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Towards a Rhetoric of Contradiction
in the Book of Ecclesiastes

by

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Abstract

The thesis deals with contradictions in the message of the book of Ecclesiastes. It presents objections to various theories that seek to eliminate these contradictions by postulating a secondary perspective in the book which is foreign to the thought of the original author (Kohelet). Such theories usually have recourse to methods of literary-historical redaction criticism or to the identification of 'quotations' in the book.

The thesis proposes the theory that a rhetoric of contradiction exists in the book and further argues that the book's rhetorical strategy leads to an ambiguous message that is indicative of a mind in conflict.

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This work is dedicated to
all the saints,
οἱ μὴ ἰδόντες καὶ πιστεύσαντες.

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List of Abbreviations

BDB	Brown, Francis, Driver, S.R., Briggs, Charles A. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907).
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
HAT	Handbuch zum Alten Testament
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
KAT	Kommentar zum Alten Testament
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZTK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

Chapter 1: Introduction

Kohelet and his Contradictions

The earliest record of a discussion about contradictions in Ecclesiastes occurs in the Babylonian Talmud. In Tractate Shabbath 30b, Rabbi Judah son of R. Samuel b. Shilath said that the sages wanted to withdraw the book because its words were "self-contradictory" (Leiman 1976:73). Later, Midrashic literature harmonized the message of the book by suggesting that they were an exposition on the vanity of worldly pursuits in comparison to the ultimate happiness that exists in obeying God's commandments (Ginsburg 1970:32). Christian commentators followed a similar trend and explained the contradictions as points of contrast between earthly vanity and heavenly things (Barton 1908:20). The contradictions in the book of Ecclesiastes are so evident that commentators over the years have found them impossible to ignore.

These contradictions broach a number of subjects. In 2:13-14a, Kohelet praises wisdom and extols its practice; but in the following lines, he remarks that one fate meets both the wise and the foolish (2:14b-15). Later on, Kohelet seems to revert to a more optimistic outlook when he praises wisdom as a gift from God to the one who is 'good' (2:26). On the subject of justice, Kohelet notes that a sinner is brave to commit evil because there is no retribution (8:11-12a). In the following lines, he challenges the previous observation by stating that it will be well for the righteous, but not for the wicked (8:12b-

13). In 11:9, Kohelet appears to contradict the advice to follow one's own desires (11:9a) with a reminder that God will bring everything into judgment (11:9b). With regard to pleasure, Kohelet considers it to be futile in 2:1-2; but in 8:15, he commends pleasure and encourages the enjoyment of food and drink. Kohelet's criticism of labour/toil is harsh in 2:11; he considers labour to be a "chasing of the wind" and void of any profit. Yet, he also considers labour to be a rewarding gift from God (3:13) and worthy of human enjoyment (5:17).

The contradictions in Ecclesiastes seem to portray contrasting views of wisdom, justice, pleasure, and labour. These apparent discrepancies in Kohelet's thought constitute a problem to those who try to interpret the message of the book.

The Aim of the Thesis

My aim is to test the feasibility of adopting contradiction as part of the fabric of Kohelet's thought in the book. Such a theory postulates no resolution to the conflicting perspectives in the book. On the contrary, the resultant tension between the disparate views would constitute an invitation to the reader/audience to share in the dilemma that the book proposes. The endeavour to test the aforementioned theory stems from various reservations over theories of redaction or quotation which seek to eliminate one of the contending perspectives in the book as a view foreign to the author. The precise nature of these 'reservations' will come to light in the

review of scholarship on Ecclesiastes that is to come under the heading "Recent Response to the Contradictions".

Kohelet and the Link with Near Eastern Wisdom

Much of the contradiction in the book of Ecclesiastes represent a discrepancy between the pietistic optimistic precepts of traditional wisdom and scepticism about divine intention to rectify the various inequities in the world. In commenting on the pessimism of Kohelet, James Crenshaw states that his pessimism stems from an absence of trust in God's 'goodness' (Crenshaw 1981:128). There was little that Kohelet could muster to strengthen his confidence in divine justice and provision from the deeds of the world. Kohelet's reaction to the injustice in the world was to congratulate the dead who did not have to look upon such a catastrophe (4:1-3). According to A.P. Hayman, the genesis of Kohelet's scepticism arises from an empirical observation of the world's events. His observation of Kohelet's use of verbs like רָאָה (to see) and יָדַע (to know), plus others like חָקַר (to inspect), lead him to the conclusion that the epistemological basis of the book is empirical (Hayman 1991:98). Kohelet relies upon what he sees and knows and he pits this against the whole received tradition of Hebrew wisdom. For Kohelet, the source of truth and knowledge is the human observation of natural phenomena.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, empirical deduction comes up against some of the basic tenets of tradition. To the wisdom corpus of instruction for living, Kohelet poses the question of a purpose for the selection of any particular lifestyle in view of death's pending reality

(2:15; 6:8). According to Robert Gordis, the contemplation of the meaning of life was an outgrowth of the deductive methods in wisdom. The sages trained their youth to apply observation and reason to solve the issues that intrigued them; these issues included the basis of morality, the possibility of life after death, and the purpose of human existence (Gordis 1968:28). In these endeavours, Kohelet and Hebrew wisdom were not alone. In ancient Near Eastern wisdom, the contemplation of meaning is usually expressed in the question of divine purpose. A similar contemplation of the source of all values from which sages derive their maxims for prudent living as a natural outgrowth of the human search for order in the universe¹ took place in the wider context of the Near East. As with Hebrew wisdom, the discernment of an 'order' in Near Eastern wisdom that exalted one course of action over another led to the question of a purpose for such an 'order'. In *The Babylonian Theodicy*,² a friend of the sage says that "the plan of the gods is remote" (line 58). Furthermore, "the mind of the god, like the center of the heavens, is remote; knowledge of it is very difficult; people

¹An example of a Babylonian opinion on the subject of an unknowable divine order can be seen in lines 258-265 of *The Babylonian Theodicy* (Pritchard 1969:604). There, a friend of the sage questions why one child is born weak and another, a mighty warrior. He concludes that the will of "the god" behind this selection process is unknowable to humans. In both examples, humans only see the effects of divine selection. But the reason behind such choices is beyond the scope of human investigation. 'Order' here has the sense of a network of delineation that separates one entity from another. As such, this 'order' safeguards the unique definition of each entity. For Kohelet, the 'order' he questions is the one that defines the goodness of wisdom and righteousness in contrast to the degradation which is foolishness and wickedness. In 6:12, the question of whether one can define anything as 'good' arises amidst the observation of an unknowable future; a future which may hold no act of judgment to distinguish between one human and another.

²The following reference comes from a translation by Lambert in James Pritchard's collection of *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Pritchard 1969:601-4).

cannot know it". Such statements bring to mind Kohelet's words: "I tested all this with wisdom, and I said, "I will be wise", but it was far from me. What has been is remote and very deep. Who can discover it?" (7:24-25). Kohelet shares, with the sages of other Near Eastern traditions, the burdensome task of uncovering some everlasting value worthy of human pursuit. Having tested everything life has to offer, Kohelet comes to the conclusion that there is no lasting 'profit' to be gleaned in life (1:3; 5:15-16). Kohelet's Babylonian counterpart despairs of ever finding the ultimate 'good' in life and opts for death. For the Babylonian sage, the ultimate 'good' is heaven's secret and no human may reach this realm.³

In the book of Ecclesiastes, the tension between the belief in a created order which elevates one form of behaviour over another comes to grief over the inability to discern any purpose or reason for such an order of preference (2:12-17; 6:12). Perhaps, it is this sustained tension that accounts for Kohelet's oscillation between affirmation of the divine order and resigned pessimism. The chasm between the two perspectives have attracted a myriad of scholarly opinions over the years. They range from attempts to reconcile the contradictions *via* various methods of harmonization to outright rejections of a sole author.

³This is a summary of the final part of W.G. Lambert's rendition of *The Dialogue of Pessimism* (Pritchard 1969:600-1). Failing to find any reward in a morally upright way of life, the master asks his slave "what is good?" In reply, the slave says, "to have my neck and yours broken and to be thrown into the river. Who is so tall that he can reach to the heavens?" The desire for suicide stems from the inability to discover a reward for the righteous. The allusion to "the heavens" seems to suggest that the question of what constitutes a profit in human activity is related to the divine will. Only heaven knows what is good for humans to do!

Recent Response to the Contradictions in Ecclesiastes

In the earlier part of this century, there was a general trend towards eliminating the contradictions by postulating a pious redactor for the orthodox elements in the book. A.H. McNeile suggested that orthodox insertions were made to rescue the Solomonic ascription (1:12) from association with heretical writings (McNeile 1904:22). G.A. Barton found such a disruption in the book's flow of thought in the conservative statement of 2:26 that he postulated for it a Jewish orthodox redactor whose philosophy was akin to that of the Pharisees (Barton 1908:44-5). Subsequently, Barton ascribed 3:17, 7:18b, 26b, 29, 8:2b, 3a, 5, 6a, 11-13, 11:9b, 12:1a and 13-14 to the same redactor (Barton 1908:45). M. Jastrow advocated a theory that a tradition of multiple anonymous authorship existed in the time of Kohelet (Jastrow 1972:31-42). His theory suggests that the orthodox elements are corrective accretions to an original cynical body in the book (Jastrow 1972:71-6). More recently, A. Lauha (Lauha 1978:157, 209) and, to a lesser extent, J.L. Crenshaw (Crenshaw 1987:48) have had recourse to similar methods in dealing with the contradictions in the book.

Another approach to the contradictions understands the book to be a diatribe where Kohelet sets up an idea to refute. H.W. Hertzberg's "zwar-aber" (yes-but) interpretative formulation approaches such an understanding of the book. The 'yes' introduces a perspective which Kohelet rejects with a refutation in the 'but' clause (Hertzberg 1963:30). For example, 3:17 represents a conservative viewpoint which Kohelet proceeds to negate in 3:18ff (Hertzberg

1963:110-11). R. Gordis and J.A. Loader abide by the same interpretative principle in their analysis of Kohelet. Gordis' theory suggests that the use of quotations of another voice with which Kohelet disagrees is intrinsic to the literary style of the book (Gordis 1968:95). In several cases (8:12b-13; 2:13-14a), he recommends that we regard the orthodox voice as a view that Kohelet does not share (Gordis 1968:222, 297). Loader's conclusion that Kohelet places 'orthodox utterances' in his literary units as part of his polemic against orthodox wisdom (Loader 1979:133) reflects a similar approach. Most recently, Izak Spangenberg has detected Socratic irony in several of Kohelet's statements. He proposes that Kohelet fakes assent to the more orthodox viewpoints in order to lure the pretentious misleader (ὁ ἀλαζών) into a rhetorical trap (Spangenberg 1996:64). Spangenberg's approach is similar to Hertberg's, Gordis', and Loader's in the way that he assumes Kohelet's disagreement with the more conservative aspects of the book.

What follows is a selection of four scholars and a showcase of their opinions on the issue of contradictions in Ecclesiastes. The following 'parade' of different opinions is meant to provide a more detailed examination of recent response to the contradictions. The selection demonstrates the range of 'solutions' to the problem of contradiction and are arranged in such an order as to reflect a growing conviction that Kohelet is someone trapped between the pietistic idealism of traditional Hebrew religion and the events in the world which conceal any merit in such a system of values. I have also included brief remarks at the end of each review to express my reservations or agreement with each perspective.

Morris Jastrow.

For Morris Jastrow, Ecclesiastes is a strange book to have slipped into a sacred collection (Jastrow 1972:9). Jastrow thinks that the views of the original author are contradictory to the rest of the canon and the admission of the book into the canon was only possible after a pious and conservative redactor had made the 'appropriate' insertions. Instead of taking Kohelet for what he was, a redactor twisted his thoughts to conform to "the conventional views and beliefs of the age" (Jastrow 1972:9).

Jastrow backs up his theory of multiple authorship by stating that exclusive authorship was not a feature of antiquity (Jastrow 1972:32). In fact, "a book that had become definite in its form and that was no longer subject to change, was a dead book" (Jastrow 1972:32). In contrast, a 'living' book was not static and changes and additions were, from the ancient point of view, not only legitimate, but a real compliment to a book and an indication of its popularity. The book of Ecclesiastes in its present form is the work of many hands and a conglomeration of a variety of opinions in conflict with one another. Jastrow has undertaken the task of deciphering the various 'slices' of different voices, each superimposed on its predecessors. He dismisses any possibility that Kohelet may have oscillated between bouts of pessimistic despair and pleasant experiences that left him optimistically inclined (Jastrow 1972:104). For Jastrow, "it is putting too great a strain on one's credulity to ask us to believe, in order to maintain the unity of the book, that Kohelet

was so moody (or rather so silly) as to blow hot and cold at the same time" (Jastrow 1972:105).

