

Chapter 5

QOHELET AS A SCEPTIC

“Hey Johnny, what are you rebelling against?” “Whaddya got?”
(The Wild One, 1953)

Qohelet sets himself against the *hebel* of human endeavours, though not against any named, coherent system of thought or belief. He does not ask explicitly, moreover, to be placed on the side of, or against any, particular tradition or school of thought, and we are invited to consider his a lone voice, speaking from his own reflection on his own experience. Insofar as he has a single target, it appears to be any assumption by his fellow humans that they can themselves influence or properly understand the world in which they live. If his positive proposals can be condensed down to a single idea, on the other hand, it is that humans must be active, not with a view to the outcome of their actions, but because it is only in those actions that they can find enjoyment, and it is only enjoyment which offers them any gain from their lives. Both the attack and the proposal sound radical, but it is difficult to evaluate them in isolation, and we risk allowing our understanding of Qohelet’s significance to be established largely by his presentation of himself.

If it seems obvious to many commentators that Qohelet is a sceptic in some sense, even if that sense is not always clearly defined,¹ then we

1. As Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis*, 45–50, has pointed out, there is much discussion of Qohelet’s scepticism without much definition of the term, or agreement about its meaning—she singles out Martin A. Klopfenstein, “Die Skepsis des Qohelet,” *TZ* 28 (1972): 97–109, as “ein Paradebeispiel für die Art der Probleme in der Diskussion,” because the article discusses Qohelet’s scepticism throughout, without once defining it (p. 47). That may be a little harsh, because Klopfenstein is hardly the only culprit. She goes on, though, to acknowledge that it is difficult to pin down a single definition (pp. 60–62), and turns to approach the matter through an investigation of Qohelet’s ideas, rather than by measuring them against a fixed yardstick. This is sensible in many respects, and my own approach, although very different in other respects, takes much the same starting-point. Over-definition can be unhelpful in itself: in his pair of studies, “What is Scepticism and Can It Be Found in the Hebrew Bible?,” *SJOT* 13 (1999): 225–57, and “Ironic Correlations and Scepticism in the

should perhaps bear in mind also that scepticism may be a matter of perspective:² in our own day, after all, it is not unusual for people holding particular religious or political views to believe themselves to be attacking an entrenched scientific establishment, while that establishment includes scientists who may perceive themselves to be sweeping away centuries of religious dogma. If the essence of scepticism, broadly understood, lies in the expression of doubt, then in such situations we are hardly dealing with a clear-cut case of received wisdom, on the one hand, and scepticism on the other. Indeed, if we allow that there may be some truth in the self-understandings of each, then both sides are “sceptical.” Obviously, though, they are not on the same side, and it is important for us to understand that, outside some particular technical uses in philosophy (to which we shall come later), scepticism need not itself unite sceptics—it is an attitude or approach, not a set of conclusions.³

In addition, and perhaps more importantly, we must also be careful about extrapolating from expressions of doubt the existence of any corresponding certainties. To take a simpler case, I am sceptical about the idea of the moon being made from blue cheese, but you would be unwise to draw from my doubt the inference that any adult actually holds that idea. Even when they are talking about the same matters, then, sceptics may have nothing more in common than their sceptical attitude, while sceptical attitudes to an idea do not in themselves indicate the acceptance of that idea by others.

Joy Statements of Qoheleth?,” *SJOT* 14 (2000): 67–100, William Anderson finds relatively little use for his elaboration of the modes of scepticism after he has turned to the much more interesting question of its relationship with irony.

2. Robert Johnston makes the interesting suggestion in this respect, with regard to Qohelet, in his “‘Confessions of a Workaholic’: A Reappraisal of Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 38 (1976): 14–28, that, viewed from the point of view that wisdom literature is supposed to be about the living of human life, Qohelet’s message is not a sceptical assault, but a call to return to core values.

3. I think that this is a problem in Crenshaw’s treatment, which understands scepticism in terms of a loss of faith; see, for example, “The Birth of Skepticism in Ancient Israel,” in *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God’s Control of Human Events, Presented to Lou H. Silberman* (ed. James L. Crenshaw and Samuel Sandmel; New York: Ktav, 1980), 1–19, esp. 9: “On the one hand, skepticism addresses itself to a specific theological situation; in short, it signifies a crisis of faith in God. On the other hand, the skeptic also isolates a wholly different kind of bankruptcy—the loss of faith in human beings.” He goes on (p. 12), to talk about admissions concerning the “bankruptcy of knowledge” resting “ultimately upon convictions about God.” To a great extent, as is clear at the outset of his essay, Crenshaw is furnishing his own idea of scepticism, and that idea is of a body of beliefs, albeit negative ones. See also the comments of Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis*, 47–48.

It is important to emphasize two such seemingly self-evident points in part because there is a tendency in some scholarship both to talk of scepticism in wisdom literature as though it were a single phenomenon,⁴ and to presume that it arose in response to some particular orthodoxy. A conventional distinction between “sceptical” and “orthodox,” or “pessimistic” and “optimistic” wisdom literature does have its uses as a broad and loose way of classifying texts, and it also draws attention to certain common features. If we are not alert to the risks, however, then it can lead us both to blur the distinctions between some texts and to overestimate the differences between others. With respect to Qohelet in particular, though, we need to be conscious that his possible scepticism in some areas does not imply that he must have been sceptical in others, even where the attitudes expressed in other texts might lead us to expect him to have been. We must also recognize that some of the expectations which he attacks would not necessarily have been common expectations, and that certain of his doubts might have been very widely shared. Qohelet’s relationship with other “sceptical” and “orthodox” texts is itself something which needs to be examined, and not presumed from the outset on the basis of broad generalizations or suppositions.

Correspondingly, if we are to understand Qohelet’s place in ancient literature and thought, his supposed scepticism should not be the point at which we start, but the point at which we finish, and it is our understanding of his ideas in context which should define that scepticism, if the term is appropriate at all, not *vice versa*. I want to begin, however, by returning briefly to the question of Qohelet’s presentation in the book, before looking at particular areas of his thought.

1. *Qohelet in the Literary Tradition*

It hardly needs to be said again that Qohelet’s monologue is founded in an autobiographical account, and his words presented as personal conclusions rather than as received wisdom. Before we are too swept away, however, by Qohelet’s claims to have developed his ideas from his own experience and insight, it might be salutary to look at something written along rather the same lines, but by a very different author:

4. So, for instance, E. J. Dillon, *The Sceptics of the Old Testament: Job, Koheleth, Agur: With English Text Translated for the First Time from the Primitive Hebrew as Restored on the Basis of Recent Philological Discoveries* (London: Isbiser & Co., 1895).

Οὐδεὶς, Κύρν', ἄτης καὶ κέρδεος αἴτιος αὐτός,
 ἀλλὰ θεοὶ τούτων δώτορες ἀμφοτέρων:
 οὐδὲ τις ἀνθρώπων ἐργάζεται ἐν φρεσὶν εἰδώς
 ἐς τέλος εἴτ' ἀγαθὸν γίνεται εἴτε κακόν.
 πολλάκι γὰρ δοκέων θήσιν κακὸν ἐσθλὸν ἔθηκεν
 καὶ τε δοκῶν θήσιν ἐσθλὸν ἔθηκε κακόν.
 οὐδέ τω ἀνθρώπων παραγίνεται ὅσ' ἐθέλησιν:
 ἴσχει γὰρ χαλεπῆς πείρατ' ἀμηχανίης.
 ἄνθρωποι δὲ μάταια νομίζομεν, εἰδοτες οὐδέν:
 θεοὶ δὲ κατὰ σφέτερον πάντα τελοῦσι νόον.

Nobody, Cynus, is himself responsible for loss and profit,
 but gods are the givers of both these things.
 Nor does any human labour knowing, at heart,
 whether he is moving to a good conclusion or a bad.
 For often, expecting to do badly he does well,
 and expecting to do well he does badly.
 Nor do as many things come to a man as he wants:
 for he holds the means of terrible hardship.
 We humans value vanities, knowing nothing,
 but gods bring everything to a conclusion
 according with their own purpose. (Theognis 133–42)⁵

Theognis was a Greek lyric poet of the sixth or late seventh century B.C.E.: although these lines are generally considered authentic (not least because they are addressed to his friend Cynus), much was ascribed to him in antiquity that was probably not, and “Theognidea” were widely cited in classical literature.⁶ Ranston noted many years ago that there are numerous correspondences of thought or expression between his verses (or those attributed to him) and Qohelet’s speech,⁷ and it is certainly difficult to read Theognis without frequently being reminded of Qohelet, as some other examples may indicate:

Πάντων μὲν μὴ φῦναι ἐπιχθονίοισιν ἄριστον
 μῆδ' ἐσιδεῖν αὐγὰς ὀξέος ἡελίου:
 φύντα δ' ὅπως ὤκιστα πύλας Ἀἴδαο περῆσαι
 καὶ κεῖσθαι πολλὴν γῆν ἐπαμυσάμενον.

5. My translations are from the text in M. L. West, *Iambi et Elegi Graeci* (2 vols.; 2d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1989–92), 1:180, 194, 221, and 231.

6. There is an extensive literature; see most recently Hendrik Selle, *Theognis und die Theognidea* (Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte 95; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008).

7. See especially H. Ranston’s *Ecclesiastes and the Early Greek Wisdom Literature* (London: Epworth, 1925), 13–62, 142–50; also “Ecclesiastes and Theognis,” *AJSL* 34 (1918): 99–122; and “Koheleth and the Early Greeks,” *JTS* 24 (1923): 160–69.

The best of all things for humans is not to be born,
nor see the rays of the dazzling sun
—but once born, to pass as swiftly as possible through the gates of Hades
and lie with much earth heaped over. (Theognis 425–28)

Ξυνὸν δ' ἀνθρώποις ὑποθήσομαι, ὅφρα τις ἦβης
ἀγλαὸν ἄνθος ἔχων καὶ φρεσὶν ἐσθλὰ νοήι,
τῶν αὐτοῦ κτεάνων εὖ πάσχεμεν: οὐ γὰρ ἀνηβᾶν
δις πέλεται πρὸς θεῶν οὐδὲ λύσις θανάτου
θνητοῖς ἀνθρώποισι:

I'll make one suggestion to all humans: while you still are young,
having a bright bloom, and soundness of mind at heart,
enjoy what you have. For there is no growing young
twice comes from the gods, nor release from death
for mortal humans... (Theognis 1007–11)

Κύρνε, θεοὺς αἰδοῦ καὶ δείδιθι: τοῦτο γὰρ ἄνδρα
εἶργει μήτ' ἔρδειν μήτε λέγειν ἀσεβῆ:

Respect and fear the gods, Cynus, for it is this that restrains a man
From doing or speaking impiety. (Theognis 1179–80)

Although they are frequently rather general, such resemblances led Ranston himself to see Theognis as a major, although probably indirect, influence on Ecclesiastes. That is not impossible, in fact, unless we wish to date Ecclesiastes very early, but the more important point is that much of what seems radical in Ecclesiastes, when it is read as part of the biblical canon, seems much less unusual when it is considered in the context of ancient literature more broadly. Theognis is not a radical sceptic, and Greece was not somehow cut off culturally from the rest of the eastern Mediterranean, even long before the Hellenistic period, so it is not at all unlikely that some of the sentiments which he expresses had much wider currency.

