*BDB* 421), *HALOT* specifies its meaning as “right” in this verse (*HALOT* 424). W. C. Williams and U. H. Ringgren both note that יָפָה is taken as a synonym of the word טוֹב, meaning “good, proper” which is more evident in Eccl 5:17(18) (W. C. Williams, *NIDOTTE* 2: 494; U. H. Ringgren, *TDOT* VI: 220). However, the book has used טוֹב 52 times and especially once in v. 12, right after v. 11’s usage of יָפָה. Observing this, Schoors draws from the conclusion of L. Gorssen to say that “יָפָה belongs to the sphere of intelligibility, but the meaning ‘appropriate’ is closer to the mark, since it is bound with בְּעֵתוֹ, which must refer to the appropriate times in 3,1-8, whereas in Gen 1, טוֹב appears more to belong to the sphere of laudatory acknowledgment and admiration of the good qualities of God’s creation” (Schoors, *Preacher* II, 257; referencing L. Gorssen, *ETL* 49 [1970], 292: “relève de l’ordre de l’intelligibilité”).

<sup>240</sup> The meaning of the term עֹלָם (or its plene form עוֹלָם as written in Eccl 3:14) remains disputed, although *BDB* and *HALOT* generally have it to be “long duration, antiquity, futurity” (*BDB* 761; *HALOT* 798). Both N. H. D. Preuss and A. Tomasino have expressed the difficult understanding of this word in Eccl 3. However, Preuss suggests that the usage הָעֹלָם here should be understood along the context of the other occurrences in the book. Examining the usage of the root: in 1:4, the word לְעוֹלָם entails “forever” in the sense that everything in this world remains perpetually the same; in 1:10, the word לְעוֹלָמִים either is viewed to be an intensive plural or as a succession of ages; and in 12:5, the term עוֹלָמוֹ with a suffix evidently means “grave, eternal home” (N. H. D. Preuss, *TDOT* X: 541-42). It seems as if this concept of “eternity” in 3:11 and 3:14 is locked, according to the other appearances in the book, within the human existence in this world. Likewise, Preuss notes that “Eccl. 3:14 can merely underscore that v. 11 in its own turn is saying that the ‘duration’ of which God has made human beings aware is not nor can it be a consciousness of human existence as such, but rather again the experience of the torment of existence as a burden through the passing of time and through the experience of the burdensome, inaccessible, and incessant nature of existence” (Preuss, *TDOT* X: 542). That is, instead of being the “eternity” as a transcend understanding of God’s timelessness, the word usage here in 3:11 is rather a way to emphasize the limited and insignificant experience that incorporates human existence as a whole. Similarly, Tomasino suggests this reading of the word in Eccl 3, stating, “this statement probably refers to the knowledge that all events occur in their proper time (season, life, death, etc.; cf. 3:1-9)” (A. Tomasino, *NIDOTTE* 3: 350). Thus, עֹלָם could be translated as “eternity” with the sense of humankind’s incapability to comprehend God’s doings—a feeling of prolonged futile.

<sup>241</sup> The literal translation “from without that man will not find the work...” is nonsensical. Both Schoors and Seow observed that the phrase מִבְּלִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא is unparalleled (see Schoors, *Preacher* I, 147-48; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 163), so Seow suggests that it might introduce “a result or final clause (so LXX, Vulg, Targ, and Syr)” (*Ecclesiastes*, 163).

<sup>242</sup> There are two mss that attest the easier reading בְּאֶדָם (“among the man”) instead of the MT’s בֵּינֵם (“among them”). Scholars have agreed that this is a scribal correction to fit with similar phrases in 2:24 and 8:15, as well as to provide a harmonized reading with the term בְּחַיָּיו (“in his life”) with a 3ms suffix (so Seow, *Ecclesiastes*,

every human who shall eat and drink and see good in all his labor, this is the gift of God.

14 I know that all that God does will exist to eternity; upon it nothing will be added, and from it nothing will be reduced. God has done [this] so that they will be fearful before him. 15 Whatever is, it already was; what is to be, already is. And God seeks what is pursued<sup>243</sup>.

16 Furthermore, I saw under the sun the place of judgment there was wickedness, and the place of righteousness there was wickedness. 17 I said in my heart, “God will judge the righteous and the wicked, because there is a time for all matter and upon all the deed there<sup>244</sup>.” 18 I said in my heart, “As regards to

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164; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 80-81; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 212; and Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 130). However, there is no need for such correction since בַּם refers back to the generic and collective הָאָדָם (“humankind, human being”) that accompanies the plural expression בְּלִבָּם (“in their hearts”) in v. 11. It is one of the features of Qohelet to refer to humankind (אָדָם) interchangeably between the singular and plural forms, especially with the article, which is “in keeping with the frequent occurrence of the word with the general meaning of ‘mankind’ in the rest of the Bible, where e.g., his creation by God is emphasized, or where an opposition to other creatures such as animals is suggested” (Schoors, *Preacher* II, 46; see also S. H. Auerbach, *Das Buch Koheleth neu übersetzt mit einem hebräischen Commentar* [Breslau 1837], 37). This notion of “mankind” is especially evident in Eccl 3 when Qohelet compares it/them with animals at the end.

<sup>243</sup> The ending אֶת־נִרְדָּה (“pursued”) is difficult to understand in context. The question at hand is what is God seeking after? Crenshaw has summarized the historical interpretation of this *crux interpretum*, noting that four answers have been offered: (1) the persecuted (LXX, Peshitta, Targum, and Sirach), (2) the events of the past (Vulgate), (3) the same, and (4) what God sought previously (*Ecclesiastes*, 100). Although the first interpretation has been assumed by many medieval commentators, modern scholars have been skeptical about its fit with the context (so Schoors, *Preacher* II, 108; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 100; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 30). Seow proposes the view that “*rdp* is also a synonym of *r’h* ‘pursue’” as in Hos 12:2 which denotes a resemblance with “*rē’ût rūah*” and “*ra’yôn rūah*” in *Ecclesiastes*; therefore, for Seow the clause means that “God will look after what people have pursued in vain” (*Ecclesiastes*, 165-66). However, this connection is not as convincing since the notion of “pursuing after the wind” is not a main expression in Eccl 3. Alternatively, Crenshaw draws from the similarity of 1:9 about the notion that “there is nothing new” and suggests that “Qohelet envisions God pursuing the past in order to bring it back into the present” (*Ecclesiastes*, 100). This understanding is agreed by Fox who focuses on the context of v. 15a and states that “the gist of the sentence seems to be that God seeks to do things he has already done” (*Time to Tear Down*, 214). Schoors follows this order while drawing attention to Jerome’s “*id est quod periit, quod expulsum est, quod esse cessavit*” (what is missing, it has been expelled, and it is finished) and Vulgate’s same understanding “*Deus instaurat quod abiit*” (God will call the past) (*Preacher* II, 108). He observes, also, that this interpretation that “God recalls/brings back what is past” is adopted by the majority of interpreters (see Schoors, *Preacher* II, 108). Murphy, similar although coming entirely from spotting the similarity between 3:15 and 1:9, suggest that “the reference then is to the past or the events of the past, which God will call back into existence, in line with the thought of v. 15a” (*Ecclesiastes*, 30). Therefore, with a large body of scholarship agreeing to the interpretation of a reoccurring past, the phrase אֶת־נִרְדָּה should be understood as that reoccurrence of events under God’s will.

<sup>244</sup> Scholars have very scattered opinions on what the meaning of שָׁם (“there”) is since it is a *crux*. According to a narrative reading, it could either point towards God’s judgement or time itself in v. 17. Peshitta and LXX reads accordingly with the masoretic as “there” while Vulgate determines it as “time” (*tunc*). Schoors has sorted out that there are these following understanding of the term in scholarship: (1) Sheol or the world to come, the divine court; (2) “the place of justice” referring to שֹׁמֵרָה in v. 16; (3) “place, proper place” with the pointing שָׁם; (4) repointed as שָׁם to mean “he has appointed, decreed”; and (5) the Akkadian *šumma* meaning “if” or “behold” (*Preacher* I, 100-1). Since there is no consensus among scholars, Schoors has strongly suggested that there is no certainty in this case, and Murphy suggests the same (*Ecclesiastes*, 30). Seow, aside from listing out all possibilities in scholarship, suggests that the word “corresponds to Akkadian *šīāmu/šāmu* ‘to determine’ and *šīmtu* ‘fate, destiny’” and uses “destiny” in his translation (*Ecclesiastes*, 167). However, Qohelet uses the noun

humankind, God [sought] to test them<sup>245</sup> and to show<sup>246</sup> that they are animals in themselves<sup>247</sup>.<sup>19</sup> For the fate of humankind and the fate of animals are a fate of one/the same to them. As one dies, so dies the other. And one/the same spirit for all. And advantage of the person over the animal—there is none. For all is an illusion. <sup>20</sup>All go to one/the same place: all are from dust, and all return to dust. <sup>21</sup>Who knows if the spirit of humankind ascends upward and if<sup>248</sup> the spirit of

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מקרה for fate later in v. 19, so reading שם here with the same meaning seems to be out of place. With a narrative reading, since Qohelet speaks of God's judgment (v. 17) and also "the place of judgment/justice" with the adverb שמה (v. 16), the term שם is seemingly most fitting with the context, suggesting the deeds that are being judged under that circumstance.

<sup>245</sup> The verb לברם ("to test" or "choose, select") is difficult to understand while the root is ברר ("purify, choose"). Although the exact meaning of the root is obscure in this context, the construction is likely to have God as the subject and the suffix -ם ("them, the people") as the object (Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 103; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 30). The main issue is whether to view לברם as an infinite or a finite verb with an emphatic ל? The insertion of "God" between "to test" and "to show" (לראות)—assuming one takes them as infinite—is awkward, and the clause lacks a finite verb. Scholars who agree with the ל used emphatically would suggest that the verb ברם is in the form of a perfect and the continuing verb ולראות is "an infinitive consecutive, used in place of a finite verb in continuation of the perfect ברם, and the lamed is again emphatic" (Schoors, *Preacher* I, 113), so therefore Gordis, C. F. Whitley, V. E. Reichert-A. Cohen, and Seow. The sentence would therefore be translated as "Surely God has chosen them to show that they are nothing but animals." However, scholars who maintain that both verbs are infinitives see the verbs depending on the verb אמרתי ("I said") as the finite complement (so Ginsburg, W. A. Irwin, Crenshaw, and Murphy), which translates to "I said in my heart concerning humankind that [my italics] God is testing and showing them..." assuming that a copula was presupposed by the text (Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 103; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 30). Both readings are possible since the text itself is difficult. Yet, since both verbs לברם and לראות should be read together with the waw-consecutive, "it is quite normal that it [לברם] be parsed as an infinitive of ברר plus suffix and preceded by the usual preposition ל" (Schoors, *Preacher* I, 112). Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall have also suggested by reading both verbs as infinitives they form "a null copula clause with האלהים as the subject and a compound ל-PP/infinitive as the copular complement" (*Qoheleth*, 138). Following this lead, I would also propose that since both v. 17 and v. 18 begin with the same idiom אני בלבי אמרתי ("I said in my heart"), I understand the content of the speaker's narrative as a sequential train of thought. Instead of taking אמרתי as the finite complement of the infinitives לברם and לראות, I suggest that the speaker connects them to ישפט ("he [God] will judge") in v. 17 as the complement. If this is the case, the insertion of "God" between "to test" and "to show" acts as a narrative supplement that completes the connection between v. 17 and v. 18 with God being the continuous subject. The mention of "God" between the two infinitives thus serves as a parenthesis usage.

<sup>246</sup> While BHS has the verb וְלִרְאוֹת in *Qal* form ("to see"), LXX, Peshitta, and Vulgate have all opted to read it as the *Hiphil* infinitive "to show" (equivalent of וְלִרְאוֹת). Syntactically, although Targum associates the verb with the finite אמרתי ("I said") at the beginning of the verse, Crenshaw suggests to view it as "a consecutive infinitive with God as subject and the people as object" along with the previous infinitive לברם (*Ecclesiastes*, 103). This falls in line with the narrative flow that I have suggested in the previous footnote on the verb לברם ("to test"): God is the subject of these two infinitive verbs and the finite verb ישפט ("he [God] will judge") in v. 17 is the complement.

<sup>247</sup> The clause שהם-בהמה המה להם ("that they are animals in themselves") is difficult to interpret when המה seems like a dittography of בהמה (so LXX, H. L. Ginsberg, Whitley, Crenshaw, Seow, etc.), but more peculiar is the ending on להם ("to them"). Schoors explains that Whitley suggests to view להם in the case of emphatic ל, and Schoors himself suggests *dativus ethicus* that is well-used in BH and later Hebrew (Schoors, *Preacher* I, 112-13). Whitley's view is affirmed by Crenshaw as well (*Ecclesiastes*, 103). Murphy assumes that it is a *dativus commodi* (*Ecclesiastes*, 30). All of these views understand להם as dative which renders the meaning to "in/of themselves," and that the preceding המה is the copula, although in many biblical cases the dative should be used along with a verb (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 168; Schoors, *Preacher* I, 112). Agreeing with this dative use, I tend not to view המה as a dittography but rather an emphatic wordplay between the former הם ("they") and בהמה ("animal") construct. Krüger has also suggested that this is an intentional pun (*Qoheleth*, 82).

<sup>248</sup> Many scholars believe that the MT having הַעֹלֶה ("the one ascending") and הַיֹּדֶד ("the one descending") with

animals descends downward [in]to the earth? 22 And I saw that nothing is better than that the person should be glad in his works, for that is his portion. For who can bring him to see whatever will be after him?

### 3. Textual Analysis

#### 3.1 Context

Eccl 3:9-22 comes after the frequently quoted Poem of Time in the beginning of Eccl 3, where the speaker lists mostly in binary pairs the appropriate moments for different human activities. The principle of the poem is to show that there is a time for everything; however, as obvious as the activities are human, the underlying tone is that humans have little to no control over time. With each counter activity that follows the initial act, the poem creates the narrative effect that all human activities are counterbalanced by the other that *could* happen another time in life. The concept of time being used in 3:1-8 is not a fixed time or date but rather “an *occasion*, a type or configuration of circumstances, whether on the grand scale of world history (such as war and peace) or on the minute scale of an individual’s routines (such as planting and keeping silent).”<sup>249</sup> Some activities like planting and uprooting (v. 2) humankind can have control, but some like giving birth and dying (v. 2) are completely beyond human hands. Then there are the activities concerning human emotions (v. 4 and 8) that rely heavily on the circumstance that the individual is experiencing at that very moment, which are difficult to determine whether they could be controlled by human action and mind. All this vagueness lends to the

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an article is a revocalization of the interrogative  $\text{-ה}$  (“if, whether”) due to dogmatic reasons. Seemingly, the masoretes “regard the doubt of human immortality expressed in this question as heretical” (Schoors, *Preacher* I, 213; see also Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 216; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 82; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 168; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 31). This assumption, however, is questioned by Gordis as he realizes that in v. 19 the similar heterodox teaching remains untouched in v. 19 (*Koheleth*, 238; also Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 104). Nonetheless, if according to MT the translation would be “Who knows the spirit of humankind the one ascending upward, and the spirit of animals the one descending downward (in)to the earth,” which renders the sentence syntactically strained and unfitting with the context. Therefore, most ancient versions have read both verbs with the interrogative:  $\text{הַעֲלֶה}$  (“whether if... ascend?”) and  $\text{הֲיִרְדֹת}$  (“whether if... descends?”). This is widely agreed by contemporary scholarship. In order to maintain the rhetorical questioning that fits with the narrative flow, it is clear that the verse should be read with the interrogative  $\text{-ה}$ .

<sup>249</sup> Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 298.

insecurity that time is ungraspable and as “an illusion” (הבל)—the theme that reoccurs throughout the book.

Some scholars have suggested that the Poem of Time (3:1-8) concludes with the rhetorical question in v. 9.<sup>250</sup> However, others have either viewed v. 9 as an introductory question for the following section or an independent verse.<sup>251</sup> Textually, one could simply judge by the minor paragraph break ם after v. 8 that v. 9 is set off from the poem. With deeper observation, v. 9 speaks about human labor and its payoff. Before the verse, the Poem of Time is set with the mindset about human activity (in a sense about laboring), but on the other hand, vv. 10-15 also addresses the question of עמל (“labor”) that is raised in relation to העושה (“the one who works”) in v. 9. Therefore, rather than identifying v. 9 with the poem (vv. 1-8) or with the response to the poem (vv. 10-15), I suggest that the verse is functioning as the bridge between the two sections. The question in v. 9 serves both as the immediate doubt of control over the outcome of human activity in the poem as well as the rhetorical introductory for the following analysis on time and labor. Thus, in order to focus on the speaker’s reflection on time, the divine intervention, and human activity, the rhetorical questioning of v. 9 must be included as the beginning of 3:9-22. The

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<sup>250</sup> Concerning scholars who view 3:1-9 as a unit: Seow compares 3:9 with 1:3, the latter being the introduction of the poem in 1:3-9 while the former “concludes the poem on times and seasons (3:1-9)” (*Ecclesiastes*, 169). Murphy might also be suggesting the same when using the verb ראה (“see”) in v. 10 as a division break, thus “3:10-15 seems to be a clear development of the initial poem on time” (*Ecclesiastes*, 31). Krüger is vague in defining the borders of the text, only suggesting that “the time-bound nature of human activity described in vv. 2-8 limits the possibilities of gain (יִתְרוֹן, *yitrôn*) for human beings,” which appears in v. 9 (*Qoheleth*, 78). Krüger also sees 3:1-9 and 1:3-11 as individual poetic blocks. Initially, Fox is also clear to perceive 3:1-9 as a unit and that v. 9 serves as the conclusion of the “Catalogue of Times” when providing the outline of the text (*Time to Tear Down*, 192), but his later comments suggest otherwise (see next footnote).

<sup>251</sup> Concerning scholars who view 3:9-15 as a unit: Longman provides a clear-cut division between vv. 1-8 and vv. 9-15, suggesting that the later draws immediate conclusion from the former (Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 111). Peculiarly, Fox—albeit viewing 3:1-9 as a literary unit as mentioned in my previous footnote—also identifies 3:1-8 as the “Catalogue of Times” and that “the following verses, vv. 9-15, draw conclusions from this fact [everything has a time],” which renders his textual borders indecisive (Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 194). For me, Fox’s inconsistency shows the fluidity of v. 9 in terms of where it belongs. Crenshaw, on the other hand, seems to view v. 9 standing on its own and leaning more to the following section as he asks accordingly to the poem, “Does God relinquish the tight hold on the correct moment for a particular activity?” and his observation is that “Qohelet addresses that issue in the next section” (*Ecclesiastes*, 96; commentary on v. 9).

Poem of Time will be omitted from this chapter since the main goal is to identify the speaker's personal voice.

Thematically and syntactically, this section ends 3:22, especially with Qohelet's signature phrasal break: nothing is better than to enjoy the present.<sup>252</sup> While Murphy takes the entirety of 3:1-4:6 as the reflection upon time and toil, he observes that the contents "are usually identified by commentators: 3:1-15; 3:16-22; 4:1-3; 4:4-6."<sup>253</sup> On the syntactic level, the verb שׁוּב ("again") in 4:1 denoting a repetition is well documented in the MT and is used similarly in 4:7 and 9:11.<sup>254</sup> Following this order, Seow suggests that "the phrase *wəšabtî ʾānî wā'er'eh* [ושבתי אני ואראה] is, thus, equivalent to *wə'ôd rā'îti* [ועוד ראיתי] in 3:16. However, whereas *wə'ôd rā'îti* seems to stress continuity with the preceding materials, *wəšabtî* appears to stress the discontinuity."<sup>255</sup> Fox follows the same thought and adds that the verb שׁוּב "is adverbial to the following verb" and that it "points to another in a series of actions or events and means 'afterwards,' 'next,' or the like."<sup>256</sup> Thus, Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall draw conclusion from Seow and Fox<sup>257</sup> to say that the verb שׁוּב functions "in its monovalent capacity and signals, like פָּנָה (2:11, 12) and סָבַב (2:20; 7:25), that Qoheleth is 'turning' to yet another observation."<sup>258</sup> Indeed, the watershed between Eccl 3 and Eccl 4 is more evident when the thematic level is taken into consideration. In 3:16-22, the speaker revisits the question of fate (first introduced in 2:12-17) while in 4:1-3 he addresses the oppressions that happen in the world. Although it could be argued that his reflection on the oppressed comes from the injustice of uncertain fate, 3:22 has already marked Qohelet's iconic ending of a unit: to enjoy in

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<sup>252</sup> See also 2:24-26 and 3:13.

<sup>253</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 31.

<sup>254</sup> *BDB*, 998.

<sup>255</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 177.

<sup>256</sup> Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 219.

<sup>257</sup> Also from Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 133.

<sup>258</sup> Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 143.

laboring.<sup>259</sup> More evidently is the doubting of the afterlife (v. 19, 21) that binds Eccl 3 together as a complete section. Unknowing what comes after death poses an existential question under humankind's vague control of time, which happens to be the main theme of vv. 1-15. In addition, the remark that "there is a *time* for all matter and upon all the deed there [during judgment]" in v. 17 secures the fact that vv. 16-22 is a continuation of the previous section. Thus, Seow notes that the two sections (vv. 1-15, 16-22) "are closely related; they are two parts of a whole."<sup>260</sup> In this chapter, 3:1-22 will be viewed as a literary unity while the poem (vv. 1-8) will be set aside to focus on the speaker's didactic strategies.<sup>261</sup>

### 3.2 Outline and Summary

Eccl 3:9-22 follows the Poem of Time (vv. 1-8) that portrays every human related activity as proper in its appointed time. However, who is the one who appoints the time for everything? Seemingly it is not humankind that has control over time but God who "makes everything proper in its time," the speaker answers in v. 11. Then again, if it is the case that the speaker is himself human, how does he know the will of God? Is he using this type of speech to position himself as a pseudo-divine being than the ordinary human in order to demonstrate his superior knowledge? In chapter three I have established the ground that in 1:12-2:26 the speaker poses with Qohelet's autobiographical voice while assuming his authority through the identity of the kingly Solomonic character. In this section, although the Solomonic identity has not been assumed, the features of ANE royal voice remains. The speaker assumes an intimacy with divine knowledge—a pseudo-divine knowledge—to continue that authority in his voice, speaking on behalf of God. The main

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<sup>259</sup> Murphy has also observed that v. 22 is "Qoheleth's patented conclusions" (*Ecclesiastes*, 32).

<sup>260</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 169.

<sup>261</sup> Although excluding 3:9, Krüger also views 3:10-22 as a thematic unit, titled "God and the 'Good': Happiness as 'Portion'" (*Qoheleth*, 83).

feature that determines the sub-units in this section is the initial verbs with the first-person suffix, listed in the following outline:<sup>262</sup>

- A. 3:9. Rhetorical Questioning
- B. 3:10-15. Response to the Question: Time
  - a. 3:10-11. God Stores Proper Time (ראיתי, “I have seen”)
  - b. 3:12-13. Enjoying Life as the Gift of God (ידעתי, “I know”)
  - c. 3:14-15. God’s Deeds Transcends Time (ידעתי, “I know”)
- C. 3:16-21. Continued Response with Attention to Fate (ועוד, “furthermore, again”)
  - a. 3:16. Transitional Observation (ראיתי, “I saw”)
  - b. 3:17-18. God Will Judge and Reveal Human’s True Nature<sup>263</sup> ( אמרתי אני בלבי, “I said in my heart” in both verses)
  - c. 3:19-20. Reflection: Fate of Death Befalls Every Being
  - d. 3:21. Interrogative Outcry: Life Beyond Death is a Mystery
- D. 3:22. Conclusion: Take Pleasure in Labor (ראיתי, “I saw”)

As shown here, the initial verbs the speaker uses can be used to identify the sub-units of the text. The only verses that lack the initial verb as the identifier are v. 9 and vv. 19-21, in which v. 9 and v. 21 are rhetorical questions while vv. 19-20 is an explanatory note. 3:9 begins with the rhetorical questioning about the worth of human laboring. The speaker has chosen to use the participle הַעֹשֶׂה (“the one who works”) most likely for rhetorical reasons: “to set up the emphasis on what God has done” later in the text.<sup>264</sup> And certainly, the same verb in *Qal* perfect עָשָׂה (“he [God] made”) shows up again in v. 11 where God’s temporal doings are being explained. There is no doubt that the rhetorical question which “passes judgment on human activity as being without profit” is “to be explained by the reasoning in vv. 10-15.”<sup>265</sup>

<sup>262</sup> Krüger has provided a very similar outline “in regard to the expressions in first person singular, which in each case introduce a new step in the train of thought” (*Qoheleth*, 83). Others have simply distinguished between vv. 1-8(9), 9(10)-15, and 16-22 (Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 194-216; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 158-59, 169; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 111, 125; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 59, 66, 68; Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 120, 135).

<sup>263</sup> This is my narrative assumption since all commentators have expressed the difficulty to understand why humans are being equated with animals during the time of judgment.

<sup>264</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 162.

<sup>265</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 34.

Thus, the reasoning of section B (vv. 10-15) tackles God and His proper time for human labor. The key here is that with the verbs used in the beginning of v. 10 (ראיתי, “I have seen”), 12 (ידעתי, “I know”), and 14 (ידעתי) all suggest the speaker expressing his knowledge and experience on the issue raised in the followings. The verbs also serve as clear unit divisions. Hence, vv. 10-11 build on empirical data<sup>266</sup> having *seen* that God has stored proper time for everything as well as placed “eternity” in the hearts of humankind. However, what does this “eternity” mean and how could the speaker have experienced this exclusive knowledge of God’s? Moreover, what is the function of this mode of speech? This will be discussed in section §4.1. In vv. 12-13 and 14-15, the speaker uses “knowing” as his empirical authority<sup>267</sup> to provide his observation that the gift of God is to enjoy the labor in life (v. 12-13) and that God transcends past, present, and future to eternity (עלם) (vv. 14-15), the same “eternity” mentioned in v. 11. Thus, humankind—using the third plural suffix “they”—should know to fear God. Peculiar is also the fact that the speaker addresses humankind excluding himself, consistently using the third person for them as opposed to his personal first-person observation. It resembles the king mediating between God and man in ANE royal fictions.

Section C (vv. 16-21) is introduced with the adjunct ועוד (“furthermore, again”), which “signals a new section and links the new section to the preceding unit: the author observes again (cf. *rā’itī* in v. 10), but he sees a new thing.”<sup>268</sup> The speaker’s attention now focuses on fate which is determined solely by God’s judgment and time. With the adjunct ועוד, v. 16 stands alone as the transition and the introductory observation that wickedness exists among judgment and righteousness. As explained in the footnote of my translation, vv. 17-18 need to be read as a continuous statement to make sense of v. 18,

<sup>266</sup> Empirical data meaning knowledge from experience. See Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 127.

<sup>267</sup> Crenshaw agrees that “although Qohelet complains about inability to discover God’s secret times, he does claim to possess sure knowledge of a sort” (*Ecclesiastes*, 98).

<sup>268</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 166. See also “scalar quality” in Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 135.

coupled together with the same “I”-Heart formulaic beginning: אמרתי אני בלבי (“I said in my heart...”). The theme here is that God will judge the righteous and the wicked, both subject to time, and reveal their true nature as bare as how animals are naked. Since the verb שפוט (“he [God] will judge”) in v. 17 is in its imperfect form, I suggest that the wickedness mentioned within judgment and righteousness in v. 16 is in a prejudgment state (“place of judgment”) subject to time. It is evident that this “place of judgment” exists within the human world since v. 16 has the equal phrase תחת השמש (“under the sun”). Hence, God’s judgment of the righteous and the wicked in vv. 17-18 is to sort them apart.<sup>269</sup> The inner dialogue in vv. 17-18 redirects the target of the speaker’s speech away from the general public and to his inner self, pondering and making sense of God’s judgment. The result is the conclusion he draws in vv. 19-20 which gives a conclusive statement of his personal view on “fate” (מקרה). Using the same term בהמה (“animal”), the speaker leads into vv. 19-20 to elaborate on the same fate that befalls both humans and animals—death.<sup>270</sup> This moment marks the speaker’s realization that no certain distinction between humans and animals have been guaranteed with God’s judgement, as both return to dust in the end (v. 20). There is a strong sense of existential crisis during this moment in the text, especially when the speaker cries out “who knows?” considering the fate of the spirit, both humans and animals, in v. 21.<sup>271</sup> This outcry is also the most “human-driven” status the speaker ever had since prior to v. 21 he has always presented

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<sup>269</sup> Contra Krüger, who suggests that “the distinction between the ‘righteous’ and ‘evildoers’ (v. 17) is abolished here in speaking of ‘human beings’” (*Qoheleth*, 92). Krüger’s reading is based on the linguistic problems in v. 18 in which he reads separately from v. 17.

<sup>270</sup> According to my reading, thus, בהמה (“animal”) should be used metaphorically in v. 18 while used physically in v. 19 for comparison.