With such an understanding in mind, Jastrow finds it necessary to attribute the contradictions within the book to the work of another. In chapter 3, he identifies verse 12 as the conclusion drawn by the original author; that there is nothing better for humans to do than to enjoy life as it is in the absence of any discernible trace of meaning in life (Jastrow 1972:73). Verse 14 which proposes that God has veiled the meaning of life from the eyes of humans is attributed to a pious redactor (Jastrow 1972:73). In Jastrow's judgment, the possibility of a hidden meaning to life is not one of Kohelet's conjectural opinions. On the contrary, Jastrow embraces the pursuit of 'joy' as the only consolation in the absence of any meaning to life. In another example, Jastrow identifies 11:9b, which reminds the reader "that God will bring you into judgment for all these things", as an antidote by a redactor (Jastrow 1972:248). Consequently, he upholds the preceding statement that one should follow one's own inclinations as the original conclusion. As such, the addition is an interruption to the original progression of thought and "as far removed from Kohelet's point of view as heaven is from earth" (Jastrow 1972:73).

Jastrow's evaluation of the book of Ecclesiastes rests upon two premises: that the redactor(s) was bent on making the book adhere as closely as possible to the orthodox, conservative image of Solomon and to "give to the book a character of being a collection of sayings, edifying and suitable for general reading like the book of Proverbs" (Jastrow 1972:118). The aforementioned prescribed intentions for

the redactor were intentions that Kohelet never shared. The basic thought of the original author was that "all is vanity" and anything that humans put their mind to will prove that this is true (Jastrow 1972:120). In Jastrow's understanding of Kohelet, the universe is in a constant flux and there is no advance in the condition of humanity. Just as the sun moves from east to west and back again to the place of its rising, and the rivers rush to the sea to empty its load but yet the sea is never full, so is the condition of humans (Jastrow 1972:121). Their eyes never tire of seeing and their ears are never filled from hearing (1:8). Jastrow denies that Kohelet ever envisioned a latent goal in the endless flux of life (Jastrow 1972:121). He attributes the comment in 3:11, that God has made everything beautiful in its time, to an addition designed to give "a pious turn to Kohelet's pessimistic reflection" (Jastrow 1972:245). For him, Kohelet's view is that there is no goal to human existence; human existence is no different from the wearisome and unchanging cycle of nature (Jastrow 1972:121). Any suggestion otherwise is the work of a redactor.

The difficulty with Jastrow's method of eliminating the contradictions in the book is that it ignores the presence of material that combines contradictory perspectives within an inseparable syntactic or thematic unit. Michael Fox has argued for the interdependence of 2:13-14a and 2:12a + 2:14b (Fox 1989:24). According to him, the programmatic statement of 2:12a looks forward to a statement about wisdom and folly and חֵלָּה (both) in 2:14b requires the mention of 'wisdom' and 'folly' as an antecedent. The excision of the orthodox viewpoint of 2:13-14a leaves a gap in

the narrative sequence and the syntactic structure of 2:12-14.⁴ On the other hand, the inclusion of 2:14b as part of the corrective gloss jeopardizes an assumption that motivates the postulation of a pious redactor for the book: the assumption that conservative and pessimistic perspectives cannot coexist in the same message.

James Crenshaw.

For James Crenshaw, "the ambiguities of daily existence and the absurdity of human efforts to understand it" are mirrored by the contradictions within the book (Crenshaw 1987:49). Although Kohelet seems to affirm divine action, he also contends that the deity's remoteness permits no one to comprehend his ways (Crenshaw 1987:46). To Kohelet, the activity of God is "ominous like distant thunder" and unlike Job, who himself presupposes a nexus between deed and consequence, he discerns no moral order at all (Crenshaw 1987:23).

Crenshaw lacks any confidence that Kohelet was certain that there remained some divine order beyond human perception. His opinion is that Kohelet was truly unable to verify or to falsify the existence of any such order (Crenshaw 1987:28); Kohelet lacks the data required to reach a decision about the nature of matters "under the sun". According to Crenshaw, this ambivalence about the nature of God is reflected in the passage where Kohelet warns against the taking of vows when one is not certain they will be carried out (5:1-

⁴The specific details of this problem will be worked out with greater detail in chapter 2 under the section on the theory of a pious redactor (p. 54).

6). As noted by Crenshaw, the implication is that God hears vows and checks to make certain that they are kept (Crenshaw 1987:138). However, his impression is that the book denies that God is going to make any moral judgment in the near future (Crenshaw 1987:138).

Crenshaw's response to Kohelet's statement of the presence of a divine order in 3:1 and 11 is that this 'order' offers no comfort because it remains hidden and beyond the manipulation of humans (Crenshaw 1987:97). The conclusion is to give up seeking this 'order' and to do good in one's lifetime (3:12). The overwhelming emphasis in Crenshaw's interpretation of the book is, once again, on the inability of humans to discover divine activity (Crenshaw 1987:98). Within such an agnostic framework, any positive affirmation of a divine purpose is out of place.

In defending his opinion that 3:17 is a gloss by a later editor, Crenshaw mentions that such optimism that God will bring about justice is missing from Kohelet's thought (Crenshaw 1987:102). If Kohelet believed that God had not relinquished responsibility for judgment, then "his assessment of injustice would be tempered by hope for its adjustment". Instead, he repeats again and again that the same fate befalls evildoers and the good and that the lot of humans is no different than that of the beasts (Crenshaw 1987:102).

In the same way, Crenshaw dismisses 11:9b as a gloss. He perceives 11:9b to be an interruption to the thought expressed in 11:9a and notes that verse 10 continues the advice in 11:9a; that one should follow the desires of one's own eyes (Crenshaw 1987:184). In the view of Crenshaw, 11:9b is a moralistic gloss inserted to counteract Kohelet's unorthodox advice (Crenshaw 1987:184). Such

orthodox utterances are seemingly out of place in the shrouded mystery that surrounds the mind of God. For James Crenshaw, the determinism of the orthodox tradition is noticeably absent in Kohelet's mind and without any discernible principle of order, there can be no assertion of future judgment (Crenshaw 1987:28).

Although I agree with Crenshaw that the divine activity is beyond human comprehension, I fail to see how the positive assertions of future judgment are out of place in the book. In my view, the positive assertions of judgment stand as one conjectural perspective in tension with the pessimism of the book; in tandem, the contending pair of perspectives reflect a mind-set of turmoil with the unknowable future as the field of speculation. Perhaps Crenshaw has overlooked the fact that one of Kohelet's recurrent conclusions is that no one can know the future (3:22; 6:12; 8:7; 9:1; 10:14). In at least two cases, contradictory testimony on the subject of judgment (3:16 and 17; 8:11-12a and 12b-13) are followed by statements about an uncertain future (3:22 and 9:1). The clash of perspectives in 3:16 and 17 leads into the observation of a common fate for humans and beasts and then into statements of ignorance about the afterlife (3:21) and the future (3:22). The observation of an unknowable future negates both perspectives (3:16 and 17) as absolute assertions and places them in the realm of speculation. In view of such, the optimism of 3:17 has no less weight than the pessimism of 3:16; they both bear witness to two possible disparate views of the future.⁵

⁵Strategies of eliminating the contradictions by positing one perspective as the dominant one (Hertzberg's 'yes-but construction'; Gordis' and Loader's theory of quotation; Spangenberg's understanding of 'Socratic irony') run into the same problem. All of the above elect pessimism as the normative view

Gerhard von Rad

Gerhard von Rad recognizes the polarity between the view which the forefathers held and that espoused by Kohelet. However, this polarity is produced not by a disagreement over the reality of a hidden divine agenda, but by different "presuppositions of faith in the two cases" (von Rad 1972:234). According to von Rad, Kohelet shares the opinion of the traditional elders in the view that God exists and rules the world (von Rad 1972:232). What is new and alarming about Kohelet's opinion is the relationship humans have with the "continuing divine activity" (von Rad 1972:232). The essential element in the "continuing divine activity" which Kohelet finds most disturbing is the inscrutability of the future. Humans are anxious to plan and organize the future in accordance with their own predetermined preferences (von Rad 1972:232). However the world goes on according to a strange determinant and "all human action comes to grief on it" (von Rad 1972:232).

Von Rad points out that although scholarship has failed to conclusively yield any unity in the book through a "linear development of thought", there remains a "unity of style and topic and theme; a unity which can make a work of literature into a whole" (von Rad 1972:227). For von Rad, Kohelet may be summarized in three basic insights:

- (i) Everything is vanity; an examination of life yields no satisfactory meaning.
- (ii) God determines everything.

in the book and proceed to explain the pious statements positing a 'cite-to-refute' tactic.

(iii) Man is unable to discern the work of God.

All these insights are interconnected by an allusion to the tenuous existence of a purpose for all reality, including humans. It is at this point that von Rad parts with the two preceding scholars; his conclusion states that the traditional elders and their entire tradition were in agreement with Kohelet (von Rad 1972:234). But where Kohelet is deeply troubled by the mystery of God's will, the elders remained firm in their trust in the divine power. The latter was an experience in constant dialogue with faith (von Rad 1972:234). It was based on reason which was based on knowledge and security in God (von Rad 1972:234). Although the elders knew that the world was surrounded by the mystery of God, they taught an experience included in faith and saw the aim of their teaching as being to strengthen faith in God (Prov 22:19). But for Kohelet the hiddenness of the future is a constant source of grief. According to von Rad, Kohelet's predicament lies in the fact that he has set out to answer the question of meaning in life which is the lot of humans in life. Kohelet confronts the totality of life and finds that any attempt to establish any semblance of meaning in life meets an abrupt end with death. Where the elders were content to accept the mystery of God's will within the framework of faith, Kohelet feels driven to discover the concrete substance of the divine will. Kohelet's search for meaning in life is based on self-interest; when he contemplates the merits of teaming up with another person, he has his own benefit in mind (4:9-12).⁶ His position is clearly not a rejection of the idea that

⁶Credit for this observation belongs to James Crenshaw (Crenshaw 1981:143).

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God submits the universe to his authority but is rather an expression of frustration at his own inability to manipulate the created order into conformity with his own objectives. The absolute rejection of any existing divine order within Kohelet's system of belief is noticeably absent in von Rad's assessment.

Von Rad's assessment of Kohelet's epistemological state is in accord with his (Kohelet's) consistent denials of a secure and knowable future (3:22; 6:12; 8:7; 9:1; 10:14). In 9:1, the unknowable future symbolizes the tentative (undemonstrated) divine disposition towards humans. Von Rad's perspective that Kohelet's position is essentially similar to that of the traditional sages is refreshing; they, like Kohelet, lament the present deplorable state and await the demonstration of divine justice in human affairs (Pss 10; 12; 13) against the backdrop of an unknown future. Indeed, Kohelet knows that only God can rectify the inequities of the world (3:14). But whether any such rectifying measure should come to pass, nobody knows; not even the wise (8:17).

Michael V. Fox.

Michael Fox does not think that Kohelet attacks the wisdom tradition nor the doctrines of wisdom literature (Fox 1989:11). His opinion is that the reader should leave the contradictions in tension because Kohelet was only stating an observation rather than resolving a problem (Fox 1989:11). Fox begins by interpreting the contradictions rather than trying to eliminate them. In his view, the contradictions are the lens through which Kohelet views life. When

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confronted with a contradiction, Fox maintains that the contrary view points are part of Kohelet's belief system. In doing so, he retains the tension between the two poles without assigning either view to another party. For Michael Fox, Kohelet's judgment of "absurdity" on everything that is done in the world consists of a disparity between "a certain reality and a framework of expectations" (Fox 1986:409). If we assign one pole to Kohelet's belief system and relegate the other to the category of falsehood, the tension collapses and the 'absurdity' is resolved. But this is not the case with Kohelet; for Kohelet, wisdom's excellence and folly's shortcomings (2:13) are as certain as the fact that both parties eventually meet the same fate (2:16). In Kohelet's view, the enjoyment of life as a pursuit (3:13) holds as much validity as the observation that earthly pleasure yields no profit (2:1-2).

Armed with such a view, Michael Fox rejects the "*zwar-aber*" (yes...but) principle of interpretation which sets up a rivalry between two opposing ideas in order to refute the former with the latter (Fox 1989:22). The "yes-but" principle of interpretation implies that Kohelet is solving a problem by undermining a belief he does not really share with the proposition of a contrary point of view. In his opinion, neither proposition is subordinate to the other and neither is disputed. The "yes" is as much the opinion of Kohelet as the "but" (Fox 1989:22).

