

## *Qoheleth in the Canon? Current Trends in the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes*

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[p.4]

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is well known that in the first century AD there was a vigorous debate among Jewish schools as to whether or not Qoheleth 'defiled the hands'<sup>1</sup>—i.e. is Ecclesiastes canonical or not? At the end of the second millennium there is still vigorous disagreement about Ecclesiastes. Norman Whybray, for example, came to see Ecclesiastes as affirming joy,<sup>2</sup> whereas Francis Watson in the context of promoting a theological hermeneutic for Scripture describes Ecclesiastes as 'rigorously hope-less'<sup>3</sup>

In this article we will overview briefly the history of the interpretation of Ecclesiastes up until the start of the twentieth century, note the impact of historical criticism on the interpretation of Ecclesiastes and the recovery of a strong sense of the unity of Ecclesiastes since Siegfried's (1898) division of the book into nine sources, and then concentrate on different proposals for reading Ecclesiastes that have emerged in the latter half of this century. The aim of this exploration is to find ways of reading Ecclesiastes that will enable its distinct voice to be heard in the context of the canon of Scripture. Thus we will conclude with some proposals for a way forward in the reading of Ecclesiastes.

### **UP UNTIL HISTORICAL CRITICISM**

The Rabbinical debate about the canonical status of Ecclesiastes indicates that there were early literal interpretations of Ecclesiastes. However by the fourth century AD allegorical reading of Ecclesiastes was dominant among Jews and Christians with 'eating and drinking' being taken, as referring to the Torah or the Eucharist, and the vanity element as a warning against excessive attachment to this world as opposed to 'eternal' life. An allegorical reading of Ecclesiastes remained the dominant mode until the Reformation. It took the revival of literal interpretation by the Reformers to open up, for example, the possibility that 'eating and drinking' refers to legitimate enjoyment of the God-given creation.<sup>4</sup> Whether interpreted allegorically or literally, prior to the rise of modern criticism virtually across the board, Ecclesiastes was read as Scripture with the epilogue taken to be the key which unlocks the book.

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<sup>1</sup> See R. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (London: SPCK, 1985), 274-337.

<sup>2</sup> R.N. Whybray, 'Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,' *JSOT* 23 (1982), 87-98.

<sup>3</sup> F. Watson, *Text, Church and World. Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 283.

<sup>4</sup> Brentius (1528), quoted in C.D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth* (New York: KTAV, 1970), 112, comments, 'There is nothing better than to be cheerful, and enjoy one's life; to eat, drink, and delight in one's employment; ... Some foolish persons, not understanding these things, have absurdly taught contempt for and flight from the world, and have committed many foolish things themselves; as we read in the lives of the Fathers that there were some who even shut themselves up from ever seeing the sun ... living above the world is not living out of the world.' The resulting reassessment of Qoheleth's attitude to the earthly and material is evident also in Luther, Melancton and Piscator (1612). According to Melancton (1556), quoted in Ginsburg, *Song of Songs*, 113, Ecclesiastes 'shows us that we are to be submissive in every station of life, and perform the duties of our calling ... that we should know that to follow our calling is pleasing to God.' Catholic interpretations of Ecclesiastes continued to stress the contempt for the earthly (see Ginsburg, *Song of Songs*, 123 ff).

[p.5]

## **HISTORICAL CRITICISM AND ECCLESIASTES**

Although it was only at the end of the nineteenth century that the historical critical method was resolutely applied to Ecclesiastes, modern biblical criticism has much earlier roots, and these roots gradually became manifest in readings of Ecclesiastes. Grotius (1644) argued, for example, that we have in Ecclesiastes a collection of different opinions concerning happiness which the author mixes up with his own arguments before giving his final opinion. Grotius was the first since Luther to argue against Solomonic authorship. After Grotius the view that Solomon was not the author gradually gained ground.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the critical reading of Ecclesiastes gathered momentum, but it was only with the source-critical commentaries of Siegfried (1898), Lauer (1900), McNeile (1904), Podechard (1912) and Barton (1912) that historical critical reading of Ecclesiastes emerged in the way that it had done for the Pentateuch during the nineteenth century. Siegfried (1898)<sup>5</sup> pioneered the source critical approach to Ecclesiastes, identifying nine different sources in the book. Within English-speaking circles McNeile (1904)<sup>6</sup> and Barton (1912)<sup>7</sup> developed more moderate source-critical approaches to Ecclesiastes. As the twentieth century has progressed a radical source critical approach to Ecclesiastes has become rare, and the book has come to be seen more and more as a unity.<sup>8</sup> The exception to this is the epilogue which is almost universally seen as a later addition. The prime legacy of source criticism in the interpretation of Ecclesiastes is this tendency to read the book without the epilogue. By comparison, in almost all pre-critical interpretation of Ecclesiastes the epilogue provides the interpretative key.

Gunkel initiated *form critical analysis* of wisdom literature<sup>9</sup> and assessment of the forms used in Ecclesiastes has continued to play a fundamental role in the interpretation of the book.<sup>10</sup> Crenshaw<sup>11</sup> suggests that the dominant literary type in Ecclesiastes is reflection arising from personal observation. He notes that scholars have also drawn attention to *masal*, diatribe and royal testament forms and that Qoheleth also uses autobiographical narrative, example story, anecdote, parable, antithesis and proverb.