<sup>271</sup> Murphy sees this as the “equivalent to a denial” (*Ecclesiastes*, 37). Longman suggests that Qohelet “is frustrated with the unknowability of the afterlife, if not its existence” (*Ecclesiastes*, 130). Crenshaw, rather than saying that Qohelet is frustrated by uncertainty, suggests that “he does not rule out the possibility, but he dismisses such speculation as a waste of time” (*Ecclesiastes* 104). Either way, Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall suggest the possibility that the mention of the human spirit ascending and the animal spirit descending may reflect “the Platonic view of the human versus animal soul,” and that “Qoheleth recognized that some of his intended audience may have adopted this Hellenistic belief” (*Qoheleth*, 140).

himself as the one knowing many mysteries of God and men. In the end, with this unresolvable uncertainty concerning God's time and judgment, v. 22 stands alone as the conclusion of Eccl 3 that echoes vv. 12-13: nothing is better than to take pleasure during one's labor.

Overall, the narrative sequence entails a shift in the speaker's tone, from his affirmative voice in 3:9-15, to his inner dialogic judgment in 3:16-20, and finally the collapse of his assertive voice in vv. 21-22. For him, the uncertainty that lies beyond human life is a mystery that he may never understand, albeit how much he understands about the divine knowledge of God's time, eternity, and judgment. The shift in his voice throughout this narrative process highlights his ultimate identity as a mere human being, incapable of grasping the immense knowledge of God.

#### **4. The Pseudo-Divine Voice in Eccl 3:9-22**

The status of the speaker in Eccl 3 is often underscored by the fact that the Poem of Time is too well-known and oft-quoted. It becomes an instinct to search for an explanation following the poem, regardless of what literary style the explanation may be. Readers take for granted the explanation by Qohelet in this section (assuming that he is the speaker) that they often forget that his personal reflection remains as subjective as a first-person speech should be. Previously in chapter three, I have shown that Eccl 1:12-2:26 is presented as the character's autobiographical narrative through the high frequency of the first-person pronoun אני ("I"). In that chapter, I have focused on bringing to attention the first-person pronoun as the significant feature of the autobiography, but as we read along the text, it becomes evident that the pronoun אני rarely stands on its own. In fact, אני is almost always accompanied by a first-person suffixed verb before its appearance.

Therefore, in this section, I would like to shift my attention to the first-person verbs beginning in verses and argue that the verbs play an important role in characterizing the

speaker's autobiographical tone. Drawing from this analysis, the interesting distance between the speaker and humankind who are addressed mostly with the third-person verbs and prepositions is also worth exploring. How does the speaker place himself among humankind? Does he see himself as a higher rank and closer to God, perhaps to maintain the king's persona? In the process I would also revisit the function of לֵב ("heart") to see how it is used in this context. Finally, I will examine the interrogative מִי יוֹדֵעַ ("who knows...") and הֲ ("if, whether") in 3:21, of how they define the meaning of the verse and therefore render the speaker vulnerable against the omniscience of God.

#### 4.1 The Superior Establishment: "I have seen" (רָאִיתִי) and "I know" (יָדַעְתִּי)

It is not the first time in the book that the verb רָאִיתִי ("I have seen") is used as a verse opening like in 3:10. The first two appearances of רָאִיתִי occurred in 1:14 and 2:13. Speaking of the root רָאָה ("see"), Seow suggests that all 47 appearances of the verb in the book, it is used "for purposeful and reflective observation,"<sup>272</sup> 18 of which occurring in the first person singular of the perfect tense. In Schoors' lengthy scholarly review of the verb רָאָה, he concludes that Qohelet uses several meanings "that are not found, or only rarely, elsewhere in the Bible," but generally according to the context, "it expresses his [Qohelet's] experience, his examination of it or the knowledge he draws from it."<sup>273</sup> Schoors also finds that Graham S. Ogden's definition of the verb best incorporates Qohelet's usage: "It speaks of more than casting a casual eye over things; it connotes a scientific and empirical examination of the realities of human life."<sup>274</sup> Indeed, in 1:14, 2:13, and 3:10 the verb provides conclusive observations of the world that the speaker experiences. Longman furthermore emphasizes that Qohelet "does not appeal to

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<sup>272</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 121. Also Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 81. Interestingly, Crenshaw, Fox, Murphy, Krüger, and Lohfink have not provided discussion about the verbs in 1:14 or 2:13.

<sup>273</sup> Schoors, *Preacher II*, 75. On his thorough analysis and review on the verb, see *Preacher II*, §1.6.

<sup>274</sup> Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2001), 43.

revelation of any kind of special insight into God or the world.”<sup>275</sup> In other words, what Ogden and Longman suggest is that Qohelet’s usage of the verb ראה (“see”) is purely rooted in the empirical knowledge of this world. The first-person verb is intimate as it represents the speaker from a personal level.

That said, returning to the context of 3:10-11, although the speaker’s observation of God-given work in this world is reasonable (v. 10), the observation that God “has made everything proper in its time” and “has given/placed eternity in their hearts” (v. 11) does not seem to fit with the empirical-based observation mentioned earlier. How would the speaker be able to perceive that mysterious eternal property (עלם) of God, given to humans, if the speaker is human and subjected to time as well? As an alternative, P. H. F. Fuhs provides a difference perspective on the verb ראה with respect to the context of Ecclesiastes. He suggests that ראה “refers not to communication of one’s own observations and experience but to critical analysis of what claims to be knowledge based on collective experience, to determine the validity of this claim.”<sup>276</sup> This suggests that ראה is stripped of any personal interests and is used to announce a collective experience of the community by the speaker. In terms of Qohelet’s speech, in most cases ראה is used as an observation of the collective human experience. However, the high frequency of the first person ראיתי has more to it than simply the collective usage.

The first person singular verb ראיתי (“I have seen”) in v. 10 is based on the personal level of interest, or else the speaker could have easily replaced the third-person plural בלבם (“in their hearts”) in v. 11 for a collective first-person plural בלבנו (“in our hearts”), suggesting that he is one among the collective humankind. Why, then, does he never bring the first-person self and the third-person humankind together using the first-person

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<sup>275</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 81.

<sup>276</sup> P. H. F. Fuhs, “ראה,” *TDOT* XIII: 227.

plural “we/us”? The distinction reminds us that the speaker in vv. 10-11 is speaking of humankind as a collective human “they” while he stands aside and observes as a pseudo-divine spectator, seemingly detached. Fuhs, providing the theological usage of רָאָה, observes that

*rā’â* denotes the entire spectrum of situations in which human beings experience or encounter God in their *personal vision* [my italics]. In this sense *rā’âh* is complementary to → גָּלָא *gālâ*, “reveal”: God emerges from the concealment of divinity, being revealed in and through every possible form of human experience. Thus *rā’â* denotes the act of revelation itself, God’s self-manifestation in person and in action. In this usage *rā’â* is not a specifically theological term but remains epistemological. The theological element is the concern that dominates its use in describing the relationship between God and humanity: to express the epistemological character of this relationship.<sup>277</sup>

When looking at the speaker’s words in 3:10, he states that he has seen “the work that God has given to humankind,” and continues to speak as God’s agent while revealing the עֲלֵמִים (“eternity,” v. 11), “the gift of God” (v. 13), and how God acts with the eternity that humankind cannot understand (vv.14-15). It is as if he has experienced these traits of God personally and is enlightened by the empirical knowledge that comes with that experience. This privileged divine knowledge empowers him beyond the common person, allowing him to comment from a mediating position—a spectator of this world—between God and man. The way he speaks to us is in a royal demeanor, much like the king in ANE literature, who surpasses common humankind and is privileged with divine knowledge. Nonetheless, he shares this knowledge with his audience with the combined didactic,

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<sup>277</sup> P. H. F. Fuhs, “רָאָה,” *TDOT* XIII: 229.

prophetic, and priestly voice that an ancient king would have. It would be even clearer when taking the distinct distance between his first person singular and the third person plural (humankind, or simply, “them, they”) that constantly appears in his speech into consideration. I will address this in the next section (§4.2). The key is that although the speaker does not directly reveal how he obtained his divine knowledge, he teaches his audience with a very strong epistemological sense, making them aware of their relationship with God.

Observing from the structure of the passage, the usage of ראייתי (“I have seen”) in 3:10-11 marks the initial observation of the speaker, followed by two sections using the first-person verb ידעתי (“I know”) as empirical feedbacks on the observations in vv. 12-13 and vv. 14-15. The verb ידעתי is used in v. 12 and v. 14 to respectively explain God’s gift of pleasure to humankind (vv. 12-13) and God’s deeds in eternity (vv. 14-15). Schoors similarly observes that when the first-person ידעתי is used, Qohelet “expresses what he has concluded from his experience,” and in the context of v. 12, “Qol draws a conclusion from vss. 1-11, be it this time a practical one, whereas in 3,14 he formulates the more theoretical conclusion of the same periscope.”<sup>278</sup> Thus, the two verbs ראייתי (“I have seen”) and ידעתי (“I know”) have a strong causal relationship, the former being the observation while the latter is the feedback rooted in personal experience. Certainly as Murphy has noted in v. 14, “‘I know’ forms an emphatic introduction to certain data about God that underlie what has been previously said: God’s actions are in the category of עולם (‘*ōlām*).’”<sup>279</sup> The consequences of the speaker’s observation led to two feedbacks of this own: to do well in life which is “the gift of God” (vv. 12-13) and to fear God because eternity is in his hands (vv. 14-15). According to the speaker, “one is caught between the

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<sup>278</sup> Schoors, *Preacher II*, 131, 136.

<sup>279</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 35.

nearness of a God who fixes times and the mystery of a God whose work is unintelligible; in this situation fear of that God is the proper response.”<sup>280</sup> Murphy is quite right in using “nearness” to express the distance between human and God, for that nearness is what provides the speaker in the text with both of these mysteries—on time and God’s work. Both of these empirical feedbacks are being emphasized by the ידעתי (“I know”) statement but cannot be detached from the ראיתי (“I have seen”) observation. It is clear that by using ידעתי (“I know”) as the emphatic expression, the speaker is sharing to his audience with a didactic purpose of his empirical knowledge. Therefore, the speaker poses as an intellectual superior while passing judgment on human life and speaking to his audience.

Consequently, it is worth noting that the knowledge that the speaker shares is not totally rooted in human experience. The speaker’s observation in 3:10-11 includes the knowledge of God’s appointed work for humankind and also the divine עולם (“eternity”) that belong to God and is seemingly exclusive to the speaker. In addition, the way that he understands pleasure in life is the gift of God (v. 13) and the way time and eternity works in God’s term (vv. 14-15) proves that he is not only intellectually privileged but also understands divine knowledge to some degree that no other human being should have known. He might not be as all-knowing as God, but he has shown his pseudo-divine state by some particular divine knowledge and also his vast surveys of the human experience that suits his authoritative voice. The question now is how does he speak of himself: does he include himself among humankind?

#### **4.2 Mediating between God and Man: “in them” (בם)**

While in Eccl 3:10-15 the speaker speaks from human experience, it does not guarantee that he is speaking on the same level as humankind as a whole. Empirical knowledge only

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<sup>280</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 35.

guarantees experience on the personal level but does not define the identity of the speaker. For instance, the flood narrative in Genesis when God speaks to Noah about never flooding earth again (Gen 9), one may also see that as an empirical evaluation from a divine being. In order to identify how the speaker in Eccl 3:9-22 views himself; it is crucial to decipher his distance from the others in the text—God and humankind.

One of the scholarly addressed issue is the third-person **בם** (“in them”) in 3:12, where there are ancient versions that prefer modifying **בם** into **באדם** (“in the man”) for the easier reading.<sup>281</sup> However, as I have mentioned earlier, there is no need for such correction since **בם** refers back to the generic and collective **האדם** (“humankind, human being”) that accompanies the plural expression **בלבם** (“in their hearts”) in v. 11. Rather, the more interesting issue here is how the preposition **ב** should be viewed in relation to the term **טוב** (“good”) that precedes it in v. 12. The function of the preposition in the context of v. 12 is either marking a “location *in* or *at* a point” or “*amid* a domain,” the former translated as “in” and the latter translated as “among.”<sup>282</sup> Both describe the speaker observing no “good” quality of human life besides pleasure (v. 12). To be more precise, from a narrative perspective the meaning of **בם** here points to the moral judgment of humankind’s character as a whole (“nothing is good in them”), because according the context of 3:9-22, the speaker always addresses humankind collectively, at most distinguishing them apart by **הצדיק** (“the righteous”) and **הרשע** (“the wicked”) in v. 17, which are also morally collective. The reason for his inclination to judge that “nothing is good in them” in v. 12a is to prepare for the comparative and ultimate better in v. 12b: **לשמוח ולעשות טוב בחייו** (“to rejoice and to do good/well in their lives”).

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<sup>281</sup> See my footnote on 3:12 in the translation section.

<sup>282</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns: 1990), 196.

Observing the first-person verb ידעתי (“I know”) along with the third-person בם (“in them”) in 3:12 is an example to knowing how the speaker views himself. Following the analysis in §4.1, it is evident in 3:9-22 that the speaker uses the first-person verbs several times to introduce his empirical observations and feedbacks, such as ראיתי (“I have seen,” v. 10, 16, 22), ידעתי (“I know,” v. 12, 14), and אמרתי (“I said,” v. 17, 18). At the same time, humankind as the receiver of God’s deeds, by contrast, is always addressed in the third person: בלבם (“in their hearts,” v. 11), בם (“in them,” v. 12), בחייו (“in their lives,” v.12),<sup>283</sup> בכל-עמלו (“in all his labor,” v. 13), שיראו (“that they will fear,” v. 14), לברם (“to test them,” v. 18), שהם-בהמה (“that they are animals,” v. 18), להם (“to them,” v. 18), במעשיו (“in his work,” v. 22), and חלקו (“his portion,” v. 22). There is not once that the speaker has chosen to use the first-person plural to address himself along *with* humankind as a collective One. The speaker has chosen to distance himself from humankind, perhaps not fundamentally but rhetorically so that he may speak to the audience with a dominant voice while sharing his empirical knowledge. His stance is similar to the royal figure in ANE fiction.

Finally, the distance between the speaker with God can be measure by the first-person verbs he uses when addressing God. As mentioned earlier, in section 3:10-15, ראיתי (“I have seen”) and ידעתי (“I know”) are the verbs that demonstrate the speaker’s superior knowledge than the average person. But to what extent? To answer this, the context must be considered. On several occasions, the knowledge that the speaker present is truly beyond human. Time being the main theme being discussed in this section, the speaker introduces also the idea of עֶלְמָם (“eternity”) which he deems a trait that is given to humankind by God and from God alone. What does עֶלְמָם mean when used in v. 11 and

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<sup>283</sup> Literally, “in his life,” but the interchangeability between the singular and the plural form is well documented in Ecclesiastes (Schoors, *Preacher* II, 46).

v. 14? Bo Isaksson, after reviewing multiple scholarly explanations of the term, suggests that reading the term as “a *desiderium aeternitatis*, meaning a longing for eternal life, or a yearning for God, does not seem to conform well to the context.”<sup>284</sup> He also points out that the context here is crucial in understanding the term. In Isaksson’s observation, “the whole context is pervaded by time” and “an interpretation that retains a temporal meaning in *’ōlām* must therefore be given priority.”<sup>285</sup> Schoors, also conducting a thorough scholarly review, draws direct conclusion from Isaksson’s observation, stating that “in Qoh, עולם has a strong temporal denotation, and the context of 3,11 deals with pre-ordained time (3,1-8) and remote or unlimited time (vs. 14: לעולם, and even the end of vs. 11 itself: את־המעשה אשר־עשה האלהים מראש ועד־סוף).”<sup>286</sup> Evidently, the term עולם is used strictly along the concept of time but not conformed to time, rather, “a sense of that which is timeless and, as such, stands in contrast to *’ittô* ‘its time.”<sup>287</sup> If taking עולם “eternity” to entail the timelessness of God, then supposedly this knowledge is beyond human comprehension. Nonetheless, the speaker is still able to perceive this divine trait being placed within the human heart (בלבם) through his empirical observations (ראיתי, vv. 10-11). The contradiction comes right when he states that God’s purpose of doing this is “so that humankind will not find out the work God has done from the beginning to the end” (v. 11b). The speaker himself understands this exclusive knowledge belonging to God that is not revealed to humankind. Clearly, he is suggesting that he has figured out this mystery—directly or indirectly—which places him in between the distance of God and humankind. It will be even clearer when he explains this sense of עולם in v. 14, especially when using the first-person verb ידעתי (“I know”). The speaker’s knowing of God’s intention to make people “fearful before him” by placing the sense of eternity in the

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<sup>284</sup> Isaksson, *Studies in the Language*, 180. He refers to Loretz (1964), p. 282 on this.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid. For his thorough discussion with scholarship, see pp. 179-81.

<sup>286</sup> Schoors, *Preacher II*, 224. For his thorough discussion with scholarship, see pp. 221-25.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., *Ecclesiastes*, 163.

human heart (v. 14) is evidence to how he portrays himself as a teacher of God's deeds. Hence, the speaker in 3:10-15 poses with a didactic authoritative voice, making observations and judgments between God and man.

### 4.3 Double Function of the Heart (לב): Dialogic and Judgmental

After establishing that the speaker in 3:10-15 gains his authoritative voice through sharing exclusive divine knowledge, I now turn my focus to 3:16-22. One of the focuses of my previous chapter is the function of the לב ("heart") that is often used as a dialogic partner of the speaker alongside the first-person pronoun אני—a pattern that I have coined the "I"-Heart formula. He uses this mainly as a way of reflecting on his observations and to provide evaluation for his findings in life. In vv. 16-22, there are two cases that he uses this construction: אמרתי אני בלבי ("I said in my heart") in the beginning of v. 17 and v. 18. The functions are no different from how the idiom is used in 1:12-2:26, which is a combination of using the heart as a dialogic partner and also a notion of inner dialogue.

What's worth mentioning in 3:16-22 is the context given to the usage of the "I"-Heart formula. In vv. 17-18, the "I"-Heart formula introduces the speaker's observation of God's action during the time of judgment with the continuous theme of time from the previous section. The tone that the speaker uses to address this is in a very confident voice, using the imperfect verb ישפט האלהים ("God will judge") to demonstrate God's action and then providing the rationale using the causal conjunction כי־עת ("for there is a time") to explain further about God's judging action in v. 17. The trajectory of this firm statement anticipates that the event of judgment will happen according to God's will *in his time*. Seow has suggested that the expression here "need not refer to eschatological judgment" and that it does not imply a future setting for the events to happen: it simply means that "God will judge in God's own time."<sup>288</sup> I agree with the judgment not being strictly an

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<sup>288</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 166.

eschatological one but it remains difficult to say that the speaker excludes all future anticipations of judgment within worldly time, since tracing the textual development the speaker gradually move towards the issue of death and fate in vv. 19-20. The key is to understand fully that judgment is solely in God's hands.<sup>289</sup>

The use of the "I"-Heart formula at the beginning of v. 17 and v. 18 redirects the addressee of this speech: whereas the speaker had been addressing his audience from vv. 9-16, he now turns to speaking with his heart or speaking to himself in order to provide a thorough examination of God's judgment (vv. 17-18). This confident usage of the "I"-Heart formula is somewhat different from the way he uses it to pass brief observations (1:16), to give direction to the heart (2:1), and to question the motivation of his life (2:15)—the pursuit of knowledge. Rather than an experimental function of the formula, now the speaker uses it as a mode of speech to declare a conclusive statement on the relationship between God and man, as he himself speaks as a spectator.

Whether the judgment of God lies ahead of his time, or is it already happening now accordingly to God's appointed times, the speaker rests assured that it is what it is, that judgment is beyond human control and only subject to God alone. Humankind is the receiving end of judgment with no means to alter it. Thus, the לֵב ("heart") being used here with the formula is both dialogic (speaking to oneself, or, considering on one's own) and also judgmental (God's judgment is undeniably divine). The didactic content comes after these two inner dialogues and is revealed in vv. 19-20 where the speaker

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<sup>289</sup> Judging by the contrast between v. 17a and 17b, Krüger observes two possible understandings that do not mutually exclude, but rather complement each other: (1) "The concept of divine judgment is thus integrated into the understanding of God's activity that is developed in 3:1-15 and at the same time thereby relativized: of everything that God makes is beautiful and appropriate in its time (v. 11), this is true both for his tolerance of wickedness and for his intervention against it;" and (2) "Yet one can also understand v. 17 to mean that here the concept of a divine judgment is being reinterpreted in the sense of the understanding of divine activity that was previously developed: the changing of the times (cf. 3:1-8) not only allows wickedness but also limits its duration" (*Qoheleth*, 91).

consolidates that fate is no different between humankind and animals when all shall return to dust.

#### 4.4 Vulnerability Exposed: The Interrogatives “Who knows...” (מִי יוֹדֵעַ) and “If/Whether...” (הֲ)

So far in Eccl 3:9-20, I have shown the speaker in all his confidence, of how he stands above humankind as a didactic teacher with divine knowledge revealed to him, and of how he evaluates with ease the process and properties of God’s judgment. With all the authoritative voice the speaker has built up through the previous sections, it is interesting to find him drastically falling into an existential crisis in v. 21-22. The theme of v. 21 follows his preceding reflection in vv. 19-20 that the fate of death befalls every living being, regardless of humans or animals; and thus, the unknown destination of the רוּחַ (“spirit”). The verse begins with the idiomatic interrogative מִי יוֹדֵעַ (“who knows...”) which entails that the “exclamatory and rhetorical questions in מִי must be recognized from context,” and that this fixed expression entails that “the outcome is unobtainable.”<sup>290</sup> The context addresses the notion that spirits head either upwards or downwards, depending on human or animal.<sup>291</sup> The answer, thus, according to this rhetorical question: no one knows. For Schoors, this type of rhetorical questions in Ecclesiastes “function as an expression of skepticism or, more exactly, agnosticism, *pace* Mazzinghi, who himself admits that they express the impossibility of a human being grasping the deeper sense of reality.”<sup>292</sup> If agnosticism is the case, it entails a meltdown of the speaker’s intellectual

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<sup>290</sup> Waltke and O’Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 321. See also Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jacobus A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 323.

<sup>291</sup> According to Krüger who quotes Schwienhorst-Schönberger, v. 21 is “often understood as a polemic ‘against a popular idea—which perhaps arose under Greek-Hellenistic influence—of the continued life of individuals after death” (Krüger’s translation in *Qoheleth*, 82; translated from Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen*, 120). Martin Hengel also notes that “both in Euripides and in Greek epitaphs there often appears the conception that after death the human soul mounts to its dwelling place, the *aether*, the seat of the gods” (*Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, vol. 1, trans. John Bowden [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974], 124).

<sup>292</sup> Schoors, *Preacher II*, 132; referring to L. Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 58: “esprime l’impossibilità, per l’uomo, di

authority underlying Eccl 3 until this very verse (v. 21). What the speaker is suggesting, is that there is no guarantee of life after death, which seemingly opposes to the traditional doctrines of afterlife.

Traditionally, in order to solve the Qohelet's unorthodox questioning of the spirits' final destinations, the ancient masoretes may have turned their attention to the more obscure use of the participle *העלה* and *הירדת*, revocalizing them as *הַעֲלֶה* ("the one going upward") and *הַיִּרְדֵת* ("the one going downward") for the sake of orthodox traditions, as many scholars have believed.<sup>293</sup> Whether this is true or not, scholarship has widely agreed that the masoretic reading is difficult, because the revocalization would produce a syntactically problematic meaning. There would be no clear subject attached to the interrogative *מִי יוֹדֵעַ* ("who knows...") to complete the rhetoric question. Therefore, the prefixed *ה* attached to both verbs is actually the interrogative *הֲ* ("if/whether"), thus rendering both verbs as *הַעֲלֶה* ("if [the spirit of humans] ascends?") and *הַיִּרְדֵת* ("if [the spirit of animals] descend?"). The more logical verse would then mean: "Who knows if the spirit of humankind ascends upward and if the spirit of animals descends downward (in)to the earth?" The verse then demonstrates a very strong sense of unknowingness towards the afterlife. Usually the interrogative *הֲ* functions as a yes/no question in the MT, but according to the context here, since *מִי יוֹדֵעַ* ("who knows...") has already taken up the rhetorical function of the question, *הֲ* should be understood as an open-ended indirect question.<sup>294</sup> That is, *הֲ* ("if, whether") contributes to the uncertainty of the spirit's destination while *מִי יוֹדֵעַ* ("who knows...") asks the rhetorical question that entails the answer: no one knows.

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cogliere il senso profondo della realtà."

<sup>293</sup> See text-critical fn. 248 in my translation.

<sup>294</sup> For the functions of the interrogative *הֲ*, see Merwe, Naudé, and Kroeze, *Reference Grammar*, 322. For its function in the context of 3:21, see Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 141.

Consequently, the interrogative combination in 3:21 “does not necessarily deny the possibility of the afterlife;” it is just that “the issue is beyond the pale of human possibility.”<sup>295</sup> For the speaker to ask the impossible question of afterlife (v. 21) that holds such an enormous amount of uncertainty, without answering, and especially with so much determination and confidence in vv. 9-20, it only shows that even with exclusive divine knowledge on God’s time and eternity the speaker is still human. It is even more evident when he concludes this section by falling back to his idiosyncratic conclusion: nothing is better than pleasure (v. 22). This conclusion has appeared also in 2:24 and 3:12, which always functions semantically as an outcry of the speaker’s personal limitations. His final verdict is always that the חלק (“portion”) from God is the enjoyment in human activities. Thus, according to Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, “the afterlife is even less knowable than life under the sun, and even though it, too, is fundamentally unknowable and there is no discernible ‘absolute good’ (v. 12), at least one can take comfort in the smaller ‘goods.’”<sup>296</sup> In addition, the speaker apparently cannot see past his own death, once again using the rhetorical interrogative מי (“who”) to ask who will lead humans to see among their lives (v. 22). The answer is simple: no one. Simply put, as knowledgeable as the speaker is, he is bound to the world and lives merely as a human being.

## 5. Summary

In this chapter, I have explored the stark distance between the speaker and humankind as he addresses himself using the first-person while consistently using the third-person for the collective humankind in Eccl 3:9-22. Throughout the analysis whilst employing a narrative approach, it has become clear that the literary devices he uses in his speech, functions in a way that distances himself from the general common people. These devices

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<sup>295</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 130.

<sup>296</sup> Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 141-42.

are: (1) the beginning verbs in several verses that are in first person (אמרתי, ידעתי, ראיתי) referring to his superior observations and evaluations; (2) the consistent use of the third-person suffix on prepositions, nouns, and verbs pointing to humankind and the reluctance to use a collective first-person plural to include himself among humankind; (3) the “I”-Heart formula that concludes the relationship between God’s eternity and human’s incapability over fate, while he judges as a bystander; and (4) the rhetorical questioning at the end that serves as an outcry of his very own incapability. Even as the intellectual authority, he is still man.

Nonetheless, in order for the speaker to maintain his authoritative voice with a didactic function, he distances himself from the general public. The possession of exclusive divine knowledge about God’s time, eternity, judgment, and gift enables him to share his empirical knowledge as the wisdom supreme with the people—just as the role of the king in ANE literature. This oral design remains effective in maintaining the authoritative Solomonic royal voice from the previous section (1:12-2:26). The result is a teacher who teaches accordingly to his so-called “privileged experience,” while realizing in the process that he is subject to what he teaches. Longman therefore provides this section (3:9-22) with a very fitting closure: “Qohelet’s statement has an objective tone to it. By his use of third-person narration, he presents himself as an impartial observer. It is clear, though, from his expressions of pain throughout the book, that Qohelet understood that he too was subject to the same realities and conclusions. He was not just an observer; he was both observer and participant.”<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 121.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Do Not Be Excessively Righteous nor Wicked:**

### **The Voice of the Teacher of Experience in Eccl 7:15-8:1**

#### **1. Introduction**

Eccl 7:15-8:1 is a crucial segment in the book where Qohelet arrives at his approach to deal with the four main mysteries of his quest: righteousness, wickedness, wisdom, and foolishness (7:16-17). His instruction to his audience is to be cautious about extremism in each case since extremism in one's manner may lead to one's destruction, directly or indirectly. Nonetheless, as the one who partakes on the quest for the search of wisdom, Qohelet preferably maintains his stance as an advocate for righteousness and wisdom over the wickedness and foolishness. In order to persuade his audience to seek the former, the speaker has implored several literary strategies to make his point clear, drawing not only from traditional biblical wisdom quotes but also from his personal experience. It is then important once again to address from what role Qohelet is speaking from. Presumably for the sake of teaching and instruction, Qohelet might shift his role to convey a different personality and to make his speech more convincing to his implied audience. It is therefore the purpose of this chapter to seek out Qohelet's personhood in this passage and to explore how Qohelet formulates his instructions to make his observations and arguments convincing.

While in the previous chapters I have shown how Qohelet establishes his authority by adopting the Solomonic kingly voice, in this section he seemingly embraces his empirical inadequacy as a human being for not being able to grasp wisdom to its fullest. Yet, it can be seen from some hints that Qohelet is still speaking *according to* Solomon or Solomon's wisdom (if not *as* Solomon himself), just not as the royal authoritative figure but simply as Solomon the man who speaks from his personal life. The result is a character

who eventually establishes his understanding of wisdom from the general feedback of his relationships with other people. It not only brings the Solomonic guise to a full circle but also creates a feeling of intimacy with this “king” in a personal way for the audience through Qohelet’s speech. Peculiarly though, Qohelet is exposed by the frame-narrator in 7:27 as the speaker of this section, which happens only once in the main body of the book aside from the prologue and epilogue. At first glance, this seems like an inadvertent scribal error, but many scholars have proven that the insertion has its editorial function. In this chapter, I will also focus on the insertion’s narrative function in relation to Qohelet’s first-person discourse.