The postulation of a redactor to explain the contradictions is equally dubious for Fox. In his opinion, the glosses do not fulfill the purposes ascribed to their authors (Fox 1989:24). Fox cites the example of 8:11-12a + 14. If a pious scribe was trying to assert God's

justice without eliminating the offending words, he might add an assertion after v. 14 that the day of judgment would eventually come. As it is, the hypothetical scribe has allowed Kohelet's doubts to have the final word (Fox 1989:24). The result of the additions is not a verification of pious beliefs but a portrayal of tension between reality and pious idealism. It would appear that a pious redactor undertook the task of inserting material to refute Kohelet's scepticism and yet failed to render a decisive conclusion to the book in keeping with his purpose. Moreover, the sentences commonly designated as interpolations are often syntactically linked to material that is almost certainly original (Fox 1989:24).⁷

Declining to adopt the idea of a pious redactor or of the quotation of orthodox statements for the sake of refutation, Michael Fox attributes the contradictions in the book to Kohelet himself. According to Fox, the tensions in the book "belong to the substance of Kohelet's thought" (Fox 1989:12). For Kohelet, many of the events he witnesses in the world are an affront to his sense of reason and justice. Kohelet's outrage reveals his commitment to a framework of expectation of which he cannot divest himself even though it fails to always be operative in the world around him. Michael Fox, therefore, approaches the contradictions in the book with one eye on the qualities and principles which Kohelet considers worthwhile and important (Fox 1989:13) and another on the blaring affront to those values in the events of Kohelet's world.

⁷Fox's discussion of this problem with regard to 2:12-14 has already been mentioned in my comment on M. Jastrow's theory of a pious redactor.

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Michael Fox's theory of contradiction avoids the pitfalls in some of the other theories. He avoids the syntactical/contextual problems that the advocates of a pious redactor for the book have to face. Fox also avoids the apparent arbitrariness in the selection of a dominant perspective to which proponents of a theory of refutation have recourse. He pays due attention to the final message of the book which seems far too ambivalent to sustain the affirmation of orthodox piety as the dominant perspective; as such, the book does not explicitly reflect the purpose of inculcating the pious perspective ascribed to the redactor.⁸ However, the implicit ambivalence in the denial of any knowledge of the future also negates the possibility of the book being an absolute resignation to a pessimistic perspective. The ambivalent nature of the book which consists in the propagation of contradictory perspectives works both ways and any interpretation of either view as dominant in the book seems out of place.

The Thesis: A General Outline

Hence I arrive at the primary purpose of my thesis to test the possibility that the contradictions in the book are the fabric of Kohelet's thought. Such a proposition would suggest that the 'tug-of-war' between pietistic values and Kohelet's inability to find any justification for them in the world constitutes a tension in Kohelet's

⁸Indeed, Fox has pointed out that in the passages which form the nucleus in the discussion of this matter (2:12-16; 3:17; 8:5-7; 8:10-14), it is the 'sceptic' who has the final word (Fox 1989:25).

mind. This tension would not only sustain the polarity throughout the book, but also constitute Kohelet's dilemma.

Due to limits in space, the following discussion will confine itself to specific passages within the specific topics of 'justice' and 'wisdom'. These two topics together account for most of the contradictions in the book. The disparity between a just world where the righteous and the wicked receive their just consequences and the opposite comes under discussion in 3:16-22, 8:10-14. In relation to the subject of justice, the lament for an unjust world is attested in 4:1-3, 7:15, and 9:1-3. A similar tentative theory of reward for the wise and retribution for the foolish is the subject of attention in 1:12-18 + 2:12-17 and 10:1-15. To a lesser extent, the issue also arises in general statements about wisdom interspersed throughout the book (6:8; 7:1-14, 15-18, 19-25; 8:1, 6; 9:1-3, 10,13-18). The selection of the aforementioned topoi covers a sizeable portion of the subject matter in the book. It is towards the end of examining Kohelet's ideas on the subject of divine justice that we now turn in the following chapter.

Chapter 2: Kohelet and Justice

The Wisdom Tradition and the Theory of Reward and Retribution

The theory of reward and retribution is a part of the wisdom tradition (Rankin 1936:77). According to O.S. Rankin, it is an ancient belief that the righteous will fare well and be compensated by reward; the wicked will however reap punishment befitting their deeds (Rankin 1936:77). The proverbs of Israel's wisdom literature posit a nexus between righteous behaviour and reward. Wealth (Prov 3:16; 8:18, 20-21), honour (Prov 3:16, 35; 8:18) and long life (Prov 3:2, 16) are the rewards that the wise and the righteous can expect. But the lot of the wicked is disgrace (Prov 6:33) and poverty (Prov 6:11). For O.S. Rankin, the connection between the "ethical and the eudaemonistic" had become so axiomatic in Israel by the time of Job and Kohelet that the problem of the suffering righteous became an acute problem (Rankin 1936:86).

Klaus Koch's 'Deed-Result' Connection

In an article, Klaus Koch argues that the consequence for an evil deed is an inevitable effect of the deed (Koch 1983:58).¹ Koch's suggestion postulates a 'deed-result connection' which is intrinsic to creation; no independent divine initiative is required to link act to

¹This article was originally published in *ZTK* 52 (1955), 1-42. This thesis makes reference to the English translation by Thomas H. Trapp in *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 57-87.

consequence. Koch draws his conclusions from what he deems to be the absence of any "judicial process"² in the proverbs which deal with the consequences of deeds. In considering Proverbs 25:21-22, Koch denies that שָׁלַם (he shall complete...) has the nuance of 'reward' here; he opts to retain the meaning of it as 'to make complete' (Exod 21:34; 22:2,4,5,10-14). Koch denies that Proverbs 25:21-22 makes any reference to an action of reward on the part of YHWH; he is merely "facilitating the completion of something which previous human action has already set in motion" (Koch 1983:61). In referring to Proverbs 11:18, Koch suggests that the metaphor of 'planting and harvesting' is used to promote the self-sustained deed-consequence construction (Koch 1983:58). In other references to Proverbs 11:3 and 5, he identifies the 'path' as another analogy for the concept of the construction. Koch proposes that, according to these verses, the consequence of an action is like a chosen 'path' on a "continuous journey" (Koch 1983:58); the consequence is determined solely by the choice of individual action. Koch's exegesis of these verses undermine the role of YHWH as the independent arbiter of justice; YHWH merely assists in the process of a self-sustained structure that automatically metes out the appropriate consequence according to the moral quality of an action (Koch 1983:60).

²The "judicial process" is an essential part of the concept of retribution for Koch. "In this process, the personal freedom and economic circumstances of the person, which up to that point have not been affected by his actions, are now indeed affected by some 'alteration' in the person's circumstances relative to possessions, freedom, or maybe even life, as that person receives either a 'reward' or 'punishment'. In such a case, punishment and reward are not part of the person's nature, nor part of the essence of the action. The response to one's action would be by assessment, meted out by higher authority, and then imposed upon one from the outside" (Koch 1983:59). It is this aspect of the theory of 'retribution' that Koch denies in the Hebrew Bible.

Klaus Koch's theory of a self-sustaining structure of reward and retribution in Israelite wisdom has elicited much response. Michael V. Fox denies that the "tat-ergehen-zusammenhang" (deed-consequence connection) is the exclusive principle of justice in the Hebrew Bible (Fox 1989:125). He cites the fact that many of the verses that Koch discusses, such as Proverbs 20:22, "show God doing more than merely facilitating a natural causal process" (Fox 1989:125).

Roland Murphy thinks that Koch's theory is an oversimplification of the Israelite view of deed and consequence (Murphy 1991:31). The Hebrew Bible frequently presents YHWH as reacting to good and evil actions. Such a mythic construction depicts the will of YHWH as an integral link in the deed-consequence relationship. According to Murphy, it is ludicrous to suggest that the sages invented such an automatic structure connecting deed and consequence, and then, so convinced themselves of its truth that its failure presented a crisis for wisdom (Murphy 1991:31). Wisdom did not disassociate the process of justice from God; the Hebrews perceived YHWH as the guarantor of justice and any intrusion of injustice was an instance of divine abstinence (for whatever reason) from intervention.

Both James G. Williams and Patrick D. Miller Jr. find in Proverbs a greater degree of correspondence between deed and consequence than consequentiality. According to Williams, the usual formula is "Y is typically the result of X" (Williams 1981:19). The aphoristic style of Hebrew wisdom shuns a strict determinism that "all X leads to Y and Y is always the result of X" (Williams 1981:19). Patrick D. Miller

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Jr. cites Hosea 4:9 as an example of the 'correspondence' of a good deed with a good result.

It will be like people, like priests;
and I will visit upon him his ways,
and his deeds I will bring back upon him.

According to Miller, the emphasis is on YHWH bringing a consequence upon the individual in correspondence with the deed (Miller 1982:122). YHWH's prominence as the initiator of retribution excludes the possibility of a deed generating its own fate. Again, Miller finds a relationship of correspondence between deed and consequence with YHWH as the inscrutable link in Hosea 21:14.

I will punish you
according to the fruit of all your deeds.

The primary thrust of the prophetic message is the correlation between what the designated party has done and what will be done to them (Miller 1982:128). The initiative for the completion of justice, once again, lies with YHWH.

The interpretation of verses that seem to depict a mechanical system of reward or retribution independent of divine initiative (Prov 26:27; 28:10; 11:3, 17-21) are countered by those that clearly indicate that YHWH is the one who accomplishes justice (Prov 10:3; 12:2; 15:25-26; 22:22-23). The confidence which the wise of Israel possess in YHWH's impending judgment is only sustained by their faith. It is grounded in the character of YHWH; for the sages of Israel,

YHWH who loves righteousness will surely punish the wicked and reward the righteous (Prov 21:3; 20:22-23; 15:8-9, 29). Israel's confidence is not derived from the observation of events in the world; the writings of the sages reveal a painful awareness of the presence of injustice in the world. This 'awareness' is reflected in various proverbs that acknowledge a discrepancy between the wealthy and the righteous:

Better a poor man whose conduct is blameless than a man with twisted lips who is rich (Prov 9:1).
Better a little with the fear of YHWH than great treasure and unrest (Prov 15:16).

It is not beyond the notice of Israel's wise that the wicked sometimes do prosper and accumulate "treasure". However, in spite of these discrepancies in the theory of reward and retribution, they continued to hope that YHWH, in his capacity as God, would rectify these inequities. Hence they were able to say:

Do not say, "I will repay evil". Hope in YHWH and he will help you (Prov 20:22).	Be still before YHWH and hope in him.....those who wait for YHWH shall possess the land (Ps 37:7, 9).
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Kohelet and his Views on Divine Justice

Kohelet, like the wise sages before him, is also aware of the injustices in the world. The righteous sometimes receive the lot of the wicked and *vice versa* (8:14), and the wicked prolong their life (7:15). The race is not won by the swift, nor the battle by the great

warrior, and wealth does not go to the wise (9:11). He warns his readers not to be shocked when they see the oppression of the poor and the denial of justice (5:7); for Kohelet knows that justice is not to be taken for granted "under the sun" (3:16).

It is also evident that, for Kohelet, there is no device in creation that inevitably links the appropriate consequence to the moral quality of a deed. For him, the responsibility for justice lies with God; hence when he does speak of justice, he attributes the responsibility of its execution to God (3:17; 11:9b). Conversely, he also attributes the suspension of justice to divine initiative (5:7; 9:1).³ In Kohelet's view, the fulfillment of justice is not always an observable reality in the world; in fact, all his experience tells him that there is no guarantee for justice in the events of the world. The wicked do not always propagate their own destruction; they sometimes receive the rewards of the righteous (8:14).

The only place where a link is forged between the moral quality of a deed and its appropriate consequence is in Kohelet's prejudicial preferential statements for the 'righteous'. Even here, the theory of reward and retribution belongs in the category of 'ought to be/ought not to be'; the category of an abstract ideal whose reality is at best tenuous. The fact that the righteous receive the lot of the wicked and *vice versa* is absurd and unjust to Kohelet (8:14). The

³In 5:7, Kohelet attributes the oppression of the poor and the denial of justice to a corrupt hierarchical structure; "one official watches over another, and there are higher officials over them" (5:7). The insinuation is that the corruption of justice stems from some initiative at the pinnacle of this authority structure. Elsewhere in the book, Kohelet expresses certainty that God is the ultimate authority for everything that happens in the world (3:14; 7:13; 9:1). The combined effect of 5:7 with 3:14, 7:13 and 9:1 is an attribution of the miscarriage of justice to God.

events of the world blur any distinction between the righteous and the wicked and they all fall under the common cloak of time and chance (9:11). This is an affront to Kohelet's sense of justice and he loathes it, calling the common lot of the righteous and the wicked "an evil matter" (9:2-3).

8:10-15 as a Representative Passage for Kohelet's Views on Divine Justice

Since the aim of this thesis is to test the possibility that the contradictions in the book are part of the fabric of Kohelet's thought, 8:10-15 is an apt choice for the subject of justice. The choice of 8:10-15 for a close reading is dictated by concerns for quality and quantity. With regard to the latter, 8:10-15 is the single longest passage on the subject of the treatment of the righteous and the wicked. In terms of its quality, it also displays the greatest degree of ambivalence with regard to the merit of righteous behaviour. The passage contains the largest portion (8:12b-13) which affirms the accomplishment of justice outside of the epilogue, and this remains a problem for those who adhere to a wholly pessimistic interpretation of Kohelet's message.