Galling<sup>12</sup> developed a form critical interpretation of Ecclesiastes in which he divided Ecclesiastes up into a large number of originally independent sayings. Such an approach clearly militates against reading Ecclesiastes as a strongly unified text. However on the macro level of the form of Ecclesiastes no consensus has been reached as regards its genre and

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<sup>5</sup> C. Siegfried, *Prediger and Hoheslied* (HAT) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1898).

<sup>6</sup> A.H. McNeile, *An Introduction to Ecclesiastes With Notes and Appendices* (Cambridge: CUP, 1904).

<sup>7</sup> G.A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ICC), (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912).

<sup>8</sup> R. Gordis, *Koheleth the Man and his World* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 73, notes the growing recognition of the unity of Ecclesiastes.

<sup>9</sup> R. E. Clements, *A Century of Old Testament Study* (London: Lutterworth, 1976), 101, 102.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. D. Michel, *Qoheleth* (Erträge der Forschung), (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), 76-81; R.E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature* (The Forms of Old Testament Literature XIII), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> J.L. Crenshaw, 'Ecclesiastes, Book of,' in D.N. Freedman (ed.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. II (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 275.

<sup>12</sup> K. Galling, 'Koheleth-Studien,' *ZAW* 50 (1932), 276-99, *Der Prediger* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., HAT 18), (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1969).

structure,<sup>13</sup> although Wright's New Critical analysis of the structure has convinced a number of scholars.<sup>14</sup> The problem of whether Ecclesiastes is prose or poetry remains, with the majority of scholars treating it as a mixture of both.<sup>15</sup>

[p.6]

The tradition history of Ecclesiastes has been a matter of concern throughout this century.<sup>16</sup> Within the OT wisdom tradition Ecclesiastes has regularly been seen as a negative, sceptical reaction to mainline wisdom as represented by Proverbs.<sup>17</sup> Gese<sup>18</sup> identified Qoheleth with a crisis of wisdom in Israel, but scholars remain divided over the existence and extent of this 'crisis'. To what extent do we have a rigid doctrine of retribution in the OT and to what extent is Ecclesiastes a reaction to this?<sup>19</sup> At the end of this century there is no consensus about the development of the wisdom tradition and how Ecclesiastes fits into that development. Using sociological analysis Brueggemann has suggested that

Ecclesiastes articulates a conservative ideology that reflects social control and a concern for stability... The emancipatory side of wisdom is reflected in the embrace of creation in the Song of Solomon, the ideological dimension is articulated in Ecclesiastes.<sup>20</sup>

This view is a development of Brueggemann's discernment of a royal (order) and a liberative trajectory in the OT.<sup>21</sup>

The relationship of OT wisdom to international wisdom has been an issue throughout this century. Studies of Ecclesiastes continue to concern themselves with Ecclesiastes' relationship to Mesopotamia, Egypt and Greece.<sup>22</sup> During this century the Jewishness of Ecclesiastes has received greater recognition but its relationship to Greek thought in particular continues to be debated.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> A.G. Wright, 'The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth,' *CBQ* 30 (1968), 313-34, (1968) and A. Schoors, 'La structure littéraire de Qohéleth,' *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 13 (1982), 91-116, contain useful overviews of the great variety of structures that have been proposed.

<sup>14</sup> See below for a discussion of Wright's analysis. It is, for example, followed by R.E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC), (Texas: Word, 1992), xxxii-xli, and is drawn upon by L.G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation. The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 203 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. R.E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xxvi-xxxii.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Michel, *Qoheleth*, 66-75.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. for example W. Baumgartner, 'The Wisdom Literature,' in H.H. Rowley ed., *The Old Testament and Modern Study* (Oxford: OUP, 1951), 221-27.

<sup>18</sup> H. Gese, 'The Crisis of Wisdom in Koheleth,' in J.L. Crenshaw, ed., *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 141-53.

<sup>19</sup> For a superb treatment of this issue see R. Van Leeuwen, 'Wealth and Poverty: System and Contradiction in Proverbs,' *Hebrew Studies* 33 (1992), 25-36.

<sup>20</sup> W. Brueggemann, 'The Social Significance of Solomon as a Patron of Wisdom,' in J.G. Gammie and L.G. Perdue eds., *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 129. On the sociological analysis of Ecclesiastes cf. also F. Crüsemann, 'The Unchangeable World: The 'Crisis of Wisdom' in Qoheleth,' in W. Schotroff and W. Stegemann eds., *God of the Lowly* (New York: Orbis, 1984), 57-77.

<sup>21</sup> W. Brueggemann, 'Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel,' *JBL* 98 (1979), 161-85. Cf. J.R. Middleton, 'Is Creation Theology Inherently Conservative? A Dialogue With Walter Brueggemann,' *HTR* 87/3 (1994), 257-77, for a critique of Brueggemann's view of creation order and see Brueggemann's reply, 'Response to J. Richard Middleton,' *HTR* 87/3 (1994), 279-89.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xli-xlv.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. for example N. Lohfink, *Kohelet* (NEB), (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1993), 7-9, who tends to assume the Hellenistic character of Ecclesiastes, with Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xlv, who is far more cautious. Lohfink thinks that Ecclesiastes may have been written between 190 and 180 BC, just before the Maccabean revolt. In this context Judea belonged to the Hellenistic world and Hellenistic ideas were pervasive and competed with the

A certain consensus has emerged out of a historical critical interpretation of Ecclesiastes. Very few scholars defend Solomonic authorship nowadays: most regard Ecclesiastes as written by an unknown Jew around the late third century BC. Most scholars regard the book as a basic unity with the exception of the epilogue. However, as regards Ecclesiastes' structure, message, relationship to OT traditions and to international wisdom there is no consensus.