## 2. Translation and Critical Notes

7:15 Both<sup>298</sup> I have seen in the days of my illusions: there is [the] righteous who perishes in his righteousness, and there is [the] wicked who prolongs in his evilness.

16 Do not be excessively righteous and do not make yourself overly wise;  
why should you baffle<sup>299</sup> yourself?

17 Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool;  
why should you die when it is not your time?

18 It is good that you should take hold of this, but also not letting go your hand from that, for the one who fears God will go forth from both of them:

19 “Wisdom will give more strength<sup>300</sup> to the wise than ten

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<sup>298</sup> The meaning of כל (“all”) with the definite article “is limited by the context to things (or persons) just mentioned” (BDB 482). Since v. 15 is a clear break from the previous section, and the verse includes a comparison between the righteous and the wicked following הכל, the term הכל is best translated to “both” according to the twofold ideas.

<sup>299</sup> The *Hithpolel* form תשוקם (root: שָׁמַם, meaning “be desolated, appalled”) occurs 5 times (Ps 143:4; Dan 8:27; Eccl 7:16; Isa 59:16; 63:5) in the MT, and each “clearly refers to a psychological state” although the meaning is approximate according to different texts (I. Meyer, *TDOT* XV: 242). Aside from Ecclesiastes, the other occurrences generally mean “to be shocked” or “to be dumbfounded” (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 254), but here in Eccl 7:16 it is clearly used reflexively. Literal translation would therefore yield “why should you destroy yourself mentally?”

<sup>300</sup> Qumran (4Q<sup>a</sup>Qoh<sup>a</sup>) has the verb תעזר and the LXX has βοηθήσει, both meaning “will help.” However, instead of having Qumran and LXX’s suggested alternative, the majority of scholars read MT as the more original reading based on the rule of *lectio difficilior* (e.g. BDB; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 279; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 142; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 256; etc.). The complexity of the issue is whether the verb תעזר is used transitively (“strengthens”) or intransitively (“is strong for...”), in which the latter case is based on many occurrences in the Hebrew Bible that the root עזר is used transitively (Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought* [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter,

domineers<sup>301</sup> that are in the city.”<sup>302</sup>

20 “For no one is so righteous on earth that will do good and will never sin.”<sup>303</sup>

21 In addition, to all the things that people say<sup>304</sup>, do not give your heart, so that you will not<sup>305</sup> hear your servant cursing you, 22 for also many times your heart knows<sup>306</sup> that you have cursed others as well.

23 All this I have tested with wisdom; I said, “I will be wise,” but it is far from me. 24 Far is that which is extremely deep/unsearchable; who can find it out?

25 I turned—myself and my heart<sup>307</sup>—to know, to explore, and to seek wisdom and reckoning, and to know wickedness [is] folly, and the folly [is]

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1979], 67). On the overview of scholarly opinions, both Schoors and Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall have noted that it is hard to decide between the ancient variants, but according to the text, the transitive understanding has been preferred by many according to the textual structure (Schoors, *Preacher* II, 408; Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 213-14). Thus, I opt for the transitive notion of the MT variant.

<sup>301</sup> While the inclusion of v. 19 is already awkward in the passage, the mention of the “ten rulers” or “ten officials” is equally confusing. According to Seow and Murphy, many commentators associate the ten rulers with the *deka protoi* (“ten first [citizens]”) expressed by Josephus, who seem to have administrative duties in Hellenistic cities (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 257; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 71). However, Seow also argues against this idea of the ten which extends “from the end of the first to the beginning of the fourth century in this era [Roman institution], but not earlier” (*Ecclesiastes*, 257; referencing A. H. M. Jones, *The Greek City from Alexander to Justinian* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1940], 139). There is no certain way to assert what the speaker is referring to with the “ten rulers.” Nonetheless, using the lexical form, of the 15 occurrences of the root שלט (“to dominate, to overpower”) in the MT, 9 appear in *Ecclesiastes* while the form in 7:19 is used nominally. M. Sæbø elaborates on the usage in *Ecclesiastes* by saying that “in the case of individual relationships, one text raises the ethical question of how one person exercises authority over another, possibly to the other’s hurt (Eccl. 8:9); the other text (2:19) concerns control over one’s own possessions, acquired ‘with toil and wisdom,’ and in particular with the question of whether they will be inherited by someone who is wise or by a ‘fool’” (Sæbø, *TDOT* XV: 85). Either way, the term has strong ties with human relationships. Instead of seeing the term שליטים here as “rulers” with an institutional or governmental importance, it is more suitable to translate it as “domineers,” signifying the unbalanced power relations between people. This interpretation would fit well with the comparison of “strength” between the wise and the ten domineers in v. 19; in addition, the immediate text adopting this notion of “dominance” is the noun שלטון (“authority”) of the king and over the day of death in 8:4 and 8:8 respectively, as well as the adjective שליט (“dominant”) over the wind in 8:8.

<sup>302</sup> The awkward insertion of v. 19 could be understood as a conceptual quotation of Prov 21:22 and 24:5, which both value the wise more than the strong to the extent that the former defeats the latter. Gordis had suggested that this theme “is common in Wisdom teaching” (*Koheleth*, 278).

<sup>303</sup> According to Gordis, v. 20 is “virtually a quotation of the passage in Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the Temple” in 1 Kgs 8:46, which has כי אין אדם אשר לא יחטא (“for there is no one who does not sin”) (*Koheleth*, 278). Eccl 7:20 could be read as an expansion of this quote.

<sup>304</sup> LXX codex Vaticanus and Sinaiticus have supplemented the action “say” with ἀσεβεις (“the wicked”) as the subject; likewise, Peshitta and Targum. However, this is likely a gloss and therefore should be omitted (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 258; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 262-63).

<sup>305</sup> The usage of אשר לא (“so that... not”) is the equivalent of פן (“lest, in case”). See Gordis, *Koheleth*, 279; Whitley, *Koheleth*, 68; Schoors, *Preacher* I, 143.

<sup>306</sup> Some manuscripts have misread ידע (“knows”) for ירע (“quivers, act injuriously”), which might have also led to LXX’s misinterpretation of *πονηρεύσεται* (“to act wickedly against”), but this does not fit with the meaning of the sentence.

<sup>307</sup> The MT construction is difficult, so there are some manuscripts that alter ולבי (“and my heart”) to בלבי (“in my heart”) for an easier reading, which is adopted by Targum and Vulgate. However, MT is also attested by LXX and Peshitta. Seow follows Schoors’ rationale which suggests that וְ is explicative here and that “sometimes

madness.<sup>308</sup> 26 And I found<sup>309</sup> more bitter than death the woman who is a trap, and her heart [like] nets, her hands [like] bonds; the one that is good before God escapes from her but the sinner is captured by her. 27 See, this I have found, said Qohelet,<sup>310</sup> one by one to find the reckoning 28 which my soul has sought persistently, but I have not found. One man from a thousand I found, but a woman in all these I found not. 29 For this alone, see, I have found that God has made humankind upright, but they have sought out many schemes<sup>311</sup>.

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the main subject can be specified by a more particular subject, mostly an organ or a capacity” (Schoors, *Preacher I*, 154; see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 260). This is a possible treatment though denoting an explicit usage for וְ. Alternatively, if viewing וְ as a common conjunction “and,” “the extra subject may be a virtual personification of the heart, which occurs also in 2:1, where Qohelet talks to his heart” (Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 145). This reading is supported by Fox who sees “his [Qohelet’s] heart as an entity distinct from his ego, the ‘I’” (*Time to Tear Down*, 267) and Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall who suggest that Qohelet uses this strategy “to reinforce his role as the instigator and primary reporter of the experiment while at the same time indicating that he was not alone in his quest” (*Qoheleth*, 219). For the purpose of the narrative reading proposed here and with the common usage of the וְ conjunction, I also see the heart as a separate entity that Qohelet uses as criteria for his exploration.

<sup>308</sup> The four nouns at the end of v. 25 are syntactically challenging. Several manuscripts, LXX, and Peshitta add a conjunction “and” before the noun הוֹלָלוֹת (“madness”) to smooth out the sentence, but it is still a difficult reading. Scholars also have very scattered opinions or no solution to this: “the nouns can be understood as double accusatives after the verb of cognition (Gordis), or they may simply be four objects of the twice-used infinitive *lāda* ‘at (to know)’” (Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 146; see Gordis comparing 7:25 to 1:17 in his *Koheleth*, 212-13).

<sup>309</sup> The beginning form מוֹצֵא is the *Qal* participle of מָצָא (“to find”) followed by the subject אֲנִי. According to Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, this participle-pronoun word order is rare in comparison to the common pronoun-participle order in Hebrew where “the word order of participial clauses is strongly subject-participle” (*Qoheleth*, 220). Then, not only is the participle מוֹצֵא here “focus-fronted,” “this fronting serves to contrast with Qoheleth’s earlier confession in vv. 23-24 that he could not find wisdom: ‘Who can find it?’ (v. 24) versus ‘Look what I did find!’” (Ibid.). The participle thus serves as a continuation of ideas previous suggested with the same root in v. 24. Longman also suggests that the usage, “rather than the expected suffixed form of the verb, indicates that his conclusions are the result of repeated experience” (*Ecclesiastes*, 203; referencing Isaksson, *Studies in the Language*, 65-66). Thus, v. 26 can be read as a continuation of the interrogative in v. 24.

<sup>310</sup> The feminine form אָמְרָה קָהֵלֶת (“said Qohelet [f.]”) in the MT should be read according to the textual apparatus masculine form אָמַר הַקָּהֵלֶת (“said Qohelet [m.]”), attested by LXX and in 1:2 and 12:8. The MT should be a simple scribal error.

<sup>311</sup> Many commentators translate the plural noun הַשְּׁבִנוֹת as “devices” (eg. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 180; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 144; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 74; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 202; etc.) which, although a neutral way of understanding this term, does not reflect the contrast in the sentence. The only other instance that this lexeme appears in the MT is in 2 Chr 26:15, referring to “war machinery or special defence constructions in Jerusalem, without clarifying what they were exactly” (Schoors, *Preacher II*, 446; see also K. Seybold, *TDOT V*: 236). Perhaps rooted in this, Lohfink has also gone to the extent to suggest that the noun could also be translated as “siege towers” (*Qoheleth*, 103). However, this military connotation does not fit the tone of the current passage in Eccl 7. The term הַשְּׁבִנוֹת rather follows after the related noun חֶשְׁבֹן (“reckoning, calculation”) in v. 25 and 27. Similarly, LXX translates the term הַשְּׁבִנוֹת as λογισμὸς (“reasoning, conclusion”). Seybold’s explanation for the common translation as “devices” is that it suggests “ideas and strategies for self-realization,” which is a clearer understanding of the term (Seybold, *TDOT V*: 236). Therefore, as Schoors denotes, “the noun is here related to the negative connotation which the verb חָשַׁב frequently has: ‘to contrive evil, ruin,’ so “the noun should refer to human inventions, a planned and technically conceived activity which is often wrong, ineffective, or evil” (*Preacher II*, 447). Judging by the contrast between humankind’s הַשְּׁבִנוֹת and יָשָׁר (“upright, straight”) in v. 29, it is safe to say that the meaning “schemes” for the noun הַשְּׁבִנוֹת better represents its contrast with “upright” than being translated as “devices” or “inventions.”

8:1 Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing?  
Wisdom of a person brightens his face, and the fierce/aggression of his face will  
be altered<sup>312</sup>.

### 3. Outline/Structure

#### 3.1 Context

Arriving at Eccl 7, the genre shifts from a prose evaluation to a series of proverbial sayings. Since 6:12 asks the question “who knows what is good for mortals,” 7:1-12 answers with a list of “a whole series of *tôb-sayings* (‘better-than’ sayings), most of which are in the style of traditional Israelite and Egyptian didactic (proverbial) literature.”<sup>313</sup> Although 7:13-14 departs from the proverbial saying style, it serves as a conclusion to the previous sayings which “display an intricate network of repetitions, catch words, and word plays” on the theme of “good.”<sup>314</sup> Thus, commentators have widely accepted 7:1-14 as a section of its own, written/spoken as a response to the question posed in 6:12.<sup>315</sup> Comparing 7:14 and 15, the thematic difference is evident: the former contemplates on the days that are good (ביום טובה), prosperous, and with joy while the latter immediately opens with

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<sup>312</sup> The *Pual* verb יִשְׁתַּנֶּה (“will be changed”) with the *’alep* ending is an interchangeable spelling of שִׁנָּה (“to change”) in Late Biblical Hebrew, and thus, many Hebrew manuscripts have the יִשְׁתַּנֶּה reading (GKC §75rr; Whitley, *Koheleth*, 71; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 278; Schoors, *Preacher I*, 27). However, the substitution has caused misinterpretation for the translators of the LXX text, who translates the verb as *μισθῆσεται* (“will be hated,” יִשְׁתַּנֶּה in Hebrew) and followed by the Peshitta. This misreading has been confirmed widely as a mistake or “an interpretative translation of the difficult Hebrew text” (Schoors, *Preacher I*, 28). Nonetheless, the syntactical interpretation of the *Pual* verb יִשְׁתַּנֶּה (“will be changed”) itself is questioned by some scholars. According to Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall’s scholarly review, “some argue for emending the verb יִשְׁתַּנֶּה to a *Piel* and adding the 3ms pronominal suffix (יִשְׁתַּנֶּנּוּ) by moving the difficult אֲנִי from the beginning of v. 2 and taking the א as dittography. The reconstructed phrase would be עוֹז פָּנָיו יִשְׁתַּנֶּנּוּ ‘the “strength” of his face will change him’ (see, e.g., Seow 1997: 278-79; Fox 1999: 276; others translate as a *Piel* but do not note it, e.g., Crenshaw, 148-49; Longman, 209)” (Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 227). In other words, instead of the *Pual* reading, the *Piel* form of the verb יִשְׁתַּנֶּנּוּ would render the sentence as “the aggression of one’s face alters them,” the subject being the undefined אָדָם (“person”) (Schoors’ scholarly review in *Preacher II*, 421). In my narrative reading, I tend to agree with the original MT text with the *Pual* form which brings v. 1a and 1b together in a causal relationship, so that “the aggression of his face” is changed due to the “wisdom of the person.” The *Piel* reading leaves this verse in an awkward comparison between “wisdom brightens one’s face” versus “aggression of one’s face alters them”: the former clearly expressing how wisdom positively changes the person’s manner while the latter fails to determine how aggression—as a quality of the person—will make a change on the person. “Wisdom” and the “aggression of one’s face” do not seem to be direct opposites.

<sup>313</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 241.

<sup>314</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 62.

<sup>315</sup> For instance, Crenshaw simply titles Eccl 7:1-14 as “A Collection of Proverbs” (*Ecclesiastes*, 132).

the speaker talking about his vain life (בימי הבלי) and the status of the righteous and the wicked. Thus, 7:14 and 7:15 belong in separate sections.

In terms of closing the section on Eccl 8:1, scholars hold different opinions on this. The biblical text that follows immediately after Eccl 7:15-8:1 speaks about the obedience toward the king who exercises absolute royal authority (8:4) and the consequences of disobedience (8:5). While Crenshaw puts 8:1 along with its following text, he also notes that the verse “may be a clever allusion to the previous section, or it may ask whether anyone knows the true meaning of the aphorism about wisdom illuminating one’s face,”<sup>316</sup> leaving some space for ambiguity. Murphy sums up the state of scholarship regarding the orientation of 8:1 by observing eventually it is the “overall construal” that determines where 8:1 would be included; hence, “8:1a could [also] be an echo of the previous verses (vv. 23, 25) about Qoheleth’s search for wisdom.”<sup>317</sup> His personal rationale, nonetheless, sees 8:1 along with the later text, marking an ending at 7:29 due to “the occurrence of the telling phrase ‘find out’” for this section.<sup>318</sup>

In my observation, scholars tend to hold no objections against 8:1a being part of the speech of 7:15-29 although most still group 8:1 along with Eccl 8 in terms of structure without providing much rationale.<sup>319</sup> However, I suspect the reason for keeping 8:1 with its later text is due to the difficult interpretation of the *Pual* verb יִשְׁנָא (“will be altered”) at the end of the verse, where many scholars have attempted to smooth it out by correcting and combining it with the equally confusing אֲנִי at the beginning of 8:2 to form a *Piel* יִשְׁנֹאנִי (“changes them”).<sup>320</sup> If this were the case, the decision would sacrifice the

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<sup>316</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 149.

<sup>317</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 75. Fox uses the same rationale to state the ending being at 8:1a (*Time to Tear Down*, 266).

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>319</sup> Besides the examples mentioned earlier, see also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 290; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 266; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 150; etc.

<sup>320</sup> See fn. 312 in the translation section for the detailed discussion of the *Pual* vs. *Piel* form of the verb שָׁנָה.

narrative flow in favor of a morphological reasoning of the vocabulary, and thus makes little sense for my narrative reading of the section. Consequently, I agree not only with the consensus that 8:1a belongs to the previous text, but also the strong case presented by Whybray that “the references to ‘wise’ and ‘wisdom’ [in 8:1], together with the absence of any reference to the king compared with the specificity of 8:2 suggest that the verse is in some way connected with the preceding and not the following verses.”<sup>321</sup> Indeed, I end this section on 8:1 because starting from 8:2 the speaker shifts his attention towards the king’s authority, unlike the theme of wisdom in the previous text.

### **3.2 Outline and Summary**

Ecc 7:15-8:1 is a very well thought out structure designed for persuasion. It holds a significant importance in the main body of the book due to Qohelet arriving at a conclusive judgment of righteousness and wickedness with his pursuit of wisdom. Unlike the teachings of traditional wisdom which encourages its audience to solely seek righteousness and to condemn and cast away wickedness, Qohelet peculiarly suggests that one should not be excessively obsessed with either one (7:16-17) but to maintain both (7:18). He teaches this not only through simple statements but with an intricately designed discourse meant to persuade his audience. Since his approach to the topics of righteousness vs. wickedness and being wise vs. being foolish is so unconventional, he employs several rhetoric to make his teachings count while not going directly against traditional values of these ideas. Therefore, using the different modes of speech as the criteria, the passage can be broken down into the following sections and units:

- A. 7:15. Qualitative Observation: On Righteousness and Wickedness in the World
  - a. 7:16-17. Proverbial Instructions as Parallel Contrast
    - i. 7:16. Warning against Excessive Righteousness and Wisdom
    - ii. 7:17. Warning against Excessive Wickedness and Foolishness
- B. 7:18. Instructive Response: Keep Both but Fear God

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<sup>321</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 128.

- a. 7:19-20. Quoting Traditional Wisdom as Proofs
  - i. 7:19. The Advantage of Wisdom (cf. Prov 21:22; 24:5)<sup>322</sup>
  - ii. 7:20. No Human Being Is Fully Righteous (cf. Solomon’s speech in 1 Kgs 8:46)<sup>323</sup>
- b. 7:21-22. Additional Instruction
- C. 7:23-24. Short Conclusion and Bridge
- D. 7: 25-29. Quantitative Observations: On Wisdom among Humankind
  - a. 7:25. Reaffirming Main Quest
  - b. 7:26-28. Evaluation: The Wise is Scarce and The Sinners Abundant
  - c. 7:29. Short Conclusion: Humans Stray from God-Given Righteousness and Wisdom
- E. 8:1. Final Remark: Wisdom Boosts One’s Temperament

For many commentators, the breaking down of this section into units is not strictly defined; many have relied simply on the thematic differences between units. Due to the awkward placement of 7:19 and the messy thematic sequence of vv. 25-29, opinions on how to categorize the sub-units differs from scholar to scholar. In general, there is a consensus that the passage consists of two parts: some see it as 7:15-22 and 7:23-29<sup>324</sup> while some see it as 7:15-24 and 7:25-29.<sup>325</sup> Either way, the first part “concerns the impossibility of extreme righteousness and wisdom” (vv. 15-22[24]) and the second part “concerns the threat of folly and the elusiveness of wisdom” (vv. 23[25]-29).<sup>326</sup> Longman is more cautious towards including 7:23-24 in either parts, and instead, divides the passage into vv. 15-22, vv. 23-24, and vv. 25-29.<sup>327</sup> The reason for vv. 23-24 being flexibly included with the first or the second section or to stand alone from both sections is due to the fact that “the unconquerable distance of wisdom” mentioned here could serve as a

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<sup>322</sup> Following Gordis’ observations (*Koheleth*, 278).

<sup>323</sup> Both Gordis and Barton suggest that this is a quotation from 1 Kgs 8:49 (Gordis, *Koheleth*, 278; Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 144). Similar concepts from traditional wisdom are also echoed in Ps 143:2 “for no one living is righteous before you” and Prov 20:9 “Who can say, ‘I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin?’” (NRSV translation; observed by Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 142-43; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 199). However, the Hebrew word sequence is almost a near copy of the remarks by King Solomon in 1 Kgs 8:49: כִּי אִין אָדָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִחַטָּא (“for there is no one who does not sin”).

<sup>324</sup> For instance: Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 140, 144; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 139, 143; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 266.

<sup>325</sup> For instance: Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 69, 75; Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 180, 184; Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall who actually believe that 7:1-24 is a complete unit while vv.15-24 is one of the sub-units (*Qoheleth*, 195, 218).

<sup>326</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 266.

<sup>327</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 208.

conclusion to Qohelet's evaluation in vv. 15-22,<sup>328</sup> but could also "be considered a transition to the search for wisdom mentioned in v 25."<sup>329</sup> For this reason, I have considered vv. 23-24 as the conclusion for vv. 15-22 and the bridge to connect towards 7:25-8:1.

Moving on to the outline I have provided, section A opens with Qohelet's observation that the righteous and the wicked do not live out their respective lives according to the deeds they have done (7:15). Established earlier in chapter 2 of this research, Qohelet often uses the term ראייתי ("I have seen") as a marker for a new topic or observation, so it is evident that v. 15 functions as an introduction to his following comments. This is a strong claim against traditional Israelite wisdom which often teaches that the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked will be punished upon judgment. Instead of giving a straightforward rationale for this observation, Qohelet proceeds to teach his audience about how to deal with this situation in life using a chiasmic structure in vv. 16-17. These two verses are in the form of proverbial sayings, using the negated jussives אל-תהי צדיק ("do not be [too] righteous," v. 16) and אל-תהי רשע ("do not be [too] wicked," v. 17) as a warning toward the 2nd-person audience, followed by the interrogative למה ("for what/why?") to present the outcome if the instructions are not followed. The sentence structures of vv. 16-17 are paralleled and thus form a pair. They serve as the practical instructions for v. 15.

Section B, at first glance, poses an issue due to the indefinites זה...זה ("this... that") in 7:18. Judging by the narrative flow of the context, it becomes clear that the "this" and "that" refer to the two scenarios stated in v. 16 and 17; that is, "Qohelet advocates the avoidance of excessive righteousness and wisdom, as well as folly and excessive

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<sup>328</sup> Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 217.

<sup>329</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 69.

wickedness.”<sup>330</sup> Therefore, v. 18 is a continuation and instructive response to vv. 16-17 but also section A in general, with the additional command to “fear God.” 7:19-20 is yet another problematic unit that puzzles many commentators with many seeking desperate solutions to smooth out the awkwardness. Although “wisdom” is mentioned at the start of v. 19, the content about its advantage over the strength of “ten domineers” (עשרה שליטים) seems out of place. Fox, for instance, argues against MT that v. 19 should be relocated after 7:11-12 due to the thematic similarity on “The Advantage of Wisdom.”<sup>331</sup> In addition, v. 20 is also confusing when read along with v. 19 which had just stated how great wisdom is. If read without any reference point, v. 19 and 20 seem to cancel out each other as v. 20 questions the authenticity of the fully righteous, diminishing the persuasiveness of Qohelet’s argument.

To solve this inner-textual contradiction, Gordis’ solution is worth noting. The notion that wisdom, i.e. the wise ones, defending the city in v. 19 is mentioned in Prov 21:22 and 24:5.<sup>332</sup> In terms of v. 20, “the verse here is virtually a quotation of the passage in Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the Temple” in 1 Kgs 8:46 which has a highly similar sentence: *כי אין אדם אשר לא יחטא* (“for there is no one who does not sin”).<sup>333</sup> In other words, v. 19 and 20 could be understood as Qohelet quoting crucial concepts—if not direct quotes—from traditional biblical wisdom. In my narrative reading, understanding vv. 19-20 as quotations from the past is powerful since it would entail that Qohelet adopts ideas from Proverbs which is the pinnacle of biblical wisdom in v. 19 and continues to play with the Solomonic disguise in v. 20 by quoting Solomon’s speech in 1 Kings. The function is to prove that “wisdom as the mightiest human trait” (v. 19) and “no one could be so righteous” (v. 20) are coexisting ideas in traditional wisdom. Consequently, this

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<sup>330</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 197. Also Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 141; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 142.

<sup>331</sup> Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 256.

<sup>332</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth*, 278; see also Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 142-3.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*

makes for a strong reference to prove Qohelet's instruction that we should keep both righteousness and wickedness in a controlled balance but not going to either extremes, as stated in section A. In addition, he maintains his Solomonic voice, assuming his audience is familiar with biblical background. Finally, having proven that his instructions in section A and B is grounded in traditional wisdom, he offers a final piece of advice that goes continues the idea of v. 20: one cannot avoid hearsay either as the initiator or on the receiving end, so keep it light to heart (vv. 21-22).

Up to this moment, section A and B could be seen as Qohelet speaking on the *qualities* of being wise (as opposed to understanding Wisdom). As stated, Wisdom (with a capitalized "W")<sup>334</sup> could be vaguely understood as the balance between righteousness and wickedness, wisdom and foolishness. The purpose is not to reveal the nature of Wisdom, a quest that continues to confound Qohelet and that is seemingly impossible to achieve, but how to apply wisdom to one's daily life and especially to human interactions. This leads to section C, which sums up how Wisdom could be "tested" but its nature remains out of reach no matter how much Qohelet tries to grapple with it (vv. 23-24). Since vv. 23-24 fits smoothly with v. 25, section C also serves as a lead into the following sections.<sup>335</sup> Hence, section C (i.e. vv. 23-24) becomes the bridge between section A + B and section D + E.

Section D starts off with Qohelet restating his quest in v. 25, using the altered yet idiomatic expression סבֹּוֹתִי אֲנִי וּלְבַי לְדַעַת ("I turned—myself and my heart—to know..."). The same expression is used in Ecclesiastes as an ending note in 1:17, or as a shift of topic in 2:12, both as a reaffirmation of the ongoing quest for wisdom.<sup>336</sup> Several verbs with

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<sup>334</sup> "Wisdom" with a capital can be understood as a way to express the ultimate wisdom, deep wisdom, or divine wisdom that Qohelet had been seeking for throughout the whole book.

<sup>335</sup> Krüger, taking vv. 23-24 with vv. 25-29, observes that "the section 7:23-29 offers for the first time since 1:12-2:26 another coherent first-person report on a 'test' of Qoheleth, its execution, and its outcome" (*Qoheleth*, 143).

<sup>336</sup> Likewise, Longman emends the awkward phrasing based on 1:17 and suggests that the initial verb סבֹּוֹתִי "indicates that Qohelet now turns to a new subject" (*Ecclesiastes*, 202).

exploratory connotations are used in v. 25: לדעת (“to know”), לתור (“to explore”), and בקש (“to seek”). Subsequently, in the next verse (v. 26) the speaker begins by revealing what he has found, using the verb ומוצא (“and I found...”). It is therefore evident that v. 25 and 26 belong in the same unit, the latter being an evaluation of the former actions. Observing the repetition of the verb מצא (“to find”), one may see that vv. 26-29 form a complete unit, focusing on the negative depiction of the woman and his search for a חשבון (“calculation, estimation, explanation,” v. 27) of things. It should be noted that in the attempts where scholarship tries to explain the reasoning for Qohelet’s negative impression toward woman, “this passage remains irreparably misogynistic.”<sup>337</sup> Indeed, Qohelet does display a gender bias in his evaluation of men and women specifically in this passage, but there are ways to negate the tone of this section (vv. 26-28) which will be explained later. On the other hand, there is also the interesting depiction of a 1:1000 ratio when searching for “the one that is good before God” (v. 26), and judging by the narrative construction of section D, it poses as a better evidence to see Qohelet aiming at teasing out the *quantitative* properties of wisdom.

Finally, I end the passage on 8:1 (section E) with Qohelet’s judgment that wisdom should be preferred so that it may change one’s temperament. The majority of scholars end the passage at 7:29, seeing it as a closure, which entails that there is no need for a section E in my outline. However, 7:29 has too much in common with vv. 26-28 and too little to conclude the whole 7:15-28. For example, judging by content of 7:29: (1) “For this alone” at the beginning would not be an appropriate conclusive phrase to include everything that is discussed in vv. 15-28; (2) the finding that “God has made humankind upright” correlates to “the one that is good before God” in v. 26; and (3) the final outcome that humankind “sought out many schemes” is in direct relation with section D which

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<sup>337</sup> Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 266.

speaks about the sinner being capture by the woman's snare (v. 26) but would contradict Qohelet's instruction to seek balance between righteousness and wickedness in section A and B. Contrarily, 8:1 serves as the better conclusion for 7:15-29 considering it bears the reoccurring question "who knows the interpretation of things?" which echoes wisdom being far and deep in v. 24. In addition, as I have mentioned in §3.1, 8:1 and its following text in Eccl 8 do not have matching theme, so if 8:1 is left out of this segment, 8:1 would be left stranded between 7:15-29 and what follows after Eccl 8. Therefore, it suits well that 8:1 is the final verdict for 7:15-8:1, ending on a high note that encourages people to pursue wisdom for a better countenance.