Ecclesiastes 8:10-15: Verse 10

וַיֵּכֶן רְאִיחִי רְשָׁעִים קְבָרִים
וְבָאוּ וּמִמָּקוֹם קֹדֶשׁ יֵהָיוּ
וַיִּשְׁכַּחוּ בְּעִיר אֲשֶׁר כָּדְעָה
נִסְיָהּ הַבֵּל:

Thus I saw the wicked being buried,
they used to come and go from the
holy place. But what they used to do
in the city was forgotten. This too is
an absurdity (8:10).

The interpretation of this verse is beset with problems. The Septuagint reads the latter half of the first line as "ασεβείς εἰς τάφους ἐισαχθέντας" (...the wicked being carried to their tombs). In doing so it seems to presuppose קְבָרִים מִבָּאִים (being brought to [their] graves) instead of the Masoretic וְבָאוּ קְבָרִים (Whitley 1979:74). Following the lead of the Septuagint, Robert Gordis renders the line as "I have seen the wrong-doers being carried with pomp to their graves..." (Gordis 1968:184). G.R. Driver reads קָרְבִּים וְבָאִים and renders it as "and then I have seen wicked men, *approaching and entering* the holy place⁴..." (Driver 1954:230). James Crenshaw accepts Driver's interpretation of 8:10a and renders his translation of the verse accordingly (Crenshaw 1987:153). As I see it, the Masoretic rendition of וְבָאוּ קְבָרִים does not present a problem for the understanding of the verse. The sight of the wicked receiving burial presents the occasion for Kohelet to recall their hypocritical deeds. וְבָאוּ (they used to come) marks the beginning of Kohelet's reflections on the lives of the wicked. As such, there is no need for any corrective emendation to render the text comprehensible.

There is dissension among biblical scholars about the relationship between the two halves of the verse. Some understand

⁴The italics are mine.

the whole verse to apply to the wicked. Driver supposes וַיִּשְׁתַּכְּחוּ (and they boast) instead of the Masoretic וַיִּשְׁתַּכְּחוּ (and it was forgotten). He also translates אֲשֶׁר כָּדָעְשׁוּ as "that they have done right" (Driver 1954:230). Thus, he understands the verse to refer to the burial of the wicked who used to walk about and boast. Robert Gordis concurs with Driver in the emendation of וַיִּשְׁתַּכְּחוּ to וַיִּשְׁתַּכְּחוּ, but maintains that אֲשֶׁר כָּדָעְשׁוּ is to be translated "where they had acted thus" (Gordis 1968:295). There are others who see a relationship of contrast between the two halves of the verse; the first part refers to the wicked, and the second to the righteous. Michael Fox retains the Masoretic וַיִּשְׁתַּכְּחוּ and translates the second line as an antithetic clause in relation to the first: "while those who had acted honestly were neglected in the city" (Fox 1989:249). Roland Murphy concurs with Fox and elects to maintain a contrast between the fate of the wicked and the just in his rendition of 8:10 (Murphy 1992:85).

The impetus for such a flurry of suggestions for a corrective rendition of 8:10 stems from the apparent clumsiness in the progression of thought in the verse (Serrano 1954:168). Any corrective insertion/deletion to the Masoretic text can only proceed from the failure of an exhaustive attempt to reconcile the text to an acceptable interpretation of its meaning. In my view, there is no need to reject the Masoretic rendition of 8:10. Kohelet's observation of the wicked being buried provides an occasion for him to reminisce about their lives. He remembers their frequent intrusions into the "holy place" and laments the fact that their hypocritical deeds are forgotten. The pronouncement of 'absurdity' is directed at the lack of any punitive measure against the "wicked".

8:10 depicts an incongruent situation that offends Kohelet's sense of justice. This is obvious for two, or possibly three, reasons:

(i) First, there is a state of antithesis between רָשָׁעִים (the wicked) and קָדוֹשׁ (holy). The adjective "holy" is used to describe the nature of God; in Leviticus 11:45; 19:2 and 20:26, the Israelites are commanded to be "holy" for God is "holy" (BDB 1907:872).⁵ When applied to humans, it often describes the pious worshippers of God (Pss 16:3; 34:10; Deut 33:3; Dan 8:24). In Exodus 29:31, the term describes the place associated with the cult of worship, and in Psalm 46:5 it qualifies the habitations of God. The wicked (רָשָׁעִים) are depicted as being the object of God's wrath (Job 20:28-9). The term is also used to describe those who are in opposition to divine decrees (Ps 1:1-2). In the third psalm, the psalmist invokes YHWH against the wicked and he answers (Ps 3:5) from his "holy mountain" (בְּהַר קָדְשׁוֹ) by shattering the teeth of the wicked (Ps 3:8). It is therefore an abomination for "the wicked" to be seen entering and walking about the "holy place" (8:10). Kohelet acknowledges that there is an inherent danger in such a practice; he warns us not to offer the sacrifice of fools and, in so doing, commit evil (5:1).⁶

⁵Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907).

⁶Kohelet maintains the possibility that God may be moved to wrath by an unkept vow and exact retribution by destroying the work of the sinner (5:5). For him, the danger of divine reaction to an evil deed is real (although inconsistent). 8:10 and 5:1-6 share a common denominator in the mention of hypocrisy in a 'holy' place. In both cases, the guilty party acts with little regard for divine retribution. In Kohelet's precautionary statement of 5:1-6, the hypothetical 'intruder' enters the "house of God" and is brash in word and thought (5:1). Kohelet warns that such wanton verbosity can lead to hasty promises which one may later regret (5:3-5). Such a presumptuous attitude in the presence of God also characterizes the wicked who parade around the

(ii) Second, Kohelet qualifies the entire situation in 8:10 as a case of **הֶבֶל** (vanity). The occurrence of **הֶבֶל** in the book of Ecclesiastes is witness to a unique usage of the term in the Hebrew Bible.⁷ Kohelet employs the term to designate the prospect of a fool inheriting the reward from the labour of one who has acted wisely (2:18-19). The fact that conscientious labour might lead to grief and anxiety also receives the appellation of **הֶבֶל** (2:22-23). The similar fate of the fool and the wise one is **הֶבֶל** (2:15), as is the righteous receiving the lot of the wicked (8:14). All these statements imply an ideal⁸ which,

'holy' place in 8:10. As such, 8:10 maintains the antithesis between the evil-doers and a holy place which arises in 5:1-6.

הֶבֶל has the literal meaning of 'breath' or 'vapour' (BDB 1907:210). The term has the metaphoric nuance of 'impermanence' (Lam 4:17; Jer 10:3, 8). It often designates the false gods (idols) worshipped by God's people (Deut 32:21; 1 Kgs 16:13, 26; 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5; 8:19; 10:8, 15; 51:18; Jon 2:9; Ps 31:6). **הֶבֶל** can also carry the charge of nihilism toward human activity (Isa 49:4; Job 7:16; Pss 39:5, 6, 11; 94:11; 144:4). The term, with its variety of nuances (both metaphoric and literal) can be translated as 'vapourous', 'ephemeral', 'futile', 'ineffectual', 'deceptive', or 'transitory'. A general connotation of 'impermanence' may be observed in all the above renditions of **הֶבֶל**. However, Kohelet presents a problem for the usual understanding of **הֶבֶל**; he designates certain circumstances, where none of the aforementioned meanings are suitable, as **הֶבֶל** (2:21; 6:1-2; 8:10; 8:14). The appropriation of a wise labouring individual's reward by one who has not worked (2:21; 6:1-2) can hardly be termed 'transitory', 'deceptive' (in the sense of the entire situation being false), or 'vapourous'. Likewise, the disregard of evil and hypocrisy (8:10) and occurrences of injustice (8:14) are misfits for the traditional semantic categories of the term. These situations represent instances of inequity and injustice and the appropriate reaction is moral outrage. Kohelet does not indicate that injustice is 'transitory' or 'fleeting'. For him, injustice is a persistent reality (4:1-3; 7:15) and any projection of a future judgment occurs as a tentative possibility within the context of an unknown future (3:22; 9:1). Hence Victor Hamilton identifies a special meaning for **הֶבֶל** in Ecclesiastes (Hamilton 1980:205). He identifies the occurrence of the term in the sense of 'senseless' or 'irrational' in 2:15, 6:7-9, and 8:10-14. Likewise, M. Fox sees a disjunction between reality and an expected consequence in the **הֶבֶל** judgments of 6:1-2, 8:10, and 8:14 (Fox 1986:410). The occurrence of the term in 8:10 is one in a number of occasions in the book where **הֶבֶל** designates an instance of inequity.

⁸The indication of an 'implicit ideal' in any perjorative statement is dealt with in the following chapter under the section on the proverb of 1:15 (p. 101ff).

according to Kohelet, ought to be in place instead of what he sees before him in the world. These examples form a group of situations in the book of Ecclesiastes where the general qualification of **הָבֵל** in the sense of 'impermanent' does not fit. The above situations are instances of inequity that call for rectification. The occurrence of **הָבֵל** in 8:10, which deals with the disregard of the hypocrisy of the wicked, includes the verse in a series of observed inequities in the book of Ecclesiastes.

(iii) A possible third indication⁹ that the situation in 8:10 is an affront to Kohelet's sense of justice is the use of **קְבָרִים** ([the wicked] being buried). The verb adds an 'earthy' connotation to his presentation of an inequitable situation. This image is picked up in 8:14 where Kohelet observes another injustice that is committed "on the earth" (**עַל-הָאָרֶץ**). Kohelet's allusion to this common symbol of human estrangement from divine will¹⁰ may be indicative of the

For now, it would suffice to recognize the use of the term **הָבֵל** as an indication of Kohelet's disapproval of a situation.

⁹The occurrence of an allusion to the 'earth' is not in itself proof that Kohelet means to present the situation in 8:10 as an affront to justice. The proof that the situation in 8:10 is an outrage to Kohelet's ethical preconceptions is in the first two points. **אָרֶץ** (the earth) is a polyvalent symbol in the Hebrew Bible and not always metaphorical in usage. The interpretation of 'the earthy' image as a symbol for estrangement from divine injunction is part of the mythic construction of the Hebrew Bible. The link between the burial of the wicked in 8:10 to such a mythic construction can only be made because of the other factors which indicate that the portrayal of inequity is part of the author's rhetorical intention.

¹⁰In the Hebrew Bible, the earth (**אָרֶץ**) is often symbolically invoked as part of a metaphor for the estrangement of humanity from the divinely created cosmic 'order' in the universe. In Genesis 3:17-19, God's reaction to Adam's sin is to curse the ground:

Cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it
all the days of your life.
Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.

judicial discrepancy he observes in 8:10. Kohelet may be drawing upon a rich and well-developed symbol for the alienation of humans from the created 'order' when he invokes the image of the earth in 8:10 and 14. In 8:10, such an allusion to 'the earth' would create a second semantically antithetic pole opposite רָשָׁעִים (the wicked).¹¹

By interweaving various elements in antithetic opposition together, Kohelet creates a picture of disharmony for his audience. The wicked are seen buried in the ground which has become hostile on the account of human depravity; they even enter and walk about in the holy place. The mingling of such disparate elements is the reality that Kohelet sees, and for him, it is an "absurdity" (הֶבֶל).

By the sweat of your brow
you shall eat bread,
until you return to the ground.

The earth, which used to be the source of human nourishment (Gen 1:29) and occupation (Gen 2:15), now withholds its yield from Adam. The consequence that God brings on Adam's rebellion is that the earth becomes hostile towards him. The motif of the 'hostile earth' carries on in Genesis 4:10-11; there, the ground absorbs Abel's spilt blood and becomes unresponsive to Cain's efforts to cultivate it (Gen 4:12). As a symbol of human rebellion against God, the motif continues throughout the Hebrew Bible; Jeremiah describes the desolation of the land as a result of YHWH's fierce anger toward his people (Jer 4:26). The prophet Ezekiel draws a link between the abominable deeds of the people and the destruction of the land (Ezek 33:29). Zephaniah bears witness to the systematic deconstruction of creation and the removal of humans from the face of the earth on YHWH's day in Zephaniah 1:2-3 (see Michael Deroche's 'Zephaniah I 2-3: the Sweeping of Creation' VT 30 (1980), 104-9).

¹¹The first being the adjective קֹדֶשׁ (holy).

Verses 11 and 12a

אֲשֶׁר אֵיךְ נַעֲשֶׂה פְתָנָם מַעֲשֵׂה הָרָעָה מְהֵרָה
עַל־כֵּן מָלֵא לֵב בְּנֵי־הָאָדָם בָּהֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת רָע:

אֲשֶׁר חֹסֵא עֲשֵׂה רָע מֵאָח וּמֵאֲרִיךְ לוֹ

For the sentence for an evil deed is not carried out quickly, therefore the hearts of humans become full to do evil (8:11),

for a sinner who commits evil a hundred times lengthens [his life] (8:12a).