To take a quite separate example, we also find strong resemblances to some of Qohelet's other themes in an Egyptian text from a much earlier period which describes itself as a harper's song from the tomb of King Intef, although its actual date and origin are disputed:⁸

8. My translation is based on the transcriptions of Papyrus Harris 500 (BM Papyrus 10060), col. VI, 2–VII, 3, and of the fragmentary copy from the tomb of Paatenemheb (the Leyden fragment), in Michael Fox, "A Study of Antef," *Orientalia* 46 (1977): 393–423, esp. 405–6. For the sake of clarity, I have taken considerable liberties with the presentation of the text. For collected translations of harpers' songs, see especially Miriam Lichtheim, "The Songs of the Harpers," *JNES* 4 (1945): 178–212, and Edward F. Wente, "Egyptian 'Make Merry' Songs Reconsidered," *JNES* 21 (1962): 118–28. Fox also gives a translation and a transcription of

The song which is in the tomb of Intef, the justified, which is in front of the harpist:

This noble is flourishing: fate is good, perishing good.

A generation has been going, another staying on,

Since the time of the ancients.

The divine dead who existed long ago, are at peace in their pyramids;

Nobles, become spirits, likewise buried in their pyramids.

Those who built tombs—their places are no more:

see what has been done with them!

I have heard the words of Imhotep and of Djedef-Hor,

widely quoted as their sayings.

See the places belonging to them, their walls crumbled away—

their places are no more, as though they had never existed.

None comes from there

to say how they are doing, to say what they are doing

until he has made our hearts whole,⁹

until we pass swiftly to the place they went.

But be happy in your heart:

Forgetfulness performs the spirit-making rite for you.¹⁰

Follow your heart while you exist,

put myrrh upon your head, dress yourself in fine linen,

anoint yourself with true wonders of divine stuff.

Keep adding to your happiness, let your heart never slacken.

Follow your heart and your happiness, do your things on earth.

Let your heart never perish, until¹¹ there comes to you that day of lament:

the Weary-Hearted One doesn't hear their lament,

weeping doesn't save a man from the netherworld.

Papyrus Harris in his *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 345–47, 378–80.

9. The text reads *stm.tw=f*; with Fox, I understand this to be a writing of *r stmt=f*. This would seem to align the clause with what follows, although Fox translates “and thus to heal our hearts.” David Lorton, “The Expression *šms-ib*,” *JARCE* 7 (1968): 41–54, esp. 47, prefers to read in accordance with the preceding, as *stm=f*. The verb is otherwise unattested, although it appears to be a causative form; most commentators understand it as “make complete,” Lorton as “make to cease.”

10. I divide *wḏ3=k ib=k rs mh3 ib ḥr s3ḥ n=k*, as Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 1:197. Lichtheim disowns her previous rendering, “May thy heart be cheerful to permit the heart to forget the making of (funerary) services for thee” (“The Songs of the Harpers,” 92)—presumably reading *r smh3*—as “overlong and unbalanced.” Fox also divides *r smh3*, but refuses to construe *wḏ3=k* with *ib=k*, rendering, “Be hale! while your heart is directed toward self-forgetfulness.”

11. There are significant differences between the sources here. I read *m wḏ ib=k*, with Papyrus Harris (as Fox), where the Leyden text has *m ḥḏ ib=k* (or *ḥḏt*: Fox, *Song of Songs*, 380); cf. Lichtheim, “as your heart commands.” Immediately afterwards, though, it is probably the Leyden text which is right to read *r* before *iw n=k*.

Refrain: Have a holiday—never tire of it!
 No one can have his things go with him.
 There is none who goes comes back again.

This song is unusual in its insistence not that one should rejoice in the afterlife, or perhaps in the context of specific funerary celebrations, but that life should be enjoyed because death is unknown—quite a radical position in the Egyptian context, which itself attracts criticism in another song.¹² Much of the content, though, is highly conventional, and found in other harpers' songs and funerary inscriptions—not least the initial reference to the coming and going of generations, which is sometimes linked elsewhere to natural phenomena. Just before it too commends rejoicing in life, for instance, the *Song of Khai-Inheret* remarks that:

(As) the waters go downstream
 And the north wind goes upstream,
 (So) every man (goes) to his (appointed) hour.¹³

Of course, the reference here is to the Nile, and the theme seems to be very different from that expressed by Qohelet in 1:6–7, but there are enough points of contact with Egyptian harpers' songs more generally that Stefan Fischer sees them as a major influence on Ecclesiastes.¹⁴ That is questionable, at least if we are to envisage anything close to direct influence, but these texts again show that what seems so strange in the biblical context may have been much more commonplace in reality. Certain of the themes in the Intef song recur many centuries later in tomb autobiographies from the Late Period. For example,

O my brother, my husband,
 Friend, high priest!
 Weary not of drink and food,
 Of drinking deep and loving!
 Celebrate the holiday,
 Follow your heart day and night,
 Let not care into your heart,
 Value the years spent on earth!
 The west [i.e. the place of the afterlife], it is a land of sleep,
 Darkness weighs on the dwelling-place

12. See Lichtheim, "The Songs of the Harpers," 197–98, and *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 2:115–16.

13. From Lichtheim, "The Songs of the Harpers," 201.

14. See Stefan Fischer, *Die Aufforderung zur Lebensfreude im Buch Kohelet und seine Rezeption der ägyptischen Harfnerlieder* (Wiener alttestamentliche Studien 2; Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1999), and "Qohelet and 'Heretic' Harpers' Songs," *JSOT* 26 (2002): 105–21.

Those who are there sleep in their mummy-forms.
 They wake not to see their brothers,
 They see not their fathers, their mothers,
 Their hearts forgot their wives, their children.¹⁵

One final example may suffice. The Sumerian *Ballade of Early Rulers*, as Alster titles it a little quaintly, bears a resemblance to the harper's song from the tomb of King Intef, but can claim transmission rather closer to Israel: copies of a version are known from Ugarit and Emar, and another version is attested in Assurbanipal's library in Nineveh.¹⁶ The version from Syria, as reconstructed by Alster, reads in translation:

With Eni the plans are drawn.
 According to the decisions of the gods, lots are allotted.
 Since time immemorial there has been [w]ind!
 Has there ever been a time when you did not hear this from the mouth of
 a predecessor?
 Above them were those (kings), (and above) those kings were others.
 Above (are) the houses where they lived, [below (are)] their everlasting
 houses.
 Like the remote heavens, no hand, indeed, has ever reached them.
 Like the depth of the underworld (lit. earth), one knows nothing (about
 it/them).
 All life is an illusion.
 The life of mankind was not [intended to last for ever].
 Where is Alulu, the king [who reigned 36,000 years?]
 ...
 Where are those great kings, from former days till now?
 They are no longer engendered, they are no longer born.
 Life onto which no light is shed, how can it be more valuable than death?
 Young man, let me truly instruct you about your god!
 Chase away grief from depression! Spurn silence!
 Instead of a single day's joy, let there come a long day of 36,000 years
 <of silence!>
 As for her little child, may Siraš rejoice over you!
 These are the regulations of righteous mankind!¹⁷

15. From the Stela of Taimhotep. Translation from Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings*. Vol. 3, *The Late Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 62–63. See also Burkes, *Death*, 190–97; Burkes' excellent study considers more generally the developments in attitudes to death that are reflected both in such texts and in Ecclesiastes.

16. For a general description with translations, see Lambert, "Some New Babylonian Wisdom Literature," 37–42. Editions of the three known versions are given in Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 288–322.

17. Translation from Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 312–17. Sayings in other versions are often strikingly reminiscent of Qohelet; note, for example, from the

Although they are not always linked to each other, or to other ideas, in the same ways as in our work, references to human transience and calls to enjoy life can be found in a very wide range of ancient Near Eastern and classical literature. Indeed, Christoph Uehlinger has assembled a very impressive array of texts to demonstrate the close relationship between Ecclesiastes and other ancient Near Eastern literature in many different respects.¹⁸ To that extent, far from being a lone voice, Qohelet may have echoed themes and ideas which were well known already to his audience, and it seems increasingly clear that the book, for all its idiosyncrasies, stood well in the mainstream of ancient literature, and perhaps also ancient popular culture (if that can be generalized). It is important, in other words, to appreciate that Qohelet may have seemed far from shockingly new and radical to the original readers of the book.

Neo-Assyrian text, lines 5–6: “Whatever the heart(’s desires[?]) are on earth, they are no good, [they evaporate(?)] in ‘wind(?)’ / The task of a scholar’s pupil does not yield a joyous heart” (p. 321). Having earlier noted that the Syrian texts show signs of struggling with the original (pp. 292–93), Alster himself comments (p. 297), that “It should now be clear that the spiritual atmosphere of Qohelet was not inspired by Greek influence alone. The inspiration came, at least in part, from Sumerian texts of the early second millennium B.C.E. So far one would have thought that the most likely channel through which they might have passed to the biblical world is through the Syro-Mesopotamian area of the Late Bronze Age (thirteenth century B.C.E.). We can now dismiss that possibility, because the scribes of that area evidently had so many difficulties in coping with the original sources that they were unable to understand them fully, or even seriously misunderstood crucial points. So the transmission is more likely to have happened much later, during the exile through learned circles in Babylon itself.” I think we should more probably draw the conclusion that, whether the origins are ultimately Sumerian or not, the Near East and Eastern Mediterranean regions were familiar over a very long period with the sorts of themes and ideas found in Ecclesiastes.

18. Christoph Uehlinger, “Qohelet im Horizont mesopotamischer, levantinischer und ägyptischer Weisheitsliteratur der persischen und hellenistischen Zeit,” in *Das Buch Kohelet. Studien zur Struktur, Geschichte, Rezeption und Theologie* (ed. Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger; BZAW 254; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 155–247. The principal concern of this important study is to demonstrate that, “Das Qoh-Buch ist—historisch betrachtet—zunächst einmal ein Teil der *altlevantinischen Literaturgeschichte*. Die Primärquelle für die Erhebung der ‘zeitgenössischen Diskussion’ ist dann aber die mesopotamische, ägyptische und levantinische Weisheitsliteratur der persischen und hellenistischen Zeit in ihrer ganzen Breite, nicht nur die ältere alttestamentliche Weisheit und/oder die griechisch-hellenistische Popularphilosophie” (p. 156). Other studies include Loretz, *Qohelet und der alte Orient*, and Johan Yeong-Sik Pakh, “Qohelet e le Tradizioni sapienziali del vicino oriente antico,” in Bellia and Passaro, eds., *Il Libro del Qohelet*, 117–43.