In many aspects, Eccl 7:15-8:1 serves as a closing remark to Qohelet's main quest for wisdom. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to deal with elements that construct Qohelet's assumed identity which is still somewhat attached to the Solomonic figure, albeit very personal, from an experience point of view. This allows the once distant Solomonic character—as a high-above royalty—to transform into a personal advisor and teacher for the common audience. Hence, the didactic strategies for everyday life instructions will also be examined. Once the character's narrative arc has been established, I will demonstrate how Qohelet's view on the genders and the frame-narrator's intervention (Eccl 7:26-29) calls for the first-person personhood of Qohelet to be identified in the text. Overall, the syntactic framework examined in this section could be seen as a miniature model for the literary style of the book which also frequently has proverbial sayings inserted between the narrative intervals.

#### **4. Qohelet's Personas in Eccl 7:15-8:1**

Throughout the chapters, it has been established that Qohelet's character is nothing short of the Solomonic feature, from speaking as if an established king in Eccl 1:12-2:26 (chapter 3) to speaking as a pseudo-divine royal presence casting a judgmental eye on

humankind with his bystander position in 3:9-22 (chapter 4). While Qohelet's discourse remains grand and the themes extending far in both sections, his voice has always been personal and self-aware. We understand *his* understanding of the world through his lens, by his first-person monologue of the observations and the feelings he has experienced. However, there are also cases where we—the audience—are address in the second person as the receiver of his instructions.<sup>338</sup> Some of these first person to second person speech are designed as proverbial sayings, but in the two cases in section 7:15-8:1, the tone of the speeches are very direct and personal. Thus, this section serves as a key to further understand Qohelet as the narrative character.

#### **4.1 The Experienced Elder**

To begin with, how is Qohelet posturing himself in this section? Two identities come into play when this question is asked: on the one hand, Qohelet has disguised himself with the Solomonic kingly voice directly and indirectly in the passages that I have explored in previous chapters; on the other hand, although having not stated directly that he *is* the wise in his own discourse, he has shown strong empathy for the fate of the wise who will certainly feel remorseful when faced with the absurdity of this world. Besides, it has been stated several times by himself that his goal is to “be wise,” the immediate example being in Eccl 7:23. When thinking about Qohelet the man, one cannot undermine the fact that his character building is in fact strongly associated with the Solomonic figure and the wise from the beginning of Ecclesiastes. With this as the prerequisite, we head forth to understand the man as told through his own words in 7:15-8:1.

Speaking of the Solomonic identity, it has been shown in the previous chapters in this research and by scholars that Qohelet merely uses the identity as a point of entry to make his judgments worthwhile to his audience. Gordis, for instance, has emphasized that “the

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<sup>338</sup> For instance, Eccl 5:1-9; 7:16-18, 21-22; 8:2; 9:7-10; 10:4, 20; 11:1-2, 5-6, 9-10; 12:1.

author makes no effort to imply seriously that Solomon is the author” and that Solomon is used as an “effective device” to demonstrate that “even the ultimate of wisdom and luxury possible to man has no absolute value or significance.”<sup>339</sup> Even so, Gordis has also suggested that after Eccl 2:12, “the role of Solomon is laid aside for the remaining five-sixths of the book, never to be resumed.”<sup>340</sup> Fox, as the pioneer of the frame-narrator discourse on the book, has also stated similarly that “Qohelet assumes the role of king [Solomon] in 1:12 only for his experiment with wisdom (1:12-18) and pleasure (2:1-11), then drops the pose.”<sup>341</sup> For these scholars, the Solomonic kingly identity remains only in the first two chapters of the book and dissolves when the narrative proceeds forward.<sup>342</sup> Christianson, however, disagrees with this view that the Solomonic influence can be so clearly distinguished from section to section, who suggests that the Solomonic guise “provides for the reader an ever-present, if sometimes elusive, sometimes insinuated context in which to grasp the experiments of Qoheleth.”<sup>343</sup> Furthermore, in terms of the specific passages that allude to this guise, he lists 7:25-29 and the epilogue as examples—the former being in the context of the discussion of this chapter.<sup>344</sup> I tend to follow Christianson’s notion about the Solomonic presence and will elaborate in greater detail the context of 7:25-29 in §4.3.

Returning to the focus on 7:15-8:1, Barton’s commentary starts 7:15-21 off with a definitive statement: “Qoheleth here drops the Solomonic mask” without much explanation.<sup>345</sup> While Barton is not within the camp of scholars who dismiss the

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<sup>339</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth*, 40.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> Fox, “Frame-Narrative,” 85-86.

<sup>342</sup> The list of scholars holding this position has been compiled by Christianson (*A Time to Tell*, 128), including A. Barucq, B. S. Childs, J. Crenshaw, F. Ellermeier, K. Galling, H. L. Ginsberg, R. Gordis, T. Longman III, R. B. Salters, C.-L. Seow, G. T. Sheppard, and W. Zimmerli.

<sup>343</sup> Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 148.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 143-47.

<sup>345</sup> Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 143.

Solomonic presence after the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes, he nonetheless agrees that the voice drops off from this section. However, this is not completely true. 7:20 is the outlier in 7:15-21 that inherits Solomon’s speech through an intertextual comparison, where Gordis has noted that v. 20 is “virtually a quotation of the passage in Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the Temple” in 1 Kgs 8:46 on an idiomatic basis.<sup>346</sup> Verses 19-20 could be taken as quotations taken from other earlier HB scriptures, as shown in my translation, but since there are no clues to identify any quotation markers in this section, the verses remain vague concerning whether Qohelet is taking vv. 19-20 as his own speech or quoting from earlier texts. Either way, Qohelet draws influence from the traditional Solomonic voice, if not from the Solomonic wisdom. Some scholars have also identified the concept in v. 20 similar to Ps 143:2, Job 15:14-16, or Prov 20:9,<sup>347</sup> but judging by syntactic construction, the majority agree that Eccl 7:20 is most similar with 1 Kgs 8:46.<sup>348</sup> Therefore, the Solomonic figure exists in the ideas presented in Eccl 7:15-21, highlighted by the syntactical imitation of Solomon’s prayer through Qohelet’s speech/quotation.

In the following Eccl 7:22-8:1, the Solomonic “ghost” continues to underlie Qohelet’s teaching. However, the Solomonic shadow does not present itself as a quotation from the past, but rather from King Solomon’s depiction in 1 Kings. The focus here is undoubtedly the misogynistic depiction against women in 7:25-29,<sup>349</sup> which Christianson associates with the Solomonic guise.<sup>350</sup> Qohelet’s misogynistic view towards women, especially in v. 28b where he states that through his seeking one out of a thousand men and none from

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<sup>346</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth*, 278. For a comparison between the Hebrew, see my translation footnote on v. 20.

<sup>347</sup> For instance, Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 122; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 262; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 142-43; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 199; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 141; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 99.

<sup>348</sup> See Gordis, *Koheleth*, 278; Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 144; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 142; Whitley, *Koheleth*, 68; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 69; Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 214.

<sup>349</sup> Many have read 7:25-29 as an inevitable misogynistic text: Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 147; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 78; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 273; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 206;

<sup>350</sup> Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 143-47.

one thousand women he has found, is detected and hinted towards Solomon's harem in 1 Kgs 11:1-8 by some.<sup>351</sup> While other commentaries have not alluded Eccl 7:25-29 to 1 Kgs 11:1-8, I sense that in most cases scholars are too indulged in deciphering the meaning behind Qohelet's misogyny, either trying to find a good explanation or simply tempting to smooth out his flaw. Besides Christianson being the main advocate of this intertextual connection, Isaksson also provides a narrative reasoning where the woman as a trap in Eccl 7:26 serves as an allusion "made to the 1000 wives of king Solomon, mentioned in 7:28, who led him astray and turned his heart after other gods (1 Kings 11:3)."<sup>352</sup> Indeed, as history has it, it is told that among Solomon's wives there "were seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart" (1 Kgs 11:3), adding up to the total of one thousand. As Qohelet often adopts the Solomonic voice in the book, it is reasonable to believe that there is a high chance Qohelet is alluding to Solomon's personal flaws and experiences with women to portray the king in his most vulnerable bias. Therefore, all in all it can be seen that in 7:15-8:1 Qohelet's speech still inherits the Solomonic voice, at least in term of his legacy if not his full personhood.

Identifying the underlying Solomonic voice that Qohelet adopts in Eccl 7:15-8:1 is vital to understand how he positions himself in relation to his audience. Instead of just proceeding with his monologue or using the heart as a dialogic partner, this section brings up his didactic speech towards the second-person audience. There is no doubt that Qohelet poses as a teacher throughout the whole book, and the didactic strategies in this section will be further discussed in §4.2. It is what type of teacher Qohelet is that's key to the understanding of his personhood. Qohelet is widely known to be a sage; in fact, Gordis is so sure as to say that "the content and form of his book make it clear that Koheleth was

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<sup>351</sup> Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 147; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 148; Isaksson, *Studies in the Language*, 66; Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 144.

<sup>352</sup> Isaksson, *Studies in the Language*, 66.

a teacher in one of the Wisdom academies in Jerusalem, which served the educational needs of upper-class youth.”<sup>353</sup> Yet, since the dating, authorship, location of the composition of the book is still under scrutiny, this could only be seen as a proposal. Nonetheless, Qohelet is still a sage due to “his use of the language and literary forms typical of that movement [wisdom tradition], and his treatment of a broad range of characteristic topoi, the commonplaces of ancient wisdom,” as told by Murphy.<sup>354</sup> Qohelet inherits the “substantial concern of the sages,” which is “What is good (*tôb*) for humans?”<sup>355</sup> In 7:18, Qohelet does just that by teaching to his audience what is good in relation to dealing with the comparisons between righteousness, wisdom, wickedness, and foolishness in vv. 16-17.

Now, supposedly if we were to follow Gordis’ suggestion that Qohelet belongs to a particular sage academy, Qohelet’s knowledge should have been passed down systematically. However, in 7:15-8:1 as well as many places throughout the whole book, Qohelet has continually emphasized that his instructions were solely experienced through his own life, e.g. in 7:15 where he begins with “both I have seen in the days of my *hebel* [short life]” and 7:23 where “all this I have tested with wisdom.” These suggest that Qohelet have experienced it all (i.e. the themes that follow or precede). Moreover, while Christianson sees the book “entrenched via the repetition of certain motifs that have their origin in the Solomonic guise,”<sup>356</sup> the misogynistic case of 7:25-29 has surpassed this arena and ventured into the blurry realm of undistinguishable character: is Qohelet talking about his personal views or is he *adopting* Solomon’s character as his own and for

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<sup>353</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth*, 76-77.

<sup>354</sup> Murphy, “The Sage in Ecclesiastes and Qoheleth the Sage,” in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, 265.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>356</sup> Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 147. In the footnote from the same page, what Christianson means by repeating motifs are idiomatic expressions like “I observed,” “I gave my heart over,” “I applied myself,” “I said in my heart,” or the “הבל” judgments” which are “a natural validation of Qoheleth’s narrative springing from the guise proper of chs. 1-2.”

the sake of his teaching? The key is that Qohelet is still speaking from a first-person speech, and either way, the boldness to say that he has gained that experience with both men and women in the count of thousands (v. 28b) suggests that he is a man with experiences far beyond the common person. Hence, it is safe to say that Qohelet—no matter in a personal stance or with a Solomonic guise—is posing as an experienced elder with a didactic function towards his audience. Indeed, this is proven later in the book that Qohelet takes himself as the elderly wise addressing the “young man” in 11:9 and 12:1. As for the Solomonic undertone, it serves as a basis for the wisdom he teaches by quoting from the Solomonic stories or intentionally pretending to speak as Solomon himself, i.e., blurring the lines between his own character and the Solomonic figure.

#### **4.2 The Everyday Teacher in 7:15-24**

Understanding that Qohelet is teaching as a wise old man allows us to dig deeper into the narrative tactics of his speech. Qohelet is not just presenting traditional wisdom through idiomatic sayings, but rather adding all sorts of personal touch to those sayings, creating the effect that the content itself is personal and intimate. The first person to second person instruction that, unlike proverbial idioms, provide a critique on the life of the commoners who seem to be the audience in Eccl 7:15-8:1, rooted deep in the experiences that Qohelet shares. The shifting and merging between genres and forms in this passage will be examined in closeness since this reveals Qohelet’s style of speech. All in all, the aim is not a morphological decoding of the meaning of certain words but rather a syntactical analysis of the mode of speech.

Beginning at Eccl 7:15, Qohelet shares his unconventional observation that goes against traditional wisdom: that he has seen the righteous perish in his righteousness while the wicked prolong in his evilness. In traditional Proverbial wisdom, it is often taught the other way around, the righteous saved from troubles and will prosper (Prov

10:2; 11:4, 8, 21; 12:21; 18:10) while the wicked is doomed with no redemption (Prov 11:5-8; 12:12; 14:32). In addition, Proverbial wisdom teaches that “the prolongation of life is one of the benefits of wisdom, which implies right conduct (see Prov 3:2, 16; 28:2, 16).”<sup>357</sup> Then why does Qohelet go against this wisdom thinking? Before his stark contrast between the outcomes of the righteous and the wicked in Eccl 7:15b, he emphasizes that this is what he has witnessed “in the days of my *hebel* [short life]” (v. 15a). Apparently, Qohelet is not interested in the conventional and idealistic teaching of wisdom in the past but rather, through his personal experiences rooted in reality, using the teachings against itself to prove that exceptions exist. Or, it is also possible that Qohelet is using this twist and teaching as a mode of setting up a new norm of wisdom. As Isaksson observes in Qohelet’s style of speech, the existential particle *שׁוּ* (“there is...”) that he uses according to the context “functions as a kind of localizer, calling attention to the present state of the author.”<sup>358</sup> The same *שׁוּ* is used twice in v. 15, and according to Longman, “is ignored by some English translations like the NIV, which then mistakenly format the verse as poetry.”<sup>359</sup> The verse is definitely not poetry; it is rather a narrative prose by Qohelet that integrates and modifies traditional Proverbial ideas into the speech. It could be understood as a strategy to show Qohelet’s dynamic usage of his vast understanding of traditional wisdom and as a way to stay in-line with the commonly known Proverbial wisdom. Longman even suggests that Qohelet “surely wanted his listener/reader to be shocked by what he said” with this paradox, being “the polar opposite of what some strands of biblical teaching indicate.”<sup>360</sup> Hence, right off the bat of this section we see that the concerns and teachings of Qohelet are deeply ingrained in human life.

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<sup>357</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 266.

<sup>358</sup> Isaksson, *Studies in the Language*, 46.

<sup>359</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 194.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*

Again, using 7:15 as a point of entry, Qohelet's contrast between the outcome of the righteous and the wicked sets the tone for the following instructions. 7:16-17 is stated in a chiasmic pair while denoting, once again, opposite ideas.<sup>361</sup> The verses follow Qoheleth's common experience with the righteous and the wicked in v. 15, in which Qohelet instructs his audience not to be too הרבה ("excessive") in both, and also in being wise or foolish. It is within the territory of ancient wisdom that sages tend to use the form "do not be... do not be..." or "do not do (this)... do not do (that)..." as the mode of instruction. For instance, Seow detects that the parallelism of vv. 16-17 might come from the Aramaic *Proverbs of Ahiqar*, "circulating among the Jews of Elephantine in Egypt in the Persian period: 'l tskl kbyr [w']l yd'k h[ . . . ] 'do not be overly clever, lest... be extinguished' (see *TAD III*, 1.147)."<sup>362</sup> Similar forms can also be seen in Proverbial sayings, but if the case is true that the text examined here is related to ancient ANE teachings, it shows that Qohelet adopts the general style of ANE royal instructions. However, Qohelet does not stop here. In addition to giving out the instructions in Eccl 7:16-17, he also adds the interrogatives למה ("why...?") after the instructions to directly address the second-person listeners. This syntactic design drastically enhances the effectiveness of the conventionally styled instructions, moving the tone from a general teaching for the mass (collective function) to a person-to-person contact. Both verbs at the end of v. 16 and v. 17—תשומם ("baffle yourself") and תמות ("you should die")—are in the second person singular, suggesting that Qohelet is addressing the personal instead of the collective. The second person singular continues into v. 18, where Qohelet continues to stretch his instructions into a practical advice, using the verb תמות ("you shall take hold") to tell the listener about both righteousness with wisdom and wickedness with foolishness. Generally, Qohelet's

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<sup>361</sup> See Seow's discussion for more detail on the morphological chiasmic contrast between the wordings in vv. 16-17 (*Ecclesiastes*, 253).

<sup>362</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 253. Seow's translation is from the *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*, 3 volumes, B. Porten and A. Yardeni, eds. (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities), 1986-93.

contextual anti-extremism view in vv. 15-18 has confounded scholars in a way that generated an array of different interpretations.<sup>363</sup> However, my focus remains on the chiastic parallel in vv. 16-17, deriving from Qohelet's observation in v. 15 and ending with his practical advice in v. 18. The chiastic construction demonstrates Qohelet's capability to not only imitate traditional ANE instructions, but to furthermore elaborate and incorporate his personal speech into the structure, which transforms the dull traditional instructions into his dynamic experience-sharing towards the second-person audience. In this way, Qohelet's teaching becomes more lively and personal-based; instead of letting royal instructions remain high-above and untouchable, he has made the knowledge transferrable, accessible, and relatable for his audience.

So far, Qohelet's teaching in Eccl 7:15-18 has been rooted in Proverbial and ANE wisdom. Verse 18 is not only the practical advice given to the second person, it also serves as the bridge toward vv. 19-20 where the Solomonic influence comes into play. However, v. 19 at first glance seems out of place, and thus Barton: "It is impossible to find any intelligent connection for this verse with the preceding context."<sup>364</sup> Throughout the years, due to the difficult placement and the meaning of this verse, scholars have tried to make sense of it. Fox goes to the extreme and suggests that v. 19 "is irrelevant in its current place" and "it interrupts the tight connection between vv. 18 and 20," suggesting that the verse must be read as a continuation of v. 12.<sup>365</sup> But there is no textual evidence to support this change. Gordis' solution, on the other hand, remains loyal to the MT and proves satisfying for the narrative flow: "V. 19 may be a quotation of a conventional

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<sup>363</sup> It is not my intention to provide a judgment saying which interpretation is the best. Nonetheless, simply through the notion of death concerning wickedness-foolishness in v. 17 and the stress that only the one "who fears God will go forth from both" in v. 18 that Qohelet is still pro righteousness-wisdom. It has been explained in chapter 4 that death is beyond human comprehension and is only controlled by God alone, so the association of death with wickedness-foolishness may suggest that keeping extreme to this side of the spectrum would result in God's judgment.

<sup>364</sup> Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 144.

<sup>365</sup> Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 256-57.

proverb, extolling wisdom as giving a man the self-assurance he needs. The theme is common in Wisdom teaching (cf. Pr. 21:22; 24:5).<sup>366</sup> Following Gordis, Longman explains that “the saying, which may be a proverb, is simply that wisdom is much more important than other human qualities and abilities.”<sup>367</sup> That is, v. 19 could be understood as a proverbial saying formulated as a quotation by Qohelet with Prov 21:22 or 24:5 in mind. If so, v. 20 being a quotation from Solomon’s prayer is even more likely due to the similarity of syntactic construction between 1 Kgs 8:46.<sup>368</sup> What v. 20 emphasizes is the reality “that perfect goodness, which is identical for the Wisdom writers with wisdom, is never attainable to man.”<sup>369</sup> Both vv. 19-20 serve as quotations to elaborate on the anti-extremism Qohelet had shown earlier, the former as a Proverbial proof and the latter as a Solomonic wisdom. Read together, the quotations marks that “even as he [Qohelet] illustrates overconfidence in wisdom’s strength in v 19, so he speaks of overconfidence in righteousness in v 20: no one on earth is so righteous, who does only good and does not err (or ‘does not sin’).”<sup>370</sup> The quotations not only serves as supplementations to Qohelet’s previous instruction, but also functions as proofs that Qohelet is knowledgeable in terms of proverbial sayings and Solomonic wisdom. This background knowledge allows Qohelet to establish his position as the didactic authority who has been educated in traditional and ancient wisdoms.

Finally, the remaining Eccl 7:21-24 contains elements that have been discussed previously. Verses 21-22 warns of the commonplace mistake that every human being will err in his/her life: the inevitable urge to curse others. This topic may seem relatively minor in comparison to the righteousness-wisdom and wickedness-foolishness contrast

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<sup>366</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth*, 278.

<sup>367</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 198.

<sup>368</sup> See my discussion in §4.1 and in the translation notes.

<sup>369</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth*, 278.

<sup>370</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 269.

in vv. 15-20. Nonetheless, the passage is still marked with Qohelet's didactic method of instructing the second-person audience directly, namely using second-person verbs such as the jussive form **אל תתן לבך** ("you should not give your heart," v. 21), the imperfect form **תשמע** ("you will hear," v. 21), or the perfect form **קללת** ("you have cursed," v. 22), all in the singular. Additionally, vv. 21-22 adopts the recurring style that Qohelet uses to maintain balance between two contrasting ideas: hearing your servant curse yourself (v. 21) because you have done the same towards others (v. 22). As for vv. 23-24, the focus would be Qohelet's idiomatic way of self-humiliation, saying "I will be wise" but ending up realizing that wisdom is still far from him (v. 23). It has been mentioned in previous chapters that this mode of speech from Qohelet is a way to expose his vulnerability as a mere human being, not capable of deciphering all the wisdom in this world and especially the wisdom that belongs to the godly realms.<sup>371</sup> This is further reinforced by the statement that "far is that which is extremely deep/unsearchable" (v. 24), which pertains to the overall idea in the book that wisdom itself is elusive. As mentioned in chapter 2 of this research, the effect of this self-humiliation makes Qohelet human, not as the wise sage that is high above but rather the experienced old man who has taught his audience from his own sense of defeat: his failed goal to obtain wisdom in life.

To sum up, Qohelet is ingenious in combining the old with the new (of his days), exploring ways to incorporate traditional wisdom into his personal experience-sharing. Although it is commonly known that he is a critic of traditional wisdom thoughts, he is also a master of those thoughts. Simply between Eccl 7:15-24, he has interchanged the cause and effect of the traditional value of righteousness versus wickedness (v. 15), conjoined his first-person speech with the altered proverbial knowledge (v. 15), combined his personal questioning and instruction for the second-person listener with

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<sup>371</sup> See §4.4 in chapter 2.

ANE wisdom (vv. 16-18), quoted from Proverbial sayings and Solomonic wisdom (vv. 19-20), applied the recurring style to address a commonplace sin (vv. 21-22), and emphasized his failings to allow his teaching to be at the personal level (vv. 23-24). As a result, his instructions and discourse become more dynamic and easier accessible in comparison to traditional wisdom that is rooted in the sage academy within the royal court. Qohelet's way of introducing wisdom to his time has made the wisdom beneficial for even the commoners.

### **4.3 The Flawed Wise and the Frame-Narrator's Intervention**

In subchapter §4.2, I have ended it with Eccl 7:23-24, focusing on the strategy of Qohelet's self-humiliation to make his teaching effective. Qohelet's expression that "wisdom is far from me" has a similar appearance in 2:15. However, whereas in 2:15 Qohelet's expressions serves more as an outcry and regret,<sup>372</sup> the expression in 7:23-24 is relieved of the emotional aspects and used to show the deepness of wisdom—a mystery unreachable for the human comprehension. As Seow notes, "all that is happening in the world is distant and unfathomable (literally 'deep, deep'), and no one can comprehend it."<sup>373</sup> Verse 24 is left off with an open question: "who can find it out?" One would assume that Qohelet will provide a rationale after the question, but what follows is the deeply elusive and misogynistic passage (vv. 25-29) that has left scholars scrambling for a proper solution.

It is quite strange for one who is a reader of Qohelet to see him allude to a misogynistic comment as a satisfying solution and instruction following the expression that wisdom is deep and unbeknownst to all, including himself (7:24). The theme of vv. 25-29 is inevitably using women (or "the woman" as in v. 26) as the trap for sinners. While

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<sup>372</sup> After Qohelet asked himself why he had "acted excessively wise" in Eccl 2:15, he explains in vv. 16-17 that "the wise die just like the fool" and therefore he "hated life" for it being "a pursuit of emptiness" (my translation).

<sup>373</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 270.

“the one [who is man] that is good before God” (v. 26) earns a way to evade the trap, there is no saving grace for women as the other sex. What is worse is that while Qohelet speaks about a particular “woman” in v. 26, in the following he stresses that upon his prolonged search among a thousand men and women respectively, there is one he has found among men but none among women (vv. 27-28). Scholars have sought ways to solve Qohelet’s misogynistic view but in general scholarship have failed to reach an agreement. Many have found 7:25-29 “notoriously difficult,”<sup>374</sup> not even due to Qohelet’s bias but because of the difficult wording and syntactic structure. For instance, what does Qohelet mean when he says “one by one to find the reckoning/sum/explanation (חשבון), which my mind has sought repeatedly” (vv. 27b-28)? What “reckoning/sum/explanation” does he mean? Also, when Qohelet speaks of האשה (“the woman”) in v. 26, is he speaking of (1) “‘woman as such,’ that is, of all women in general;” or (2) “of a certain subclass of women who are more closely defined through the statements introduced with אִשָּׁה (‘. . . that woman who is a snare . . .’);” or (3) of a ‘personification’ of ‘folly’ or ‘wisdom’ as ‘woman’?”<sup>375</sup> This is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of seeking out a suitable explanation for Qohelet’s depiction of the sexes here.

While interpretations of Eccl 7:25-29 may be abundant and divisive, there is a common ground in scholarship that recognizes the text as gender biased and misogynistic. Therefore, instead of trying to tread through the confusion and controversies concerning the interpretations of the notorious gender bias of Qohelet in vv. 25-29, I would like to examine the passage in retrospect of the Solomonic influence, namely of the account of his harem in 1 Kgs 11:1-8, following Christianson’s footsteps.<sup>376</sup> The Solomonic

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<sup>374</sup> Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 29.

<sup>375</sup> Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 145. Krüger’s emphasis. Krüger provides a list of scholars who believe in the respective interpretation of the term “the woman.”

<sup>376</sup> See Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 143-48. On Christianson’s full notion of the “Solomonic Guise,” see pp. 128-72.

connection Eccl 7:25-29 and 1 Kgs 11:1-8 are often overlooked. Since I have spoken about this briefly in §4.1, I will continue with the in-text analysis. I suggest that Qohelet is perhaps adopting the Solomonic figure as his own identity in a way that purposely highlights the controversial personal aspects that exists along the Solomonic legacy.

It should be clarified in advance that the narrative route I am taking here is based on the fact that Eccl 7:25-29 is pointing toward King Solomon's court with princesses and concubines in 1 Kgs 11:1-8.<sup>377</sup> If Qohelet were to adopt the Solomonic identity, why would he choose this controversial segment? We should be reminded that in Eccl 7:23-24 Qohelet speaks about his incapability to grasp the fullness of wisdom. It has also been proven in previous texts that Qohelet does not see himself as the ultimate perfect man of the wise, albeit that being his ultimate goal of life. We also know from §4.1 and §4.2 that Qohelet is a teacher of experience who specializes and loves to adapt traditional wisdom into his discourse. When we read 7:25, the idiomatic verb סבותי ("I turned") with the phrase "me and my heart to know..." it is obvious that Qohelet is again ready to embark on a search for a certain type of wisdom. He lists the things of this seeking: wisdom, reckoning, wickedness, folly, and madness. Yet, only "folly" is mention twice in different forms: כסל ("folly," masculine singular) and הסכלות ("the folly," feminine singular). If this search is the search of an experience that is bound to leave a negative impact for the audience and which emphasizes that human beings are bound to err, what else is better than to adopt King Solomon's image—the wisest of all—as a stark example of the best also prone to making mistakes in life?

Therefore, proceeding with this rationale, Qohelet uses the Solomonic guise as a convenient literary device to portray Solomon's misogynistic case as a flaw of this wise

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<sup>377</sup> Barton proposes that Qohelet was perhaps "thinking of the experience of Solomon as described in 1 K. 11" (*Ecclesiastes*, 147).

character. Three benefits come from this adaptation: (1) Solomon is already a well-known representative of wisdom; (2) Qohelet has been using the Solomonic voice as the undertone or foundation of his discourse, the most evident being in Eccl 1:12-2:26; and (3) Solomon's personal fondness of women is the major flaw that displeased the Lord (1 Kgs 11:6-8), both in human relationships and Solomon's relationship with God. Evidence of this intertextual parallel include Qohelet's notion of the woman's heart "nets/traps" (Eccl 7:26) and the Lord's warning that the foreign women will "incline Solomon's heart to follow their gods" (1 Kgs 11:2, 4); Qohelet's "a woman in all these I found not" (Eccl 7:28) suggesting that the fondness of women became the ultimate flaw of Solomon's reputation; and Qohelet's observation that "God making humankind upright," but they have sought out schemes (Eccl 7:29) reflecting Solomon's heart being "not true to YHWH his God" after pursuing women (1 Kgs 11:4). It could be argued that Qohelet had not specifically touched human's relationship with God in Eccl 7:25-29, but throughout the book and as close as v. 18, Qohelet did express a keenness for "the one who fears God." These narrative parallels provide for a deeper insight into how Qohelet applies the Solomonic guise to his teaching.