With respect to the message of Ecclesiastes historical critical scholarship differs notably from pre-critical readings in its general rejection of the need to harmonise Qoheleth with theological orthodoxy. This loss of theological constraint has not produced agreement about the message of Ecclesiastes, as for example, the huge variety of proposals about how to translate *hebel* indicate.<sup>24</sup> Some like Crenshaw regard Qoheleth as deeply pessimistic, others regard him as also positive but to differing extents.<sup>25</sup> Crenshaw writes:

Qoheleth taught by means of various literary types that earlier optimistic claims about wisdom's power to secure one's existence have no validity. No discernible principle of order governs the universe, rewarding virtue and punishing evil. The creator, distant and uninvolved, acts as judge only (if at all) in extreme cases of flagrant affront

[p.7]

...Death cancels all imagined gains, rendering life under the sun absurd. Therefore the best policy is to enjoy one's wife, together with good food and drink, during youth, for old age and death will soon put an end to this 'relative' good. In short, Qoheleth examined all of life and discovered no absolute good that would survive death's effect... Qoheleth bears witness to an intellectual crisis in ancient Israel.<sup>26</sup>

In similar vein to Crenshaw, Francis Watson describes Qoheleth's vision as 'rigorously hopeless'.

Nowhere else in Holy Scripture is there so forthrightly set out an alternative vision to that of the gospel, a rival version of the truth... In the light of the gospel, nothing could be more illusory than the consolation of Qoheleth's celebrated realism.<sup>27</sup>

Loader likewise argues that Ecclesiastes is a negative witness to the gospel.<sup>28</sup> Whybray by contrast has recently argued that Qoheleth was mainly a preacher of joy. And Ogden asserts

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Jewish tradition. 'Das Buch Koh kann nur verstanden werden als Versuch, so viel wie möglich von der griechischen Weltdeutung zu gewinnen, ohne dass dabei die israelitische Weisheit doch ihren Eigenstand aufgeben musste.' (Lohfink, *Kohelet*, 9) Lohfink assumes a high degree of Hellenistic influence whereas C.R. Harrison, *Qoheleth in Social-Historical Perspective* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1991), argues that it was minimal in Judea. Harrison, however, argues that Ptolemaic economic policy was deeply effecting Judean society.

<sup>24</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, sticks with 'vanity', M. Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions* (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), proposes 'absurd', G. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), proposes 'enigmatic', the Good News Bible translates *hebel* as 'useless', Lohfink, *Kohelet*, suggest 'Windhauch'.

<sup>25</sup> In this respect cf. for example Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, with Ogden, *Qoheleth*.

<sup>26</sup> J.L. Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, Book of,' *Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. II, 277.

<sup>27</sup> F. Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 283-87.

<sup>28</sup> J.A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qoheleth* (New York: de Gruyter, 1979), *Ecclesiastes. A Practical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

that Ecclesiastes' thesis 'is that life under God must be taken and enjoyed in all its mystery.'<sup>29</sup> Ellul sums up Ecclesiastes' message as: 'In reality, all is vanity. In truth, everything is a gift of God.'<sup>30</sup>

## RECENT READINGS OF ECCLESIASTES

Historical criticism remains highly influential in OT studies. However, in recent decades a variety of other reading strategies have developed, some of which are proving fertile in the interpretation of Ecclesiastes. In this section we will look at some of these newer approaches to Ecclesiastes.

### *A Canonical Reading*

To a great extent historical criticism has sought to exclude theological presuppositions from its methodology by insisting that the OT should be read in the same way as any other ANE text. In the latter half of this century there has been a growing reaction to that tendency.<sup>31</sup> Childs<sup>32</sup> has sought to develop a hermeneutic which takes the OT seriously as canon. The intriguing effect of his canonical approach upon his reading of Ecclesiastes is that he reappropriates the epilogue as the key to the canonical function of Ecclesiastes, thereby undermining the one universal fruit of source-criticism of Ecclesiastes. In Childs' view the epilogue alerts us to Ecclesiastes' nature as a corrective within the broader wisdom tradition comparable to James' relationship to Romans in the NT.

### *Literary Readings of Ecclesiastes*

John Barton and others have noted the similarity of Child's canonical hermeneutic to literary methods such as New

[p.8]

Criticism and structuralism.<sup>33</sup> Childs denies such a literary pedigree for his method. Whatever the case the conscious application of literary methods to Ecclesiastes has proved very fruitful in recent years.

### *New Critical Readings*

The Catholic OT scholar A.G. Wright has analysed the structure of Ecclesiastes by means of a close reading of the text along New Critical lines,<sup>34</sup> and Lohfink, another Catholic OT scholar, describes his creative approach to Ecclesiastes as that of *Werkinterpretation*, the German equivalent of New Criticism (NC).<sup>35</sup> Although both Wright and Lohfink see the epilogue as an addition to Qoheleth by another hand, their approaches indicate the developing tendency to read Ecclesiastes as carefully crafted literature. Here we will briefly outline Wright's approach.

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<sup>29</sup> Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 14.

<sup>30</sup> J. Ellul, *Reason for Being. A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 31.

<sup>31</sup> Most recently Watson, *Text, Church and World*, has pleaded for 'Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective'.

<sup>32</sup> B. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

<sup>33</sup> J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament Method in Biblical Study* (London: DLT, 1984), 153, 154, 180-84.