The double usage of אֲשֶׁר in 8:11-12a is commonly held to occur in the causal sense of 'because' or 'for' (Crenshaw 1987:155; Gordis 1968:296; Murphy 1992:79¹²). The middle line, "the hearts of humans become full to do evil", is therefore motivated both by 8:11a and 12a.¹³ Both lines are an elaboration of a similar principle; the absence and delay of retributive judgment.

אֲשֶׁר אֵיךְ נַעֲשֶׂה פְתָנָם מַעֲשֵׂה הָרָעָה מְהֵרָה

אֲשֶׁר חֹסֵא עֲשֵׂה רָע מֵאָח וּמֵאֲרִיךְ לוֹ

For the sentence for an evil deed is not carried out quickly... (8:11a)

for a sinner who commits evil a hundred times lengthens [his life] (8:12a).

Although both lines are concerned about the absence of justice, the former focuses on the initiator of justice, and the latter on the persistence of the evil-doer in the absence of judgment. The

¹²The causal sense of אֲשֶׁר is apparent in Murphy's translation of 8:11.

¹³The suggestion that 12a belongs with 12b and not 11 requires that אֲשֶׁר in 12a means 'although' or 'even if'. The translation in the *New American Standard* interprets אֲשֶׁר as 'although' and renders 8:12a as, "although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that....". As Robert Gordis has stated (Gordis 1968:293), such a reading of אֲשֶׁר is unattested in the Hebrew Bible. In view of that fact, the context requires that we interpret the term in its causal sense; אֲשֶׁר introduces a second clause (the first being 8:11a) that motivates the emboldenment to do evil in 8:11b.

occurrence of **דִּקְדָּק**¹⁴ in Ecclesiastes 8:11a carries a possible inference to some figure of authority who oversees the accomplishment of justice. But Kohelet omits to mention who this figure of authority is. As stated by Roland Murphy, Kohelet's statement can apply to both civil authorities and divine governance of the world (Murphy 1992:85).

In 8:12a, the focus shifts to the perpetrator of evil (**הַחַטָּא עֹשֶׂה רָע**). A correspondence may be seen between the delay of justice and the prolonging of the sinner's life; as the implementation of the sentence is delayed, the sinner prolongs his life. 8:11a and 8:12a therefore form a semantic merismus representing both parties in the miscarriage of justice; the judge and the indicted (or, in the context of 8:11-12a, the guilty party who escapes indictment).

The effect of a dual-representation of an inconsistent judicial system which designates both parties is a broader perspective on a specific instant of injustice. The occurrence of **רָעָא** in its causal sense in 8:11b represents a syntactic progression from 'cause' to 'effect' in

¹⁴The occurrence of **דִּקְדָּק** (sentence, edict) is rare. It occurs in biblical Hebrew only in one other place; Esther 1:20. There, the term designates the king's edict (**דִּקְדָּק מֶלֶךְ**) which is given throughout the land. It also occurs in the Aramaic portions of Ezra (Ezra 4:17; 6:11) and Daniel (Dan 3:16; 4:14). In all the aforementioned examples, the term is always associated with the governing authority of a monarch; in Ezra 4:17 and 6:11, it is Artaxerxes and Cyrus respectively and in Daniel 3:16 and 4:14, it is Nebuchadnezzar. In Ecclesiastes, there is no obvious figure of authority to which to attach the 'edict'. The immediate context supplies the information that the failure to deploy the 'edict' leads directly to the multiplication of evil (8:11b). As such, the 'edict' represents a desired act of retribution to curb the activity of the wicked. Kohelet's ambiguity concerning the identity of the 'judicial' figure behind the 'edict' is consistent with his other veiled attempts to implicate God in the failure of justice (as already mentioned, the combined effect of 5:7, 3:14, 7:1, and 9:1 is a muted implication of God for the inconsistency of justice). Perhaps, 8:11a is another example of Kohelet's reluctance to dispute one who is stronger than himself (6:10b).

the verse. The result of an inconsistent judicial system is the emboldenment of humans to do evil (8:11b). על-כן (thus, therefore) in 8:11b introduces a result clause; the failure to exact punishment leads to the daring to commit more evil. The three-fold repetition of רע (evil) in the short space of three lines is prominent. Each occurrence of the term is preceded by some form of the verb עשה (to do, act). In 8:11a, the verb occurs as a participle and part of an adjectival clause modifying פְּתָיִם (sentence, edict). It occurs in 8:11b as an infinitive construct, and again as a participle in 8:12a. Evil activity is therefore very much in the forefront of Kohelet's mind as he contemplates the suspension of justice.

In the course of three lines, Kohelet paints a picture of a lethargic judicial system that precipitates the rampant multiplication of evil. The outbreak of evil activity is witnessed by the three-fold repetition of רע (evil) and the fact that the fear of retribution is far from the minds of evil-doers (8:11b). Kohelet fills the reader with the chaotic image of a world where justice fails and the fear of God is not widespread as they stand at the threshold of the following scene (8:12b-13) which reverses the effect of the former. The contrast is stark and pronounced and the clash produces a contradiction that is unmistakable.

Verses 12b and 13

כִּי נִסְיִידַע אֲנִי אֲשֶׁר
יִהְיֶה טוֹב לִירְאֵי הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יִירָאוּ מִלִּפְנֵי:

וְטוֹב לֹא־יִהְיֶה לְקָשָׁע וְלֹא־יִאָּרֶךְ יָמָיו כָּצֵל
אֲשֶׁר אֵינוֹ יִרְאֵה לִפְנֵי אֱלֹהִים:

But still I know;

it shall be well for those who fear
God, who fear him before his face,
(8:12b)

and it shall not be well for the wicked
one and, like a shadow, he shall not
lengthen his days, because he does
not fear God before his face (8:13b).

According to Robert Gordis, כִּי נָם (but still, although) is a subordinate conjunction employed by Kohelet (Gordis 1968:297); it also occurs in 4:14 and 8:16. It occurs elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, with a similar meaning, as כִּי נָם (Isa 1:15; Hos 8:10; 9:16; Ps 23:4). In 8:12b, Kohelet employs the conjunction to introduce a subordinate clause contrary to the preceding one. The antithesis between 8:11-12a and 8:12b-13 is quite obvious when we compare 8:12a and 8:13a:

אֲשֶׁר חָטָא עֲשֵׂה רַע מֵאֵת וּמֵאֲרִיד לוֹ

וְטוֹב לֹא־יִהְיֶה לְקָשָׁע וְלֹא־יִאָּרֶךְ יָמָיו כָּצֵל

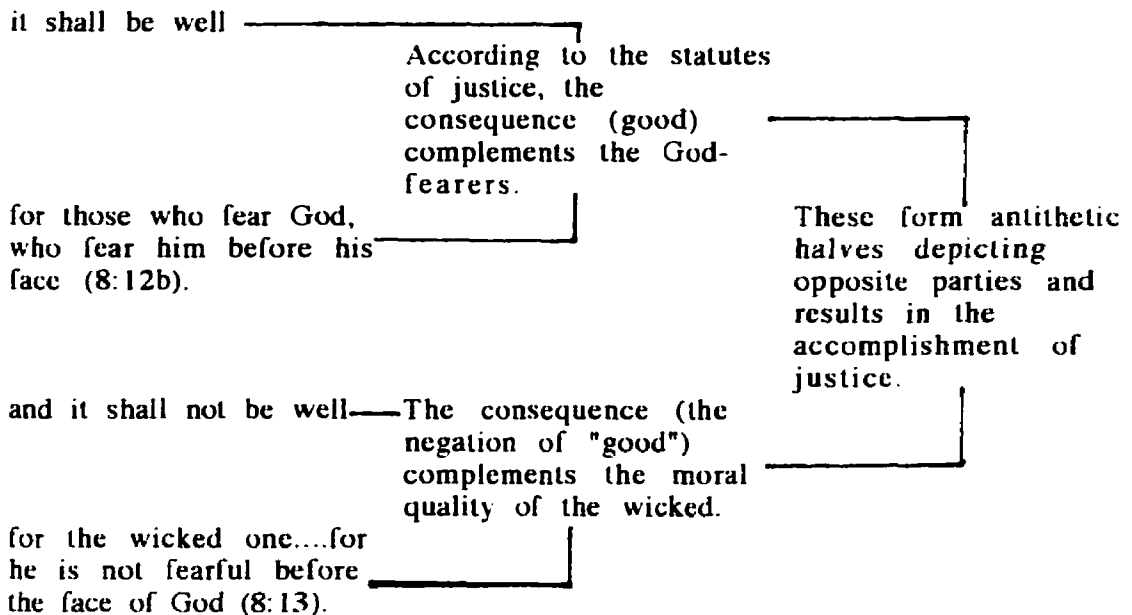
for a sinner who commits evil a
hundred times lengthens [his life],
(8:12a)

and it shall not be well for the wicked
one and, like a shadow, he shall not
lengthen his days (8:13a)

The contradiction between the two lines is stark. They share a similar grammatical subject; the "wicked one" in 8:13a is a synonymous replacement for the "sinner" in 8:12a. But 8:13a reverses the consequence of evil by negating the latter half of 8:12a.

The positive affirmation of justice in 8:12b-13 is a counterpoint to the pessimism of 8:11-12a.¹⁵

The positive affirmation of justice in 8:12b-13 is the product of two statements (verses 12b and 13) which forge a link between two moral categories and their complementary consequences.



Complementary entities in 8:12b-13 form antithetic halves¹⁶ which combine to present a situation where justice is brought to

¹⁵It should be noted that the antithesis here represents an 'absolute' contradiction. The two contradictory halves are mutually exclusive; each half calls for the negation of the other. If any reconciliation is to occur, one of the statements must, ultimately, be false.

¹⁶The two halves are only antithetic in the sense that they deal with opposite moral categories in the judicial process; verse 12b is concerned with the righteous God-fearer and verse 13, with the wicked. Grammatically, 8:12b is also in antithesis to 8:13; "it shall be well" (8:12b) finds its opposite, "it shall not be well" in 8:13. The grammatical opposition is echoed in the relationship between "[those] who fear him before his face" (8:12b) and "he does not fear God before his face" (8:13b). But 8:12b and 8:13 are also complementary because they collectively deal with opposite parties (and their opposite consequences) in the accomplishment of justice. The antithetic halves of 8:12b-13 are united by a single element; the traditional 'deed-consequence' construction that relates the moral character of a person to its appropriate consequence.

completion. The "good" (טוֹב) is matched up with the "God-fearers and, conversely, the irreverent have their "good" negated. The overall result is the complete reversal of the scenario in 8:11-12a which depicts the suspension of justice; there, the sinner lengthens his life (8:12a).

The Contradiction of 8:11-12a and 8:12b-13

The contradiction between 8:11-12a and 8:12b-13 is pronounced. Other elements which add to the contrast include the repetition of טוֹב (good, well) in 8:12b and 13. The repetition of טוֹב stands in contrast to the three-fold repetition of רַע (evil) in 8:11-12a. As much as the passage on the accomplishment of justice (8:12b-13) is characterized by the repetition of 'good', it is also marked by the prominence of the 'fear of God'; the term "fear of God" is mentioned 3 times (8:12b, 13a, 13b). Although the third occurrence is accompanied by the negative particle אֵינֶנּוּ, it is part of a clause (beginning with אֲשֶׁר in 8:13b) that elaborates on the nature of the wicked. The wicked are characterized by their lack of 'fear' before God. In contrast, the 'fear of God' is noticeably absent (both semantically and literally) in 8:11-12a; there, the wicked are bold to do evil (8:11b). The repetition of אֱלֹהִים (God) in 8:12b-13 evokes the prominence of the divine. The vision of restored justice begins with a statement that 'good' will come to the "God fearer" (8:12b) and ends with a description about "the wicked"; "the wicked" are the ones who

Although a state of antithesis exists between verses 12b and 13, the two units do not represent a contradiction.

do not fear God. The occurrence of the term "God" at the beginning and the end of the vision of restored justice strengthens its prominence in the passage on the restoration of Justice.¹⁷ The proximity of the divine presence is emphasized by the repetition of the preposition **לפני** (before the face of, in the presence of); the virtue of the righteous stems from their willingness to be fearful in the presence of God (8:12b). The combination of the repetition of the term "God" and its preceding preposition, "before the face of...", is a heightened emphasis on the divine presence. The divine prominence in 8:12b-13 is in contrast to the prominence of humans (**בְּנֵי־הָאָדָם**) in 8:11-12a. In 8:11-12a, the emphasis is on the sinful human heart that continues unrepentant. The absence of any regard for the divine in 8:11-12a is a feature that the subsequent passage in 8:12b-13 proceeds to exploit for its affirmation of justice.