It is possible also that Ecclesiastes drew more directly on existing literature, and there is nothing new or especially problematic in the notion that Qohelet may be citing other sources; after all, we saw earlier that 5:3 (ET 5:4) seems to allude to Deut 23, and most commentators also recognize an allusion to, or even a borrowing from, Gilgamesh in ch. 9.¹⁹ Furthermore, the epilogue to Ecclesiastes seems to suggest itself, at 12:9, that Qohelet was in some sense a collector of sayings. From that point of view, we should be conscious that less of a premium was placed on originality in ancient Near Eastern literature, and that materials were often recycled or re-contextualized in new compositions.

We may be reasonably confident, on the other hand, that such materials as the author did borrow or adapt from elsewhere did not originally include the sort of comments which tie them into Qohelet's broader themes about *hebel*, or his own experience. To an extent that we cannot clearly define, Qohelet's monologue seems to be a re-working of existing ideas and materials, which sets them in the context of Qohelet's over-arching themes and narrative. That draws attention to the essentially facilitatory nature of that presentation, but it does not in itself detract from the originality of the work overall. Indeed, it suggests that we should be looking to the broader aspects of the presentation if we are to understand the distinctiveness of the book.

a. *Instruction and the Individual*

As we may recall from much earlier in this study, instructional literature, especially in Egypt but also elsewhere, was usually attributed to a named author, in contrast to most other pre-classical Near Eastern literature. The convention may go back to an original association of such works with tomb biographies, but these attributions were commonly fictional. In many cases, they were apparently intended to lend authority and prestige to the advice which they offered, by linking it to some famous man, perhaps from the distant past, whose example was worth following. Alternatively, or in addition, the attribution sometimes provided a narrative context within which the content was to be understood, and such late instructions as *Ahiqar* or '*Onchsheshonqy* set their advice within quite complicated stories.²⁰ Although it is not an instruction itself, the general

19. See, for example, Loretz, *Qohelet und der alte Orient*, 116–22. Uehlinger, "Qohelet im Horizont," 180–92, rightly questions whether the author of Ecclesiastes could have drawn this directly from *Gilgamesh*.

20. *Ahiqar* may bear some responsibility for this development, and Lichtheim has argued plausibly that it exercised a significant influence on '*Onchsheshonqy*'; see Lichtheim's *Late Egyptian Wisdom Literature*, 13–22.

presentation in Ecclesiastes can probably be understood in broadly similar terms, and the use of a fictional speech to frame ideas is very widespread in Near Eastern literature.

Although linked to an individual in this way, however, instructions often also claimed or sought a place in some much longer tradition. One of the earliest Egyptian examples, for instance, the *Instruction of Ptah-hotep*, has the elderly vizier pass on to his son advice that is his own, but that has also been passed down to him through the generations, from ancestors who once listened to the gods.²¹ In Mesopotamia, *Šuruppak* claims a legendary, antediluvian origin, and in Jewish literature, the unnamed but individual father who speaks in Prov 1–9 is careful to show how his words go back to teaching from his own father (Prov 4). Rather later, the prologue to the Greek version of Ben Sira points out that the book was written in the light of much reading of the Torah, which concurs both with Ben Sira's own association of wisdom with law, and with his strong emphasis on inherited instruction. A sense of age and tradition is important for many such works, and one Egyptian composition, apparently a collection of admonitions, styles itself simply *The Instruction According to Ancient Writings*.²² In this respect, Qohelet's monologue is clearly very different: to whatever extent it actually made use of older material, it makes no actual claim to antiquity beyond the dubious association with Solomon, and Qohelet's words are avowedly his own, not lessons passed down from of old.

The monologue is not entirely without parallel in this respect. Tradition is not explicitly at the heart of all ancient advice literature, and the specific experience of the protagonists may indeed sometimes have an explicit role to play in their advice. For instance, two Egyptian instructions attributed to kings—*Amenemhet* and *Merikare*—do anchor part of their content in experiences attributed to those kings,²³ and it would be wrong to view advice as wholly disconnected from individual experience in other texts. Instructions are never presented, however, as radical

21. Papyrus Prisse, col. 5, lines 4–6; see the translation in Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe*, 250.

22. See my *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 169–70. The Egyptian text is now published in Fredrik Hagen, “‘The Prohibitions’: A New Kingdom Didactic Text,” *JEA* 91 (2005): 125–64. The ostrakon preserving the title (OBM EA 5631 [*verso*]) does not certainly belong to the rest of the work, which is an unusual collection of negative admonitions, but the fact that it does contain the beginning of one such admonition makes it unlikely that we are dealing with a freestanding “literary doodle,” to use Hagen's term (p. 152).

23. Translations in Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 1:97–109, 135–39; Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe*, 203–34.

re-evaluations of received traditions, and conformity with those traditions is clearly valued more highly in such compositions than is independence of mind. Correspondingly, references to personal experience should not generally be understood as references to real personal discovery. When the writer of Prov 24:30–34, for example, tells of how he passed the overgrown field of a lazy man, sat down and considered it, and reached the conclusion that laziness is a bad thing, we are being offered an illustrative story, not an account of a new philosophical insight—and it is telling that the conclusion reached is no different from that found without such a story, but in almost identical words, at Prov 6:10–11. It is, perhaps, no less telling that Ben Sira looks for wisdom in study and prayer (Sir 39:1–11) or in instruction (51:13–22), not in personal experience. Although, as we have seen, Qohelet cannot be called an empiricist without significant qualification, the presentation of his ideas as the consequence of experience and observation, without reference to tradition, does stand out in the wider context of ancient advice literature.

One consequence is that the authority of the advice devolves entirely on to Qohelet himself, and the reader's response to it is bound up, therefore, with the credibility of the character. In this respect, Qohelet occupies a role more like that of the individual characters in dialogues, and it may be no coincidence that a few ancient texts use separate voices to explore questions about the usefulness or validity of traditional advice. This exploration can take several forms, and perhaps the simplest is found in the Egyptian *Instruction of Any*, when Any's son replies to the instruction given by Any, protesting at his inability to learn so much.²⁴ A similar, but much more interesting device is used in the Mesopotamian work, *Šūpê-amēlī*, where a father again presents what seems to be quite a conventional instruction. The son's response does not convey either his gratitude or a protest against learning. Rather, he seems to talk about uncertainty over who will enjoy the proceeds of his land, about his father's leaving his wealth behind when he dies, and about the shadow of death hanging over humans, who will be cut off from the living when they have died.²⁵

24. Translation in Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 2:135–46. See also Michael V. Fox, "Who Can Learn? A Dispute in Ancient Pedagogy," in *Wisdom, You Are My Sister: Studies in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm., on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday* (ed. M. L. Barré; CBQMS 29; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1997), 62–77.

25. See especially Hurowitz, "The Wisdom of *Šūpê-amēlī*."

Although comparisons have been drawn between Qohelet and the son in *Šūpê-amēlī*, it is difficult to say whether the son's reply even constitutes a rejection of the father's instruction, let alone a sceptical assessment of instruction in general. The preamble to the work, in fact, seems to commend the father as a man who has been given divine insight, and we are not offered a specific basis for the son's objections—unless it is in his initial claim that humans are restless. This makes it difficult to say precisely how the reply is supposed to relate to the father's instruction, and what we are supposed to make of the piece overall. What we can say, though, is that the detachment of advice from tradition, and its attribution more strictly to individuals, offered an occasional way for writers to present separate, perhaps critical viewpoints.

Although it is not so straightforwardly described as "advice literature," the so-called *Dialogue of Pessimism* in Mesopotamia also shows, in a rather different way, how traditional sayings can be used to formulate an argument for quite contrary courses of action—perhaps pre-empting a tenet of Greek sophism²⁶—as a servant justifies the different, and contradictory proposals of his indecisive master.²⁷ Here, the dialogue is not between characters with opposing viewpoints, but instead a single character is made to express different views. The late Demotic instruction on Papyrus Insinger famously sets up contradictory sayings to show the limitations of conventional advice in the face of divine power, and if the whole content was originally attributed to one speaker, as seems likely (the beginning is lost), it is using a similar technique within a rather different format.²⁸

Links with Qohelet have been suggested on other grounds for all these "sceptical" compositions, but the key point here is that they reflect a degree of vitality in the literary conventions employed. When Qohelet attributes his ideas not to tradition but strictly to his own experience, in a fashion that seems unremarkable to a modern reader, he is also detaching them from any implication of established authority. The presentation of the character in this way gives him a different sort of voice, and the few loose analogies in the context of advice literature suggest that other authors may have exploited such techniques to talk more critically about advice.

26. Diogenes Laertius says of Protagoras, καὶ πρῶτος ἔφη δύο λόγους εἶναι περὶ παντὸς πράγματος ἀντικειμένους ἀλλήλοις: οἷς καὶ συνηρώτα, πρῶτος τοῦτο πράξας, "And he was the first who said that there were two contradictory cases to be made about every matter; and he would propound them, being the first to do so" (*Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* 9:51)

27. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 139–49.

28. See Lichtheim, *Late Egyptian Wisdom Literature*, 107–234.

b. *Cumulative Argument*

The detachment of Qohelet from claims to traditional authority makes Ecclesiastes different from most other advice literature in respect of its attribution, but is not without parallel. Something similar might be said also of its attempt to prove general points, which go beyond the particular aphorisms and observations which it offers, and here again we may turn to Papyrus Insinger for an analogy. I shall have more to say about the thought of that text a little later, but for now it suffices to note that it shares with Qohelet's monologue an unusual aspect of presentation: repeated affirmations of a single point in relation to many different themes.

This Ptolemaic work is more regularly structured than Ecclesiastes, organizing its predominantly one-line sayings by subject matter into separate, numbered teachings. Except for the last, furthermore, each of the preserved teachings closes with a comment that (in Lichtheim's translation) "The fate and the fortune that come, it is the god who determines them," or some minor variant on that. The point is often preceded by other comments about divine action, or by the inclusion of sayings, as noted above, which contradict sayings already presented in that teaching. What appear to be a lot of miscellaneous aphorisms, when they are considered separately, are deployed in this way to demonstrate a single overall point, that human fortunes and affairs are under divine control.

Clearly, Ecclesiastes does not have a comparable sequence of separate sections or, for that matter, such regularity of form in its sayings. The characterizations of different phenomena as *hebel*, however, serve a similar purpose, both marking the conclusion of many observations, and cumulatively affirming Qohelet's point that all is *hebel*. Again, they provide a framework for the interpretation of many different items, the implications of which would not always be clear otherwise, and they are not merely a structural device, but integral to the design of the book. Although there is no good reason to suppose any direct influence of one upon the other, Ecclesiastes and the Demotic instruction share a common mode of argument, if it can be called that.