Nonetheless, the mystery has not been completely unfolded in terms of Eccl 7:25-29. If Solomon's gender bias was at the center of Qohelet's teaching, why doesn't he outspokenly mention Solomon? To begin with, as much as Qohelet adopts the Solomonic voice in several places in the book, Qohelet himself, even as a speaker, is also a persona shaped by the author *as* the autobiographic narrator. What makes Qohelet's wisdom so unorthodox and powerful is due to his anonymous yet personal experience, which dominates the literary type of the book. If Qohelet easily mentions Solomon as the focus of this teaching of the unbalanced depiction of sexes (Eccl 7:25-29), his audience would have known the story from the very start. Adding the fact that Solomon was such a

prominent figure for traditional wisdom, critiquing Solomon and adopting his voice here and there would let Qohelet run “the risk that someone will question his authority to dare such observations.”<sup>378</sup> According to Crenshaw, “an editor invests Qohelet with the authority of the wisest sage of all, King Solomon, and identifies him as a professional teacher who spoke reliable and pleasing words to his students” to counter that risk.<sup>379</sup> In other words, Qohelet the character is in fact the frame-narrator/epilogist’s puppet who speaks on behalf of all the ancient and Solomonic wisdoms through a first-person speech, allowing the content to be intimate with the audience. In terms of the discreet story of Solomon’s fall from his fondness of women in Eccl 7:25-29, Qohelet must maintain that first-person narrative to gain weight for the instruction. That is why when the frame-narrator accidentally (perhaps even intentionally) reveals himself by the words אָמַרְהָ קֹהֵלֶת (“says Qohelet”) between Qohelet’s first-person narrative in v. 27, the reader is suddenly jolted from the narrative flow and realizes that there is someone behind Qohelet all along. Whether the insertion of a third-person Qohelet is accidental or not, it shows that the author of the book is focused on keeping Qohelet the main protagonist in the presumed Solomonic story, blurring the lines between a historically clear-cut figure (King Solomon) and an anonymous narrator (Qohelet). The purpose is, evidently, to maintain Qohelet as the didactic teacher and not through a sudden emergence of a secondary character like Solomon the king himself. And since Qohelet has already stated his incapability to grasp wisdom to its fullest in v. 23-24, reading vv. 25-29 with the feeling that the Qohelet character is not totally righteous and just makes the audience feel that he is one of them, a figure who can be related to and relied upon. Through this literary

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<sup>378</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 28.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*

strategy, it allows Qohelet's teaching and instruction to pass on more easily to the audience.

I tend to agree with Whybray's reflection on the Solomonic voice of Qohelet's speech:

The reflections attributed to Qoheleth-Solomon are not peculiar to him but are echoed throughout the book; and since the whole book is expressed in the first person singular, it is impossible to be certain at what point the "I" of Solomon gives place to the "I" of Qoheleth himself. Solomon is made to merge imperceptibly with the personality of the real author.<sup>380</sup>

Whybray sums up why the frame-narrator/epilogist would force Qohelet to continue to be the first-person experience-sharer of Eccl 7:25-29 despite the underlying image of Solomon. Eventually, it is Qohelet's voice that is upfront and vivid throughout the reflecting of human life and teaching of wisdom in the book. Consequently, the audience builds up this personal relationship with Qohelet, making him (i.e. a character) the perfect agent to convey the wisdom and thoughts of the true frame-narrator, also known as the epilogist. Qohelet as the hollow and anonymous figure in the narrative is capable of inheriting controversial values from traditional wisdom, such as the case for Solomon's misogynistic errs. Or, Qohelet is also free from being associated with a certain camp or academy of wisdom thoughts, allowing his speech to flow from one camp to the other, from ANE wisdom to traditional proverbial wisdom, or to Solomonic wisdom.

## 5. Summary

The text of Eccl 7:15-8:1 is dynamic in a way that it allows Qohelet's voice to be singled out in relation to the respective traditional wisdoms. There are direct quotations like 7:19-20 that are clean from Qohelet's personal judgment, then there are sentences

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<sup>380</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 46.

and parallels in 7:15-18 that not only imitate the style of proverbial sayings but incorporate Qohelet's first-person didactic voice as a commentary or reflection. At the end of Eccl 7, there is the pseudo-Solomonic storytelling that is transformed through Qohelet's narrative into a character-building process, one that allow Qohelet the figure to become even more dynamic and "human" instead of an unreachable Wise. Thus, in this chapter, I have explored the literary strategies in Eccl 7:15-8:1 in relation to Qohelet's character to demonstrate how the character himself functions as a crucial point of entry to the wisdom thoughts presented in this section. Through the syntactic analysis of Eccl 7:15-8:1 one sees how Qohelet departs from being that unreachable royal figure and adopts an intimate didactic voice, using several rhetorical strategies to present wisdom as the undeniable path that his audience should partake. Whereas wisdom has always been far and beyond in the early stages of this book, now the wisdom that Qohelet teaches is not of high wisdom or divine wisdom but a wisdom usable, functional, and practical for the common person for the sake of elevating one's demeanor, despite the fact that the nature of such wisdom is still difficult to grasp. The instructions on how to treat wisdom in one's life are now clear while in the previous texts Qohelet was still in the probing, mining, and assessing stage for that piece of knowledge/advice.

## **Chapter Four**

### **“Go, Eat Your Bread in Gladness”:**

### **Qohelet’s Optimistic Pessimism in Eccl 8:16-9:12**

#### **1. Introduction**

This chapter will deal with the passages in Ecclesiastes that may best portray Qohelet to his fullest: a wise man begging to teach his audience about life before the inevitable and universal fate of death of all being. Previously in Chapter Three, I have suggested that Eccl 7:15-8:1 could be seen as Qohelet bringing his quest for wisdom to a close. Dealing with 8:16-9:12 here, the passages could be seen as an extension and further conclusion of that quest which evaluates the quality of life and the fate of death. As Shannon Burkes observed, Eccl 9 “has a climactic feel to it and would have served as a decent conclusion to the book in its own right if it had ended at verse 10 or 12.”<sup>381</sup>

Eccl 8:16-9:12 comes not long after 7:15-8:1, which is followed by an observation on the authority of kingly commands (8:1-9) and the vague time of judgement towards the wicked and the righteous (8:10-15). Eventually, Qohelet’s observation leads to the conclusion to enjoy life (8:15) due to the nature of humankind’s unknowingness of God’s purpose (עֲבֹדָה, “work”) in this world (8:16-17), which the latter serves as a lead-in into 9:1-12. “Not knowing” becomes the key theme that is explored throughout 9:1-12, and Qohelet tries to answer why the living is better than the dead and how enjoying life maximizes human’s control over their own lives (spoiler alert: this act is also approved by God). In a sense, the Qohelet that we see in this passage becomes the most philosophical while he wrestles the ultimate question of life, death, and fate, all of which boundaries that set the all-knowingness of God against the unknowingness of humankind.

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<sup>381</sup> Shannon Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period*, SBL Dissertation Series 170 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 68.

These are key questions that have puzzled humankind throughout history but have propelled them to seek answers to for generations and generations. Being the Wise himself, Qohelet is due to ponder over these issues, and this is the passage where he demonstrates it through his monologue.

Where there is a beginning, there will also be an ending. This sums up the general conclusion that readers may find in Eccl 8:16-9:12. To be more precise, where there is life, death awaits, and this is the ultimate fate in this world for all living beings. The way Qohelet addresses death in this book and particularly in this passage has scholars speculating whether Qohelet holds a pessimistic view or optimistic view towards life. For instance, Crenshaw is one of the advocates for pessimism who titles the unit 9:1-10 “The Shadow of Death” and states that “a lengthening shadow extends throughout the book, and becoming especially dark in this unit.”<sup>382</sup> On the contrary, Whybray, who’s known for his article “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,”<sup>383</sup> suggests later in his commentary on 9:1-10 that “the awareness of mortality ought to give men a new zest for life rather than drive them to despair.”<sup>384</sup> However, for me Qohelet’s view cannot be simplified into an either/or between the pessimistic and the optimistic. Rather, it is the tone of Qohelet’s portrayal of life that can be categorized into the pessimistic and the optimistic, and through the shifts of tone an understanding of fate arises. Additionally, how should one live their life once the knowledge of the inevitable death becomes clear to them? Qohelet not only answers with the reoccurring theme of “enjoying life” in 9:7-10, he states it in the form of imperative commands towards his audience. The form of the imperatives is similar to the form of a blessing or benediction. This seems to be a hint that Qohelet is not only using

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<sup>382</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 158-59. On the pessimistic spectrum on Qohelet’s view of life: Longman (*Ecclesiastes*, 224), Enns (*Ecclesiastes*, 93-38), Anderson (*Qoheleth and Its Pessimistic Theology*), etc.

<sup>383</sup> Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *JSOT* 7, no. 23 (July 1982): 87-98.

<sup>384</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 140. On the optimistic spectrum on Qohelet’s view of life: Seow (*Ecclesiastes*, 305), Lohfink (*Qoheleth*, 110), etc.

the didactic speech of a teacher, he is also using the language of a divine figure by these commands.

Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to find out where the tonal shifts between the optimistic and the pessimistic occur in 8:16-9:12 and how they shape Qohelet's teaching of life (i.e. theology). While several "heart" (לב) phrases reappear once more, I will compare in more detail the functions of the heart in Qohelet's dialogue in relation to the functions mentioned in my previous chapters. Then I will examine the imperative command to enjoy life in 9:7-10 to identify hints of Qohelet's benedictory speech and pose as a minister of his audience. Lastly, all the aforementioned elements seem to mount up to an overarching "divine" tone for Qohelet who expresses his immense knowledge with an omnipresent voice. The analyses should bring forth a further solidification of Qohelet as a dynamic character capable of using his first-person speak as a literary device for maximizing the influence of his teachings.

## 2. Translation and Critical Notes

**8:16** When I set my heart to know wisdom and to see the task/business that is done on earth (while in the day and in the night one also does not see sleep in his eyes),<sup>385</sup> 17 I saw the whole works of God, that no one can find out the deed that is done under the sun. For mankind may labor to seek but will not find. Even if the wise claims to know, he will not be able to find out.

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<sup>385</sup> The clause of v. 16b introduced by the conjunction **כִּי גַם** ("while also" [?]) is an uncommon and unusual interruption within the protasis-apodosis structure of **בְּאִשֶׁר...וְרָאִיתִי** ("When..., then/and...") in vv. 16-17. The missing antecedent from the third-person noun **בְּעֵינָיו** ("in his eyes") makes the clause all the more confusing. However, if the sudden switch of person from the first (v. 16a) to third (v. 16b) and back to the first (v. 17) is taken as the speaker referring to himself, the clause can be regarded as parenthetical. Such is the reasoning of Fox who goes so far as to emend the noun **בְּעֵינָיו** as first person (*Time to Tear Down*, 289). Alternatively, Seow suggests that the inconsistencies could be resolved by acknowledging the clause being inadvertently misplaced from v. 17 (*Ecclesiastes*, 289). Both solutions attempt to solve the awkward placement of the clause, yet both seem forced. Nonetheless, the parenthetical usage is undoubtedly agreed upon by both and many others (See also Schoors, *Preacher I*, 135-36; Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 158; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 138; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 292; Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 245). One of the fundamental troubles lies in the murky translation of the conjunction **כִּי גַם**. Gordis translates the conjunction as "although" for a concessive interpretation, citing Eccl 4:14 and 8:12, and considers 8:16b "as an anticipation which logically belongs to אָדָם in vs. 17," a statement Schoors agrees in the wider context of *Ecclesiastes* but not for 8:16b (Schoors, *Preacher I*, 135; cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 297-98). The safest way is to preserve the clause in its original position as a simple subordinate to further describe the speaker's status in 8:16a.

9:1 Indeed,<sup>386</sup> all this I have put unto my heart, examining<sup>387</sup> it all, where the righteous and the wise and their works are in the hands of God. Whether love or hate, mankind cannot know everything before them. 2 Everything (is) as to everything,<sup>388</sup> having the same fate. To the righteous and to the wicked, to the good (and to the evil),<sup>389</sup> to the clean and to the unclean, to the one who sacrifices and to the one who does not sacrifice. Such as the good, so as the sinner; the one who swears is like the one who fears an oath. 3 This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that there is a same fate for all.<sup>390</sup> Moreover, the heart of

<sup>386</sup> The conjunction כִּי here should be taken as an asseverative “indeed” rather than a causal “because.” Although Fox and Bartholomew opt for the causal (Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 290; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 296) by suggesting that there is a logical connection with the previous section, the thematic connection is loose. Instead, the demonstrative זֶה (“this”) that follows points forward to indicate the works in the hands of God rather than backwards to the matter in chapter 8 (Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 156; Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 248). With “indeed,” 9:1 opens a new subunit within the wider section while maintaining a close relationship with 8:16-17 due to the similar theme about not being able to find out the deeds on earth.

<sup>387</sup> The MT has the *Qal* infinitive לְבוֹר of the root בּוּר (“examine”), the by-form of בָּרַר (“test, select”) (*BDB* 101, 140; *HALOT* 116). However, the LXX and Peshitta emended MT’s וּלְבוֹר אֵת (“and to examine...”) to reflect וּלְבִי רָאָה (“and my heart saw,” thus, εἶδεν). Perhaps this is due to the fact that the verb בּוּר is a lexeme specific to *Ecclesiastes* and even a *hapax legomenon* in MT (Schoors, *Preacher II*, 354). This, in fact, poses MT as the *lectio difficilior* which should be retained as the more original. Seow provides further evidences that the root בּוּר is attested in classical Arabic where it may mean “to examine, try prove, experience” and in Akkadian a similar verb bâru meaning “to become certain, proved, certified” (*Ecclesiastes*, 297). Nonetheless, the alternative “and my heart saw” of the LXX amendment cannot be ruled out. Both cases prove that the action, whether “examine” or “see,” conveys a dynamic relationship between the speaker and his heart. Although MT has the *Qal* infinitive לְבוֹר which normally translates to “to examine,” the use of the waw “to mark the edge of the ל-PP [prepositional phrase]/infinitive clause וּלְבוֹר here signals the appositive status of the phrase; as and appositive, the לְבוֹר PP clarifies the first occurrence of כִּלְיָהּ” (Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 248). Thus, the *Qal* infinitive וּלְבוֹר should be translated as “..., examining...” See the “Epexegetical” use of וּ under §4.3.3(d) in Arnold and Choi (*Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 147).

<sup>388</sup> I.e. “Everything is as it is.” Here is a crux where some mss, LXX, Peshitta, and Vulgate reflect the noun הַבַּל (“puff of wind”) instead of the term הַכֹּל (“everything”) (Schoors, *Preacher I*, 144-45). These versions attach the beginning of the verse to the ending of v. 1, rendering the text as a *lectio conflata* and restoring it to the expression הַכֹּל לְפָנֵיהֶם הַבַּל: בְּאִשֶּׁר (“everything before them is a puff of wind, since...”), which makes the term בְּאִשֶּׁר function as a causal, rendering the following as “since one fate comes to all” (Schoors, *Preacher I*, 145). Fox agrees with this rendering and translates “everything one sees is absurd, inasmuch as all have the same fate” while Seow suggests that this is not needed (Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 291; contra Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 299). In terms of the suggested reading בְּאִשֶּׁר for כְּאִשֶּׁר in the MT apparatus, Seow reasons that this reading is “an inner-Greek corruption from *en hois tois pasin*” in the LXX (*Ecclesiastes*, 299). Gordis also retains the MT text with כְּאִשֶּׁר, saving the MT with a comparative meaning “Everything is like everything else” (*Koheleth*, 300). Both interpretations are possible but cannot coexist due to their syntactical differences. Considering MT as the most original, without rendering הַכֹּל to הַבַּל and to retain the completeness of the ending of v. 1, there is an advantage of reading MT per se since both interpretations yield the same result: the same fate befalls all.

<sup>389</sup> The LXX, Peshitta, and Vulgate added an additional term וְלָרַע (“and to the evil”) to וְלָטוֹב (“and to the good”), perhaps judging from the apparent series of pairs. Seow assumes an omission of the term וְלָרַע that is due to an accidental haplography while Gordis considers it intentional for rhythmic purposes (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 299; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 300-1). Fox suggests that the LXX insertion reflects the original since LXX is “too mechanical to have added a word for the sake of literary balance” (*Time to Tear Down*, 292). That is, MT could be corrupted. In terms of completing the comparative pairs, it is reasonable to include וְלָרַע (“and to the evil”) in the translation.

<sup>390</sup> The expression כִּי מְקַרָּה אֶחָד לְכָל (“that there is a same fate for all”) has already appeared once in v. 2: “Everything... having the same fate.” Although this expression could be seen as a reprise of v. 2’s statement, without a complete copy of the same phrase it could be seen as the speaker restating the theme of fate with explanatory emphasis. The majority of commentators preserve the expression instead of omitting it as a

humans is filled with evil, and madness is in their heart throughout their lives, and afterwards<sup>391</sup> to the dead. 4 For whoever is united<sup>392</sup> with the living, there is confidence;<sup>393</sup> for a living dog is better than a dead lion. 5 While the living know that they will die, the dead know nothing; no longer will there be rewards for them because their remembrance has been forgotten. 6 Their love, their hate, and their jealousy have already perished, and there will no longer be shares for them to eternity for all that happens under the sun.

7 Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine with good heart! For God has already favored your deeds. 8 At all time, let your garments be white and the oil on your head not be lacking. 9 Enjoy life<sup>394</sup> with the woman whom you love all the days of your temporary life, whom<sup>395</sup> he has given to you under the

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repetition.

<sup>391</sup> The 3ms suffix of the preposition אחריו (“after it”) is difficult since it fails to point to a certain singular subject in the syntactical structure where many terms were in the plural. Thus, ancient witnesses tend to modify the singular to plural, suggesting אחריהם, such as LXX and Peshitta with “after them,” Targum and Symmachus with “their end,” and Vulgate with “after these things.” Gordis suggests that the render is unnecessary since the suffix ו is a “petrified ending” (or “fossilized suffix” in Schoors) that appears also in Eccl 3:22, 6:12, 7:14, much like the adverbial יחדו (“altogether”) (Gordis, *Koheleth*, 238, 301; see also Schoors, *Preacher I*, 118). With this adverbial sense, Gordis translates the term as “afterwards” (also Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 89; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 225). Gordis’ explanation is satisfying.

<sup>392</sup> This is the first instance in the book where the Ketiv יבחר (“chosen”) and Qere יחבר (“be united to”) readings affect the meaning of the text. Although MT favors the Ketiv reading, many mss, LXX, Peshitta, Vulgate, and Targum attest the Qere reading which is in the 3ms *Pual* imperfect form יחבר. This is supported by the majority of modern commentators. The problem with the Ketiv reading יבחר is because its appearance in the *Pual* would be a *hapax legomenon*, which is why most who choose the Ketiv would point it as the *Niphal* form (Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 251). In the syntactical meaning, Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall is right to observe that “given the mention of כל החיים in the next verse, we understand the Qere יחבר to be either implied or formally gapped back into this clause, thus creating a contrast between ‘being joined to the dead’ and ‘being joined to the living’” (Qoheleth, 251). On the other hand, the Qere reading יחבר does appear in the *Pual* form. It is most likely that the MT’s Ketiv reading originated from a metathesis scribal error from the Qere (Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 251; Schoors, *Preacher I*, 37).

<sup>393</sup> The noun בטחון is often translated as “hope.” However, having only three occurrences in the MT with the two other (2 Kgs 18:19; Isa 36:4) meaning “trust” or “confidence,” it is difficult to say whether “hope” is justified. The argument for “hope” is mainly based on the meaning of the term in later Hebrew to mean “faith” or “hope” as in Talmudic literature (Gordis, *Koheleth*, 304; Whitley, *Koheleth*, 80). However, Fredericks’ in-depth analysis of the language of Ecclesiastes has pointed out that the semantic differences between “trust,” “confidence,” and “hope” is negligible, and that reading a Talmudic sense into Qohelet’s language makes little sense (*Qoheleth’s Language*, 179). Thus, Seow offers the meaning “certitude” as the term בטחון “refers to one’s confidence or certitude that something will happen” (*Ecclesiastes*, 300). Fox provides an even plainer interpretation: “he who has something he can be sure of” (*Time to Tear Down*, 287). All in all, the meaning “confidence” seems to provide the most satisfying sense of the word without being far-reached from its two other occurrences in MT and fits the context here.

<sup>394</sup> Literally “see life,” but nearly all commentaries have translated the verb ראה as “enjoy,” citing the similar usage in Eccl 2:1, 3:13, 6:6, etc. For commentators, the notion of seeking and searching for pleasure in the things that one does in life is often linked with the adjective טוב (“good”) in the book (So Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 165; Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 256). In 9:9, although טוב is omitted, the sense of “experiencing life in a good way” remains evident within the context. This “enjoyment” is enacted only through experiencing life itself.

<sup>395</sup> The second appearance of the relative pronoun אשר is ambiguous in this position. Three options of its object emerge from this ambiguity: (1) some commentators leave the relative pronoun ambiguous, translating it as “which,” “that,” or altering the syntactical structure to render the object of the pronoun obscure (so Gordis, *Koheleth*, 188; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 298; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 288; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 158; Krüger,

sun; *all your temporary days*,<sup>396</sup> *that*<sup>397</sup> is your portion in life and in your labor that you are laboring under the sun. 10 All that your hand should find to do, do so with your strength/ability; for there is no work, no explanation, no knowledge, and no wisdom in Sheol—where you are heading.

11 Again I saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift and the battle not to the mighty, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the discerning, nor favor to the knowledgeable, because time and chance will happen to them all. 12 For indeed, no mankind can know his time. Like fish being captured in an evil net and like birds caught in a trap, humans, like them, are entrapped into an evil time that will fall upon them suddenly.

### 3. Textual Analysis

#### 3.1 Context

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*Qoheleth*, 166; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 114); (2) some argue that the pronoun considers “enjoying the days of your temporary life” as the object (so Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 88; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 302; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 226); and (3) others propose that the pronoun points towards “the woman” (so Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 166; Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 257). In the cases of (1) and (2), insufficient evidence has been brought forth to argue for both, most of which relying on speculation. However, Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall have observed that in biblical Hebrew most head words of a relative אשר “is typically the closest available antecedent, which here [v. 9] would appear to be כל ימי חיי הבלד (Qoheleth, 257; see also Waltke and O’Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 19.3b [p. 333], for MT examples of the head word being the closest antecedent in most resumptive אשר clauses). However, in Holmstedt’s individual research on relative clause in biblical Hebrew, he discovers that Hebrew “strongly disprefers [sic] a full copy of the relative head as the resumption within the relative” (Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 257; cf. Holmstedt, *The Relative Clause in Biblical Hebrew*, 171-72). In other words, instead of כל ימי חיי הבלד being the head of the relative אשר, the pronoun actually shares the head with the first אשר of v. 9a which is אשה (“woman/wife”). I favor this observation that clears up the ambiguity of the excessive relative pronouns in this verse (3 times) which contributes to a clearer syntactical meaning.

<sup>396</sup> LXXA, Targum, and some mss omitted the clause כל ימי הבלד, and Peshitta and some mss omitted the entire relative clause אשר נתן ... הבלד. This perhaps suggests that these witnesses have taken the repetition as an error of scribal dittography (Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 226; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 306). However, Gordis finds the clause not an exact repetition of the former but a shorter form, creating a “haunting effect, like the Kinah rhythm, and is to be retained” (*Koheleth*, 306). In this sense the dittography is intentional, as how Crenshaw suggests that the repetition of “the idea of fleeting existence (kol-y<sup>e</sup>mê hayyê heblekâ . . . kōl- y<sup>e</sup>mê heblekâ) reinforces the utter futility of this effort to escape death’s clutches” and functions rhetorically (*Ecclesiastes*, 163). Similarly, Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall take it as the emphasis on “the fatalism with which Qoheleth is toying” (*Qoheleth*, 257). Thus, I consider the repetition of the idea “in your temporary life/days” the speaker’s reaffirmation to his audience to seize the momentary opportunity to experience and enjoy life to its fullness.

<sup>397</sup> While the MT Occidental text and the Qere of Oriental mss have the 3ms pronoun הוא, the Oriental Ketiv has the 3fs pronoun היא. Perhaps like the relative pronoun אשר, the Oriental Ketiv was thinking of referring the pronoun to the head אשה (“woman”) in v. 9a (Gordis, *Koheleth*, 306; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 226). However, judging by my translation, having the repeated emphasis of the clause כל ימי הבלד has broken the pronoun continuity. It is thus unlikely that the 3ms הוא, rendered as the 3fs Ketiv היא in some manuscripts, could be attached to the noun אשה (“woman”). Instead, the emphasis clause כל ימי הבלד becomes the nearest head for the pronoun הוא. According to v. 6, while the חלק (“portion/share”) can no longer be enjoyed by the dead, in v. 9 the speaker reaffirms that it can be secured through עמל (“labor/toil”) by the living (Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 166). Thus, the MT 3ms הוא should be considered.

This passage demonstrates Qohelet's most bare-bone depiction of the human condition: the uncertainty of life due to a fate beyond reason. As Longman suggests, "the first ten verses of Eccl 9 is among the most clearly pessimistic of the entire book," which carries the theme that "death comes to all and is the definitive end."<sup>398</sup> While some commentators see 8:1-17 as a literary unit and 9:1-6 another,<sup>399</sup> prior to 8:16-17 are vv. 10-15 which question whether the righteous and the wicked get what they deserve according to their deeds and within their lifetime. Qohelet's answer in v. 15 is negative and thus he closes with the familiar *carpe diem* theme frequently used throughout the book as closing remarks: to enjoy life under the sun.<sup>400</sup> Verse 16 opens with Qohelet's typical way of reaffirming his wisdom-seeking journey and its fruitions with the temporal clause *כאשר נתתי את לבי לדעת* ("When I set my heart to know..."), setting up v. 16 as the protasis to the v. 17 apodosis.<sup>401</sup> Although vv. 16-17 could be taken as both a conclusion to the previous section or the introduction for the latter section,<sup>402</sup> due to the temporal *כאשר* ("when") beginning and a psychological turning point,<sup>403</sup> it is best seen as an intermission and interruption of speech that is set apart from the preceding texts.<sup>404</sup> In addition, Isaksson's analysis of the root *נתן* ("to set/to give") suggests that the form with a *waw*-conjunction (*ונתתי*) "sets the tone for the rest of the autobiographical thread by expressing a perfect tense uttered from the mouth of an experienced sage that has

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<sup>398</sup> Longman on Eccl 9:1-10 (*Ecclesiastes*, 224). Similarly, Crenshaw comments, "A lengthening shadow extends throughout the book, becoming especially dark in this unit" (*Ecclesiastes*, 159). Contra Whybray, who considers Qohelet here is expressing the most positive aspect of life: "the awareness of mortality ought to give men a new zest for life rather than drive them to despair" (*Ecclesiastes*, 140). The subject of pessimism versus optimism in Qohelet's tone is frequently debated in scholarship, although it is not the main concern of my work.

<sup>399</sup> In fact, the majority of commentators group the units in this way. Contrarily, Barton, Gordis, and Lohfink see 8:16-9:1 falling in the same literary unit (Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 156-7; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 294; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 110).

<sup>400</sup> Also 2:24; 3:12, 22.

<sup>401</sup> Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 157; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 222.

<sup>402</sup> Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall's scholarly review reveals that "commentators are split on whether to connect the passage with the preceding material as a concluding reflection, or the following (chap. 9) as an introductory idea" due to the way Qohelet reflects (*Qohelet*, 244).

<sup>403</sup> Isaksson, *Studies in the Language*, 171.

<sup>404</sup> Similar opening clauses are used in 1:13, 17; 8:9; 9:1.

penetrated the futility of life, a nuance that is a manifestation of the neutralized constative aspect."<sup>405</sup> The verb נתתי in v. 16 may not be a *waw*-conjunction, but the temporal term כאשר ("when") serves the same function. That is, the temporal clause כאשר נתתי את לבי לדעת ("When I set my heart to know...") opens up a new beginning where Qohelet turns his attention once again to his findings.

Another signal that suggests 8:16-17 should fit with 9:1 is the theme of mankind not being able to know or to find out the works of God. Some commentators have attempted to reason 8:16-9:1 falling in the same unit due to the opening demonstrative pronoun כל־זה ("all this") which lacks a preceding subject, similar to that in 7:27, 29; 8:9.<sup>406</sup> However, both Whybray and Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall are sceptical, with the latter suggesting that this grammatical observation is nullified by the fact that the second appearance of כל־זה in 9:1 "makes better sense of the entire clause if זה is cataphoric and thus points forward to the clarification ולבור."<sup>407</sup> The second כל־זה in 9:1 indeed mounts up to a clarification of the pronoun: the examination by heart about God's judgement of the righteous and the wise. While this lexical observation fails to stand, the alternative is to group 8:16-17 with 9:1 by their ending remarks. 8:17 closes with the wise "will not be able to find out" what he claims to know while 9:1 closes with "mankind cannot know everything before them." This theme in 8:16-17 does not follow through from vv. 10-15 albeit vv. 16-17 serving as an intermission between 8:10-15 and 9:1-6. As Lohfink illustrates, however zeal the wise may claim to be in their seeking (8:16-17), it cannot reach the ultimate goal "that one might really know concerning oneself whether one is

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<sup>405</sup> Isaksson, *Studies in the Language*, 118.