The emphasis of various terms and phrases in 8:11-12a and 8:12b-13 creates two 'walls' of opposing concepts that point to the immense chasm between them. Each term or phrase finds its opposite in the other antithetic half:

8:11-12a

"evil"
 "prolong their days"
 -

8:12b-13

"good"
 (not) "prolong their days"
 "fear before God"

¹⁷I do not mean to say that the repetition of the term "God" with its preceding preposition **לפני** (in the presence of...) has a direct literal reference to the indispensability of divine presence for the initiation of justice in 8:12b-13. To accomplish that, "God" must move into the grammatical role of subject from its present position (i.e. the sentence should read "God will make it well for those who fear God..."). The term functions like a mental 'flashcard' that combines with the other 'signals' in the unit of 8:12b-13 to stand in antithesis to symbols with a similar function in the opposite passage (8:11-12a). The presence of such opposing verbal 'images' complements the opposition that already exists in the literal meaning of the two passages (8:11-12a and 8:12b-13).

"humans"

"God"

The combination of the reversal of injustice and the clash between opposing terms results in a contradiction which is so prominent as to be indicative of rhetorical intent.¹⁸

Verse 14

יֵשׁ-הֶבֶל אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה עַל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר	There is an absurdity that is done on the earth (8:14a);
יֵשׁ צְדִיקִים אֲשֶׁר מִנִּיעַ אֱלֹהִים כַּמַּעֲשֶׂה הַרְשָׁעִים	there are righteous ones who receive according to the deeds of the wicked (8:14b),
וְיֵשׁ רָשָׁעִים שֶׁמִּנִּיעַ אֱלֹהִים כַּמַּעֲשֶׂה הַצְדִּיקִים	and there are wicked ones who receive according to the deeds of the righteous (8:14c).
אָמַרְתִּי שֶׁגַּם-זֶה הֶבֶל:	I said that this too is an absurdity (8:14d).

יֵשׁ is a particle of existence (BDB 1907:441). It occurs 3 times in 8:14. Kohelet begins by stating that "there is an absurdity" (יֵשׁ-הֶבֶל) and he concludes by repeating his statement; שֶׁגַּם-זֶה הֶבֶל (this too is an absurdity). The pronouncement of 'absurdity' encloses two lines which elaborate on the nature of the 'absurdity'. The repetition of the particle of existence before each of the two lines expressing an

¹⁸The opposition between 8:11-12a and 8:12b-13 is so abruptly blatant that it suggests the existence of some purpose for it. It now remains the task of rhetorical criticism to ascertain the nature of this purpose (or if it even exists). The 'clash' in itself indicates nothing. It could be part of a stark transformation from an unjust world to a just one; as such, the author would be bearing witness to a cosmic reversal of injustice and means to communicate the severity of the disruption to injustice. Conversely, the 'clash' may be an attempt to draw attention to the discrepancy between the pietist's ideal and the reality of the world only to favour the latter for its grounding in truth. The identification of a rhetorical purpose for the antithesis in 8:11-13 will come later in the section "Towards a Rhetoric of Contradiction".

inequity (8:14b, c) after its use to introduce the statement that an "absurdity" exists reinforces the identification of the two inequitable situations as the "absurdity" that Kohelet observes.

Kohelet's ability to weave antithetic elements together to create a picture of disharmony returns in 8:14.

יֵשׁ צְדִיקִים אֲשֶׁר מָנַע אֱלֹהִים כְּמַעֲשֵׂה הַרְשָׁעִים (8:14b)

וְיֵשׁ רָשָׁעִים שֶׁמָּנַע אֱלֹהִים כְּמַעֲשֵׂה הַצְדִּיקִים (8:14c)

The righteous (צְדִיקִים) and the wicked (רָשָׁעִים) are two opposite categories in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 18:23; Job 9:24; 15:20; 20:29; Pss 1:1, 4, 6; 3:8; 7:10; 9:18; 11:6). In designating the righteous as the recipients according to the deeds of the wicked and *vice versa*, Kohelet creates antithesis within each line and overturns the basic premise of justice. Moreover, the lexical sequence of "the righteous: the wicked: the wicked: the righteous" creates chiasmus and draws further attention to the disparity between the moral quality of the people and the consequence in each line.²⁰

All the indicators that an incongruent situation exists in 8:10 are present here in 8:14. The antithesis between "the wicked" and "holy places" is found here in 8:14 between "the wicked" and "the righteous". In 8:14, the precedence of the preposition כִּי (like, as according to) before the second part of 8:14b and c clearly indicate

¹⁹The emphases are mine.

²⁰In a certain sense, the chiasmus here is insignificant. It is not the lexical sequence of the terms that is pertinent, but the fact that a mismatch between a particular group of individuals and a particular type of consequence has occurred within the two clauses of 8:14b and 8:14c.

the discrepancy between the moral quality of the individual(s) and the consequence. The clause *כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה הַרְשָׁעִים* (according to the deeds of the wicked), and its counterpart in 8:14c, *כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה הַצְדִּיקִים* (according to the deeds of the righteous), designates a possessive link between a certain type of people and a certain type of consequence. For Kohelet, this link is severed and a mismatch has occurred; hence the righteous receive according to the deeds of the wicked and *vice versa*. The discrepancy which was implied in 8:10 (by the antithesis between "the wicked" and "holy places") returns in 8:14b and c. Moreover, the pronouncement of "absurdity" which so often expresses an inequity in the book frames the observation of injustice is here in 8:14. Finally, the allusion to the earth receives a second mention in 8:14; "there is an absurdity that is done on the earth..." (8:14a). As mentioned before, Kohelet may be alluding to an established metaphor for the alienation of humanity from the divinely established 'order' in the Hebrew Bible.

The Conclusion of Verse 15

וְשִׁבַּחְתִּי אֶת אֱתֶר־הַשָּׁמַיִם
 אֲשֶׁר אֵין־טוֹב לָאָדָם חַחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ
 כִּי־אֵין־לָאִכּוֹל וְלִשְׁתּוֹת וְלִשְׂמֹחַ
 וְהוּא יִלְוֶנוּ בְּעִמְלּוֹ יְמֵי חַיָּיו
 אֲשֶׁר־נָתַן־לּוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים חַחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ:

And I praised pleasure
 because there is no good for a man
 under the sun (8:15a),
 except to eat, to drink, and to make
 merry. And that will stay amidst his
 toil all his days (8:15b),
 which God has given him under the
 sun (8:15c).

The mood in 8:15 is a mixture of a muted praise for joy and despondence. In contrast to 8:12b-13 which affirms that "good" (טוֹב)

will come to the "God-fearer", 8:15 darkens the optimism of 8:12b-13 by limiting the amount of "good" available to all humans under the sun. The praise for eating, drinking and merry-making is placed within a concessive clause. **עַל־כֵּן** after a negation usually means 'unless' or 'except' (BDB 1907:474) as attested in Genesis 39:9; 28:17 and Esther 2:15. The joys of eating and drinking are a concession in view of the fact that there is no other "good" under the sun (8:15a). The ability in the mention of such pleasures to ameliorate the mood of the passage is limited in 8:15.

There is a repetition of **תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ** (under the sun) in 8:15 (verses 15a and 15c). The recurrence of the phrase "under the sun" is reminiscent of Kohelet's general quest to understand everything that happens under the sun/heavens (1:13-14; 8:17). This is a task that he fails to accomplish. The mention of God as the giver of 'life' in 8:15c suggests that he is the one responsible for there not being any "good" for humans under the sun²¹ with the exception of the pleasures in food and drink. This suggestion is reminiscent of other verses elsewhere where Kohelet insinuates that God is the

²¹The phrase "under the sun" is associated both with Kohelet's statements about his general task (1:13-14) and with his labour to understand the divine activity (8:17). On at least 5 occasions, he mentions **עָמַל** (toil, labour) and "under the sun" together (2:18, 20, 22; 5:17; 9:9). The close association of 'labour' and the phrase 'under the sun' in the aforementioned cases suggests that human toil/labour is one facet of "all activity under the sun" which he seeks to understand (1:13-14; 8:17). In both 1:13 and 8:17, God is designated as the giver of the task to understand 'all activity under the sun'. Since the 'work of God' is not considered to be separate from the work done 'under the sun' (8:17), it follows that 7:13 is a clear indication that Kohelet considers the incomprehensibility of the world to be God's doing. In 7:13, Kohelet applies the same proverb used to qualify "all work done under the sun" (1:14-15) to describe the inevitability of divine deeds. Furthermore, 3:10-14 also suggests that the incomprehensibility of "the work which God has done" is God's will so that humans will fear him (3:14). Therefore, the absurdity of human toil (2:22-23) is, by association with "all activity under the sun", also the product of divine initiative.

responsible party for human inability to understand everything which is done in the world (3:10-14; 6:10-12).

In conclusion to his observation that justice is not complete in 8:10-15, Kohelet refocuses his readers' attention on the task of discovering the divine activity under the sun. He also affirms that "eating, drinking and merry-making" are concessions amidst the toil of life. The failure of justice in 8:10 and 8:14 remains a problem commanding Kohelet's attention.

Overall Structure and Meaning in 8:10-15

An overview of 8:10-15 reveals that 8:10 and 8:14 are specific examples of injustice in operation in the world. These two sub-units allude to a discrepancy between the demands of justice and the events of the world.²² The discrepancy becomes especially blatant when the epistemological structure²³ that postulates a specific consequence for a specific moral type is distorted in 8:14. In 8:14,

²²It should be noted that the antithesis in 8:10 marks a distinction between two moral categories. This is different from the later discrepancy between the moral type and the corresponding consequence which 8:14 endeavours to display. The former alludes to a distinction in moral quality whereas the latter alludes to a theory of reward and retribution which links a type of deed/person to a type of consequence. It can be said that 8:14 assumes the distinction between the two moral categories in 8:10 in portraying the discrepancy between these two moral categories and their respective consequences. In this case, the assignment of 'proper' and distinct consequences to match each moral type is also a recognition of the distinctiveness of each moral category.

²³The following chapter deals with the role of Kohelet's hermeneutical preconceptions in his interaction with the events of the world. Here in 8:10 and 8:14, such 'preconceptions' are evident in statements which clearly delineate the type of consequence which is appropriate for a certain moral type (8:14). Even the statements of disgust which Kohelet makes at injustice from time to time (2:17; 8:14d) are dependent on such preconceived notions of what constitutes 'justice'.

this discrepancy is unmistakable from the mismatch of terms as witnessed in the chiasmic structure of 8:14b and c; "the righteous" is mismatched with the consequences of "the wicked" and *vice versa*. The entire situation is then aptly assigned the quality of "absurdity". It is abundantly clear from 8:10 and 8:14 that Kohelet means to allude to two distinct moral categories (the righteous and the wicked) as well as to a structure of reward and retribution that should assign an appropriate consequence in accordance with each moral quality.

The two examples of injustice in 8:10 and 8:14 enclose two antithetic passages (8:11-12a and 8:12b-13) that present opposite views of the theory of reward and retribution. The adjoining phrase *אֲנִי יוֹדֵעַ* (although I know) for the two disparate portions of 8:11-13 recognizes the distinction between the two contending perspectives. The particle *וְ* (also), at once, designates the 'otherness' of the view in 8:12b-13 and includes it alongside its opposite in 8:11-12a in the author's contemplative 'field of vision'.²⁴ 8:11-13, as a whole, depicts the inner struggle brought about by the observations of injustice in 8:10 and 14. The contradiction suspends the reader in a dilemma without any suggestion by the author as to which side of the 'fence' to stand.

²⁴In his study of emphatic structures in biblical Hebrew, T. Muraoka states that the basic function of *וְ* is additive (Muraoka 1985:143). He cites the following as examples of the particle *וְ* having a simple additive function: Genesis 27:33, 31:15, 46:4, Deuteronomy 2:15, Psalm 132:12, and Job 2:10 (Muraoka 1985:145). Although the particle may have an emphatic force, such a force would not occur at the expense of the additive function (Muraoka 1985:146).

Towards a Rhetoric of Contradiction

There is no attempt to harmonize the two opposite perspectives of 8:11-13 with an explanation for the state of injustice in 8:11-12a. An attempt to neutralize the pessimistic voice would do well to provide a reason for the temporary suspension of justice. The insertion of such a reason would subsume the present state of injustice under the specifications of some 'greater' plan and promote the ultimate completion of justice as the dominant view. On the contrary, the method of engagement here is blatant contradiction with no recourse to any external explanatory factor to establish the state of injustice as a temporary one.

With the two opposing views in tension, Kohelet's discourse turns to perpetuate the ambiguity precipitated by the contradiction in 8:11-13. 8:16, which comes after the exhortation to enjoy life, states Kohelet's intention to apply wisdom to understand the world's events. In 8:17, Kohelet admits failure and remarks that "the business" on earth even escapes the understanding of the wise. 9:1 refocuses on the problem of injustice; it is towards the common fate of the righteous and the wicked that Kohelet applies his understanding, "examining everything" (9:1).