Perhaps a better way of looking at this, however, is not in terms of rhetorical technique, but in terms of the way both understand individual pieces of advice or observation as contributions to a broader idea. Obviously, Qohelet's speech is already far from being just a compilation of aphorisms, but he owes a clear debt to literary traditions of sayings collection, especially in chs. 7, 10 and 11, when series of sayings take the place of continuous discussion. Even elsewhere, the set pieces, the many sudden breaks and the apparent changes of direction all serve to remind us that Qohelet is delivering neither an essay nor a sustained argument,

but a lot of essentially individual items. That these are supposed to add up to something more than the sum of their parts, however, is indicated not only by specific resemblances between many of them, but also by the way he links them to his overall theme. Indeed, when the motto of 1:2 is repeated in 12:8, we may well understand this as an effort to show that an initial proposition has been clarified and proved.²⁹ Qohelet has a point to make, and he conscripts his many observations of *hebel* to make it.

Of course, Qohelet does not make his point only in this way, and there are times at which he does seem to be using something closer to what we would recognize as reasoning. In 2:18–22, for example, he would seem to be making the point that:

- ownership does not depend on worthiness or hard work
- therefore worthiness and hard work do not imply ownership
- therefore worthiness and hard work are a waste of effort

Of course, the argument hinges on the second step here, which is rather questionable—and that may be why Qohelet does not state it explicitly, but apparently allows the conclusion to follow from a double statement of the initial premise. This is indicative, however, of a general tendency not to set out arguments completely, or even to indicate their nature. To put a point made earlier in a different way, are we supposed, for instance, to take the natural phenomena of 1:5–7 as the basis for an inductive argument, which extrapolates the existence of other processes from these examples, or are they just illustrative of an existing belief? The distribution of related discussions across the monologue, along with this apparent lack of concern to form clear arguments, make it difficult to view what Qohelet is saying in terms of a treatise, but it is also clear that the book makes an effort not only to link its ideas, but to develop and extrapolate from them, albeit in what appears to be a very disjointed way.

Papyrus Insinger furnishes a parallel to the use of accumulation, but not obviously to such development, and in this respect Ecclesiastes is very unusual as advice literature. That probably does not mean that we should regard it instead as philosophy, at least if that were supposed to imply that argumentation in itself creates a link to Greek philosophical texts³⁰—and it is not clear that the distinction would be especially useful

29. See, for example, William H. U. Anderson, “The Poetic Inclusio of Qoheleth in Relation to 1,2 and 12,8,” *SJOT* 12 (1998): 203–13.

30. Peter Machinist, “Fate, *miqreh*, and Reason: Some Reflections on Qohelet and Biblical Thought,” in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* (ed. Ziony Zevit, Seymour Gitin and Michael Sokoloff; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 159–75, suggests

otherwise.³¹ For all that it includes, however, more conventional series of sayings, along with a certain amount of material which is, at best, tangential to its key themes, Qohelet's monologue seems to involve a deliberate attempt to demonstrate a more general point than its contents can show individually.

c. *Poetry*

Because we have focused on Qohelet's main ideas, we have had little reason to look at some of his "tangential" material at all. Some of this

that "if we are to consider Greek, specifically, Hellenistic, influence on Qohelet's use of *miqreh*, and I think we may, we must be circumspect, for the influence may reside not so much in the use of *miqreh* for fate per se, as in the ability to write about *miqreh* in a way that indicates both a rational process at work and, even more, a reflection on what that rationality consists of. We have here, in short, a concern for 'second-order' thinking such as marked Greek thought from the pre-Socratics onward and that otherwise is hardly to be noticed in the written remains of the pre-Hellenistic Near East" (p. 174). Whether or not that overstates the degree of argumentation in Ecclesiastes, I am sure that it misrepresents the type. For the sort of thinking which Machinist has in mind, see especially G. E. R. Lloyd, *Magic, Reason and Experience: Studies in the Origin and Development of Greek Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

31. I do not intend to address the broader question of Qohelet's affinities with Greek philosophical thought. Attempts to associate ideas in Ecclesiastes with Greek philosophy have a long and mixed history, and even the most ardent proponents of such an association might admit that the issue has too often been confused by a focus on superficial resemblances rather than underlying purposes or assumptions: this is a criticism which might be levelled in particular at Rainer Braun, *Kohelet und die fruhhellenistische Popularphilosophie* (BZAW 130; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973), which is very learned but somewhat eclectic, although there is a similar tendency visible in some other works. Carol Newsom, "Job and Ecclesiastes," in *Old Testament Interpretation: Past, Present, and Future: Essays in Honor of Gene M. Tucker* (ed. James L. Mays, David L. Petersen and Kent H. Richards; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 177–94, esp. 185, notes that "parallels alone do not constitute an argument for influence, especially when the ideas or expressions in question may just as easily be traced to native Semitic wisdom traditions." A useful overview appears in Burkes, *Death*, 91–108, but it is difficult to get a proper handle on the subject because the links which individual scholars perceive depend to a great extent on their understanding of what Qohelet is saying, so there is no single set of claims which can be addressed. In principle, it is unlikely that the date of Ecclesiastes would preclude contacts with early Greek philosophy (although associations with the more developed philosophical systems are probably to be excluded on that basis), but we should not neglect the extent of the cultural links between Greece and the Levant long before that date: resemblances may indicate relationships without demonstrating dependencies.

consists of sayings like those in 4:9–12, which seem to pick up the point about working only for oneself made in 2:7–8, but to carry it in a quite different direction, which is of questionable relevance to Qohelet's theme. Obviously, what counts as tangential or irrelevant is going to depend on what one takes to be the theme and meaning of different passages. The most significant example, however, is probably the most unarguable as well: even if death or old age are important considerations at other points, it is difficult to see how the long and problematic sequence of images in 12:2–7 might have been included to prove any particular point. Their function, indeed, seems not to be argumentative but evocative, and they bring the monologue to a close among scenes of the dimness, grief and brokenness which will mark also the close of every human life.

Elsewhere, the sequence of pairs in 3:2–8 fits more closely into the particular point that Qohelet is trying to make. Whether any of the sequence is needed to make that point might be debated; it would be hard to argue that it is all needed, however, or that the many different pairs each express some different nuance of his argument. Similar questions, indeed, might be asked about, say, the analogies presented in the prologue at 1:5–9, or the sayings presented in series by ch. 7. Whether or not the author of Ecclesiastes composed them himself (and I see no good reason to suppose that he did not) such set-pieces have clearly not been included solely, or perhaps even primarily, for the purpose of argumentation. Without either getting involved in problems of definition, or suggesting that we must read them as verse, we can speak very broadly of these materials as poetry, and some or all are often actually considered poems.³²

32. Hertzberg, *Der Prediger* (Kommentar zum Alten Testament 17/4; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1963), 73, for instance, takes the prologue ("ein Meisterstück") to be "in schlichter, edler Sprache geschrieben, läuft es in rhythmisch freier Form ab, meist in Dreiern und Zweiern, die zwanglos und doch in metrischer Absicht geordnet sind," and Verheij suggests that the passage "is at a rather blurred part of the borderline between poetry and prose"; cf. Arian J. C. Verheij, "Words Speaking for Themselves: On the Poetics of Qohelet 1:4–7," in *Give Ear to my Words: Psalms and Other Poetry in and Around the Hebrew Bible. Essays in Honour of Professor N. A. van Uchelen* (ed. Janet Dyk; Amsterdam: Societas Hebraica Amstelodamensis, 1996), 183–88, esp. 183. Verheij notes the pervasive use of assonance and repetition which is characteristic of vv. 4–7, and similar devices are explored in the more wide-ranging study by Wong Tin-Sheung, "Qoheleth 1:3–11: Prose or Poetry?," *Jian Dao* 14 (2000): 25–47. In 3:1–9, Athalya Brenner, for example, takes it for granted that we are dealing with "a poem which lists human actions and reactions in contrasted pairs," although she argues that Qohelet has re-used (or "misused") an existing love poem; see "Some Observations on the Figurations of Woman in Wisdom Literature," in *A Feminist Companion to*

Just as it is not obviously helpful, however, to call Qohelet a philosopher because he argues, so it is doubtful that we should speak of him as a poet because he uses poetic language. This is one respect, indeed, in which he has much in common with the protagonists of other ancient advice literature, who (contrary to rumour) characteristically have little time for simple and lucid exposition. As the citations from Theognis at the beginning of this section may suggest anyway, however, it is not easy or desirable to impose strict categories of that sort on ancient literature. The presence of these materials, on the other hand, does go some way to offset any impression that demonstration of its key ideas is the only concern of the monologue.

We may be pushed a little further in the same direction, if we observe that the most obvious biblical analogies to some of Qohelet's themes and ideas are to be found in the Psalms. For instance, Ps 39:5–7 (ET 39:4–6) not only draws on the imagery of *hebel* to emphasize the transience of human life, but also declares that “one collects, but knows not who will gather in”—apparently a reference to the idea that we are forced by mortality to pass our work on to others we do not know. Psalm 49 makes the same point, that wealth must be left to others, while at the same time emphasizing that the wise and the foolish must both die (v. 11 [ET 10]), and that all humans, indeed, must die like animals (vv. 13, 21 [ET 12, 20]), joining their ancestors in Sheol, where they will never again see the light (v. 20 [ET 19]).³³ Psalm 73, on the other hand, concerns itself with the problem that the wicked seem prosperous and healthy, which leads others to praise them, and to doubt divine justice.

Of course, there are differences too, and if we can talk of any direct influence passing between Qohelet and such psalms, then the direction of that influence is difficult to establish—as is the cultic significance, if any, of the particular poems. Such questions, however, do not really change the fact that key themes in Qohelet's monologue are best attested elsewhere in Hebrew poetry, and we might also bear in mind that the book of Job, commonly linked with Ecclesiastes in discussions of sceptical and pessimistic literature, is itself primarily poetic. Poetry and poetic

Wisdom Literature (ed. Athalya Brenner; The Feminist Companion to the Bible 9; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 50–66, esp. 50, 57. J. A. Loader, “Qohelet 3:2–8—A ‘Sonnet’ in the Old Testament,” *ZAW* 81 (1969): 239–42, goes so far as to declare that in 3:2–8 we have “an exact parallel to the Petrarchan sonnet” (p. 241). More generally, see Loretz, “Poetry and Prose.”

33. See Holger Delkurt, “*Der Mensch ist dem Vieh gleich, das vertilgt wird*”: *Tod und Hoffnung gegen den Tod in Ps 49 und bei Kohelet* (Biblich-theologische Studien 50; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005).

language have to be considered not only as a component of our book, but as a significant characteristic of the works which seem to stand closest to it in Hebrew literature.

d. *Conclusions*

We observed much earlier in this study that there are some distinctive aspects to the presentation of Qohelet as a character. Clearly, there are also some distinctive features in his monologue itself, and we have noted in particular here both its conscious detachment from any idea of ancient or traditional authority, and its attempts to develop particular themes, associating specific instances with a general conclusion. Along with both the autobiographical and the observational aspects of Qohelet's discourse, the former highlights the obvious concern to present his words as those of an individual, arising out of individual experience. We have also seen, however, that such individualism and detachment from tradition is attributed to characters in some other, comparable literature, and that what looks like a break with the usual conventions may be no more than a literary exploitation of those conventions.