<sup>406</sup> Note that this is observed by Whybray and Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, but they have not provided the references to those works (Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 139; Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 248).

<sup>407</sup> Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 248.

loved or scorned by God (9:1).<sup>408</sup> Thus, 9:1 should be seen as a reaffirmation and further explanation of Qohelet's thought on the nature of wisdom unbeknownst to mankind.

Switching to the ending of my selected passage, it concerns whether 9:1-10 and vv. 11-12 should be categorized together or separately. Judging by MT at first glimpse seems simple: MT signals a paragraph break with a *parashah setumah* ("closed portion") ם at the ending of v. 10. However, the ם merely suggests a paragraph division for the original written tradition of the manuscript rather than for the content which is thematically more accurate.<sup>409</sup> Whybray holds the view that vv. 11-12 is an independent unit while Seow brings them together with 9:13-10:15, though both semantically taking the expression שבתי וראה ("again I saw") in v. 11 as the indicator of a new section, similarly used in 4:1, 7.<sup>410</sup> While this expression indeed signals a new section beginning in 4:1, 7, the case of 9:11-12 has its contextual basis from its preceding text. More scholars see vv. 11-12 attached to vv. 1-10 due to a joint theme of looming uncertainty (vv. 1, 11-12), fate (vv. 2-6, 11-12), and eventually, death (vv. 2-6, 10).<sup>411</sup> As Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall explain, vv. 11-12 serve "as a bookend with vv. 1-6, drawing the focus to Qoheleth's advice to live life fully in vv. 7-10."<sup>412</sup> While vv. 1-6 demonstrate "a 'deed-result connection' with a reference to death as the common destiny of all human beings," vv. 11-12 supplement this with "the experience of contingency in life," as noted by Krüger.<sup>413</sup> Contextually, it is clearer that vv. 11-12 accompanies what was expressed earlier in vv. 1-10.

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<sup>408</sup> Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 110.

<sup>409</sup> BHS [1997], xii-xiii; Kelley/Mynatt/Crawford, *The Masorah of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 155.

<sup>410</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 139, 145; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 307.

<sup>411</sup> Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 258; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 167, 174; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 306; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 232; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 90. Contra Lohfink who sees in vv. 11-12 Qohelet refusing "his students any guarantee of success" and "self-praise" in this introductory piece to reflect on the "placement of students in society" in the following sections (*Qoheleth*, 122). Lohfink is evidently fixated on the didactic purpose of Qohelet's speech here.

<sup>412</sup> Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 258.

<sup>413</sup> Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 174.

In terms of the break between vv. 11-12 and the following sections beginning from v. 13, even if Seow sees these two sections belonging in the same unit, he also admits that “the introductory words ‘this, too’ indicate that there is both continuity and discontinuity with the preceding verses.”<sup>414</sup> Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall see the זה (“this”) in v. 13 as demonstrative, namely “the complement of bivalent ראה” in v. 13 which is “fronted to signal a switch of topics from the preceding discussion of death to the following parable about wisdom.”<sup>415</sup> Following this observation, v. 13 ending with “this wisdom is great for me” does not seem to match the dire tone of “an evil time” at the end of v. 12. Instead, the “great wisdom” judgment better fits with the parable of the poor wise man in the city coming after v. 13. Thus, it is sensible to take 8:16-9:12 as a complete unit where 9:12 serves as a closing analogy of the unpredictability of fate.<sup>416</sup>

### 3.2 Outline and Summary

Ecc 8:16-9:12 is not only a passage that shows both Qohelet’s pessimistic and optimistic views toward life but also one that includes the best array of the usages of the heart (לב). Qohelet begins with a review of his quest for wisdom which results in the realization that no one, including himself, can figure out the meaning of things that happen in this world. Therefore, he gives up and attributes fate and existence to “the hand of God” (9:1). He mourns that the same fate of ultimate death happens to all living beings regardless of good or evil. However, while he stresses that evil resides within the human mind, he still believes that death is inferior to being alive since no meanings can be achieved in that state. Thus, with this realization he encourages his audiences to enjoy life to its fullness while it lasts in a plea similar to a benediction (9:7-10). Ultimately, he notes that this unknowingness of what may happen in life is beyond any human recognition and uses

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<sup>414</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 321.

<sup>415</sup> Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 261.

<sup>416</sup> Several commentators have considered 9:1-12 as a complete unit: Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 88; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 166; Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 247; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 296-97; Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 93.

this as a mode of reverse psychology to urge his audience to seize the moments before a dire fate befalls them.

The outline of this passage is in a sequential narrative order, as follows:<sup>417</sup>

- A. 8:16-17. The Result of the Quest to Know Ultimate Wisdom
- B. 9:1-3. Findings from the Quest: Death is the Inevitable Fate for All Living
- C. 9:4-6. The Living Trumps the Dead
- D. 9:7-10. Imperative Command: Enjoy and Experience Life to Its Fullest
- E. 9:11-12. A Reminder: Time and Chance is Beyond the Grasp of the Living<sup>418</sup>

Section A (8:16-17) opens with Qohelet's reaffirmation of his quest to search for wisdom, only to realize that all the tasks and deeds on earth are inconceivable by any human being. In addition to Isaksson's suggestion that כִּאֲשֶׁר ("when") serves as a signal for a beginning and psychological turning point,<sup>419</sup> the traditional formula of "I set my heart to know..." is reminiscent of similar opening remarks in 1:13 and 7:25. Interestingly, whereas Qohelet uses the first person to address his seeing "the whole works of God" in v. 17, he juxtaposes the incapability to figure out all the deeds and knowledge using several third-person stances, including "no one" (לֹא הָאָדָם, lit. "no man"), "mankind" (הָאָדָם), and "the wise" (הַחֲכָמִים). Ultimately, he is applying this distinction to demonstrate that he is the wisest that has gone through every possible piece of understanding to arrive at this unsatisfying result.

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<sup>417</sup> Many commentators have taken 9:1-10 as a single unit: Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 158; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 224; Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 139; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 296. The majority of them then breaks the unit into the subunits vv. 1-6 and vv. 7-10 (Longman, Brown, Seow; also Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 155, 163). Whybray goes beyond this and identifies vv. 1-3, vv. 4-6, and vv. 7-10 as three subunits. Fox explicitly takes 8:16-9:10 as the larger unit with four subunits: 8:16-17, 9:1-3, 9:4-6, and 9:7-10, then sees 9:11-12 as the following standalone unit (*Time to Tear Down*, 288, 295). My outline is most similar to Fox's outline of this passage since he similarly suggests that 8:16-9:10 "strings various topics in a single train of thought" (*Time to Tear Down*, 288).

<sup>418</sup> Although most commentaries take 9:11-12 as a standalone passage, it would be more fitting if it serves a purpose for the narrative flow. For reasons demonstrated in §3.1, I suggest that vv. 11-12 fits along nicely with 8:16-9:10 with a similar theme of fate.

<sup>419</sup> Isaksson, *Studies in the Language*, 171.

The asseverative “indeed” (כִּי) kicks off section B (9:1-3), carrying both the signal of a subunit break from section A and a carrying forth the issue at stake at the end of 8:17. Likewise, Ogden notes that the asseverative כִּי “is an important marker as the author draws attention to what is to follow.”<sup>420</sup> What is revealed in the following loops back to the failed survey in section A which chains sections A and B in a tight link: “mankind cannot know everything” (9:1). Qohelet once again stresses his thorough search—by heart—of the works done by the righteous and the wicked. This time, besides arriving at the same unachievable sense of lacking in section A, he gains a new insight: all things regardless of their stances in life will arrive at the same fate in the end—death (vv. 2-3).<sup>421</sup> This is a crucial enlightenment of Qohelet’s overarching anthropological theology. Up to this point readers have always sensed a strandedness in Qohelet’s quest of wisdom; through Qohelet’s navigation of wisdom he has arrived at some minor insights, and in some cases he casts doubts on his own judgment, but nothing has been as close as seeing death as the ultimate end for every living being. This enlightenment for Qohelet will become the backbone for his urge to his audience to seize life and experience it to the fullest while it lasts, as it is shown in the following sections. It should be noted that the “evil” (רָע) in v. 3a and v. 3b consist of different meanings. “Evil” in v. 3a relates to the inescapable fate (death) for every being; it is the universality of death that is evil, i.e. a “bad thing,” in Qohelet’s eyes.<sup>422</sup> “Evil” in v. 3b, on the other hand, is used morally, adding to the “dimension that human beings are thoroughly sinful while they live.”<sup>423</sup> Fox uniquely links these two different meaning of “evil” together by suggesting that “observing the universality of death [the former “evil”] provokes man to inane, irrational

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<sup>420</sup> Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 156.

<sup>421</sup> The notion of “a same fate befalls all” also appears in 2:14-15 and 3:19.

<sup>422</sup> As Seow says, “The evil is in the injustice of this sameness” (*Ecclesiastes*, 304). Bartholomew suggests it is this “utterly inexplicable and unacceptable” notion of universal death that makes Qohelet see death as an evil (*Ecclesiastes*, 302), a power that both the good and bad shall succumb to. See also Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 91.

<sup>423</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 227.

behavior [the latter evil].”<sup>424</sup> Although I do not fully agree that the observation of death will cause a disruption to human behavior, Fox’s views are nonetheless fascinating in terms of the dynamics between the two perspectives of evil.

While some commentators tend to view section B and C (9:4-6) as one unit, section C shifts the previous pessimistic tone to focus on the living, shedding hope for the living. First of all, as Gordis suggests from a linguistic perspective, the initial “for” (כי) is “here used as an emphatic particle, to introduce the section, a usage common elsewhere in Biblical Hebrew, as e.g. Nu. 23:23; Isa. 15:1; Amos 3:7; Pr. 30:2; Job 5:2; 28:1.”<sup>425</sup> In a literary perspective, v.4 challenges the pessimistic view of death in section B very abruptly with Qohelet announcing those who unite with the living will have “confidence” (בטחון) which some translations translates this term to “hope.”<sup>426</sup> With “hope” it sets an even larger distinction with the previous dire tone. Although it seems that the pessimistic tone returns in vv. 5-6 where Qohelet speaks about the meaninglessness of those that are doomed for death, vv. 5-6 is based on the privilege the living holds against the dead in the first sentence: the capability “to know” (בטחון). Ironically, the way the living is portrayed as being more privileged than the dead is their knowledge of *knowing* that they will die. One may ask how is this a blessing? Immediately after, Qohelet says, “the dead know nothing” (v. 5). Bartholomew takes this as an evidence that “death [for Qohelet] is so awful that it completely overshadows any value to life.”<sup>427</sup> Longman suggests that since “the living may be better off than the dead, they are nonetheless pitiable.”<sup>428</sup> Both of these views are easily understood *if* section C is taken on its own without further vindication,

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<sup>424</sup> Fox further adds: “In 8:11f., it was the observation of inequitable lifespans that had this effect” (*Time to Tear Down*, 292).

<sup>425</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth*, 304.

<sup>426</sup> For instance, in the NRSV, ESV bibles, etc.

<sup>427</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 303.

<sup>428</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 228.

and both may lead to a pessimistic tone for both the living and the dead.<sup>429</sup> However, this is not the case, as in a turn of events 9:7 begins with an imperative command to urge the living to enjoy life. The tone shifts even more towards the optimistic and hopeful. Moreover, in addition to Qohelet using the rhetorical comparison in v. 5 to show how the living is better than the dead, in v. 6 he uses a reverse portrayal of what the dead will miss to emphasize what the living can *still* experience: love, hate, jealousy, and shares. Although these elements contain both good and bad among them, it is fundamentally better than the dead having completely nothing. Thus, the best interpretation that remains on neutral grounds between the pessimistic and the optimistic is by Gordis, who observes, “consciousness on any terms is preferable to nonexistence, and knowledge, however limited and melancholy in content, is better than ignorance.”<sup>430</sup> Having consciousness and the capability to feel are indeed the key that Qohelet encourages his audience to pursue.

Section D (9:7-10) presents a series of imperative commands: “go” (לֵךְ), “eat” (אֲכַל), “drink” (שָׁתֵה), “let it be...” (יִהְיֶה), and “enjoy (see) life” (רַצֵּה חַיִּים). Qoheleth uses these imperatives as a plea to his audience in urging them to enjoy life. The imperatives are unusual since before this moment whenever Qohelet comments on enjoying life, his speech takes on the form of advice (the so-called “*carpe diem* passages” 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:17-19; 8:15; with the imperative exception of 7:14 “be joyful”).<sup>431</sup> They also lack any introductory formula as in v. 1 and 11, which lends more to the intensity and urgency

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<sup>429</sup> Indeed, when Longman continues his analysis towards 9:7, he argues against Whybray’s optimistic views and reinforces that Qohelet is encouraging his audience simply out of “urgency in the light of death”—a pessimistic view (*Ecclesiastes*, 229). Similarly, when Bartholomew introduces 9:7-10, it dawns on him that after the “despairing reflection” in vv. 4-6 “the imperatives in vv. 7-10 come as a shock” due to the shift of the narrative tone (*Ecclesiastes*, 303). While Longman continues to argue for the case of a pessimistic tone, Bartholomew seems awestruck by the fact that the tone of vv. 7-10 does not fit the previous pessimism anymore. For Bartholomew, eventually the tonal twist in vv. 7-10 evolves into an unresolved contradiction: “how is one to appropriate joy if one is living like a dog” (*Ecclesiastes*, 305)?

<sup>430</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth*, 305.

<sup>431</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 162; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 229.

of his command. Clearly this makes vv. 7-10 stand out from the rest of the subunits of this passage. In fact, section D proves crucial to the immediate understanding of Qohelet's view of life and death for the whole book. Whereas he struggles to manifest a clear-cut maneuver between life in death beforehand, Qohelet is finally confident and comfortable in this subunit to advocate for the enjoyment of life in the face of apparent death to all, hence the strong imperatives. However, there are two other key messages in this section that dictates the weight of Qohelet's imperative expressions: that "God has already favored your deeds" (v. 7) and the emptiness of Sheol where everyone is heading (v. 10). These two factors must be viewed hand in hand in case the former is mistakenly interpreted as God allowing all kinds of deeds on earth. Reading vv. 7-10 in full yields the result observed by Ogden that "Qoheleth locates enjoyment within the divine will; God wills that we enjoy his basic provisions, for he is the one who provides them (cf. 2.24 etc.)."<sup>432</sup> Similarly, Sheol exists beyond human grasp but within God's quarters; that is, the timing of one's fateful death is beyond human conception. Who knows if our deeds may lead to our timely fate? Yet the only thing sure is that we all face death one day or another. It is within this unknowingness that Qohelet encourages the fruitful experiencing of life. Under this circumstance, Ogden is right in stating that "there is no trace of pessimism or despondency. The call in this verse [v. 10] is rooted in the thought that life is lived in the shadow of death, and so one must adopt an attitude to this present which is cognizant of that fact."<sup>433</sup> The fact that there is "no work, no explanation, no knowledge, and no wisdom in Sheol" (v. 10) as Qohelet's final warning proves that he is not advocating blind hedonism but rather "all useful and intellectual activity."<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 164.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 167. Ogden also recalls in 7:14 Qoheleth feeling "the need to remind his readers how important death is to a definition of life and to the framing of one's lifestyle" (*Ibid.*).

<sup>434</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 145. See also Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 257-58.

Finally, section E (9:11-12) is a passage where many commentators treat as a separate unit. “Again I saw under the sun” in v. 11 indeed signifies a break from its preceding text. Nonetheless, the theme of time, chance, fate, and “evil time” (v. 12, namely death, drawing from the interpretation of “evil” in v. 3a) evidently tie closely to the topics in vv. 1-10. Section E can be seen as an emphasis and a reminder on the unpredictability of the fates of all living beings. Although in v. 12 Qohelet employs fish and birds from nature as examples, the subject to be warned is undoubtedly mankind. The motif of this section is therefore the reoccurring theme of time: “no mankind can know his time” (v. 12).

Overall, Qohelet’s speech in Eccl 8:16-9:12 serves as an end of his quest for wisdom. Although the result from the quest seems rather pessimistic with the knowledge that death is inevitable and still many mysteries cannot be answered in this world, Qohelet’s voice shows a sense of certainty. Comparing his exploration of “fate” in this passage to 3:19-22, whereas earlier in the book his voice shows much doubt on the subject, here he states the topic as a fact. Qohelet’s voice here is the best portrayal of his role as the teacher of wisdom, but peculiarly, in 9:7-10 he introduces the *carpe diem* passages in the form of a command. Can there be more to his role as a teacher? Also, with the end of his quest, how should readers understand his position in the debate of the pessimistic versus optimistic view on life? These are the issues that I will tackle in the following sections.

#### **4. The Dynamics of an Optimistic Pessimism in Eccl 8:16-9:12**

There is a looming sense of “unknowingness” in Eccl 8:16-9:12 that propels Qohelet into his thought process. Yet, within this unknowingness there is one key element that is certain: death as the final fate of all living beings (9:3). Eventually, for Qohelet this revelation of the living not knowing many things (8:17, 9:1) paired with the inescapable certainty of death—even for the wise—contributes to the insecurity in his voice.

Nonetheless, unlike the previous chapters where Qohelet questions his observation of this world with much doubt,<sup>435</sup> the insecurity in 8:16-9:12 is not a matter of tone but rather due to the uneasy discursion between life and death. In fact, Qohelet speaks with such a firm voice on the topic of fate that it seems if he has become the authority over these existential issues. Where does this voice of confidence come from? Is this the effect of an accumulated previous questionings throughout his quest that now Qohelet finally found an ultimate answer to? Since Qohelet's self-doubting ends with this passage and ceases to reappear in later passages in the book, I believe so.

In the following sections, I will demonstrate how Qohelet as the speaker jostles through this difficult topic by switching back and forth an optimistic tone and a pessimistic tone. As usual, Qohelet continues to use his heart as a seat of evaluation, but there is a lack of the heart's function as an inner dialogic partner which might suggest that Qohelet has no need for this inner debate as he figures out a solution to the wisdom of life. In terms of this "solution," his imperative commands in 9:7-10 advocates the notion of enjoying life, but instead of straightforwardly explaining like in previous passages, this time it comes out in the form of a direct command similar to that of a blessing or benediction. If Qohelet is mimicking a ministerial disposition, does it entail that he has now arrived at a state where he is beyond self-doubt and has internalized and accepted this "fate" he speaks of? It is interesting to see if there are any evidences in his discourse that proves this position. In turn, through these examinations Qohelet's dynamic character will also be teased out along with revealing elements within his speech.

#### **4.1 Identifying the Optimistic and Pessimistic Tones (Not Views)**

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<sup>435</sup> Passages in the book where Qohelet casts doubts on his findings through his internal self-questioning: 2:1-2, 9-11, 15-17, 18-23; 3:21-22; 6:7-9, 11-12; 7:23-29. Note that Qohelet's self-interrogation ends after 8:16-9:12, and after this section Qohelet mostly speaks with proverbial sayings, teachings, and commands for his audience.

To identify whether Qohelet holds an optimistic or pessimistic *view* towards life, one must start where the discussion begins. Early in this chapter I have listed a few scholars that either hold a pessimistic reading of Qohelet or an optimistic one, Crenshaw being in the former while Whybray being in the latter. I have deliberately focused solely on the cases where those scholars had specifically quoted Eccl 9:1-10 for their position. However, the debate of the optimistic Qohelet vs. the pessimistic Qohelet in scholarship for the most part consist of judgment of the whole book of Ecclesiastes. For instance, Gerhard von Rad falls in the pessimistic camp, stating in his work *Wisdom in Israel* that “Koheleth, for his part, understands his admittedly very negative judgment of the whole as the end-result of many individual experiences.”<sup>436</sup> Von Rad has suggested and called into question Qoheleth’s judgment of life since, in Qohelet, he sees not only does God have full power over human life, but death also chips away in the pursuit of meaning in life:

The worst of all is that man is incapable of controlling the future will happen, for who will tell him what is going to happen (8.7; 9.1; 10.14)? Behind the problem of the future, there lies for Koheleth the still more difficult question of death which casts its shadow over every meaningful interpretation of life. Whenever Koheleth speaks of fate (*miqreh*), death is always envisaged at the same time.<sup>437</sup>

Von Rad suggests eventually that Qohelet presents his overall theses in order to provide a counter-blow to older teachings which believed, too ‘optimistically,’ or better, too realistically, that they could see God at work in experience.”<sup>438</sup> On the other hand, there is Leo G. Perdue who, upon observing Qohelet’s potential Hellenistic influence and judging him as a Jewish sage “thinking that Judaism has failed to achieve a credible vision

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<sup>436</sup> Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 227.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

and commanding presence in the lives of people, particularly the intellectuals,”<sup>439</sup> believes that Qohelet is hold an optimistic view of this world. Perdue, being known for his extensive research into the historical and sociological context of Qohelet, suggests that the mission of Qoheleth sets about to reorient Judaism to a philosophical quest to determine the good in human existence, and, upon its discovery, to shape a new wisdom, grounded in humanism, that enables people through their conduct and thinking to experience that good.”<sup>440</sup> Von Rad and Perdue’s different views toward Qohelet’s position of this world and the purpose of his quest provides us a glimpse into how historically scholars tend to corner the book of Ecclesiastes into a single position: either optimistic or pessimistic. Indeed, the way Qohelet flips from one side to the other is confusing for critics who are in search of a unified answer to his inconsistencies. As Mills observes in the book, “Qohelet sometimes seems to be two, opposing selves, pessimistic and optimistic by turns.”<sup>441</sup>

More recent scholarship, however, have realized that a singular view towards the book or Qohelet as a character is not necessary for understanding Qohelet’s ideology and theology. Many have taken account the fact that Qohelet changes his position according to the topic he addresses; therefore, these scholars hold a mixed view of Qohelet’s position toward life. Starting with Fox, although he recognizes that Qohelet is frustrated that “the mass of disjointed deeds and events cannot be drawn together into a coherent and significant picture”<sup>442</sup>—a negative view of life, Fox also think that Qohelet “comes to realize that despite all its unfairness and absurdity, life itself is good, to be grasped all the more eagerly for its brevity, given death’s finality (9:7-10; 11:7)”<sup>443</sup>—a positive depiction.

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<sup>439</sup> Perdue, *Wisdom Literature*, 161.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>441</sup> Mills, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 41.

<sup>442</sup> Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, xxx.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxi. In this commentary, Fox further explains as follows: “Koheleth is not a nihilist. ‘Everything is absurd’ is to be understood as expressing a general characterization of life, not as an absolute proposition negating all

Bartholomew refuses to jump too quickly into conclusion about what stance Qoheleth proposes. He carefully draws out the reasons of debate, and reminds readers to constantly rethink both possibilities:

Commentators remain polarized as to whether Ecclesiastes is fundamentally positive, affirming joy, or basically pessimistic. The majority incline to the latter view. In my view scholars continually fall into the trap of leveling Qoheleth toward his *hebel* pole, or toward his *carpe diem*—affirmation-of-joy pole. This is to ignore the literary juxtaposition of contradictory views that is central to the book and the life-death tension it embodies. Qoheleth's autonomous epistemology, depending on observation, experience, and reason alone, leads him continually to the *hebel* conclusion, which is juxtaposed again and again with his *carpe diem* confessions of the goodness of life. The book is about the struggle to live with and resolve the agonized tension between these two poles.<sup>444</sup>

Also critiquing on Qoheleth scholarship's obsession on choosing between the optimistic and the pessimistic is Dell, who draws attention to the term "vanity," saying that

Interpretations today tend to opt either negative or a positive evaluation of Qoheleth's thought, but I shall suggest that, although on first sight the renunciation of the world seems a negative stance, it in fact went on to be interpreted more positively in a changing scholarly environment during the Middle Ages and up to the Reformation, and

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possible activities and values. As well as tearing down, Qoheleth builds up, showing how we can recover and reconstruct meanings. He does not arrive at a grand logic (or theology) that makes sense of everything, but he does recommend modest and small-scale accommodations in our individual lives" (*Ecclesiastes*, xxx). For Fox it is clear that Qoheleth's view of the world consists of both deconstructing and reconstructing what is known from traditional wisdom.

<sup>444</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 93.

that in fact the term הבל holds the key to a more flexible meaning that helps us to escape from one-sided evaluations.<sup>445</sup>

Dell's observation is crucial not only due to her evaluation of scholarship from antiquity to the modern, her fixation on the term "vanity" (הבל) within the text also keeps the evaluation of Qohelet's views at bay and avoids being swayed by a generic overall understanding of the text and the strict classification of Qohelet into certain historical roles from traditional interpretations. Similarly, there are many more who tread on this path to decipher Qohelet's views, refusing to give in towards a certain camp of interpretation.<sup>446</sup> The problem of seeing Qohelet's *view* pertaining to the optimistic or the pessimistic is that there is no clear criteria for which the evaluation can be based on. Similar to Bartholomew's and Dell's observations, "views" overemphasize on a comprehensive understanding of the figure Qohelet and the book of Ecclesiastes as a whole, at the same time underestimating the internal tug-of-war that Qohelet frequently experiences throughout his journey for wisdom. This is even more true if we were to evaluate Qohelet as a dynamic character who changes according to his focus—on wisdom, on the location of God, on his existential crisis, or when he addresses his audience. Therefore, a better way to understand Qohelet is to assign the optimistic and the pessimistic to the evaluation of a certain topic, term, or in my case, the tonal shifts in a closed textual unit.

The unit that I draw upon, consequently, is the passage from Eccl 8:16-9:12 where Qohelet addresses head-on the troubles of the living given the knowledge of an imminent death. The trajectory that humankind is destined for death is coined "fate" (מקרה) in

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<sup>445</sup> Dell, *Interpreting Ecclesiastes: Readers Old and New*, 37.

<sup>446</sup> Aside from the scholars mentioned in the main text, other commentators that hold a mixed view towards Qohelet's view of life according to different elements in the text are as follows: Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall (*Qoheleth*, 247-59), Brown (*Ecclesiastes*, 91-95), Shields (*End of Wisdom*, 201-5), Ogden (*Qoheleth*, 155-67), and Barton (*Ecclesiastes*, 156-62).

Qohelet's vocabulary. The noun *מקרה* denotes "what happens to someone not through their own will or actions and without any known instigator,"<sup>447</sup> and although in its 3 out of 10 times appearing in other Hebrew Biblical texts meaning "incident, chance" (1 Sam 6:9; 20:26; Ruth 2:3), the other 7 times appearing in the book of Ecclesiastes it always means "(predetermined) fate, fortune."<sup>448</sup> In the case of Eccl 9:3, fate clearly points toward death. In fact, even in the cases of 2:14-15 and 3:19, the underlying notion is also death.<sup>449</sup> Throughout 8:16-9:12, on the surface level it seems that the "unknowingness" of human life threads through the unit, however, the underlying key component of this unknowingness and the incapability to understand wisdom (8:17; 9:1, 5, 10, 12) is actually solely the concept of death. As shown in the textual analysis, the asseverative "indeed" (*כִּי*) in 9:1 firmly ties 8:16-17 together with the following texts. That is, when Qohelet speaks of this act of "not being able to find out" in 8:17 and "mankind cannot know everything before them" in 9:1, the condition of this unknowingness is explained in the following "having the same fate" (v. 2), "there is a same fate for all (v. 3a), and finally, "to the dead" (v. 3b). The ultimate fate which is death will inevitably befall every living being, and it contributes to Qohelet's lack of total understanding of the wisdoms he pursues. Death is also the factor that contributes to Qohelet's pessimistic tone on the topic of life. The pessimistic tone is further fulfilled by the depiction that the general human beings has their hearts filled with evil and madness while they live (v. 3), the aphorism of "a living dog is better than a dead lion" (v. 4), the emphasis that the dead "know nothing" and will be "forgotten" (v. 5), and the feelings and shares of the dead "perished" (v. 6). Qohelet does not hold back when he views death as the inferior state in relation to being alive; yet, he acknowledges that this is a state where everyone of us will eventually face in

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<sup>447</sup> HALOT 629.

<sup>448</sup> Eccl 2:14, 15; 3:19; 9:2, 3. See Schoors, *Preacher II*, 203.

<sup>449</sup> Schoors, *Preacher II*, 203-4.

due time. Qohelet keeps pressing forward this idea so much that he returns to the fate of death right after a brief interval of optimism in 9:7-10a, as he warns and emphasizes that “there is no work, no explanation, no knowledge, and no wisdom in Sheol—where you are heading” in v. 10b. Then finally, as if all these preexisting warnings are not enough for his audience, he combines the overarching “unknowingness” and the underlying “death” together in one single conclusion in 9:12: (1) that “no mankind can know his time,” and (2) the happening of this so-called “fate” (i.e. death) is like creatures being ensnared into “a trap”—an analogy of “an evil time.” Clearly, this is straightforward negative characterization of Qohelet’s concept of death. All these are clues that death as the end of all meaning lends its pessimistic tone to Qohelet’s voice. It will not be mistaken that this notion of fate goes against what Qohelet had been striving and seeking for so long: wisdom and knowing. In the face of death, humankind is vulnerable as we take on a passive role; there is no knowing when that fate will take place in each individual’s lives, and thus it will happen “suddenly” (9:12), and all meaning that one has accumulated throughout his/her life will be canceled. And so, it is fitting that the *HALOT*’s definition of “fate” (מקרה) also incorporates this not knowing when it happens and who conjures its happening. The cancelation of meaning through the occurrence of death forms the notion of a pessimistic fate in the eyes of the wisdom-seeking Qohelet.