<sup>34</sup> For an introduction to New Criticism and its application to OT studies see C.G. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory* (Analecta Biblica 139), (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1998), pp. 107-17.

<sup>35</sup> 'Freu Dich, Jungling—doch nicht, well du jung bist. Zum Formproblem im Schlussgedicht Kohelets (Koh 11, 9-12, 8),' *BI* 3/2 (1995), 160.

Wright argues that NC provides a method for getting objectively at the structure of Ecclesiastes and thereby breaking the riddle of this book. We have access to the structure through the patterns of verbal repetition in Ecclesiastes. It is the commitment to close reading of NC that Wright fords most attractive and helpful. NC's method:

essentially it is to put attention, first of all, not on the thought but on the form. The critic looks for repetitions of vocabulary and of grammatical forms and thus seeks to uncover whatever literary devices the author may have used, such as inclusions, mots crochets, anaphora, chiasm, symmetry, refrains, announcement of topic and subsequent resumption, recapitulation, etc.<sup>36</sup>

Changes in genre, mood etc. and numerical patterns may also provide clues to the author's plan. Patterns thereby discerned are then related to the content of the book and where development in thought coincides with these patterns, an outline emerges. This sets the stage for Wright to redo a close reading of Ecclesiastes.

In 1:12-18 Wright finds a double introduction followed in 2:1-17 by two paragraphs that expand on this double introduction. The double introduction is marked out by its form. Each introductory section contains an introductory statement and ends with 'all is vanity and a chase after wind' plus a proverb. Wright justifies starting with 1:12 because of a general acknowledgement that this is where the book starts. 2:1-11 and 12-17 are also marked off by the phrase 'all was vanity and a chase after wind'. In this way Wright discerns four sections in 1:12 - 2:17. These sections are generally recognised but in Wright's view no one has pursued this type of analysis further. This he seeks to do by letting subsequent occurrences of the 'vanity' phrase indicate the ends of other units. In this way he arrives at four additional sections in a

[p.9]

short-long-short-long arrangement: 2:18-26; 3:1 - 4:6; 4:7-16; 4:17 - 6:9.<sup>37</sup> The 'vanity' phrase ends in 6:9 and is not repeated in the remaining six chapters. These four sections are all concerned with evaluating man's toil and would seem to be meaningful units. The main subject of 2:18 - 6:9 is 'toil'.

Thus in 1:12 - 6:9 Wright finds a continuity of thought. Qoheleth seeks to report the results of his investigation of life. He starts with a double introduction (1:12-15; 1:16-18) and then evaluates pleasure seeking (2:1-11), wisdom (2:12-17) and the results of toil (2:18 - 6:9). These eight units are tied together not only by the repetition of the evaluation, but also by an interlocking arrangement whereby, once the series begins, each section picks up a motif mentioned two units earlier.

Chapter 6:6-9 contains a number of phrases that recall earlier remarks. This, plus the cessation of the 'vanity' phrase, suggests that 6:9 marks a major break. Wright scrutinises 6:10-12 and finds two new ideas introduced: man does not know what is good to do nor does he know what comes after him. In verses 7 and 8 a pattern occurs with the verbal expressions 'not find/who can find', and in verses 9 and 10 'do not know' and 'no knowledge' occur with great regularity. Wright uses these phrases to mark off sections and thereby ends up with the

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<sup>36</sup> Wright, *The Riddle of the Sphinx*, CBQ 30, 318.

<sup>37</sup> Wright, *The Riddle of the Sphinx*, CBQ 30, 321.

development of man not knowing what is good in four sections in 7:1 - 8:17, and with the development of man not knowing what is to come in six sections in 9:1 - 11:6.<sup>38</sup> This brings us to the generally recognised final poem on youth and old age at the end of the book. Chapter 1:2 and 12:8, as is generally recognised, is an overall inclusion. The question in 1:3 provides the context in which 1:4-11 is to be read. The epilogue is from the editor. In this way Wright arrives at the following outline.

TITLE	1:1
POEM ON TOIL	1:2-11
1. QOHELETH'S INVESTIGATION OF LIFE	1:12 - 6:9
Double Introduction	1:12-15, 1:16-18
Study of pleasure seeking	2:1-11
Study of wisdom and folly	2:12-17
Study of the fruits of toil	2:18 - 6:9
II. QOHELETH'S CONCLUSIONS	6:10 - 11:6
Introduction: man does not know what God has done, for man cannot find out what is good to do, and he cannot find out what comes after	6:10-12
A. Man cannot find out what is good for him to do Critique of traditional wisdom	7:1 - 8:17
B. Man does not know what will come after him	9:1 - 11:6
[p.10]	
POEM ON YOUTH AND OLD AGE	11:7 - 12:8
EPILOGUE	12:9-14

Wright is sure this is objective:

it seems almost certain that the patterns uncovered are a deliberate device utilized by the author to provide the main structure of the book... it is a case of verbal repetitions marking out and exactly coinciding with the repetitions of ideas.<sup>39</sup>

The theme of Ecclesiastes is thus the impossibility of understanding what God has done. Qoheleth's only advice is to enjoy life while one can.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Structuralist Reading***

Loader<sup>41</sup> also fits with this literary trend in his modified structuralist<sup>42</sup> reading of Ecclesiastes whereby he discerns polar opposites as at the heart of its structure. These polar opposites reflect the tension between Qoheleth's view and that of general wisdom. However for Loader, Ecclesiastes is finally negative and theologically a negative witness to the gospel. It is debatable whether Loader is right in seeing Qoheleth as finally negative but Loader's

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<sup>38</sup> Wright, *The Riddle of the Sphinx*, *CBQ* 30, 323.