There are similar indications of both continuity and distinctiveness in Qohelet's accumulation of *hebel* statements to affirm that "all is *hebel*." The only close parallel, on Papyrus Insinger, stands very clearly in the traditions of advice literature, even if it is bending the conventions to a new purpose. Qohelet's speech stands further from the standard collections of sentence literature, and can aspire to a more complicated development of its ideas. It is not an essay, though, and there is a lack of continuous discussion within most of the monologue that both recalls the normal atomism of ancient advice literature, and inhibits serious argumentation. We observed, finally, that there are also materials present in the book which have clearly not been included only—or at all—for their contribution to development or elucidation of the key themes, and that it seems difficult not to discern in some of them a quality that is more poetic than argumentative.

It is undoubtedly difficult to point to any other ancient composition that looks quite like Ecclesiastes overall, and its presentation is also clearly unusual in certain particulars as well. Of course, we possess only a limited corpus of other texts for comparison, and the problems over dating make it difficult to assess the relationship even with those. I think, though, that we have enough indications to suggest that the original readers would probably have found more here that was familiar than radically new in the book's presentation. We need to distinguish, however, between claims and reality in such matters—between, one might

say, the authorial assertions to which a reader consents, and the reader's own knowledge and recognition.

It seems difficult to doubt that the author of Ecclesiastes sets up Qohelet as a radical thinker of some sort. From both his self-presentation and his attribution of his conclusions to personal experience, rather than to tradition, it may have been apparent to readers from the outset that Qohelet did not want to be heard as just another tradent of ancient wisdom. From his challenging initial claims and his subsequent attempts to demonstrate them, moreover, it would probably also have been clear that he was offering more than just a collection of advice. Going back to our earlier discussion, we might add that things like his dialect and commercial vocabulary would probably also have shaped a strong initial perception that Qohelet was supposed to be different. Of course, as the book progresses, such initial indications are rapidly affirmed by the narrative of rejection and regret in ch. 2, and by Qohelet's subsequent self-presentation as a man who sees clearly in a world of delusion.

As we have seen, however, there are grounds to suspect that many of Qohelet's themes, and even certain of his words, would have been familiar already to the original audience, and, in looking at the distinctiveness of the presentation, we have also seen much that is conventional, or at least not unprecedented. Setting aside the message of the book itself for the moment, we must appreciate that although readers probably understood that Qohelet was being presented to them as something new, it was as something new within the confines of the familiar—a character who reacts against convention in a text which is steeped in convention, and who bares his soul while dressing his words as traditional sayings, or perhaps sometimes as poetry. In certain ways, indeed, Qohelet is a counterpart to the more common protagonists of advice literature, whose words actually may be novel, even though they are presented as ancient tradition. At the very least, there is too much in the book that is familiar even to us from elsewhere for us to presume that its original audience would have taken its self-presentation at face value.

Accordingly, it would seem no more wise to assume that Qohelet's words really are radical, just because they are presented as such, than it would be to assume that they are genuinely the *cri de coeur* of a man who has been through the experiences he describes. This is a literary work, intended to be read against a background of conventions and expectations about which we know very little. Certainly, what evidence we have suggests, on the other hand, that readers might well not have expected to find in a work like this the relative consistency of theme that the monologue exhibits, and they may have been surprised by the way in

which possibly familiar motifs of transience and enjoyment, for example, are tied together. The fact that much may have been conventional does not mean that nothing in the book was new.

2. Key Themes

As we turn to the place of Qohelet's ideas, then, it is important to recognize that they too may have roots much deeper in existing literature, and that what Qohelet associates with his own experiences and observations may well have been derived by the author from elsewhere. Again, though, we find an interesting combination of the old and the apparently new, and here the inter-relationship of new ideas begins to give us a clearer picture of the book's distinctive contributions.

a. *The Problem of Divine Sovereignty*

Various limitations are placed on human knowledge and ambition in ancient advice literature. *Ptahhotep*, for example, recognizes that some individuals may simply be incapable of learning what they are supposed to do, and finds in this a distinction between those deemed suitable and unsuitable by the god—an idea that is a little reminiscent of Qohelet's ideas in 2:26.³⁴ The debate between father and son in the *Instruction of Any* also raises questions about the human ability to learn what is supposed to be learnt, although in a rather different way. The most important and commonly cited limitation, though, is the ability of gods to overrule human plans. As two examples from Proverbs put it:

Many plans are in the mind of a man, but what will occur is what YHWH has planned. (Prov 19:21)

There is no wisdom, and no understanding, and no plan that stands in the way of YHWH: a horse is readied for the day of battle, while the victory is YHWH's. (Prov 21:30–31; cf. Ps 33:17)

At the heart of such ideas there lies not a rejection of advice, but an acknowledgment that divine action cannot be constrained by human action. The *Instruction of Amenemope* famously contrasts human words with divine deeds,³⁵ but also points to various ways in which humans can incur divine anger, and in this respect it is probably typical of an emphasis on personal piety which became widespread in New Kingdom

34. See Papyrus Prisse, col. 16, lines 3–13; translation in Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe*, 262–63.

35. *Amenemope* XIX.16–17: “The words men say are one thing, the deeds of the god are another”; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 2:157.

Egypt.³⁶ Put simply, the unconstrainable power of the divine means that humans can never guarantee a particular outcome on the basis of their own behaviour, but can nevertheless behave in ways that improve their chances of success and minimize their chances of incurring divine punishment.

Although such limitations are not always stated explicitly, they are probably understood even in much earlier literature. Correspondingly, there may never actually have been any purely “optimistic” advice literature, if by that term we mean to imply that writers considered themselves to be offering cast-iron guarantees of success to those who followed their advice about specific behaviour. The issues are drawn out very effectively in the biblical book of Job, which does not focus specifically on advice, but which shows how the situation of an individual may not actually reflect an anticipated divine response to their behaviour. Arguably, in fact, Job’s sufferings come about not *despite* his piety but *because* of it: whether or not Job’s friends and community would usually be right to interpret the situation in terms of divine punishment or discipline, they are wrong to do so in this case—as both Job and the reader are well aware. When God intervenes, moreover, it is not to explain his actions, but to affirm that he does not need to explain them: the issue is not that humans should perceive no relationship between their behaviour and what happens to them (cf. 38:13), but rather that God is not bound to the maintenance of such a relationship by any commitment or debt.

The recognition of divine sovereignty does not in itself imply the inadequacy of advice, and, likewise, does not exclude the probability that common understandings of a situation may be correct. In Job, divine retribution is normally operative, which is why it is presumed by others to be the reason for the hero’s suffering, and Job’s prosperity, both before and after the events addressed by the main story, is associated with divine favour. It is because retribution usually functions that the exceptions pose a problem, and we may observe that the statement of divine freedom in Prov 19:21 (“Many plans are in the mind of a man...”) is preceded, just a few verses before, by an assurance that God can indeed be constrained: “He who’s kind to a poor man puts YHWH in his debt—and he will pay him back what’s owed” (Prov 19:17). Papyrus Insinger, mentioned already above, puts conventional advice into perspective by adding contradictory statements, but there is no reason to suppose that the advice is considered to have been rendered useless for

36. See, for example, J. Assmann, “Weisheit, Loyalismus und Frömmigkeit,” in *Studien zu altägyptischen Lebenslehren* (ed. E. Hornung and O. Keel; OBO 28; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), 11–72.

that reason. In literature which emphasizes the power and freedom of gods, then, we do not usually find some corresponding belief that humans can do nothing to control their own situation. This is rather, one might say, a theoretical limitation that explains unpredictability in human affairs, and that sustains a theological presupposition of divine sovereignty. In many texts it is effectively ignored while in others it provides a key focus for concern, but what we are probably seeing is not a difference of fundamental belief between such texts, so much as a difference in concern or emphasis.

Read in relation to such issues, Jewish literature offers some interesting complications, especially in respect of both the covenantal ideology which runs through many historiographical and other materials, and the associated idea of commands (“instruction”) about behaviour given by God. There may be a sideswipe at notions of covenant, indeed, in Job 40:28 (ET 41:4), and if a belief in divine self-limitation through covenants is not strictly incompatible with ideas of absolute divine sovereignty or freedom, it does at least sit a little uncomfortably with them. I have argued elsewhere that the ideas put forward in Prov 1–9 try to incorporate Deuteronomic themes into what is essentially the framework of instructional literature,³⁷ and that attempt gives rise to a very distinctive approach: for this work, the task of humans is apparently not so much to conform to a preset idea of right and wrong behaviour, but to gain through instruction, and then to internalize, a wisdom that permits them to recognize in any situation the behaviour which is expected of them by God. We do find, therefore, at least one specifically Jewish response to the problem.

In some important respects, this is very distinctive. An emphasis on discernment and differentiation in Prov 1–9 effectively nurtures the idea that righteousness lies in understanding the divine will, rather than in following a set of specific admonitions. Although the work is not trying directly to address the problem of divine sovereignty, therefore, it superficially removes from God the constraint of having to reward or punish behaviour in accordance with such admonitions. Indeed, the presentation shifts a great deal more away from God, since humans, as depicted in Prov 1–9, are typically not judged directly, but destroy themselves by following the wrong paths: without wisdom, the limits on their perception turn the world into a sort of minefield, and even that wisdom has to be told apart from other, more dangerous would-be guides (see especially 1:10–19; 7:1–27; 9:13–18). By elaborating an idea of discernment forged by instruction, Prov 1–9 offers what may be a more confident assurance

37. See my *Instruction and Imagery*.

of conformity to the divine will, but places the onus on humans to adapt themselves, not on God to constrain himself.

This may be a version of the idea which Qohelet himself promotes—that it is those who fear God that will survive—and such an idea may be found elsewhere in Proverbs as well (e.g. 14:27; 19:23): wisdom literature has broader concerns with attitude and character, which make it inappropriate to focus solely on actions as the trigger for divine response. Qohelet's ideas about divine sovereignty, however, are not related solely to those in Proverbs, but seem broadly to echo ideas found very widely in other wisdom literature: God is beyond human constraint, which imposes limits on the effectiveness of human behaviour; despite that, however, the God-fearing may expect to survive. If he doubts that humans can assure their well-being through their own actions, this a doubt which seems to have been very widely shared.

Qohelet's approach to questions in this area, though, becomes much more distinctive when we consider his rejection of a simple link between actual wellbeing and material prosperity. Although God does apparently reward humans, as we saw earlier, it may not be by granting them rewards that are physical, or even visible; accordingly, if such things are what humans seek when they behave in a certain way, they may find themselves rewarded, but not with what they thought they wanted. Conversely, those who appear to be prospering may actually be suffering, or at least awaiting punishment. Without fundamentally challenging the idea that righteousness and wickedness will usually elicit an appropriate divine response, Qohelet nevertheless detaches that response from human expectations about deed and consequence in a much more radical way than does other literature, and understands it in terms of his more general doubts about the correspondence between perception and reality, tied up with his ideas about the world.

b. *Fate and Process*

Before we pursue that further, it is important to look a little more closely at other understandings of divine action. To the passages about divine sovereignty cited above from Proverbs, we might add the following examples, which do not so much contrast as integrate human actions with divine plans:

A human's mind may plan his route, but it is YHWH who places his steps.
(Prov 16:9; cf. Jer 10:23)

The steps of a man are from YHWH, and a human—what can he understand of his way? (Prov 20:24)

These rather similar sayings seem to suggest that God may not merely overrule human plans, but actively exploit them: humans can believe they are acting according to their own design when their deeds are actually being controlled by God, or may simply be led along in a particular direction without understanding that their route is planned by God.