כִּי אֶחָדָלָה נָתַתִּי אֶל־לִבִּי לִבְחֹר אֶחָדָלָה
אֲשֶׁר הַצְדִּיקִים וְהַחֲכָמִים יַעֲבֹדוּם בְּיַד הָאֱלֹהִים
גַּם־אֲהַבָה גַּם־שָׂנְאָה אֵין יָדַע הָאָדָם
הַכֹּל לִפְנֵיהֶם:

Indeed, all this I took to my heart to examine all of this; the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether (it is) love or whether (it is) hatred, no human knows. Everything is before them (9:1).

The clause introduced by אֲשֶׁר is an object clause (Jouon and Muraoka 1993:590); it contains the focus of Kohelet's scrutiny which is the fact

that all humans are in the 'hand' of God. The following line clarifies the exact nature of Kohelet's concern: it is the unknowable future that constitutes the source of his concern. The double occurrence of **וְאֵי** acts as a unifying syntactic structure of inclusion (BDB 1907:169) to present the twin possibilities for an unknowable future. In the case of 9:1, the unknowable future constitutes the uncertainty of divine disposition towards humans.

The contradiction of 8:11-13 culminates in a task of inquiry (8:16-9:1a) that comes up against the barrier of an unknown future. The result is not only a negation of future judgment as a certainty (8:12b-13), but also the negation of any assertion of perpetual injustice. As such, 9:1 serves to explain that the contradictory assertions of 8:11-13 are voices of contentious deliberation over an uncertain future. Such a rhetoric of antithesis is not confined to 8:10-9:1; 3:16-22 employs a similar method of antithesis leading to ambiguity.

Excursus: A Similar Rhetorical Strategy of Contradiction in 3:16-22

וְעוֹד רָאִיתִי תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ
מְקוֹם הַמִּשְׁפָּט שָׁמָּה הָרָשָׁע
וּמְקוֹם הַצְדִּיק שָׁמָּה הָרָשָׁע:
אָמַרְתִּי אֲנִי בְלִבִּי
אֶחָד הַצְדִּיק וְאֶחָד הָרָשָׁע יִשְׁפֹּט הָאֱלֹהִים
כִּי־עַתָּה לְכָל־חָפֶז וְעַל כָּל־הַמַּעֲשֵׂה שָׁם:

I continually saw under the sun, that in the place of judgment, there (was) evil; and in the place of righteousness, there (was) evil (3:16). I said in my heart: "God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every desire and for all deeds there (3:17).

In the former verse (3:16), "wickedness" (הַרְשָׁעָה) stands in the place of "judgment" (הַמִּשְׁפָּט). Verse 17 employs a recovered use of the root שָׁפַט (to judge, to pronounce judgment). It however reverses the 'injustice' of verse 16 by stating that God "will judge" (יִשְׁפֹּט) the righteous and the wicked. With the recovered use of the root שָׁפַט, Kohelet emphasizes the quality of justice in this vision of the future; the absence of this quality was noted in verse 16.²⁵

The repetition of הַרְשָׁעָה emphasizes the widespread presence of evil in 3:16. This emphasis is balanced by the exaggerated description of the scope of the judgment in 3:17; the judgment will bring into account every deed and whim of both the righteous and the wicked. Kohelet stretches his elaboration on the scope of divine judgment over two lines forming a thematic chiasmus with the judging action of God as its focus:

אֶת־הַצְדִּיק וְאֶת־הַרְשָׁעָה (a)

the righteous and the wicked, (a)

יִשְׁפֹּט הָאֱלֹהִים (b)

God will judge, (b)

בִּיָּעַת לְכָל־חַפֵּץ וְעַל כָּל־מַעֲשֵׂה שָׁם (c)

for (there is) a time for every desire
and every deed there. (c)

²⁵Perhaps one may propose a chronological progression from 3:16 to 3:17. The use of the imperfect (יִשְׁפֹּט) in 3:17 may be construed as part of an anticipated or desired vision for the future that incorporates the present state of injustice in 3:16 as the initial stage before the transformation. In such case, there would be no contradiction between verses 16 and 17; they would be representing different extremes in a chronological progression depicting the accomplishment of justice in the world. Although such an understanding of 3:16-17 is plausible in its lexical moment, the exegesis of material following 3:16-17 will show how the antithesis is interpreted by 3:22. 3:22 maintains the vision of future judgment as a possibility, while placing emphasis on the unknowability of the future. Within the context of the uncertain future, the perpetuation of injustice assumes a position of equal standing alongside the advent of justice as a future possibility. Hence, the present state of 3:16 and the vision of 3:17 become contenders for a single spot in the future. In the light of 3:22, the antithesis of 3:16-17 becomes contention.

The "righteous" and the "wicked" form two opposite categories that collectively designate the totality of humankind; these opposite parties form the object of God's judgment in part (a). The totality of the human host as an object of divine judgment in part (a) is matched by the all-encompassing quality of the judgment which scrutinizes every aspect of human life in part (c); every thought/desire (לְכָל-חֲפֶצֶר) and every deed (כָּל-מַעֲשֵׂה) has its appropriate time and place. The repetition of כָּל (all/every) in part (c) stands in reflection to the double usage of the accusative marker in (a) to designate the two opposite parties as the objects of judgment. In (c), the repetition of "every" adds to the emphasis on the intensity of the judgment; every whim and deed has its proper place. Parts (a) and (c) are two parallel couplets that share a common emphasis on the totality of divine judgment; while (a) emphasizes the breadth of the judgment, (c) explores the depth of the judgment. Like a zoom-lens, the lexical progression in 3:17 gives the reader a focusing effect; the initial 'frame' displays the massive body of humans which comes under judgment, and the final one examines the minute aspects of each individual in the process of judgment. At the center of this thorough process is God (b), who is the initiator of the judgment. The result of this extensive elaboration on divine judgment in 3:17 is an emphatic counterpoint to 3:16, where "justice" and "righteousness" are cast aside and replaced by "wickedness".

אֵי (there) in 3:17 provides a final link with the preceding verse. The occurrence of אֵי is reminiscent of the emphatic repetition of אֵי (there) in 3:16; there, it designates the place of judgment

(מקום המשפט) and the place of righteousness (מקום הצדק) which are taken up by "wickedness". The recurrence of שם (without the emphatic final ה) in 3:17 points the affirmation of divine judgment back to 3:16.²⁶

The final result is a picture of two opposite and contradictory world-views regarding divine judgment in competition for the same place.

The verses that follow 3:17 state the observation of commonality between humans and beasts; the common denominator of death stands as a barrier to any advantage one individual may claim over another (3:18-20). With regard to the possibility of a distinction between humans and beasts in the afterlife, Kohelet espouses ignorance (3:21). Verse 22 encourages humans to enjoy life. A final statement about human ignorance of future events concludes the passage on the destiny of humans:

כי מי יביאנו לראות
במה שיעשה אחריו:

Indeed, who will bring him to see
what will be after him? (3:22b)

²⁶The occurrence of שם with reference to a previously designated place (מקום) is attested in 1:5b and 1:7b:

ואלמקומו שואף
זורח הוא שם:
אלמקום שהנהלים הלקים
שם הם שבים ללכת:

hastening to its place, it rises there
(1:5b).

to the place where the rivers are
flowing, there they return to flow
(1:7b).

In both instances, the clear designation of a particular place in the initial clause is the object of reference by the demonstrative שם (there) in the following clause. 3:16-17 adheres to this demonstrated pattern. 3:16, in itself, contains two occurrences of the demonstrative pronoun of locale which refer back to designated 'places'. The final two lines of 3:16 collectively designate two places which have come to be occupied by "wickedness". These two lines are in turn the antecedent for the final שם of 3:17 which restores the proper occupants ("righteousness" and "judgment") of the two designated spots.

8:22b is one of several statements interspersed throughout the book on the subject of an unknowable future; the other specimens occur in 6:12, 8:7, 9:1, and 10:14. The fact that the future hides the mystery of divine disposition towards humans (9:1) has already been discussed. In 6:12, the denial of any knowledge of the future renders any claim to knowledge of a profitable course of action tentative. Kohelet establishes his view that the reality of any hierarchical structure of preference in human behaviour is dependent on a precise knowledge of future events; without such knowledge, the wise cannot claim any advantage over the foolish (2:15). 8:7 raises the question of the future in reaction to the affirmation of judgment in 8:6. The fool's persistent verbosity is criticized in 10:14 by the denial that anyone can know what will happen; but the statement of future uncertainty also raises doubt about the feasibility of praising the words of the wise (10:12-13). In all the above examples, the uncertainty of the future stands to contradict any affirmation of a positive course of action or future judgment. 3:22b is not an exception to the rule. The statement of uncertainty stands to raise doubt both about the perpetuation of injustice in 3:16 and the contradictory view of a definite time of judgment in the future (3:17).

The statement of an uncertain future in 3:22 and 9:1 places the two perspectives in 3:16-17 and 8:11-13, with their accompanying emphatic structures and word-groups, within a strategy of contradiction. The constant 'to and fro' movement between opposite perspectives suspends readers in the tension intrinsic to the anxiety of an unknown destiny. In view of the statements in 3:22 and 9:1,

the contradictions are not accidents resulting from a careless compositional style. In fact, the closely corresponding antithetic words and structures in both 3:16-17 and 8:11-13 represent a rhetorical technique where opposite perspectives actually address one another by mutual negation. The clash produces no 'winner', but only a continuing tension without any indication of an impending resolution.²⁷

²⁷The ambiguity in Ecclesiastes, which is a product of the tension between contradictory views, seems to portray a mood of exasperation as Kohelet contemplates the issue of justice and theodicy. The equal apportion of weight to each view invites the reader to share, at once, in Kohelet's dilemma and the emotion which the conundrum arouses. Within such a literary strategy, the experience of the dilemma is tantamount to the experience of an attachment (intellectually and emotionally) to two contradictory perspectives. William Empson points to the portrayal of two contradictory voices in John Dryden's *Song for St. Cecilia's Day*. The contradictory voices are the personification of the conflicting emotions which a soldier feels on the march to battle.

The trumpet's loud clangour
 invites us to arms
 With shrill notes of anger
 And mortal charms
The double double double beat
 of the thundering drum
 Cries, heark the Foes come;
Charge, charge, 'tis too late to retreat.

The element of fearful terror in the final line stands in contrast to the heroic invitation to battle in the rest of the poem. The emotions aroused by the contrasting emotions pull the soldier toward opposite courses of action; one, to plunge headlong into battle, and the other, to retreat. According to Empson, the element of timidity takes its place with the martial valour in the soldier's heart to form the total conscious experience of the march to battle (Empson 1984:198). The conflicting impulses share a place in the soldier's psychological make-up and no one emotion is relegated to a weaker position.

The Contradiction of 8:12b-13: the Theory of a Pious Redactor

Although 8:12b-13 shares a common allusion to the theory of reward and retribution with 8:10-12a and 8:14, there remains a stark contrast between lamenting the absence of justice and staunchly affirming its advent. Some consider the allusion to a possible time of judgment in the future to be uncharacteristic of Kohelet. Morris Jastrow finds such optimism to be out of character for Kohelet and, in recognition of the continuity in 8:11-13, accordingly elects to excise the entire unit. He considers it to be an addition by a pious redactor (Jastrow 1972:228). James Crenshaw thinks that 8:12b-13 is either a secondary gloss or a concession to 'orthodox' sentiments that Kohelet proceeds to undermine in verse 14 (Crenshaw 1987:155).²⁸

Advocates of a theory of a pious redactor for 8:12b-13 reject the view that the excellence of 'righteous' behaviour and the corresponding postulation of a reward for it are part of Kohelet's thought. For them, Kohelet's awareness of an unjust universe that

²⁸Crenshaw's suggestion that 8:12b-13 is a conservative perspective that Kohelet undermines in verse 14 is based on the sequential progression in 8:12-14 (Crenshaw 1987:156). Although the placement of verse 14 after verses 12b-13 may weaken the effect of the affirmation of justice, it does not exclude that view as one of Kohelet's. As the close reading of 8:10-15 has shown, the overall rhetorical effect is the enhancement of the contradiction; no one perspective deals a lethal blow to the other. The author had recourse to at least one of several methods of 'disowning' the optimism intrinsic to 8:12b-13. The insertion of a simple introductory phrase identifying 8:12b-13 as a view foreign to the author (the following section on the theory of quotations explores this method of distancing oneself from a disagreeable perspective) would suffice to promote a pessimistic reading. The passage of 8:10-15 reveals no such device to isolate and promote one perspective as the view-point of the author. Instead, we have several indicators, as the close reading suggests, that there is an effort to strengthen the antithesis between the two competing perspectives.

fails consistently to unite a 'good' consequence with a 'good' deed cannot coexist in the same mind with a belief that justice will prevail. Hence, they reject the affirmation of a link between the moral quality of an individual with a corresponding consequence in 8:12b-13 as an intrusion by a mind foreign to Kohelet's thought. Such a position requires that we understand the 'absurdity' judgment in 8:14 not to refer so much to the mismatch of incompatible entities, but to the conservative postulation that a link exists between a certain moral type and a certain type of consequence. Within such a perspective, the excellence of righteous behaviour has no objective advantage over wickedness and any hermeneutical construction that maintains such an order of preference should be abandoned.