<sup>39</sup> Wright, *The Riddle of the Sphinx*, *CBQ* 30, 324.

<sup>40</sup> Wright's approach has received mixed reactions but his analysis has been widely influential. Wright buttressed this early analysis with two later articles in which he argues that there are intricate numerical patterns in Ecclesiastes which support his proposed structure.

<sup>41</sup> Loader, *Polar Structures and Ecclesiastes*.

<sup>42</sup> For an introduction to structuralism and OT studies see Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 122-31.

discernment of polar tension in the literary shape of the book is insightful. Other scholars have developed this type of insight in different ways.

### ***A Dialogical Reading***

Perry<sup>43</sup> has recently argued for a literary reading of Ecclesiastes, but one in which Ecclesiastes is approached as the transcript of a debate between Koheleth (K) and the presenter (P). This dialogical approach, according to Perry, is the correct way to understand the 'contradictions' that have plagued commentators for so long. Ecclesiastes is an essay, a collection, a debate and the reader's task is to discern the alternating voices, which is what Perry attempts in his translation and commentary. Perry argues that Ecclesiastes elaborates on the paradigmatic contradiction in Hebrew Scripture which is introduced in the creation story of Genesis. It has to do with the way religious consciousness distinguishes itself from empirical or experiential modes of viewing life.

What seems clear is that, as against the empirically based conclusions of K that all is vanity, P counters with a series of concepts that take on the density of myths of beginnings and ultimate ends, challenging the narrowness of experiential empiricism with notions that cannot possibly be verified by the same methods. P creates a tension by reinterpreting K's devalued image of total vanity with a re-energised version of the same: 'less than All cannot satisfy man' (Blake).<sup>44</sup>

[p.11]

### ***Narrative Literary Reading***

Fox<sup>45</sup> proposes that we read Ecclesiastes as a narrative and wisdom text, with an openness to distinguishing between narrator, implied author and Qoheleth.

It tells something that happened to someone. I would like to take some first steps in the investigation of the literary characteristics of Qoheleth as narrative: Who is speaking (the question of voice), how do the voices speak, and how do they relate to each other? I will argue that the Book of Qoheleth is to be taken as a whole, as a single, well-integrated composition, the product not of editorship but of authorship, which uses interplay of voice as a deliberate literary device for rhetorical and artistic purposes.<sup>46</sup>

Fox argues that while modern scholarship correctly recognises more than one voice in Ecclesiastes, its presuppositions prevent the voice other than Qoheleth's from being listened to carefully. This other voice is the one we hear speaking in 1:2; 7:27 and 12:8 for example. This third person voice is not that of Qoheleth, as is made particularly clear by the way the voices interact in 7:27. It is unlikely, according to Fox, that Qoheleth would speak of himself in the third person in the midst of a first person sentence, while a writer quoting someone else can put a *verbum dicendi* wherever he wishes within the quotation.

Here we should not ask what Qoheleth or an editor could have written, but rather—what are the literary implications of the words? What are we meant to hear in the third person sections? ... I believe the questions raised can best be answered by the following understanding of that voice and its relation to Qoheleth. That certain words are in a

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<sup>43</sup> T.A. Perry, *Dialogues With Koheleth. The Book of Ecclesiastes. Translation and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University, 1993).

<sup>44</sup> Perry, *Dialogues With Koheleth*, 36.

<sup>45</sup> M. Fox, 'Frame Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qoheleth,' *HUCA* 48 (1977), 83-106.

<sup>46</sup> Fox, 'Frame Narrative and Composition', *HUCA* 48, 83.



different voice does not mean that they are by a different hand... I suggest that all of 1:2 - 12:14 is by the same hand—not that the epilogue is by Qoheleth, but that Qoheleth is 'by' the epilogist. In other words, the speaker we hear from time to time in the background saying 'Qoheleth said'... this speaker is the teller of the tale, the external narrator of the story of Qoheleth. That is to say, the epic situation of the third person voice in the epilogue and elsewhere is that of a man looking back and telling his son the story of the ancient wise-man Qoheleth, passing on to him words he knew Qoheleth to have said, appreciatively but cautiously evaluating his work in retrospect. Virtually all the 'story' he tells is a quotation of the words of the wise-man he is telling about. The speaker, whom I will call the frame-narrator, keeps himself well in the background, but he does not make himself disappear. He presents himself not as the creator of Qoheleth's words but as their transmitter.<sup>47</sup>

Fox thus understands Ecclesiastes as operating on three levels: the first is that of the frame-narrator who tells about the second (2a), Qoheleth-the-reporter, the narrating 'I', who looks back

[p.12]

from old age and speaks about the third level (2b), Qoheleth-the-seeker, the younger Qoheleth who made the investigation in 1:12ff. Level one is a different person from levels two and three; levels two and three are different perspectives of the same person.