Although its ideas in this respect are a little different from those of Qohelet, Papyrus Insinger illustrates another way in which the divine plan may run counter to the human understanding of a situation:

A lifetime is given to the impious man, in order to make him encounter retaliation.

Property is given to the evil man in order to deprive him of his breath through it.

One does not understand the heart of the god until what he has decreed has come. (30.23–31.1)³⁸

And we can compare also some lines from a Sumerian/Akkadian bilingual text found at Ugarit:

People do not by themselves know their doings.

The plans for day and night rest with the god.³⁹

It is clearly not novel in itself for Qohelet to suggest that what God is doing in a situation may not be what humans perceive themselves to be doing in that situation, or that human activities may form, in effect, a part of divine activities. In practical terms, indeed, that may be the implication of a great many general statements about divine action in a wide range of literature, when divine ends can only be achieved through the unconscious manipulation of human actors.⁴⁰ If we are right, however, to understand that Qohelet sees all human activities in terms of much broader processes beyond the control of the actors, then this seems to represent something rather different from *ad hoc* interventions by God in the lives of individuals.

Quite what it does represent for humans, though, is more difficult to specify, particularly if we try to understand Qohelet's ideas on the subject in terms of freewill and determinism. We saw earlier that the discussion

38. Translation from Lichtheim, *Late Egyptian Wisdom Literature*, 229.

39. Translation from Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 325. See also M. Dietrich, "‘Ein Leben ohne Freude...’. Studie über eine Weisheitskomposition aus den Gelehrtenbibliotheken von Emar und Ugarit," *UF* 24 (1992): 9–29; and Nougayrol, "Textes Suméro-Accadiens," 291–300 and pls. 164–66.

40. I doubt that Qohelet has the historical consciousness imputed to him by Staples, "Profit in Ecclesiastes," 94–95, but that study discusses several interesting biblical examples.

of times in 2:26–3:11 very definitely portrays human actions—and even emotions—as divinely approved in some sense, and that is probably also the implication of 9:7: “Go, eat your bread with pleasure, and drink your wine with a happy heart. For God has already approved your work.”⁴¹ Such ideas seem to suggest some sort of determinism, and it is possible to read much of the monologue in such terms.⁴² His strong affirmation of divine judgment would seem to suggest, nevertheless, that Qohelet believes humans themselves to be liable for their actions, and that surely seems implicit also in, say, the advice about righteousness in 7:16–20, or about the dangers of breaking an oath in 5:3–5 (ET 5:4–6).

This apparent tension between determinism and free will is surely present in the text, but it is not clear that it is a tension of which Qohelet ever shows himself to be aware, and here we may be imposing categories or drawing distinctions that would have been alien to the author of the book, or at least to his character. Qohelet’s own way of describing God’s relationship to human activities is in terms of employment and the setting of tasks: humans are workers doing for God a job which they do not understand, and which they may not be aware even that they are doing. If they do anything, however, then they are effectively doing this job, and they are employed until they die. To all intents and purposes, though, this is irrelevant to humans themselves in the conduct of their lives: ignorant of the fact that what they do is contributing to some much greater design, they simply pursue their own plans and ambitions. Of course, those ambitions are at the heart of Qohelet’s claims about *hebel*, and *hebel* would not be a problem for him if human motives were not distinct from divine plans.

The same distinction, however, is one way in which to understand his belief that humans are liable to judgment even though their actions form part of a divine plan or process. According to such an explanation, Qohelet regards the human will to do good or bad as the determining factor in judgment: a murder may suit the divine will when it happens,

41. We could probably understand this alternatively in terms of Qohelet’s ideas about restrictions on pleasure, with the very possibility of such enjoyment indicating approval.

42. The most comprehensive discussion is by Dominic Rudman, in *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (JSOTSup 316; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001). Rudman concludes that Qohelet is a determinist “in the truest sense of the word” (p. 202), although he allows that there is a degree of free will involved in the seeking of pleasure, and sees kings as free agents, courtesy of a sort of divine delegation of authority. As will become clear, I think that this study, valuable though it is in many ways, imputes a greater thoroughness and consistency to Qohelet’s thoughts on the matter than can actually be found in the text.

but a murderer is still a murderer. Even if everything is right in its time, to put this more generally, there are still right and wrong actions at the human level, and those who wilfully do what they believe to be wrong are displaying defiance toward God, rather than fear of him. If, however, Qohelet really does achieve a *modus vivendi* between his ideas in this way, by separating the morality of actions on the human level from the role of those actions on another level, then he is ignoring a point which is crucial to discussions of determinism: the mechanism of divine action. If God's plan or process needs a murder, then how is that achieved without motivating someone to commit the crime? The other main possibility, I think, is that we may be imposing too strong an idea of determinism on Qohelet's talk of times and processes, and that we should envisage something much more adaptive. On that reckoning, the processes which Qohelet envisages are not fixed and predestined, but feed, as it were, off anything that comes their way—more like the wind than the sun, to use his own illustrations, never ceasing but endlessly shifting. The most important point, though, is that the book itself does not offer an explanation, and in seeking to understand for ourselves how Qohelet reconciles his ideas we are in danger of overlooking the possibility that he (or the author) simply does not see the problem.

All this is important here because determinism is often adduced as one of the most distinctive characteristics of the book, and it would do much to help us place its thought were that true. In particular, determinism has probably been the single most important consideration in a number of attempts to link Ecclesiastes with Stoicism, which also struggled with issues of free will in respect of wrongdoing, but which held a fundamentally deterministic view of the universe.⁴³ Without going into all the difficulties that are involved in making such a link, however, it may be apparent that the gaps and problems in Qohelet's account of human subordination are no less eloquent than his assertions on the matter: this is not self-evidently the work of a writer familiar with the issues involved.

Indeed, it is not clear that Ecclesiastes marks a significant advance on Proverbs in this respect. The passages cited above, from Prov 16:9 and 20:24, seem deterministic to us, but lie in the context of a sayings

43. Among modern scholars, see, for example, John G. Gammie, "Stoicism and Anti-Stoicism in Qoheleth," *HAR* 9 (1985): 169–87. Otto Kaiser, "Determination und Freiheit beim Kohelet/Prediger Salomo und in der Frühen Stoa," in *Gottes und der Menschen Weisheit. Gesammelte Aufsätze* (BZAW 261; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), 106–25, makes a more heuristic comparison. The issue is studied in detail by Rudman, *Determinism*, 173–99, who sees significant parallels, and suspects at least an awareness in Ecclesiastes of Stoic ideas.

collection which contains numerous non-deterministic sayings. They exhibit also a concern with the problem of human comprehension that matches Qohelet's own emphasis very well, and suggest that discussions in this area were linked more to the general issues of divine sovereignty and inscrutability than to any doubts about free will. Qohelet's extrapolation of "processes," illustrated by natural phenomena, is much more distinctive than any deterministic ideas linked to those processes, but it is difficult to see Qohelet's ideas of divine governance overall as any sort of a coherent attack on existing conceptions. Furthermore, although a perception of determinism in the book was certainly a problem for some later commentators, the practical implications of any such determinism are limited so long as Qohelet continues to assert also the reality of divine judgment and the independence of human motives. It is doubtful that anyone could use Qohelet's assertions on the matter to justify the sort of fatalism that blames God for human sin, and is attacked in Sir 15:11–20.

c. *Human Knowledge*

We are surely touching on issues more important to the book itself when we return to Qohelet's ideas about knowledge, and we have already observed their centrality both to his thought and to his message. It also appears to be in this area that Qohelet most deliberately challenges established practices or ideas, portraying the common activities and assumptions of humanity as misguided, and putting his own insights forward as the only reliable source of guidance. If it is doubtful whether we can usefully describe as sceptical his rather commonplace views about the limits on human action, the term does surely seem more appropriate for at least some of his views about human knowledge and perception.

Of course, it is not so easy to separate the two areas, and we have already noted that the sentence literature in Proverbs makes its own observations about the limited human knowledge of divine plans; questions about knowledge of God, in particular, seem closely related to problems of divine sovereignty, and no less common. Even without looking beyond the biblical wisdom literature, we may recall that human ignorance is a key issue also in Job, where the reality of the hero's situation cannot be known by his companions, and that Prov 1–9 is deeply concerned with problems of perception and discernment. Such issues are not confined either to wisdom literature or to the Bible, and *Ludlul Bêl Nêmeqi*, to take one example from many in the ancient world, asks,

Would that I knew these things were acceptable to the god!
 That which is good to oneself may be a sacrilege to the god,
 That which is wretched to one's heart may be good to one's god.
 Who can learn the plan of the gods in the heavens?
 Who understands the counsel of the deep?
 Where did humanity learn the divine decree of the gods?⁴⁴

Qohelet's interest in divine inscrutability and human ignorance of God is not novel in itself, then, and we have no reason to suppose that he was addressing any common assumption that divine action was transparent, or that there were no limits on human knowledge of God.

In fact, though, Qohelet seems less interested in divine hiddenness and human ignorance than in the misperceptions and misunderstandings which result not just from the inadequacy of the information available to humans, but from a deliberate divine intention: humans do not merely misinterpret what they see, but are positively misled—or, at the very least, kept in the dark. This is a much more sophisticated idea, and although the possibility that gods could mislead as well as conceal was hardly unknown in the ancient world, Qohelet's interpretation of the consequences has no close parallel in the extant literature. Again, commentators have sometimes turned to Greek philosophy as a potential influence, and Qohelet does show a superficial resemblance to the early sceptical philosophers, who were concerned with the impossibility of certain knowledge. Their reasons for this concern, though, were very different, and in both his dogmatism and his empiricism Qohelet displays certainties about knowledge and the senses which would have been quite alien to that tradition.⁴⁵

44. Tablet II, lines 33–38; translation from Annus and Lenzi, *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, 35.