While death brings about the pessimistic tone in Qohelet’s voice, death as the veil against obtaining wisdom beyond this life urges Qohelet to construct his existential philosophy and theology on seizing time, the work, and the enjoyments of life while it lasts. As we now turn our attention to the optimistic tone of his speech, the most obvious example comes from his command in Eccl 9:7-10, which is the fifth *carpe diem* passage in the book. Oddly though, while until this point the *carpe diem* passages on enjoying life have taken the form of advice (2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:17-19 [Eng. 18-20]; 8:15), now

Qohelet switches to the imperatives “go” (לֵךְ), “eat” (אֲכַל), and “drink” (שָׁתֵה) in 9:7. Crenshaw sees Qohelet “conveying a greater sense of urgency issuing from Qohelet’s reflection on the power of death to extinguish powerful emotions.”<sup>450</sup> Crenshaw is right to identify Qohelet’s urgency against the loss of emotions that could only be experienced whilst living, this I will explore further later. Just simply from 9:7-10 alone, there are many identifiers that point towards an optimistic tone, such as eat and drink “with good heart” (v. 7), “God has already favored your deeds” (v. 7), the powerful imperative command “enjoy (רַצֵה) life with the woman whom you love” (v. 9), and the encouragement to do one’s best in v. 10. It can be argued that the only reason Qohelet is handing out these optimistic values toward life is somewhat a defense mechanism against a dire fate of death. However, it does not take away the fact that the *tone* itself is optimistic albeit the worry behind it seems pessimistic. The two jussive *Qal* forms in v. 8 “let... be” (יִהְיֶה) and “do not let... be lacking” (אַל־יִחְסֹר) which encourages the audience to whiten their garment and use oil as they wish entail a sense of decision. This makes the imperatives in v. 7 and v. 9 less forceful and rather welcoming in the sense that it is an invitation, not a command, reinforcing “the idea in the preceding, that one should *choose* to enjoy life.”<sup>451</sup> That is, the urgency that Qohelet is proposing under the looming fate of death, is a hope in which the audience may enjoy a life with choice, which is against the predestined nature of death under God’s will.

Besides the imperative and the jussive forms in 9:7-10 (which I will explore further in §4.3), there is also a sense of comparative optimism when looking at Qohelet’s comparison between the dead and the living. This is most notable when he states that “there is confidence” for the ones “united with the living” (v. 4a), the aphoristic “a living

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<sup>450</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 162.

<sup>451</sup> Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 255. Their emphasis.

dog is better than a dead lion” (v. 4b), and that the living holds the right “to know” while nothing is left for the dead (v. 5-6). Using a comparative schema, Qohelet teases out the worthiness and superiority of the living. Hence, there is still hope for the living as long as they have not met their ends. Some scholars find the aphorism of the living dog against the dead lion (v. 4) ironic and considers Qohelet taking a jab at a lousy life in comparison to an honorable death. To begin with, it is a common attitude in the Ancient Near East and biblical texts that “the dog was despised in the East (I Sam. 24:14; II Sam. 3:8; 16:9), while the lion was the royal animal (Gen. 49:9).”<sup>452</sup> Judging from this understanding, Longman considers Qohelet’s use of the aphorism meaning “life may be preferred to death, but it is a miserable business and those who are living also know that they too will die.”<sup>453</sup> This view considers that death cancels out the purpose of life, and the living is rendered meaningless solely by knowing death may come rapidly without warning. Although this is one way to interpret the aphorism, another way of seeing it is acknowledging that even the glory of the lion goes to the grave with its death while the worthless dog gains the upper hand while it lives.<sup>454</sup> If the case were the wretch whose lives are worth more than a king deprived of his essence by death, this aphorism may be seen as an optimistic tone in Qohelet’s speech.

Another subject of compare and contrast is the pairing of love (אהבה) and hate (שנאה), seen twice in Eccl 9:1 and 6. Both elements are categorized as human emotions. There are actually three mentions of love in this passage, twice in noun form (9:1, 6) and once in verb form אהבת (9:9). The verb “love” occurs when Qohelet urges his audience to “enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days..., whom he [God] has given to

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<sup>452</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth*, 305.

<sup>453</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 228. Similarly, Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 161.

<sup>454</sup> Such is the way Brown views the aphorism: “the lion’s regal stature is worthless in death” while “the groveling dog holds an absolute advantage over the lion’s carcass” (*Ecclesiastes*, 92). Similarly, Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 292), Krüger (*Qoheleth*, 170), Whybray (*Ecclesiastes*, 142), Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall (*Qoheleth*, 251).

you under the sun” (v. 9). By Schoors’ classification, this “love” in its verb form entails an “erotic love between man and woman.”<sup>455</sup> That is, the love in v. 9 suggests an intimate pleasure within human relationship. In the same verse, Qohelet states that the woman is given by God. In this case, Qohelet is speaking about the intimate human relationship between the opposite sexes that denotes a gift from God. While mostly in the rest of the passage of 8:16-9:12 God is the orchestrator of unbeknownst wisdom to humankind (8:17; 9:1) and the one who allows the fate of death to occur, this positive mentioning of God who allows this joy between the two sexes marks a stark contrast to the aforementioned distant God. If the distant God is associated with the gloomy fate of death for humankind, the love-providing God sheds light on humankind while they live. In terms of “love” in the noun form, it is treated as a couplet with “hate” in 9:1 and 6. This couplet is also found in 3:8 within the poem of time which puts emphasis on the timing of all things in human perspective. What’s interesting is that when comparing v. 1 against v. 6, whereas Qohelet suggests that “mankind cannot know *everything* before them” (my emphasis) in v. 1, love and hate with the addition of “jealousy” of the dead “have already perished” in v. 6.<sup>456</sup> In this case where love and hate form a couplet, Qohelet seems to be articulating the a key difference between the living and the dead: the living may not know everything, but they can still *feel* emotions, contrary to the dead who can experience no emotions at all! Burkes thus suggests that “although he has said that non-existence is better than a bad life, when Qoheleth actually confronts the utter void of death he is willing to laud any form of consciousness no matter how meager or gloomy.”<sup>457</sup> To Longman who holds a pessimistic view on Qohelet’s theses, “it does appear that Qohelet

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<sup>455</sup> Schoors, *Preacher II*, 319.

<sup>456</sup> “Jealousy” (קנאות) is added to the couplet perhaps for the purpose of rhyme. See Murphy (*Ecclesiastes*, 92) and Ogden (*Qoheleth*, 163).

<sup>457</sup> Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 70.

believes that even unpleasurable (*sic*) emotions are better than no emotions at all.”<sup>458</sup> Unlike “love” in its verb form denoting the pleasure of erotic relationship (v. 9), “love” in its noun form and paired with “hate” (v. 1, 6) breathes life into the essence of human existence—the ability to feel. The latter demonstrate that “the dead are isolated in every possible way from relationship with the living.”<sup>459</sup> Once again, Qohelet shows that the living is superior than the dead, and the tone is optimistic.

All in all, there is no doubt that death is the key that makes Qohelet ponder the end of all living things, but instead of making Qohelet give up hope, death shapes Qohelet as one who evokes the importance of experiencing life. While death brings about a pessimistic unknowingness into the human life, there is still an optimistic light knowing that the living is capable of enjoying life, experiencing life, and creating meaning in life. Most importantly, even that is allowed and favored by God (9:7). The dead, in turn, have nothing at hand. Eccl 8:16-9:12 begins with a slow-pace buildup where death is only reveal as the natural trajectory of fate in 9:3. However, in the layers of Qohelet’s speech there are optimistic foreshadowing of life as the ultimate champion over death. Rather than coining Qohelet’s overall view of life as the pessimistic or the optimistic, through the design of his speech one can see that the tonal shifts throughout the passage interlock both the pessimistic aspects and the optimistic aspects of life together in a tight weave. Thus, the topic of death might be the overarching theme throughout 8:16-9:12, bringing out the inevitable pessimism in Qohelet’s speech, but it does not discourage him to give up on life. Given that death is just an inescapable process of human life, “Qoheleth builds on the notion that life is best understood when viewed from the perspective of universal death.”<sup>460</sup>

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<sup>458</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 229.

<sup>459</sup> Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 163.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

In short, Qohelet holds an optimistic pessimism towards life with respect to death, which is the fate beyond human understanding, tinkering, and control. The term “optimistic pessimism” entails that in the face of the pessimistic death that one must encounter, one still has the optimism towards life and to seize it when they can. Knowing that Qohelet holds this optimistic pessimism towards life can help readers understand Qohelet’s mindset and discourse that they are not fixed on pushing a single pessimistic or optimistic view. Rather, by recognizing the pessimistic nature on the topic of death as the end of meaning, one is able to see the optimism that Qohelet brings out for those who still lives on. Fixing Qohelet to a certain view creates more inconsistencies in the character than contributing to understanding him as a character of his own. At the end of the day, the purpose of this analysis is to liberate Qohelet from the text that he speaks himself rather than adding artificial flavors to his frequently shifting character.

#### **4.2 Reexamining the Heart (לב)**

After acknowledging Qohelet’s view of life as one that incorporates both pessimism and optimism, I will explore if he has changed the way he uses the “heart” (לב) in his speech. In my previous chapters, I have observed an “I”-Heart dialogic formula (“I said in my heart”) that Qohelet frequently uses in order to tease out the mysteries, to reflect on his observations, and to provide evaluations from his quest for wisdom.<sup>461</sup> Whether the purpose of the “I”-Heart formula is a sincere act of self-interrogation or just a performative act for the reader is up to debate. The key, nonetheless, is recognizing this narrative tactic of Qohelet’s in order to identify how he brings forth the message from his findings. In the earlier chapters in the book of Ecclesiastes, the heart plays a significant role along Qohelet’s “I” (אני) counterpart in his inner dialogues, carrying nearly the same

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<sup>461</sup> See “The Heart (לב) as the Dialogue Partner and the Seat of Evaluation” in Chapter One and “Double Function of the Heart (לב): Dialogic and Judgmental” in Chapter Two of this thesis.

weight as his self. Hence, finding out whether the role of the heart has shifted in this concluding section of the book is the main goal. As Qohelet comes to a closure of his quest in Eccl 8:16-9:12, the frequency of his self-interrogation seems to have lowered, and the need for a dialogic partner during his inner dialogues decreases. In fact, after Qohelet's arriving at the ultimate question, namely the matter of death in 8:16-9:12, Qohelet never interacts with the heart again as a dialogic partner in the remaining parts of the book. Here in 8:16-9:12, the heart still appears in his monologue in relation to his character, but for the last time. Now I will examine the 4 times the heart (לב) has appeared in this passage, in 8:16; 9:1, 3, and 7.

Before I embark on the examination of the "heart," I would first like to introduce Christianson's detailed categorization of how each appearance of the "heart" (לב) in Ecclesiastes functions, of which he classifies into seven aspects:<sup>462</sup>

(A) instrument of searching and/or testing (×11)<sup>463</sup>

(B) instrument of moral 'good sense' (or its opposite) or belief (×10)<sup>464</sup>

(C) seat of reasoning, inner-dialogue (×6)<sup>465</sup>

(D) seat of joy, gladness (×6)<sup>466</sup>

(E) seat of vexation, striving (×4)<sup>467</sup>

(F) instrument of knowledge (×3)<sup>468</sup>

(G) instrument of speech (×1, 5:1)

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<sup>462</sup> Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 193-194. His full examination on לב and its relationship to Qohelet's self can be found in pp. 193-200.

<sup>463</sup> 1:13, 16b, 17; 2:3 (×2), 10 (×2); 7:25; 8:9, 16; 9:1.

<sup>464</sup> 7:2, 4, 7, 21, 26; 9:3 (×2); 10:2 (×2), 3.

<sup>465</sup> 1:16a; 2:1, 15 (×2); 3:17, 18.

<sup>466</sup> 7:3; 9:7; 11:9a, 10.

<sup>467</sup> 2:20, 22, 23; 8:11.

<sup>468</sup> 3:11; 7:22; 8:5.

The list that Christianson provides undoubtedly proves important for the understanding of Qohelet's usage of the "heart" (לב) in each scenario. As we can see, 8:16 and 9:1 host the same usage of the heart while 9:3 and 7 belong to different categories.

Starting with 8:16 and 9:1, in the phrases "I set my heart to know wisdom" (8:16) and "all this I have put unto my heart, to examine..." (9:1) the heart is used as an instrument of evaluation and critique, a seat where judgment will be performed according to a preset of values and criteria, such as category (A) in Christianson's list. Since there is a syntactic similarity between 9:1 and 8:16, I will use 8:16 as a closer example to compare with similar sentences like 1:13 and 17. In the idiomatic sense, 8:16 doesn't seem much different than 1:13 and 17, but by examining each syntax respectively, there is a change in Qohelet's emphasis on their subject matters:

(1:13a) וְנָתַתִּי אֶת־לְבִי לְדָרוֹשׁ וְלִתְּוֹר בַּחֲכָמָה עַל כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם

... and I set my heart to care and to investigate, with wisdom, over all that is done under the heavens.

(1:17a) וְאֶתְנֶה לְבִי לְדַעַת חֲכָמָה וְדַעַת הוֹלָלוֹת וְשִׁכְלוֹת

So I put my heart to understand wisdom and to understand delusion and foolishness.

(8:16a) כִּי־אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי אֶת־לְבִי לְדַעַת חֲכָמָה וְלִרְאוֹת אֶת־הָעֲנָנִים אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה עַל־הָאָרֶץ

When I set my heart to know wisdom and to see the task/business that is done on earth...

Both 1:13 and 1:17 have the *waw*-consecutive prefixed to the verb "set, put" (נתן), which serves as a marker for a new clause. The translations "and" and "so" are based on their respective syntactic contexts, but generally both sentence can stand on its own. Eccl 8:16, on the other hand, has the verb נתן on its own and before it there is a "when" (כאשר) that

marks this sentence as a temporal clause.<sup>469</sup> In this case, the temporal clause functions as a subordinate clause that “can describe an action or situation that is contemporary with the main clause.”<sup>470</sup> So where is the main clause? It comes in 8:17 when Qohelet explains, “(then) I saw the whole works of God, that no one can find out the deed that is done under the sun.” In other words, 8:16 cannot stand on its own as a subordinate and depends on the further elaboration in v. 17 which is the main focus of Qohelet’s speech. What this means is that when Qohelet speaks of his “setting my heart to know wisdom” in 8:16, he is using this idiomatic formula as a condition for what will be explained in v. 17. In Arnold and Choi’s term, 8:16 is a situational clause. This is different from 1:13 and 17 when Qohelet states the “set my heart to know” as an ongoing action. While in 1:13 and 17 the heart is used as the cog to set off Qohelet’s quest to investigate wisdom and life, in 8:16 the heart merely gets mentioned as a past moment in time to tease out the findings from the quest in v. 17. Although this does not mean the heart is sidelined in this passage, the weight of its action *during* Qohelet’s speech in 8:16 is reduced, whereas it is focused on in 1:13 and 17. Similar to 8:16, now I take 9:1 into consideration:

כִּי אֶת־כָּל־זֶה נָתַתִּי אֶל־לִבִּי וְלָבוּר אֶת־כָּל־זֶה אֲשֶׁר הַצְּדִיקִים וְהַחֲכָמִים וְעַבְדֵיהֶם בְּיַד  
הָאֱלֹהִים (9:1a)

Indeed, all this I have put unto my heart, examining it all, where the righteous and the wise and their works are in the hands of God.

Once again Qohelet uses the idiomatic expression “I have put my heart (to...)” to introduce the heart. However, the expression is preceded with “all this” which shows that the expression is used as a past situation or state to further explain the point: all are “in the hands of God.” The sentence opening “indeed,” which has been discussed textual notes of

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<sup>469</sup> See Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 176; Ronald J. Williams, *Williams’ Hebrew Syntax*, 3rd ed., revised and expanded by John C. Beckman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 103.

<sup>470</sup> Arnold and Choi, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 176.

my translation, tightly links 9:1 with 8:16-17 and converts 9:1 into an explanatory note for the previous text. The expression “I have put unto my heart” here (9:1) still demonstrates Qohelet’s attentiveness and sincerity towards the subject matter (8:17), but it is just used as a statement to show that through the process of contemplating and evaluating between the self and the heart, the outcome of this search emerges (9:1b and forward). Qohelet does not dwell on his “I”-Heart relationship in this part; he is rather keen on moving on and introducing key elements from his findings. The beauty of this syntactical reading is that it flushes out the temporal distinctions among the clauses or phrases within a fixed textual unit.

In terms of 9:3 and 7, according to Christianson’s categories, the hearts in the former signified the “instrument of moral ‘good sense’” and in the latter the “seat of joy, gladness.”<sup>471</sup> In a way, both depict a generic sense that the heart (לֵב) is used throughout the Hebrew Bible and lack a particular activity with Qohelet himself. In 9:3, Qohelet speaks of humans hearts “filled with evil” and “madness,” pointing towards humankind as the owner of this so-called “heart.” Christianson explains that “the heart here is a moral *place*, a nexus of being as over against behavior, and lies at the core of Qoheleth’s reflections on the fate of humanity.”<sup>472</sup> If so, to Qohelet the heart still carries the weight of being the center for the temperament of humankind. Throughout the book, this has been a consistent feature of Qohelet, who often uses the heart in many ways to represent people, no matter a copy of himself, an unbiased location of judgment, or a vessel for human nature. Hence, the same could be said for 9:7, where Qohelet encourages his audience to eat and drink “with good heart” (בְּלֵב טוֹב), which is synonymous as saying to enjoy “with a good spirit” or simply “with joy.”

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<sup>471</sup> Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 194.

<sup>472</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

To sum up, the heart (לב) is still very intimate for Qohelet in this latter part of the book. The “hearts” that appear in 8:16-9:12 shows us that Qohelet is still deeply attached to using them to explain the human condition. Nonetheless, the significance of the heart takes a back seat as Qohelet is urgent to share what has been discovered through his quest for wisdom. As mentioned in earlier chapters, the most unique feature in Qohelet’s “I”-Heart formula is the times he literally “speaks,” dialogues, and interacts with his heart, questioning it and asking it to respond.<sup>473</sup> However, this is nowhere to be found in 8:16-9:12 and the remaining texts in the book. This suggests that Qohelet is not struggling as much as before and is close to arriving at his goal. He takes upon himself this confidence to announce the findings from his quest and seeks to pass on the accumulated knowledge to his audience. This is proven by the fact that while the heart loses its active role in Qohelet’s speech, Qohelet continues to demonstrate a strong first-person speech with the abundant use of “I.”<sup>474</sup>

### **4.3 The Imperative Command: A Benediction/Blessing in Disguise?**

In §4.1, I have concluded that Qohelet’s view on life is an optimistic *and* pessimistic one, which allows him to articulate the multifaceted aspects of life without confinement. In §4.2, I have explored how Qohelet’s iconic use of the “heart” has taken a back seat while he concentrates on the outcome from his search of wisdom. The result is a Qohelet who has collected, gathered, and made sense of his personal experiences and has grown eager to teach those experiences. In Chapter Three, I have explored the rhetorical strategies that Qohelet employs in Eccl 7:15-8:1 to pose as a didactic figure. So how is his way of teaching different here in 8:16-9:12, given the knowledge that he is near the end of his search?

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<sup>473</sup> 1:16; 2:1, 15; 3:17, 18. Note that 2:3 can also count as an example since the heart is propelled into action through Qohelet’s command.

<sup>474</sup> With the suffix pronoun, see 8:16, 17; 9:1, 11. With the imperative command and jussive invitation, see 9:7-10.

Besides the centralized “I” taking the spotlight and the rather aphoristic and straightforward speech style (Qohelet ceases to use any interrogatives to introduce the matter at hand in this section), the particular unit 9:7-10 seems to portray a command that reminds the audience of a blessing. In addition to Qohelet speaking in styles of King Solomon, a pseudo-divine being, a wise elderly, and a teacher of wisdom, could 9:7-10 hint towards Qohelet mimicking the style of a benediction? To answer this question, I will first introduce the common view that scholars hold for this section, then I will look into the key components that form a “blessing” or “benediction,” and finally I’ll analyze the text of 9:7-10 and compare it with a few selected blessings and benedictions in the Hebrew Bible to see if the elements in 9:7-10 fit the style.

To begin with, Eccl 9:7-10 is well known for its depiction of Qohelet’s optimistic view towards life. It takes upon the form of a command by using a series of imperatives (vv. 7, 9, 10) and jussives (v. 8) to pledge the right to “enjoy life” (רַאֲהַ תַּחַיִּים, v. 9; notice the imperative in “enjoy”) with the favor of God. Many scholars see Qohelet’s shift of tone towards the optimistic in 9:7-10 a direct parallel to the *Gilgamesh Epic*, especially considering the similar topics about feasting (v. 7), garments (v. 8a), freshening of one’s head (v. 8b), and the love for one’s partner (v. 9).<sup>475</sup> These are the words spoken by Šiduri, the tavern keeper in the epic:

But you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,  
enjoy yourself always by day and by night!  
Make merry each day,  
dance and play day and night!

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<sup>475</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 305; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 162; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 93; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 143; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 119-20; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 172-73; Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 162.

Let your clothes be clean, let your head be washed, may you bathe in  
water!

Gaze on the child who holds your hand,  
let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace!

For such is the destiny [of *mortal men*].<sup>476</sup>

Indeed, the similarity is remarkable, and even the topics are introduced in the same order.<sup>477</sup> Seow notes that comparing Eccl 9:7-10 to the *Gilgamesh*, “immortality is something that human beings cannot find; people cannot live forever. And so one must make the most of the present.”<sup>478</sup> However, Krüger, judging from the current scholarship on the *Gilgamesh*, warns that “a literary connection between this text and Qoh 9:7-9 must be excluded, since this speech of the taverner was not incorporated into the ‘canonical’ version of the twelve-tablet epic.”<sup>479</sup> Alternatively, some scholars also propose the similarity between Eccl 9:7-10 and the Egyptian “Harpers’ Song” which is presumably from the tomb of King Antef and could date between the 21<sup>st</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century BCE (11<sup>th</sup> Dynasty) to as recent as the late Amarna period (20<sup>th</sup> Dynasty):<sup>480</sup>

Follow your heart as long as you live!

Put myrrh on your head,

Dress in fine linen,

Anoint yourself with oils fit for a god.

Heap up your joys,

Let your heart not sink!

Follow your heart and your happiness.

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<sup>476</sup> From the *Old Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablet x, iii; translation by George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 124.

<sup>477</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 306; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 93

<sup>478</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 306.

<sup>479</sup> Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 173.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-74. Also Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 12-13; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 119-20; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 305.

Do your things on earth as your heart commands!  
When there comes to you that day of mourning,  
The Weary-hearted [Osiris] hears not their mourning,  
Wailing saves no man from the pit!<sup>481</sup>

The full poem questions “the efficacy for the mortuary cult: Can it really ensure immortality, when tombs crumble or are violated?”<sup>482</sup> Thus, in the quoted passage the solution is to “enjoy the pleasures of life in *this* life.”<sup>483</sup> Although once again in this poem there is a thematic similarity with Eccl 9:7-10, Krüger reminds us that it is difficult to pin down a direct relationship between this Egyptian royal inscription and Eccl 9:7-10.<sup>484</sup> At best, like many scholars have speculated, one can consider that the book of Ecclesiastes might have received some influence from or the author of the book attempting to imitate literatures from Egyptian or Mesopotamian origins.<sup>485</sup> This is a way to understand the similarity between the styles and themes of Eccl 9:7-10 and ANE literature, however, it leaves much to be desired about why in the broader sense of Qohelet’s speech the links are not as evident as this particular passage. Instead, throughout the whole book it is shown that Qohelet draws many influences from traditional Israelite wisdom, literature, and theology. What if, as an alternative to the ANE influence, Qohelet also incorporates styles from traditional blessings or benedictions as a way to benefit his teaching?

In order to see such an implication, one has to temporarily shift away from a thematic focus to a linguistic approach. The *Qal* imperative command (9:7, 9-10) and jussive invitation (9:8) violently jolts readers out of hinge with this intensive sense of optimism,

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<sup>481</sup> Translated by Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature I*, 196-97.

<sup>482</sup> Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 12.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid. Fox’s emphasis.

<sup>484</sup> Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 174. He cites heavily from Christoph Uehlinger, “Qohelet im Horizont mesopotamischer, levantinischer und ägyptischer Weisheitsliteratur der persischen und hellenistischen Zeit,” in *Schwiehorst-Schönberger*, ed., *Das Buch Kohelet*, 155-247.

<sup>485</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 60.

given the fact that the texts prior and after 9:7-10 emit a gloomy tone with death in mind. A good number of commentators neglect the linguistic signals of the imperatives in this section and simply take the passage as Qohelet's piece of advice<sup>486</sup> whereas a few pick up on the imperative signal, mention it, then quickly move on to other topics.<sup>487</sup> Schoors best represents this negligence toward the imperative function when he comments on the imperative usage of the verb "go, come" (הלך) in 2:1 and 9:7: "a few occurrences are too trivial to receive special attention."<sup>488</sup> Nonetheless, there are some who consider the imperatives and the jussives a notable element for discussion.<sup>489</sup> Bartholomew, for instance, observes the same type of shock effect when reading into 9:7-10: "it is crucial to note that this passage is juxtaposed in a contradictory fashion with vv. 1-6 and vv. 11-18," and that "the lack of introductory formulae, however, combined with the several imperatives, enhances the juxtaposed nature of this advice."<sup>490</sup> In other words, the imperatives in the command functions as the exact reason why Qohelet's tone shifts rapidly from more pessimistic (vv. 1-6) to fervently optimistic (vv. 7-10) then back to relatively pessimistic (vv. 11-16) when reading through Eccl 9 in full.

In order to locate the style of benediction in Eccl 9:7-10, I will now break the passage down into two parts: the linguistic evidence and the content. The linguistic evidence is namely the verbs that are in *Qal* imperative or jussive form; the content is what's being said in Qohelet's command. In the clearest way possible, here is the rundown of each verse in 9:7-10:

9:7 → Linguistic clues: "Go" (הלך/impv.), "eat" (אכל/impv.), "drink" (שתה/impv.)

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<sup>486</sup> Thus, Barton, Gordis, Seow, Murphy, Fox, Krüger, Lohfink, Brown, Enns, Shields, and Whitley.

<sup>487</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 162; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 143; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 229-30.

<sup>488</sup> Schoors, *Preacher II*, 153.

<sup>489</sup> Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 164-67; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 303-5; Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 254-58.

<sup>490</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 303.

Contents: feast and drink in gladness<sup>491</sup> → God has favored one's deeds

9:8 → Linguistic clues: “let... be” (יָהִי/juss.),<sup>492</sup> “do not let... be lacking” (אַל יִחָסֵר/juss.)

Contents: wear white clothes<sup>493</sup> and oil (perfume) oneself<sup>494</sup>

9:9 → Linguistic clues: “enjoy, see” (רְאֵה/impv.)

Contents: life is temporary but enjoy it with the female companion given by God<sup>495</sup> / the temporary life itself is a counterpart and result of one's laboring<sup>496</sup>

9:10 → Linguistic clues: “do” (עֲשֵׂה/impv.)

Contents: do whatever one may do when one still has strength / there is nothing in Sheol where all life is headed (reasoning with reality)<sup>497</sup>

All the linguistic clues—the imperatives and the jussives—are used in the form of a command towards the second person. Since we know that Qohelet is the first-person speaker of the passage, the eagerness in his voice is clear. In terms of the content, I have

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<sup>491</sup> “Both bread and wine are symbolic of what is necessary to sustain physical life” (Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 164).

<sup>492</sup> The reason why the *Qal* imperfect יָהִי serves a jussive function in v. 8 is due to the parallel with the next clause, “in which the jussive status of the verb is signaled by the use of the negative אַל” attached to the *Qal* imperfect “lacking” (יִחָסֵר) (Holmstedt/Cook/Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 255). Normally the imperfect should be negated by אַל instead (Kutz and Josberger, *Learning Biblical Hebrew*, 198).

<sup>493</sup> “White, the colour associated with death in some cultures, is in the OT symbolic of joy” (Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 164).

<sup>494</sup> “In the hot climate of Palestine, oil protected against dryness and is clearly associated in the OT with joy and gladness. In Ps. 23:5 the LORD anoints one with oil so that one's cup overflows. In Isa. 61:3 the oil of gladness is contrasted with mourning” (Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 304).

<sup>495</sup> “This conclusion then means that the woman/wife is both beloved, and a divine gift” (Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 166).

<sup>496</sup> Qohelet's mentioning of humankind's “labor, portion” (עִמְלָה) being a part of their life, is contrasted with the notion that the dead has no “share, portion” (חֵלֶק) at all in v. 6. The two terms, although different in Hebrew, are synonymous throughout *Ecclesiastes*.