Fox's approach leads him to explore in detail the meaning of the epilogue in terms of its relationship to the main body of Ecclesiastes.<sup>48</sup> The didactic tone of the father-son instruction situation would have been easily recognised by the early readers of Ecclesiastes. In this way the epilogist identifies himself as a wisdom teacher. The frame narrator's first function in the epilogue is to testify to the reality of Qoheleth so that we react to him as having lived. The second function of the frame-narrator in the epilogue is to convey a certain stance towards Qoheleth and his teaching. Qoheleth is acknowledged as a wise man and his goals are praised but the frame-narrator is subtly non-committal about the truth of Qoheleth's words. In verse 10 Qoheleth is said to have sought fine words and truth but it is not said that he succeeded. This caution becomes more pronounced in verse 12 with the warning against excessive writing and speaking, the very activities Qoheleth is engaged in. Fox takes the comparison of the words of the wise with goads/nails to indicate not positive stability but their dangerous nature; they both prick and hurt. And of course the dogmatic certitude with which the overall duty of humans is stated contrasts with Qoheleth's insistence on the uncertainty of everything. In a sense the epilogue can be seen as a call to allow expression of unorthodox opinion as long as the right conclusion is arrived at. But:

it is not only in offering a proper conclusion that the frame-narrative makes the book more easily tolerated. The use of a frame-narrative in itself puts a certain protective distance between the author and the views expressed in his work. This distance may be important even when the author is anonymous, because it may prevent the book as a whole from being violently rejected. The author blunts objections to the book as a whole by implying through use of a frame-narrator that he is just reporting what Qoheleth said, without actually rejecting the latter's ideas.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Fox, 'Frame Narrative and Composition', *HUCA* 48, 90, 91.

<sup>48</sup> Fox, 'Frame Narrative and Composition', *HUCA* 48, 96-106.

<sup>49</sup> Fox, 'Frame Narrative and Composition', *HUCA* 48, 103.

Fox considers the relationship between the frame-narrator and the implied author, 'the voice behind the voices'. In a footnote Fox refers to the work of Wayne Booth who has argued that every work of literature has an implied author which 'includes, in short, the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole; the chief value to which *this* implied author is committed, regardless of what party his creator belongs to in real life, is that which is expressed by the total form.'<sup>50</sup> This is important because the view of the frame-narrator may not be the same as the implied author, particularly in a book like Ecclesiastes where the conventional view of the frame-narrator does not cancel out Qoheleth's scepticism unless the reader

[p.13]

allows it to. In fact, by ending such an unorthodox book with an orthodox epilogue, the author creates an ambiguity that gives the reader freedom to choose which position align with.

Personally I think that Fox's reading of the epilogue as distancing itself from the main body of the text is incorrect, and I have argued this in detail in my *Reading Ecclesiastes*.<sup>51</sup> Tremper Longman has recently developed Fox's view in the direction of the framework of Ecclesiastes giving us a strong warning against Qoheleth.<sup>52</sup> From this perspective the speeches of Qoheleth are a foil used by the second wise man, the narrator, to warn his son against the danger of doubting, speculative wisdom in Israel. I am cautious of this reading because it leans upon a diachronic analysis of the text without establishing these strands internally and I do not find Fox or Longman's reading of the epilogue persuasive.

However Fox has certainly demonstrated the fundamental importance of a literary approach to Ecclesiastes and, in my opinion, raised one of the most important questions in the interpretation of Ecclesiastes, namely how, in a final form approach, one understands the epilogue to relate to the main body of the text. Fox and Longman are significant representatives of a few recent commentators on Ecclesiastes who have focused intensively on this problem.

### ***Poststructuralist, Feminist, and Psychoanalytic Readings***

Poststructuralism and postmodernism have yet to impact the reading of Ecclesiastes in a major way. The failure of twentieth century scholars to reach any kind of consensus about its meaning could indicate radical textual indeterminacy, but see below. As regards women's experience and Ecclesiastes, attention has tended to be focused on 7:23ff in particular, in an attempt to determine whether Qoheleth was a misogynist or not.<sup>53</sup> Psychoanalytic readings are in vogue and there has been a serious, though eccentric attempt to read Ecclesiastes along these lines by Zimmerman,<sup>54</sup> using insights from Freud, Rank, Jung and Adler.

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<sup>50</sup> W. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (2nd ed.; London: Penguin, 1983), 73.

<sup>51</sup> Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 158-70.

<sup>52</sup> T. Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), especially 37-39.

<sup>53</sup> See for example N. Lohfink, 'War Kohelet ein Frauenfeind? Ein Versuch, die Logik und den Gegenstand von Koh 7, 23-28, la herauszufinden,' in M. Gilbert ed., *La Sagesse de l'Ancien Testament* (BETL 51), (Leuven: UP, 1979), 259-87, K. Baltzer, 'Women and War in Qoheleth 7:23-28: la,' *HTR* 80/1 (1987), 127-32, (1987), O. Loretz, "'Frau" and griechisch-jüdische Philosophie im Buch Qoheleth'. *UF* 23 (1991), 245-64.

<sup>54</sup> F. Zimmerman, *The Inner World of Qoheleth* (New York: KTAV, 1973).

## KEY ISSUES AND WAYS FORWARD

Ecclesiastes is a fascinating book that continues to capture people's imaginations. However one is tempted to despair when one realises the extent to which scholars still disagree about it. Take comparative genre for example. It is amazing to discover that Perdue and Fox in their exploration of this area come up with completely different lists of ANE texts that might help us in assessing the genre of Ecclesiastes!<sup>55</sup> And as we have seen scholars are polarised about the message of the book. Is there any way forward towards a true understanding of Ecclesiastes or is this book quintessentially postmodern and indeterminate?