45. Hans-Peter Müller, "Kohelet im Lichte der frühgriechischen Philosophie," in *Weisheit in Israel. Beiträge des Symposiums "Das Alte Testament und die Kultur der Moderne" anlässlich des 100. Geburtstags Gerhard von Rads (1901–1971), Heidelberg, 18.–21. Oktober 2001* (ed. David J. A. Clines, Hermann Lichtenberger and Hans-Peter Müller; Altes Testament und Moderne 12; Münster: Lit, 2003), 67–80, rightly doubts the dependence of Qohelet's scepticism on Greek thought (p. 79), and, from the pen of an expert on Greek scepticism, there is an even stronger rejection, worth citing in full: "...y a-t-il des ressemblances entre la pensée de l'Éclésiaste et celle des philosophes grecs sceptiques? Peut-on postuler l'influence du monde hellénistique sur l'auteur juif? La réponse à cette question n'est pas difficile à trouver: n'étant pas sceptique, l'Éclésiaste n'a pas été influencé de façon positive par le scepticisme grec. Il n'existe aucune raison pour croire que l'Éclésiaste ait eu une connaissance directe du scepticisme grec: aucun verset ne suggère un intérêt, favorable ou défavorable, pour la philosophie sceptique; aucune phrase ne suggère une connaissance, directe ou indirecte, de Pyrrhon ou d'Arcésilas. (J'irais volontiers

It is important to observe also that human knowledge of the world and of the divine is not the only type of knowledge dealt with in the monologue. When he considers wisdom in those terms, Qohelet freely asserts its limitations, but, as we have seen, wisdom is not simply ineffective. In fact, it offers practical advantages in the accomplishment of objectives, and a degree of insight which, if not great enough to overcome the limitations set on human knowledge, is at least sufficient to bring about an understanding of those limitations, and so to cause pain. This is, again, a long way from the ideas about knowledge found in philosophical scepticism, and it must be emphasized that the possibility of certain knowledge in itself is not rejected by Qohelet, merely the possibility of accurate knowledge about particular things.

In fact, there is so very little in common between Qohelet and Greek scepticism that it seems pointless to speculate about any possible historical connections: most scholars would date Ecclesiastes late enough for its author to have known of that tradition, or at least of its forebears, but if he did know of it, he clearly knew little or nothing about it. The differences do, however, help to point up some important aspects of Qohelet's own position on human knowledge. In particular, epistemological uncertainty evoked for the philosophers a suspension of judgment and a corresponding tranquillity. Insofar as ignorance is linked to his belief that humans can do no more than enjoy what they do (e.g. 3:11–13, 22), Qohelet's position bears a superficial resemblance to this—but ignorance is quite different from uncertainty, and it is not itself supposed to be the source of joy, merely an obstacle to other potential sources of gain for humans, which obliges them to fall back on enjoyment. The limitations on human knowledge which explicitly attract his attention, furthermore, are not general but very particular, and we outlined them earlier. Obviously, there are much broader concerns about perception involved in his ideas of *hebel*, but we can do a certain amount to delimit Qohelet's own scepticism in this area over and against the Greek variety: he does not doubt the ability of humans to know except in defined areas, and so does not doubt the possibility of knowledge itself; he does not differentiate certainty from knowledge; he does not see uncertainty as a good, but regards the limits on knowledge as a problem. In fact, we may reasonably draw from all this—and also, perhaps, from our earlier discussion of his “empiricism”—the inference that Qohelet has no significant interest in epistemology as such, or any apparent knowledge of the

un peu plus loin: l'Ecclésiaste ne s'intéressait pas à la philosophie grecque, qu'il ne connaissait pas du tout...); see Jonathan Barnes, “L'Ecclésiaste et le scepticisme Grec,” *RThPh* 131 (1999): 103–14, esp. 114.

epistemological problems which so intrigued early Greek philosophers of various schools. His doubts are not about the ability of humans to know, but about their ability to apprehend their situation when they have, and can have, no knowledge of particular things.

Those particular things include divine activity, and the limitations that he sets on knowledge in that area more probably place Qohelet in the majority than in some special sceptical camp, although it is very possible that he was actually defending that majority position, if there really were wise men claiming to know more than was commonly allowed (8:17). In other matters, however, especially his rejection of human memory, he seems to have been stating ideas much less familiar to his contemporaries. These do not arise from general preoccupations with proof and certainty, but from his basic beliefs about the world, and we must return to those if we are to understand them.

d. Humanity and the Changeless World

As we have observed, Qohelet's claim in 1:2, that all is *hebel*, is followed and qualified by his rhetorical question about the profit available from human work: the false human expectation of an unachievable gain is the very starting-point of Qohelet's speech. The nature of this gain is not spelled out, but the subsequent narrative in ch. 2 suggests that it consists in some way of the material accomplishments from human labour: the problem for humans is that what they think they are making for themselves turns out not to be theirs. To borrow the vocabulary of business ourselves, humans think that they are working for capital, but receive only a salary.

I have questioned already whether most of Qohelet's audience would have seen human life in quite these terms, but if we accept that it is the falsehood of this expectation which Qohelet himself begins by lamenting, then his doubt is focused not on human capacities, but on the very notion of human ownership. The impossibility of true ownership, moreover, is itself tied up both with his ideas about the essential continuity of the world, from which nothing can be removed, and with his proposal to find a sort of gain in pleasure, which is non-material. Since, as we have seen, the distinctive aspects of his ideas about retribution and human knowledge seem also to be founded in his beliefs about the very nature of the world, their centrality to his thought can hardly be denied. The expression of those beliefs at the beginning of the monologue, moreover, before Qohelet has even introduced himself, affirms the importance that he attaches to them.

Although we can and have explored the character and consequences of these ideas, however, it is much harder to place them in any sort of

context outside the book itself. In part, they are a statement of the obvious, that the world goes on after us, but there are more controversial elements, most notably the idea that:

What will be, will be whatever is,
and what will be done, whatever is done—
and with nothing new beneath the sun.

Again, this is reminiscent of some statements in Greek philosophy, such as Parmenides' influential denial of change, that what exists is without beginning or end:

οὐδέ ποτ' ἦν οὐδ' ἔσται, ἐπεὶ νῦν ἔστιν ὁμοῦ πάν, ἔν, συνεχές⁴⁶

Neither was it ever in the past, nor will it be in the future, because it is all together now, single, continuous.

There is no indication, however, that Qohelet's idea is rooted in the sort of concerns that gave rise to such statements in early Greek philosophy, or that he understood it to have the same ramifications. Parmenides argues for a changeless world from an ontological denial of non-existence, and this changelessness stands in contradiction to the senses in a way that calls the senses into question—it is not merely concealed by the transitoriness of human life.⁴⁷ More generally, although it is not difficult to find philosophical statements about the world in ancient sources which resemble what Qohelet is saying, it is much harder to find in Qohelet's monologue anything like the context of discussion which gave rise to such statements. We cannot exclude the possibility that the author knew of philosophical claims about continuity and changelessness, but if he did, he shows no sign of sharing or of understanding the reasoning which gave rise to them.

When we look at the Jewish religious context as a possible background, the problem is rather the opposite: it is not difficult to see, at least in broad terms, how Qohelet's ideas might stand in line with or in opposition to other ideas, but he does not make explicit statements about such relationships. His endless processes, for example, seem anti-teleological, and difficult to reconcile with, say, the periodization of history in apocalyptic literature, or with concepts of an eschaton. Beyond his statements about memory, though, Qohelet has nothing to say about history, and his depiction of the world as everlasting does not wholly and

46. Fragment 8, lines 5–6. See Hermann Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker: Griechisch und Deutsch* (2d ed.; Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1906), 1:119.

47. The argumentation in Parmenides is discussed in Lloyd, *Magic*, 69–71.

specifically exclude ideas of an ultimate transformation—just as his God, who promotes an ignorance which inspires fear, does not seem likely to be a source of prophetic or apocalyptic revelation, but such revelation is never positively denied. If there is supposed to be an attempt here actively to combat any particular cosmological, historical or theological ideas, it must surely have lain in allusions which are now obscure to us.

Rather than seeing a statement of opposition to some unidentified worldview, however, I think that we might do better to understand Qohelet's purpose in terms of his own alignment of ideas. What is important to him in the prologue, and what he will draw out through the rest of the monologue, is the disparity between the world and the lives of humans. Humans actually do come and go, and so are themselves, in a sense, each something new, and each ultimately something which will be removed from under the sun: their actions and achievements belong to the world, but they are detached from those. Accordingly, the permanence of the world points up the brevity of humans, and its continuity shows how temporary is their ownership or control of anything within it. Qohelet talks about the world in the context of humans and their work, and what he chooses to emphasize about the world may be understood as a necessary component of what he has to say about humans. In that case, he is not promoting a cosmology so much as an anthropology.

The transience of humanity is a long-established theme in ancient literature, and although it is harder to find precise parallels to Qohelet's claims about gain and ownership, they accord with ideas about the limited value of worldly goods which go back into the earliest literature:

Nothing at all is to be valued, but life should be sweet. You should not serve things; things should serve you.⁴⁸

48. This is the translation of lines 242–43 of *Šuruppak* in Jeremy Black, Graham Cunningham, Eleanor Robson and Gábor Zólyomi, *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 290; cf. Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 296, where it is lines 252–53, and translated as “Nothing at all is of value, but life should be sweet-tasting. Don’t appreciate things (too much); (because then) things will evaluate you (i.e., you will become dependent on their evaluation).” The first line also appears as the opening of a series of inter-related Sumerian compositions, which are presented by Alster under the heading “Nothing is of Value” (niṅ-nam nu-kal, versions A, B, C, in *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 266–87). In these texts, it is followed by another disavowal of the value of material goods: “Whenever a man does not own some piece of property, that man owns some property.” These texts, incidentally, include a number of sayings which resemble Qohelet's words in general terms, including commendations of joy. Note also in *Enlil and Namzitarra* (lines 19–20) Enlil's rhetorical question: “You may acquire precious metals, you may acquire precious stones, you may acquire cattle or you may acquire sheep; but the day of a human being is always getting closer, so where does your wealth lead?”

What seems to make Qohelet stand out, is not that he is presenting concepts that would have been unfamiliar or unpalatable, but that he is presenting them in a way that seems especially harsh and bleak. Viewed from his perspective, the world is incomprehensible and impermeable, above all a source of frustration and disappointment to those humans who cannot accept their temporary and limited role within it. It is difficult, however, to see anything in this which is actually sceptical of established ideas, and if it is novel, then the novelty lies more in the presentation than in the thought.

e. Pleasure and Material Prosperity

Finally, it is important to say a few words in particular about Qohelet's detachment of material prosperity from actual wellbeing, which is, as we have noted already, a very distinctive aspect of his message. In certain respects, though, it is also a very difficult one, not least if we attempt to regard it as a sceptical reaction against assurances in other literature that righteousness or wisdom can assure wealth, and other desirable possessions. The speech by personified wisdom in Prov 8 is the classic biblical example of such assurance, and, although we should bear in mind that the promises made there must be read in terms of the very specific ideas put forward by Prov 1–9, there is no reason to doubt that most advice literature expected material rewards—subject to the hazards posed by divine sovereignty. It is less clear, however, that Qohelet is actively attacking the substance of this idea.