<sup>497</sup> The phrase “with your strength” as the modifier for the imperative verb “do,” “confirms Qoheleth's positive and hearty approach to life” (Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 166-67). However, it is also true that the mentioning of Sheol as the destination of death in v. 10b undermines and counterbalances the positivity in v. 10a with its emptiness (Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 305).

explained each verse respectively in the footnotes and they accumulate to an uplifting sense of hopefulness. The only case of pessimism happens in v. 10b where Qohelet reminds his audience of Sheol—the place of emptiness after death. Still, v. 10b is articulated as a statement—a reality—rather than a negative sentiment, so it does not take away the optimism emitting from the full passage. More peculiar is the fact that Qohelet enters God *twice* into the equation (vv. 7, 9), both cases suggesting God as the giver of such enjoyment, therefore signifying “the pursuit of pleasure, as Qoheleth defines it, is enjoined for the reason that it is a divine gift (*hlq*).”<sup>498</sup> Combine this divine optimism with the linguistic clues of Qohelet’s command, what is unique in 9:7-10 “is the move from advice to imperative; it gives the enjoyment theme in this case a more authoritative cast.”<sup>499</sup> Indeed, Qohelet is pushy in this section especially with the hastening of “go” (לך) to initiate his command, but he is not arguing from a sentimental aspect. Seldom does he incorporate God into his teachings when it is directed at the audience, hence in this case, Qohelet’s command stands firm and composed with confidence. It certainly sounds like he knows some wisdom that others would not.

Next, to understand how Qohelet’s command in Eccl 9:7-10 could serve as a benediction, a survey on the definition of “benediction/blessing” in the Hebrew Bible is imminent. According to the dictionary entry in *Religion Past and Present*,

The term “benedictions” refers to statements of blessing by which the speaker directs the powers of blessing to the addressees, in contrast to statements of cursing or imprecations (maledictions; → Blessing and curse). Within Old Testament literature, one can observe a transition from an older, unspecific use (God or human as speaker; God, human or

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<sup>498</sup> Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 163.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, 163-64.

things as addressees; flexible formulation) to a younger, specific use (liturgical thanksgiving to and praise of God by humans; chief indicator: the pronunciation of the so-called *baruch* formula: “blessed be YHWH”)<sup>500</sup>

Benedictions in OT, used interchangeably with blessings, do not have fixed formulations until their later functions in liturgy and worship. The freedom of form they maintain throughout OT allows it to be used by/on anyone and on anything, the only condition being the inclusion of a divine power (not necessarily a god but a form of a spiritual power). In the event where that divine power is represented by God, often it is God who occupies the side of the initiator and also the source from which the blessing flows out.

Blessings/benedictions (and curses/imprecations) occur in the context when

the interrelationship between two people or parties, and the depth and quality of the benediction or of the imprecation reflect the nature of the relationship between those involved. Specifically, God bestows blessing on those who are in harmony with him. . . . Relationships are also prominent when human beings bless someone.<sup>501</sup>

Furthermore, the effect of the blessing “include fertility, prosperity, authority and security.”<sup>502</sup> In fact, prosperity and abundance play significant roles throughout the benedictions in the OT. Last but not least, through the perspective of Palestinian archaeology, there are mainly three basic forms of benedictions in antiquity (including examples in OT):

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<sup>500</sup> Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, “Benedictions,” in *Religion Past and Present*, vol. 1, 4th ed., eds. Hans Dieter Betz et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 687-88.

<sup>501</sup> J. McKeown, “Blessings and Curses,” in the *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2003), 84.

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86. For an elaborate discussion on each of these elements, see pp. 85-87 under the subsection “The Effect of Blessing.”

- (a) Passive blessing formulas (blessed is/be a person by a deity) in which the human speaker directs divine blessing to an addressee. A typical feature is their “indicative-jussive ambiguity” and the openness of their timeframe.
- (b) Active blessing formulas (a person blesses someone in relation to/before/through a deity).
- (c) A wish or request for a blessing (may the deity bless someone).<sup>503</sup>

At first glimpse, Qohelet’s command sits well with the active blessing formula; I will discuss in further detail later. These information layout the basic understanding of benedictions.<sup>504</sup> In brief, benediction is the act of declaring a blessing towards a subject or subjects with the purpose of lending them additional prosperity, joy, power, security, etc. (i.e. “good things”) under the supervise and assurance of a divine power. In the context of OT, that divine power is mainly YHWH.

Given the definition and context of benedictions/blessings, the content is clear for a benediction but the syntactic format is fluid. According to *RPP*’s categorization of three main formulas of benediction, all are seen throughout the Hebrew Bible and each consists of different syntactic structures. Nonetheless, a common feature across most

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<sup>503</sup> Hossfeld, “Benedictions,” in *RPP* I, 688. It needs to be stressed that these formulas allude to the content of the blessings and not any fixed syntactic structure.

<sup>504</sup> In addition to the listed information about benedictions, *RPP* actually categorizes the functions of benedictions in OT in detail. However, since this piece of information is not strongly related to the classification of Eccl 9:7-10, I will just provide it as a footnote here. *RPP* suggests that within OT, benedictions play notable roles in three areas: “They appear in the → primordial history (e.g. Gen 9:26f. or Gen 1:22, 28; 2:3; 5:2; 9:1-6, 26f. as part of the Priestly Document; → Pentateuch) and in the ancestral narratives with traces of family wishes for blessing (Gen 24:60; 27:1-40) and integrated into the lines of the theology of history (Gen 12:1-4a; 17; 28:1-9). Furthermore, they occur in Deuteronomy, which extends the blessing to the products of the land and the returns of labor (Deut 12:7; 26:15) and links blessing, following ancient Near Eastern treaty traditions, with the realization of the social order (Deut 7:12-16; 11:26-28; 14:29; 15:4-6, etc.; esp. 28:1-14 with the series of benedictions in vv. 3-6). The third concentration is found in the Psalter (→ Psalms). It offers benedictions in broad abundance and variation that increases toward the end (esp. in the latter third). At the same time, it attests to the change in the use of benedictions from spontaneous expressions of thanksgiving to the cultic-ritual praise of YHWH, from concrete thanksgiving in prayer to a marker of literary composition, from blessings for people (e.g. for the king, Pss 21:4, 7; 72:15, 17) to (theological) doxologies (e.g. at the end of the first four books, Pss 41:14; 72:18f.; 89:53; 106:48)” (Hossfeld, “Benedictions,” in *RPP* I, 688).

benedictions in the HB is the use of imperatives, jussives, or cohortatives as a plea or command. In order to compare the case in Eccl 9:7-10, I will provide four examples that have the first-person subject announce the blessing to its applied audience. The first two accounts are direct blessings from God in the form of a command, in other words, a benediction of God to humankind:

**Gen 1:28** God blessed them [humankind], and God said to them, “Bear fruit (פָּרֵי/impv.) and multiply (רָבוּ/impv.), and fill (מָלֵא/impv.) the earth and subdue (כַּבְּשָׁה/impv.) it; rule (רָדוּ/impv.) over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over all creatures that crawl over the earth.

**Gen 12:1-3** Now YHWH said to Abram, “Go (לֵךְ/impv.), from your land and from your kindred and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make you (אֶעֱשֶׂה/cohort.) a great nation, I will bless you (אֶבְרַכְךָ/cohort.), and I will make great (אֶגְדָּלְךָ/cohort.) your name so that you will be (הִיָּה/impv.) a blessing. And I will bless those (אֶבְרַכְהֶם/cohort.) who bless you, and the ones who curse you I will curse; and in you all your families of the land shall be blessed.

As shown, in both Gen 1:28 and 12:1-3 the acts of blessing are explicitly stated. Applying the same two-fold method I’ve used to analyze Eccl 9:7-10, the linguistic evidences are the imperatives used as command toward the target, and the clues by content are the elements of prosperity, abundance, power, and authority. The cohortatives in Gen 12:1-3 is an alternative way to guarantee blessing as it entails that YHWH—the speaker—will assure the happening of those verbal actions through his divine power. The betterment of the target is the sole purpose of these two benedictions. Interestingly, in Gen 12:1 YHWH also uses “go” (לֵךְ/impv.) as the signal to assign Abram to his following order and to request Abram to take upon the action. Qohelet uses the same imperative “go” to open his

command in Eccl 9:7: “Go, eat your bread in gladness.” Therefore, the imperative “go” as the lead-in for the benediction carries the important function of propelling the following orders forward in movement, unlike how Schoors suggests that it is “too trivial to receive special attention.”<sup>505</sup>

Moving on, I present two cases where the benediction occurs between two persons with God as the distant providential provider. The first is Isaac’s blessing towards Jacob and the second the psalmist’s prayer for the king (Solomon):

**Gen 27:28-29** May God give you (יִתֶּן/juss.) from the dew of the heavens, from the fatness of the earth, and an abundance of grain and new wine. Let people serve (יַעֲבֹדוּ/juss.) you and let nations bow down (יִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ/juss.) to you. Become (הִיְהוֹה/impv.) lord to your brothers and may your mother’s sons bow down (יִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ/juss.) to you. Those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed.

**Ps 72:15-17** Long may he live (יִחִי/juss.)! May the gold of Sheba be given to him (יִתֶּן/juss.); may prayers be made (יִתְפַּלֵּל/juss.) on his account and blessing invoked (יִבָּרַךְ/juss.) for him all day long. Let there be (יִהְיֶה/juss.) abundance of grain in the land, let it wave (יִרְעֵשׂ/juss.) on the top of the mountains and its fruit like Lebanon. Let those from the city bloom (יִצְיִצוּ/juss.) like grass of the land. Let his name be (יִהְיֶה/juss.) forever lasting, Before the sun, let his name be spread (יִגֹּן/juss.) Let all nations be blessed (יִתְבָּרְכוּ/juss.) in him; let them pronounce him happy (יִאֲשְׁרוּ/juss.).

A notable difference between these two passages is that Isaac’s blessing addresses Jacob directly while the psalmist addresses God for the blessing towards the king (a prayer

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<sup>505</sup> Schoors, *Preacher II*, 153.

format).<sup>506</sup> While the addressee might be different, the receiver of both benedictions are human. In both cases, the thesis of abundance, power, and prosperity become ever more pronounced than the benedictions by God himself (e.g. Gen 1:28; 12:1-3). Again, the jussive tone of the verbs takes the spotlight and enhances the theme of prosperity, entailing a hopefulness towards a foreseeable future (at least by wish). However, while God is mentioned in Isaac's blessing as the giver of those gifts (Gen 27:28), in the psalmist's prayer the role of God is distant, existing only as the hidden second-person addressee while the first-person psalmist elaborates what he wishes for the third-person king. No matter what, God, named or not, participates in these benedictions, and this is a preexisting condition for a divine blessing to be valid. Then, the style of the first-person benediction falls on two major elements: (1) the content of prosperity and welfare for the receiver and (2) a boost from the verbal imperatives/jussives/cohortatives to strengthen the voice of commitment in the blessing.

In conclusion, returning to Qohelet's command in Eccl 9:7-10 and comparing it against the components of a OT benediction, God as the divine administrator of blessing is announced in v. 7 and 9, which qualifies the initiation of a benediction. The content with prosperity comes with Qohelet's imperative command to "eat your bread in gladness" (v. 7), "drink your wine with good heart" (v. 7), "let your garments be white and the oil on your head no be lacking" (v. 8), "enjoy life with the woman whom you love" (v. 9), and to labor "with your strength" when one is alive and able (v. 10). As the cherry on the cake, Qohelet initiate this series of blessings through a strong imperative opening, "go" (אָ), which symbolizes an intimate and direct relationship with his audience, urging them forward to take upon themselves the responsibility as the receiver of this blessing of joy (just like YHWH to Abram in Gen 12:1). It is therefore through this recognition that

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<sup>506</sup> The psalmist's direct calling to God occurs in Ps 72:1, where he opens with "Give the king your justice, O God."

Qohelet's command in 9:7-10 as a benediction that readers may understand why this passage stands out against other passages (vv. 1-6; 11-18) as the evidently optimistic tone in Qohelet's speech. By this, Qohelet poses as a minister of his audience or group, passing out advices and giving them blessings from the accumulated knowledge that he himself had to toil and experience throughout his life and quest for wisdom.

#### **4.4 Qohelet with Confidence**

Recognizing Qohelet as this fatherly, ministerial, or pastoral character in Eccl 8:16-9:12 adds a flavor to the character arch of Qohelet. Throughout the book, he has gone from an imposter of King Solomon, to an explorer, to a teacher, and to a minister, not to mention that these are only the most noticeable few personas that he goes by throughout the text. The remaining issue, then again, is to understand how his role play influences the persuasiveness of his speech. After all, there is always the purpose of teaching for Qohelet; or else, why would he share such a deep and personal account of his investigations? Thus, in this section I will briefly reexamine the literary elements in 8:16-9:12 to show whether Qohelet has truly gained confidence and authority over his investigation in this concluding remark of his quest.

Starting with the opening of Eccl 8:16, Qohelet again uses his idiomatic expression to introduce his quest: "when I set my heart to know wisdom...." This expression marks the point in his disposition that he is reflecting on his quest, and there is some findings that may contribute to the wisdom being shared in that context. The similar expression can be found in 1:13, 17; 7:25; 8:9. What matters is the context that follows after he announces this expedition:

**1:13-14** I set my heart to care and to investigate, with wisdom, over all that is done under the heavens. It is a task of evil God has given to man to be concerned

about. I have seen all the works that were carried out under the sun, and look, everything is an illusion and a pursuit of emptiness.

**1:17** So I put my heart to understanding wisdom and to understanding delusion and foolishness. I observed that even this itself is a striving of emptiness.

**7:25-26** I turned—myself and my heart—to know, to explore, and to seek wisdom and reckoning, and to know wickedness (is) folly, and the folly (is) madness. And I found more bitter than death the woman who is a trap, and her heart nets, her hands bonds; the one that is good before God escapes from her but the sinner is captured by her.

**8:16-17** When I set my heart to know wisdom and to see the task/business that is done on earth (while in the day and in the night one also does not see sleep in his eyes), I saw the whole works of God, that no one can find out the deed that is done under the sun. For mankind may labor to seek but will not find. Even if the wise claims to know, he will not be able to find out.

In a parallel comparison, there is more of a sense of reckoning in 8:16-17. In 1:13-14, two immediate observations come out of his investigation: that the task itself is an evil by God, and that everything is just emptiness. Qohelet is not amused by the fact that humanity is burdened by the task of understanding this world, and his sentiments are negative towards this investigation. His evaluation of God, even before he embarks on the journey, complains about “the inscrutable divine action, which defies understanding.”<sup>507</sup> At this point, Qohelet casts a distasteful eye on the providence of God; he is more of a skeptic towards this world than an advocate. The same could be said for 1:17, where the conclusion matches the “emptiness” (רעיון רוח, literally “chasing after wind”) foretold in

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<sup>507</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 13.

1:14. One does not find Qohelet's enthusiasm in life—in terms of enjoying it—in the early stage of the book. In 7:25-26 when the investigation of wisdom expression appears again, we are met with an absurd observation: that women are traps and lead to a life worse than death. This is a passage that has stumped many commentators, leaving them scrambling for all sorts of explanations. However, fast-forward to the concluding remarks of the quest in 9:9, Qohelet explicitly states that one aspect of enjoying life is to have a life “with the woman whom you love,” and this is a divine gift from God. Such a drastic change of tone on the same topic shows a character growth in Qohelet, that throughout his search for wisdom, his perspectives on the little things in life has changed with his accumulation of knowledge. The same could be said when we arrive at 8:16-17, where Qohelet's findings entail that whereas humankind cannot find out everything about life, life and the deeds within belong to “the whole works of God” (v. 16). The skeptic of God in 1:13 has now arrived at a point where he assigns the remaining of not only humankind's “not finding” but also his own unknowingness (since he is *the wise*) to God's providence. This is a major arch that proves Qohelet grows throughout his investigations. The assurance in his tone in this final part comes where Qohelet restates the expression “put unto my heart” in 9:1 once more after 8:16-17 and solidifies the findings with the asseverative “indeed” (כִּי). That is, Qohelet has gained full control over his investigations and hesitates no more in his teaching.

In §4.3, Qohelet's potential role as a minister of his community rises out from the textual clues. Such is the case when reading through 8:16-9:12, every statement is concrete and straightforward. There are no interrogative questionings, no “I”-Heart inner dialogues, no either/or situations happening in this concluding remark. In Chapter Two of this thesis, the examination into Qohelet's pseudo-divine voice at least captures a vulnerability where the fallacy arises when Qohelet encounters the problem of fate (3:21-

22), and he falls back to pessimistic existential crisis.<sup>508</sup> In Eccl 8:16-9:12, however, none of that happens with the addition of an optimistic benediction for life (9:7-10). Sure, Qohelet still speaks of the evil in this world and in human life (v. 3), as well as the imminent gloom of death (vv. 5-6, 10, 11-12). These statements, nonetheless, function either as a statement (v. 3 is introduced with “this is an evil in all that is done under the sun:”) or a reminder that time is temporary, and that we—the living—should take hold of what life has to offer.

Therefore, Qohelet has gained confidence ultimately through his composed and calm demeanor. The way of his speech given in the text provides the evidence to this suggestion. However, to understand Qohelet’s speech in 8:16-9:12 as a confident one does not take away the fact that both optimism (pro-life) and pessimism (the reality of death) exist simultaneously in the content of his speech, not to mention that it cannot simplify Qohelet into a solely optimistic or pessimistic character. In turn, one may see Qohelet taking up a ministerial and pastoral role in 8:16-9:12 as he teaches and blesses his community with a rather solid perspective of life and death.

## 5. Summary

Understanding the tonal shift in Qoheleth’s pessimistic yet optimistic depiction of human existence is key to teasing out the didactic purpose of Eccl 8:16-9:12. The interweaving and interlocking of being optimistic while living and knowing a pessimistic fate should befall anytime contributes to Qohelet’s mode of speech. Unlike the earlier passages, the heart as a dialogic partner takes a backseat as Qohelet finally figures out the ultimate mystery of life. There are also no interrogatives in his narrative since it is clear that seizing the time that one has while alive is a fundamental component of “knowing” oneself and

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<sup>508</sup> For an investigation on how the interrogatives “Who knows...” (מִי יֹדֵעַ) and “If/Whether...” (אִם) challenges Qohelet’s pseudo-divine voice, see §4.4 in Chapter Two.

the world one lives in. Qohelet not only gains confidence in his voice, he addresses his audience in the form of a command similar to a blessing, urging them to enjoy life when they can, because if everyone has only one chance to live their lives, why not make it worthwhile and create your own joy? After all, while our fate—the fate that all will perish one day—is predestined by God himself, so are all deeds in this world that one may strive for. This is also assured and favored by God. Enjoy rather than burden over every moment of life, that is the blessing given to humankind by God. In Eccl 9:7-10, Qohelet acts as an advocate for God, to announce this news to his audience. “Enjoy life,” says Qohelet, and that is his teaching. As noted by Weeks, Qohelet’s commendations of pleasure teaches that “where such things are not really one’s own, pleasure in what one does is something real” and it sets “the human ability to take pleasure over against the human ignorance of what is really happening in the world”<sup>509</sup>

All in all, the characteristics of Qohelet should not be mapped out by a set of traditional values used to interpret the book. By reading the text and identifying the voice of his own, Qohelet will emerge from the text and become a character of his own. Barton has observed too that

Qoheleth, like other men, could come under the influence of various moods or various systems of thought. Each could possess him in turn without preventing the return of the other. Life has no outlook, its problems are insoluble, death will end all, but enjoy sensation and the sunshine while it lasts, this is his philosophy.<sup>510</sup>

Qohelet, being a character of his own, is dealing with a complex web of humankind issues, all which are existential and theological. By no means his character can be simplified into

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<sup>509</sup> Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 83.

<sup>510</sup> Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 162.

a single image and used throughout the text to decipher the text. Contrarily, before judging Qohelet by traditionally known Jewish values and wisdom, why not let the character speak without these ideological labels? Although at first glance it might render Qohelet “too free,” but the text always exists as the foundation of his character-building. In the case of Eccl 8:16-9:12, Qohelet’s voice stands firmly on its own. The optimistic pessimism defines who Qohelet is as a teacher of wisdom: a thinker and observer confined to the limitations of human existence who strives to shed light on the experience of life as a way to dilute the pessimism brought forth by death alone.

## **Conclusion**

### **1. The Aim of this Study**

This study has sought to contribute to the understanding of the book of Ecclesiastes by focusing on the character analysis of its main character—Qohelet. In order to analyze Qohelet in as a dynamic character, it has proposed to view the character in its wholeness through the application of the close reading method which begins by viewing the book as a literary unity. As opposed to traditional scholarship that tends to assign social roles (e.g. sage, teacher, preacher, etc.) or historical figures (i.e. Solomon the King who is wise) before allowing the character Qohelet to present himself through his autobiography in the text, this research focuses on setting aside the thematic and figurative assumptions traditionally attached to the character, and begins by reading his autobiography through a narrative lens. The benefit of close reading Ecclesiastes is due to the fact that a large portion of the text is spoken by a first-person voice, namely the voice of Qohelet, which describes the world that he observes and presents his own evaluation on his observations. It allows meaning to arise from the text through the literary character's autobiography while the historical evidence of the composition of the book is lost to modern readers and scholars. These external evidences once useful for conducting exegesis on an OT biblical text include dating, location, social setting, editorial hand, and redaction history.<sup>511</sup> However, in the case of Ecclesiastes, these critical elements are difficult to pinpoint, which results in the lack of information to reconstruct the author's intention in writing this book.

Alternatively, a narrative close reading of the text anchors itself in to the textual world presented in front of the readers. In the case of Ecclesiastes, it is the MT that is

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<sup>511</sup> In fact, many commentaries on Ecclesiastes begin by discussing about these elements, but due to the obscurity and lack of historical evidence, many commentaries dedicate lengthy pages discussing assumptions that are not based on the text itself but rather 1 & 2 Kings, namely the history of Solomon.

deemed closest to the original version of the author's design. Utilizing close reading to decipher the text is a way to interrogate the text and to force it to show the inconsistencies lying within itself. Since scholars have widely recognized that the words of Qohelet are filled with ambiguities, inconsistencies, and controversies, it (i.e. the text) presents itself as a rich foundation for narrative analysis. Even "Qohelet" himself is a great subject for analysis, since scholars have debated for centuries on how to understand the meaning of his Hebrew name קהלת.

Hence, the main goal of this study has been to close read the text while focusing on the character development of Qohelet. While traditional scholars tend to see Qohelet's inconsistencies as possible evidence of an editorial hand, this study proposes that those inconsistencies are more human than once thought: it shows the process of Qohelet's observing, understanding, pondering, and evaluation as he navigates the different scenarios in his quest in search of the ultimate wisdom. In other words, the reader of Qohelet's *story*, is actually seeing the internal conflicts that Qohelet has while juggling different experiences of his life with his moral compass. Like any human being, Qohelet as a character has his moods, and these moods are presented through the tone of his speech. In short, readers are witnessing the cognitive process of Qohelet's mind, which then allows them to dive deeper into meanings of the text. Any meaning that comes with analyzing Qohelet's speech reveals part of this personality; and since Qohelet is a character within the story told by the epilogist/frame-narrator, those meanings can be attributed to the narrator. Thus, the narrator being as close to the historical author as we may find, meanings that arise from the text are gateways to the intentions of historical author who wrote this book. Additionally, this research serves as a study to show that not only methods from biblical studies can be utilized to understand the text. Whereas traditional historical critical methods frequently "give" meaning to the text with the

external evidences tied to the text, close reading and narrative analysis of the character come from literary studies (i.e. New Criticism) that focuses on letting the text speak for itself. Ecclesiastes, with its lack of external evidence, provides just the perfect ground where the close reading method can be used to prove that the text itself is abundant enough for reconstructing the world behind the text.

## **2. The Results of this Study**

Beginning from the introduction, this study investigates how the murky definition of “wisdom literature” opened up the grounds of debate for modern wisdom scholars. One of the key controversies lies in the fact that the “wisdom literature” label was formed (possibly unintentionally) from the studies of form criticism in early twentieth century. Form criticism provided the basis of a potential sapiential class in the past, but this information alone still remains hypothetical as a historical *setting*, and not for a clearer definition of the so-called “wisdom genre.” Ecclesiastes being one of the main books among the corpus (with Proverbs and Job), is central to the debate as the motif and theme of wisdom in the book is loosely defined, unlike Proverbs and Job. Moreover, Ecclesiastes in the past was frequently read with a Solomonic lens, being understood from the perspective of the king in the historical books. This has led to more confusions than answers for the interpretation of the text. Hence, the introduction of this tries to show that with the different views on “Qohelet”, his closeness/distance with Solomon, and whether he represents the historical author, the methodological approach to reading the book in scholarship shifts according to how the character Qohelet is treated. One of the few agreements that wisdom scholars have towards “wisdom literature” is that it holds a didactic purpose to its audience. Following this advice, this study proposes to focus on the literary devices used in Qohelet’s autobiography to understand how the messages and

themes in the text are presented to the applied audience through Qohelet's first-person speech.

Chapter One explores the literary strategies for Qohelet's autobiographical introduction in Eccl 1:12-2:26, where Qohelet announces his royal status and demonstrates his sovereignty and power over worldly experiences. Using the first-person pronoun and his unique phrasing "I spoke with my heart" he lays out the groundwork of his investigations while incorporating his brief feedbacks and emotions within. The findings of the chapter show that Qohelet adopts the persona of a kingly figure, one that is most likely to be Solomon, to assert a dominance in his voice. In this way, he has caught the attention of the audience right away since he is allowed more capacity of experience than the common layperson. In addition, Qohelet uses a unique "I spoke with/in my heart" formula, i.e. the "I"-Heart formula, to create a dialogic space within himself. The heart serves as a partner of his inner dialogues as well as the seat of judgment and moral compass. In this way, his way of addressing his quest for wisdom becomes more dynamic than a mere person going on a typical adventure.

Chapter Two deals with Qohelet's pseudo-divine voice in Eccl 3:9-22. After the poem of time in Eccl 3, Qohelet resumes the topic about toil (3:9) but this time with the incorporation of time. He reaffirms the authority of God and acts like a mediator between God and human while teaching of God's providence of time and the gift of enjoyment. Then he proceeds to bring in the analysis of fate and judgment using the analogy between human and animal, and arrives at the conclusion that nothing is better than taking pleasure in life. The chapter explores the reason behind Qohelet's distant stance while he surveys this world. His speech seems to suggest he has a higher authority due to his immense knowledge of the world and the work of God. The chapter examines literary elements such as the use of "I have seen" (ראיתי) and "I know" (ידעתי), the distance

between Qohelet himself and the common people through the use of “in them” (בם), the double function of the heart, and takes a glimpse at Qohelet’s authoritative fallacy through the use of Hebrew interrogatives. Eventually, it is revealed that Qohelet is distancing himself from the common people not just because he wishes to maintain an authoritative stance, but that this is a design which the impact of Qohelet’s fallacy at the end of the passage becomes more vivid and intimate for the audience.

Chapter Three focuses on Qohelet’s voice of the teacher of experience in Eccl 7:15-8:1. This passage begins with a conclusive reflection on the fate of the righteous and the wicked, followed by a sequence of didactic proverbial sayings (7:16-22). Qoheleth continues to speak to himself—this time without using the heart—about his failure to understand ultimate wisdom (7:23-24). While he continues to mumble about the wisdoms he has acquired so far, he abruptly inserts a judgmental bias between the two genders in which he shows remorse that humans often deviate from their righteous nature which God had given to them and turn to the folly. The section ends with his judgment that wisdom is preferred to change one’s temperament (8:1). The chapter ponders Qohelet as the experienced elder with a Solomonic guise, not as a king but as the everyday teacher of his community, through the literary designs he hints that he is a flawed wise and that the audience should not only listen to his teaching but also learn from his experiences.

Finally, Chapter Four deals with the highly debated tone of the book in scholarship (pessimistic vs. optimistic), where I suspect that Qohelet carries a hybrid optimistic pessimism in his discourse presented in Eccl 8:16-9:12. This passage Qohelet begins with a review/recollection of his quest for wisdom, only to realize that no one including him can find the ultimate meaning of existence. Thus, he gives up and attributes fate and existence to “the hand of God.” He mourns that the same fate, death, happens to all beings

regardless of good or evil. He stresses that evil lies within the human heart and that death is inferior to being alive since no meanings can be achieved in that state. With this realization he encourages his audiences to enjoy life and continue striving when they can in the form similar to a benediction. The key components examined in this chapter are the identification of the optimistic vs. pessimistic tones, a reexamination of the literary function of the "I"-Heart formula, the imperative command as a blessing/benediction in disguise, and the confidence of Qohelet after his growth. The takeaway from this chapter is that Qohelet leaves an ambiguity for his audience so that they may take his tale with a grain of salt. Whether it is an optimistic tale or a pessimistic rant of an old man, it is up to the audience to decide. Yet, Qohelet gives his blessing in the form of a benediction, urging the audience to proceed with their life with all the experiences that he has shown them.

In conclusion, this study has reconstructed Qohelet's character by examining the literary devices in close detail. Qohelet has emerged from the text as a character who is vivid for the audience. His words and speech can be viewed as a coherent whole; however, the inconsistencies that happen throughout his monologue (i.e. dialogue with his heart) is key to understanding his view towards this world. The wisdom that lies with Qohelet is not merely the troubling thought he has; it is the experience that the audience gets by seeing how he ponders, evaluates, contradicts, and struggles through this world that is so close, yet so far from his grasp.

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