[p.14]

While there is something wonderfully ironic about a book concerned with the enigma of life being terribly difficult to get to grips with, so that in this respect Ecclesiastes enacts its message textually, I do not think we are left to flounder with no sense of the meaning of the book. In my opinion the following steps enable us to move towards a true understanding of Ecclesiastes.

An awareness that the reader plays a vital role in the understanding of the message of a book and that problems with interpretation can stem as much from the reader as the text or the author is important when wrestling with Ecclesiastes. Crenshaw is most insightful here when he says that

Research into the book also shows that it reflects the interpreter's worldview. That is why, I think, opinions vary so widely with regard to such basic matters as Qoheleth's optimism or pessimism, his attitude towards women... and his advocacy of immoral conduct.<sup>56</sup>

Are there then right ways to approach Ecclesiastes so that it might yield its message to us? In my opinion, yes.

First, it is important that we read Ecclesiastes and not just 'Qoheleth'. The legacy of historical criticism is that it appears natural to exclude the epilogue and try and get behind the text to the real Qoheleth. If we are going to do this then we need to establish cogent arguments for this approach. In my opinion Fox's case for reading the book as a literary whole is compelling so that one is always on highly speculative ground when trying to get behind the text to the real Qoheleth. The way forward is to quit such speculative activity and to focus on the different voices in Ecclesiastes, asking ultimately after the perspective of the implied author. This is the way to hear the message of Ecclesiastes. Perry, Fox and Longman have done important work in this direction and such an approach needs further research.

Second, reading the text as a whole has to involve taking the epilogue seriously as part of the literary whole. An urgent issue in Ecclesiastes scholarship is to reopen the debate about how the epilogue relates to the main body of the text.<sup>57</sup>

Third, Ecclesiastes must be read in the context of the canon of Scripture and especially of the OT wisdom literature. Fox has done seminal work on the *epistemology*<sup>58</sup> of Qoheleth in

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<sup>55</sup> See Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 146-57.

<sup>56</sup> J.L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (OTL), (London: SCM, 1988), 47.

<sup>57</sup> See in this respect K.J. Dell, 'Ecclesiastes as Wisdom'. *VT* XLIV/3 (1993), 301-29, A.G. Shead, 'Ecclesiastes From the Outside In', *Reformed Theological Review* 55/1 (1996), 24-37, 'Reading Ecclesiastes 'Epilogically'', *Tyndale Bulletin* 48.1 (1997), 67-91.

comparison with Proverbs and rightly argues that Qoheleth's epistemology is empiricistic whereas that of Proverbs is not.<sup>59</sup> However Fox does not, in my view, note the significance of this for the canonical interpretation of Ecclesiastes. Although Qoheleth goes out of his way to stress that he embarked on his quest by *hokmah*,<sup>60</sup> the key elements of his epistemology are reason and experience alone and these always lead him down to the *hebel hebalim* (vanity of vanities) conclusion.<sup>61</sup> Read against Proverbs in which 'the fear of the

[p.15]

LORD is the beginning (foundation and starting point) of wisdom' it becomes apparent just how ironic Qoheleth's description of his epistemology is. Ecclesiastes is in this sense an ironic exposure of an empiricist epistemology as always leading one to a *hebel* conclusion. Whether my reading of Ecclesiastes in this respect is right or not, considerable work needs to be done on irony and epistemology in Ecclesiastes.

Fourth, considerable attention needs to be given to the poetics of Ecclesiastes. Sternberg<sup>62</sup> has done the best work by far on the poetics of biblical (OT) narrative, but very little work has been done of this nature with respect to wisdom. Indeed it is only comparatively recently that scholars have come to recognise that the wisdom books are literary compositions in their own right.<sup>63</sup> Repetition is a significant characteristic of Ecclesiastes but it has not received much attention in terms of its function within the book as a whole. Most significant are the repetitions of the *hebel* conclusion and the joy/carpe diem passages.<sup>64</sup> The history of the interpretation of Ecclesiastes is from one angle a sustained attempt to level the book to one or other of these poles. Either the joy passages are made subsidiary to the negative *hebel* conclusion or the *hebel* passages are made subsidiary to the joy conclusion. The crucial question is how the *hebel* (vanity) passages relate to the joy passages.

I have suggested<sup>65</sup> that what we have in Ecclesiastes are the *hebel* conclusions—arrived at via Qoheleth's empiricism applied to the area he examines—juxtaposed next to the joy passages which express the shalomic perspective<sup>66</sup> on life that Qoheleth would have derived from his Jewish upbringing and being part of Israel. These perspectives are set in contradictory juxtaposition and the effect of this is to open up gaps in the reading which have to be filled as the reader moves forward. Thereby the book raises for the reader the question of how these perspectives are to be related to each other. Especially in the post-exilic context in which Ecclesiastes was probably written,<sup>67</sup> it would have been very tempting for Israelites to use

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<sup>58</sup> I.e. the method Qoheleth adopts in order to arrive at knowledge he can trust as true.

<sup>59</sup> See Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*.

<sup>60</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:13, 2:3.

<sup>61</sup> See Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 230-37.

<sup>62</sup> M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative. Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. the superb work of R. van Leeuwen in this area: *Context and Meaning in Proverbs 25-27* (SBL Dissertation Series 96), (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 'The Book of Proverbs'. in *The New Interpreter's Bible* Vol. V, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 19-264.

<sup>64</sup> The Joy passages are, Ecclesiastes 2:24-26; 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:8-10.

<sup>65</sup> See Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 237-54.

<sup>66</sup> A conversation with Robert Alter pushed me towards understanding the joy passages in Ecclesiastes in this way rather than as a sort of hedonism in the context of the despair of *hebel*.