When he first touches on the issue in 2:18–23, it is interesting to observe that Qohelet does not deny that wisdom and work may lead to prosperity; that is, after all, how he built up his own business. Rather, it is the inheritance of prosperity which undermines for him any simple link between material reward and proper behaviour, and although this drives him to see possessions as something assigned by God, and potentially taken away by God, he seems never wholly to abandon the idea that humans can earn material prosperity—or, indeed, fail to earn it (4:5; 11:4). How we reconcile these ideas will depend, of course, on how we understand Qohelet's ideas about human employment by God more generally, and this is, perhaps, another indication that he is something less than a wholehearted determinist.

We must emphasize here, however, that although humans do have the ability to create wealth for themselves, it is integral to Qohelet's ideas

Translation from Black et al., *The Literature of Ancient Sumer*, 113. The text was edited in M. Civil, "Enlil and Namzitarra," *AfO* 25 (1974): 65–71; cf. also Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 327–38.

that this wealth is essentially worthless, because it does not belong to its owners. Correspondingly, it would be very unlikely that Qohelet could conceive of material prosperity as a reward, because it would be a reward without value. On the other hand, he does see real value in pleasure, and if the granting of pleasure by God potentially constitutes a form of reward, as we suggested earlier, then this is Qohelet's equivalent to the assurances in Proverbs and elsewhere. The fact that prosperity may be assigned to the undeserving, then, provokes Qohelet to a realization that divine reward cannot lie in material wealth, but that leads him in turn not to a rejection of reward, but to a re-evaluation of its character. If he is sceptical about traditional ideas of reward, it is only about the form that that reward takes, not the general principle of retribution.

What seems more interesting here is the identification of joy as something which stands outside the valueless realm of the material. In 3:4, 8, after all, weeping, laughter, love and hate were all included in the list of actions which humans undertake as part of their employment, and the pleasure which Qohelet has in mind is clearly not just an emotion or an emotional reaction, like these others, but something more like a sensation. Naturally, this has led to further comparisons between Qohelet and Greek philosophy, although the obvious comparison with Epicureanism founders rapidly, not just on the problem that Qohelet's joy bears little resemblance to the moderate asceticism of that movement, but also on the fact that Epicureanism embraced many other ideas, including non-involvement by the gods in human affairs, that are hardly compatible with Qohelet's outlook. Early hedonist schools, such as the Cyrenaics, stand closer to Qohelet's ideas, although it is again difficult to reconcile with his theology the relatively little that is known of their broader ideas. While it would be difficult to deny the possibility of a limited influence from that direction, Qohelet's ideas may rest on no more than a development of the *carpe diem* motif, which was widespread in ancient literature.

3. *Conclusions: Qohelet's Scepticism*

Far too few texts have survived from antiquity for us to speak with any confidence about what views were normative and commonplace in any given context, and the works that we do possess have often survived more through chance, or through their connection to later interests, than because they were necessarily typical. It is not a simple task, therefore, to assess the extent to which any text was truly radical or different. In the case of Ecclesiastes, however, there are sufficient parallels to many of its key ideas that we must clearly be cautious about setting too much store by its own presentation of Qohelet as a radical questioner of human

expectations. He is, certainly, set apart from tradition, and given distinctive characteristics and experiences: we are supposed to see him as a lone individual, embittered by the realization that all he did for himself proves not to be his at all, and we are supposed to take from his words the clarity of vision which comes from a man of exceptional wisdom reflecting on his world. When it comes down to it, though, it is difficult to find in Qohelet's monologue a scepticism that is genuinely new, and its original audience may have seen much that was positively familiar to them behind the presentation.

If we are going to call Qohelet a sceptic at all, then it must be with the recognition that he is neither adopting a position of uncertainty in some general sense, nor apparently trying to set limits on human knowledge and control which went significantly beyond those widely acknowledged in a range of other literature. On some particular points, to be sure, what Qohelet has to say may well be new: his rejection of human memory, for example, is remarkable and, so far as we know, unprecedented. A great deal of what he has to say, however, arises out of well-established themes, such as the transience of human existence and the limitations placed on human knowledge by divine sovereignty.

The presentation and affinities of the book certainly give us no good grounds to detach it from existing Near Eastern literature, for all its unusual features. When it deals with transience and authority, it does not seem to do so in a way that suggests any signs of engagement with emergent Greek philosophical traditions or concerns. Indeed, although the monologue offers a coherence of overall theme which probably would have been unusual, it also contains enough that is tangential and disconnected to inhibit us from claiming that it is in any useful sense an argument or treatise. In its structure, it reveals its continuing relationship with more traditional advice literature, and in aspects of its content it also shows both a concern with literary expression and links with other traditions of poetry. Qohelet's ideas are not the only aspect of the work important to the author, and they are not always its most distinctive aspect.

If we do boil it down to its beliefs, however, then the scepticism exhibited by the monologue is mostly of the blue-cheese variety: it seems doubtful that anyone else would have expected to take a profit from their life, in Qohelet's sense, would have regarded human understanding as untrammelled, or would have expected to exercise control over their life without the possibility of divine interference.⁴⁹ That Qohelet states

49. So, similarly, Fischer, *Skepsis oder Furcht Gottes? Studien zur Komposition und Theologie des Buches Kohelet* (BZAW 247; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 239, denies that Qohelet can be detached from existing wisdom traditions: "Obwohl

certain ideas in an unusually strong way does not make them more sceptical, or make it more likely that the corresponding, contrary beliefs were widely held. It is in its more positive statements about the nature of the world that the monologue seems genuinely distinctive, perhaps, but these seem again to have been extrapolated, at least in part, from more common perceptions.

I am not trying to suggest for a moment that the views put forward by Qohelet would all have been shared by all of his contemporaries, but rather that these views seem not principally to be directed against other, more widely supported understandings. Qohelet's speech, to put it another way, does not seem first and foremost to be an expression of scepticism about ideas which were commonly held, whatever else it may be. In such matters as his assertion of divine judgment, indeed, we might be more inclined to see Qohelet as a defender of orthodoxy, and any who rejected it as the sceptics—but then, as we saw earlier, scepticism can be a matter of perspective, and Qohelet appears to view his contemporaries as, to say the least, confused about the issue. Even if we take scepticism in a more restricted, epistemological sense, it is not clear that scepticism is really the best way to characterize what is being said in the monologue. It is not just that we cannot easily establish a link between Qohelet and the Greek philosophers on this: whether he is appealing to experience in an empirical way or making what seem to be more dogmatic statements, Qohelet rarely if ever shows himself to be in any doubt about the possibility of knowledge *per se*, or the reliability of the senses. What he does doubt is the ability of humans to know certain things, not on epistemological grounds, but simply because those things are concealed by nature, divine purpose, or human transience. This is not scepticism in the philosophical sense, and it leads him not to express doubt, but to enunciate with confidence a view of the world in which humans base their actions upon poor information and false assumptions.

There may be some heuristic value in describing Qohelet as a sceptic, and an attempt to pin down his scepticism offers a useful way, at least, to explore the relationships between his monologue and other literature.

Kohelet das in der Gesamtheit der Wirklichkeit verborgene Handeln Gottes schärfer und radikaler als die sapientielle Literatur formuliert, lassen sich schon im Proverbienbuch eine ganze Reihe von Sprüchen nachweisen, die ebenfalls den Anspruch des Menschen zurückweisen, als könne er die Absicht Gottes ergründen und dadurch seinem Tun den Erfolg sichern." He goes on to conclude that Qohelet cannot be viewed as a "skeptischer Einzelgänger," but must be seen as a typical wisdom teacher, whose speech does not constitute a sceptical, fundamental critique of the possibility of human knowledge. It is problematic, if not outright misleading, to describe Qohelet as "einen erkenntnistheoretischen Skeptiker" (p. 240).

It seems more doubtful, however, that the description can really be used to define him without giving an altogether misleading impression of those relationships. Even to speak of him more loosely as a pessimist raises similar issues, if we take his pessimism to stand in opposition to some more optimistic stance. To be sure, insofar as he focuses on such things as human transience and loss, Qohelet certainly seems pessimistic, but this is more a product of his subject matter than of his opinions: we may reasonably presume that his more cheerful contemporaries tried to ignore their mortality, not to celebrate it, and it is hard to imagine what would constitute a normative optimism in such matters. If this is true of his major themes, it is no less so of the minor ones: when Qohelet talks of oppression, for instance, in 4:1–3 and 5:7–8 (ET 5:7–9), he may or may not have had particular political circumstances in mind, but even if these statements were polemical in their original context, they were neither sceptical nor pessimistic—oppression of the poor was universally condemned in the ancient world, even if it was widely practised. There is a great deal of negativity in much that Qohelet says, but much less that might have been recognized as a radical rejection of established belief.

Perhaps a more profitable approach might lie in accepting what seems to be Qohelet's own understanding of his position, as a rejection of delusion. The human motives which he rejects as *hebel* are not founded on intellectual positions, but on such emotions as greed, or on misperceptions of death and judgment arising from the invisibility of consequence. If we describe Qohelet's objections as scepticism, we turn these things by implication into beliefs, when in reality they are nothing so carefully thought out. The man who works endlessly in 4:7, for instance, does so because he has not stopped to ask what he is doing, and in 2:14, Qohelet's own investment in wisdom proves deluded because he had not considered how little difference it would make ultimately to his fate. The humans criticized by Qohelet in such passages are wasting effort or harming themselves through a lack of clear thought, not because they adhere to some alternative set of ideas.

It is not scepticism or even pessimism that characterizes Qohelet's ideas, then, so much as a sense that humans are missing the point, and he presents himself as a man seeking to steer others away from the false expectations and disappointment which he experienced himself, by opening their eyes to the reality of their situation. If his analysis is largely negative, that is because, in a world of illusion, there is value in disillusion.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: QOHELET AND HIS CREATOR

I have tried to suggest throughout this study that Qohelet's ideas cannot be detached from the presentation of his personality and experience: the monologue is spoken not by a disembodied voice, but by a character who takes trouble to explain what has driven him to the position he adopts, and whose personality is fleshed out for us by the content and manner of his speech. In the first chapter, however, we left open the question of the relationship between this character and the author of the book that contains his words: the answer to that question, I suggested, could not profoundly affect the way in which we understand the content of those words. The issue becomes very important, however, when we try to understand not their content but their significance, and the way in which the book was intended to be read. Without claiming that we can reach a definitive answer on the evidence available, I want to close by exploring that question a little further.

There is little to be gained, I think, by trying to assess the historicity of Qohelet as an individual. The claims that he makes to extraordinary wisdom, wealth and experience may raise some reasonable doubts, but are not falsifiable—at least if we set aside the broader historical questions entailed in the Solomonic attribution. Accordingly, we cannot positively exclude the possibility that the monologue originated as a factual account of experience, although such an evaluation would need to take into account its many apparent links with other literature: to some extent or another this appears to be a deliberate literary composition, not a journal. In the form that we have it, however, which is the only form in which we know it to have circulated, the monologue is framed by an introduction and epilogue which speak of Qohelet in the third person. So far as this presentation is concerned, it really does not matter whether Qohelet originally spoke and breathed, or whether he was invented out of whole cloth: he is a character speaking in a book.