<sup>67</sup> The date of Ecclesiastes particularly in relation to its language remains controversial. See B. Isakkson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth With Special Emphasis on the Verbal System* (Studea Semitica Upsaliensia 10), (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1987), D.C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language: Re-evaluating its Nature and Date* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1988), A. Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words. A*

reason and experience to conclude that life is *hebel hebalim*. Increasing Greek influence might also weight their analysis in this empiricist direction.

This juxtaposition would explain why readers are constantly tempted to flatten out Ecclesiastes either towards the *hebel* pole or towards the joy pole. They are attempting to fill the gaps that the contradictory juxtapositions open up. A crucial question is whether or not Ecclesiastes itself gives us clues as to how to bridge the gaps between these perspectives. I suggest it does. Understanding the irony of Qoheleth's epistemology is one major clue, telling us as it were that if you start from here you will always end up with *hebel*. Qoheleth, for this perspective, describes his approach as *hokmah* but it is actually folly because it does not begin from the fear of the LORD.

The other major clues to bridging the gaps come towards the end of the book. Normally in Ecclesiastes a *hebel* conclusion is

[p.16]

reached and then it is juxtaposed with a joy passage. Towards the end of the book this order is reversed (11:8 ff.) and particularly important is the exhortation prefacing the final section before the epilogue, that is, 'Remember your creator' followed by a threefold 'before...' This exhortation to remember is virtually the equivalent of starting with the fear of the LORD. It means developing a perspective integrally shaped by a view of this world as the LORD'S. In other words it is the reverse of Qoheleth's epistemology. Such a starting point does not deliver one from the struggles of life, as the very strong discussion of death (see 12:1-8) which follows makes quite clear. However it does provide one with a place to stand amidst the struggle so that the 'light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun' (11:7).

This journey brings one back to the point summed up in the epilogue: 'Fear God and keep his commandments'. The epilogue is not a flippant exhortation at odds with the terrific struggle in the main body of the text. It is Ecclesiastes' equivalent of T.S. Eliot's conclusion to his *Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration  
and the end of all our exploring  
will be to arrive where we started  
and know the place for the first time.<sup>68</sup>

## APPENDIX

### COMMENTARIES ON ECCLESIASTES<sup>69</sup>

At the turn of the century Ecclesiastes was subjected to historical critical scrutiny and the attempt to discern a variety of sources in Ecclesiastes is well-reflected in G.A. Barton's (ICC, T & T Clark, 1912) commentary on Ecclesiastes. In the course of the twentieth century

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*Study of the Language of Qoheleth* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 41), (Leuven: Departement Orientalistiek, 1992), C.L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (AB), (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 11-21.

<sup>68</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936, 1974), 222.

<sup>69</sup> This is a revised version of a commentary survey recently published in *Biblical Studies Bulletin*, Issue 10, December 1998.

scholars have moved away from the fragmentation of Ecclesiastes into sources and have increasingly come to recognise its unity. R. Gordis' mid-century commentary (*Koheleth—The Man and His World*, Schocken Books, 1951) is a good example of this trend. Whybray (*Ecclesiastes*, OTG, 1989) is a useful introduction to the present state of scholarship on Ecclesiastes. Moderate critical commentaries which largely read Ecclesiastes as a unity and are helpful theologically are Whybray (NCBC, 1989) and Murphy (WBC, Word, 1992). However these still tend to see the epilogue as a later addition to the book. How exactly we read Ecclesiastes as a whole and relate the joy passages to the vanity passages remains a controversial point.

The literary turn in biblical interpretation has reopened discussion about the shape of Ecclesiastes as a whole and is proving very fruitful in reading Ecclesiastes. Loader (*Text and Interpretation*, Eerdmans, 1986) uses structuralist insights to

[p.17]

analyse the polar opposites in Qoheleth's thought. T.A. Perry (*Dialogues with Koheleth*, Philadelphia, 1993) analyses Ecclesiastes as a dialogue. A.G. Wright has used new critical insights to great effect in his very useful analysis (see *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, London, 1990). M. Fox has done the most exciting work on a narrative approach to Ecclesiastes (*Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, Almond, 1989). Fox's conclusions are controversial but his discussion of Qoheleth's epistemology and the narrative shape of Ecclesiastes are very important for a theological reading of Ecclesiastes as a whole. Tremper Longman (NICOT, 1998) has utilised Fox's insights to argue that Qoheleth's pessimistic speeches are framed by a narrator who warns in the epilogue against the speculative wisdom of Qoheleth.

In my opinion the best recent commentary on Ecclesiastes is that by G. Ogden (*Readings, JSOT*, 1987). Ogden sides with those scholars who read Ecclesiastes as ultimately affirming faith and joy rather than pessimism (such as J.L. Crenshaw, OTL, SCM, 1988). J. Ellul's *Reason for Being* (Eerdmans, 1990) and the Tyndale commentary by Eaton (1983) are also most useful for a theological reading of Ecclesiastes. D. Fredericks (*Coping with Transience*, Sheffield, 1993) interprets Ecclesiastes as struggling with the transience of life. C.L. Seow's (New York, 1997) *Anchor Bible Commentary* is particularly useful for linguistic comments.

At a popular level Kidner (*Bible Speaks Today*, 1976) still points the reader in the right direction. I recommend Ogden, to be supplemented by Fox, and Murphy for exegetical detail and Seow for linguistic detail.