The rejection of a palpable belief in the advent of justice as part of Kohelet's thought leads to the postulation of a conservative redactor for 8:12b-13. However, this theory is severely debilitated by the ambiguous tone of the book; it would seem that the redactor has failed to establish his/her view as the final and dominant one in the book. In commenting on 8:12b-13, Michael Fox points out that anyone reading 8:11-12a + 14 would face a sharp counterpoint to God's justice. The hypothetical orthodox redactor would have done better to insert a statement after verse 14 that the day of judgment would eventually come and rectify all present inequities (Fox 1989:24). As the text stands, 8:11-12a, 14 and 9:1-3 engage the affirmation of justice in 8:12b-13 in a tug-o-war where neither side is victorious. A glance at the wider context of the material surrounding 8:12b-13 reveals its impotency as a corrective gloss to neutralize and dissipate the pessimistic tone of Kohelet. In the

following presentation, (x) represents a positive evaluation for the advent of justice and (y) represents a negation of that perspective in a particular portion. Passages that are neutral in this respect are represented by the symbol (#).

Ecclesiastes 8:5-9:3; a Bird's Eye View:

The one who observes a commandment will come to know no evil affair, for a wise heart knows the time and judgement. Indeed, there is a time and judgement for all desires, and the evil of a man lies heavy upon him (8:5-6). (x) Kohelet affirms that a time of judgment will come and evil will not escape punishment.

For nobody knows what will happen; who will tell him how it will be? No human has the power over the wind in order to restrain the wind and no one has power over the day, and there is no discharge of a war. But wickedness will not save them (8:7-8). (y) Kohelet says that the future is unknown and nobody can tell what will happen. Like the wind and the day of death, all future events are beyond human prediction.

All this I have seen and given my heart to (see) all deeds which are done under the sun, a time when one man has power over another man to harm him (8:9). (#)

Thus I saw the wicked buried, they used to enter and walk about the holy place; and what they had done was forgotten in the city. This also is an absurdity (8:10). (y) Kohelet observes an abominable act which goes unpunished.

Because the sentence for an evil deed is not done in haste, the hearts of humans become full to do evil. For a sinner who commits evil a hundred times prolongs [his life] (8:11-12a). (y) and laments the absence of any justice to bring about a retribution.

But still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear him before his face. And it will not be well for the wicked one and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, for he is not fearful before the face of God (8:12b-13). (x) A projection is made to envision a time of judgment in the future to rectify the present inequities.

There is an absurdity that is done on the earth; there are righteous ones who receive according to the deeds of the wicked. And there are wicked ones who receive according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this too is an absurdity (8:14).

(y) Kohelet observes another instance of injustice.

So I praised joy for there is nothing better for humans under the sun except to eat, to drink and to make merry. This will stay by his toil all the days of his life which God has given him under the sun. When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done under on the earth, (even though one's eyes should see no sleep by day or by night) I saw every work of God and I concluded that a human is unable to discover the work which has been done under the sun. Therefore, a human toils to search, but is unable to discover. Even if a wise one should proclaim to know, he is not able to discover (8:15-17).

(y) In despair, Kohelet recommends the pleasures of the world. He concludes that the world is beyond his ability to comprehend.

For all this I have put to my heart to explain; the righteous, the wise and their actions are in the hand of God. Whether (it is) love or whether (it is) hatred, humans do not know; everything is before them. Everything is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous, for the wicked, for the good, the clean, the unclean, for the one who offers sacrifice and for the one who does not offer sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who fears an oath. There is an evil in all that is done under the sun; there is one fate for all humans. And also, the hearts of the sons of humans are full of evil and folly is in their hearts during their lives and afterward, [they go] to the dead (9:1-3).

(#) and (y) Kohelet confirms that all humans face an unknown future. The possibility that there is no distinction between the evil and the righteous is an abomination to Kohelet. In contrast to the affirmation of justice in 8:12b-13, Kohelet goes on to press the counterpoint that all humans meet the same end; justice is absent.

5

In this brief selection, it can be seen that the 'optimistic' voice generally emerges in the first half. It is the voice of the pessimist that dominates the latter half of the passage. Furthermore, the statement that an uncertain future renders the destiny of the righteous uncertain (9:1) mocks any attempt to derive comfort from the assurances of 8:12b-13. If the theoretical pious redactor means to dissolve the pessimism of the 'original' Kohelet with a firm affirmation that a final judgment will occur, then he has failed miserably in this task. After 8:12b-13, the only other positive statement for divine justice is in 11:9b. However, the lapse between the statements of injustice in 9:2-3 and 11:9b excludes the possibility of the latter reversing the effect of the former. It seems unlikely that an orthodox redactor eager to counter the unorthodox statements in the book would leave such painful doubts about divine justice to stand unchallenged for so long.

Moreover, such a theory of redaction would have to assume that, prior to the insertion of corrective glosses, a wholly 'pessimistic' book was deemed appropriate for 'canonization'. Without an established status for Ecclesiastes within the corpus of Hebrew religious literature, a scribe would not deem the book worthy of the copious effort required to render it acceptable to a conservative audience. The wholesale designation of the book as heretical literature and its consequent consignment for destruction or withdrawal²⁹ would have been more convenient. The religious

²⁹There existed, in the period of the Mishna, a facility (the *Genizah*) for the storage of materials deemed unworthy of circulation. These materials were considered valuable and were only put away because of apparent minor discrepancies between them and the Law (Moore 1927 [v.1]:247). The fear was that the 'half-learned' would stumble from the misinterpretation of these

authorities had suppressed many other books from the period of Ecclesiastes which are now included in the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha (Gordis 1968:71).³⁰ If the authorities deemed it necessary to withdraw, from circulation, books which were much less 'unorthodox' in flavour, then an 'untamed' Ecclesiastes could hardly have escaped withdrawal.

Furthermore, the theory of an 'orthodox' redactor assumes that the book can be partitioned leaving two separate disparate messages. A pious redactor cannot be expected to include pessimistic assertions in insertions designed to fabricate an orthodox flavour in the book. Closer attention to 2 passages (2:12-14 and 8:6-8) reveals that some 'conservative' material is inextricably linked with the pessimistic statements of the sceptic. Michael Fox points to 2:12-14 as an example:

וְשִׁיתִי אֵלַי לְחַמּוֹת חֵכְמָה וְהוֹלָלוֹת וְסִכְלֹת
כִּי מִה הָאָדָם שׁוֹבוֹת אַחֲרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ
אֵת אֲשֶׁר־כָּבַד עֲשִׂהוּ:

I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly. Indeed, what will a man who comes after a king (do), (but) that which they have already done? (2:12)

books (Moore 1927 [v.1]:247). These books had to be considered to have intrinsic value to be consigned to the *Genizah*. In contrast, the books of the heretics were simply destroyed by fire (Tosefta Shabbath 13:5). The Gospels were included in this category. It is evident that a 'graded' system of the withdrawal of literature was in place by the time of the Mishna (ca. 200 C.E.). There is no evidence that any attempt to soften the effects of 'unorthodox' passages was ever made; the system either withdrew materials and kept them for the use of the educated 'elite' or destroyed them. Although this process of selection is approximately 500 years removed from the alleged composition of Ecclesiastes, it is almost certain that a similar process would have existed in Kohelet's day. It is difficult to imagine the existence of a select set of books for inclusion in the category of divinely inspired and canonical literature without some system of exclusion (Leiman 1976:17).

³⁰Robert Gordis mentions Esdras and Baruch in particular. These were books that exhibited "no sectarian eccentricity" (Moore 1927 [v.2]:344). Yet, they were withdrawn on the account of their apocalyptic visions of 'end things' (Gordis 1968:71).

וְרָאִיתִי אֲנִי שֶׁיֵּשׁ יִתְרוֹן לַחֲכָמָה מִן־הַפְּסָלִיחַ
 בִּיְתֵרוֹן הָאוֹר מִן־הַחֹשֶׁךְ:
 הַחֲכָם עֵינָיו בְּרֹאשׁוֹ וְהַפְּסָל בַּחֹשֶׁךְ הוֹלֵךְ
 וְיָדַעְתִּי שֶׁבְּאֵי שְׂמֵקָה אֶחָד יָקֵד אֶחָד־כָּלֶם:

And I saw that there is an advantage
 for wisdom over folly as (there is) for
 light over darkness (2:13).
 The wise one has eyes in his head, but
 the fool walks in darkness, (2:14a)
 but I also know that one fate befalls
 them both (2:14b).

In considering 2:12-14, Fox points to the fact that the thematic categorization of Kohelet's search in 2:12 looks forward to a statement about wisdom or folly and בָּלֶם (both) in 2:14b looks back to its antecedent (the wise one and the fool) in 2:14a (Fox 1989:24). The excision of 2:13-14a would disrupt the lexical progression in 2:12-14 by depriving 2:14b of a principal clause that defines the parties designated by "both". Moreover, the excision of 2:13-14a would also deprive the particle גַּם (also) of the 'other' perspective which it requires; the omission of 2:13-14a would leave 2:14b without a contradictory 'other' perspective to contend.³¹

The proponent of the theory of an orthodox redactor for Ecclesiastes would have to include 2:14b as part of an additional gloss. Yet, as Michael Fox has stated, pious redactors can hardly be expected to include an unorthodox perspective in their 'corrective' interpolations (Fox 1989:24); such redactors would only promote ambiguity and further confusion and not a pious resolution to the problem of injustice.

There is another example of the two contradictory perspectives on the theory of reward and retribution being inseparable in 8:5-8:

³¹Jastrow sees the difficulty in the wholesale excision of 2:13-14a and elects to retain 2:13. In order to designate 2:13 as the 'inferior' perspective, he proposes a modal function in וְ (there is...) where none is obvious (Jastrow 1972:207).

שומר מצוה לא ידע דבר רע
ועת ומשפט ידע לב חכם:

כי לכל חפץ יש עת ומשפט
כידעת האדם רבה עליו:

כראינו ידע מה שיהיה
כי כאשר יהיה מי יגיד לו:
אין אדם שליט ברוח
לכלוא את הרוח
ואין שלטון ביום המות
ואין משלוח במלחמה
ולא מלט רשע אחיבועליו:

The one who observes a commandment will come to know no evil affair, for a wise heart knows the time and judgment (8:5). Indeed there is a time and judgment for all desires, for a person's evil is heavy upon him (8:6).

For nobody knows what will happen; who will tell him how it will be? (8:7)

No human has the power over the wind in order to restrain the wind and no one has power in the day of death, and there is no discharge of a war. But wickedness will not save its possessor (8:8).

The denial that anyone can know the future (and by its link with 8:6, of any knowledge of a time of judgment)³² requires an introduction

³²The alleged counterpoint to the affirmation of judgment in 8:7 is very similar to other statements which Kohelet has made about the unknowability of the future:

כי מי יביאנו לראות במה שיהיה אחריו:

אשר מריניד לאדם
מה יהיה אחריו תחת השמש:
לא ידע האדם מה שיהיה
ואשר יהיה מאחריו מי יגיד לו:

Indeed, who will bring him to see what will be after him? (3:22b)

For who will tell a human what will be after him under the sun? (6:12b)

A human does not know what will be and who will tell him what will be after him? (10:14b)

In 3:22b, the rhetorical question comes after an affirmation that death meets all and the resultant observation is that no advantage may be seen for humans (3:19). As far as the afterlife is concerned, Kohelet denies that anyone can know if humans are to be treated differently from beasts (3:21). The admission of ignorance about the future and the concluding rhetorical question of 3:22b are therefore a contradiction to any positive affirmation of a judgment which separates the righteous from the wicked (3:17). 6:12 begins by posing the question of whether anyone can really know what is "good" to do in life. Kohelet then links this question with another: can anyone know what the future holds? The transient existence of humanity is like a "shadow" and the unknowability of the future negates any attempt to identify any course of action as "good". In 10:14, the verbosity of the fool which is absurd is due to the fact that the future is unknown. Excessive talk, in 6:11, is futile because it fails to reveal any advantage for humans. The observation in 6:11 is taken up here in 10:14 where Kohelet denigrates the fool's verbosity (10:12-14a) by reiterating the fact that no human knows the future (10:14b). The collective effect of these statements which deny any knowledge of the future in their various contexts is a contradiction to any positive affirmation of a

to the general theme of 'time' which 8:5b-6 provides. The leap from an exhortation to keep a royal command in 8:5a to a comment on the unknowability of the future in 8:7-8 is disjoint. 8:5b-6 supplies the transitional link between two disparate topics; the affirmation of a time of judgment relieves the individual from the burden of tyranny and also leads directly into the question of whether an unknowable future actually holds such a promise. The scepticism of 8:7-8 is linked with the orthodox affirmation of a time of judgment in the future (8:5b-6) within the contextual syntax of 8:2-9 (which deals with the general theme of 'authority'). Once again, the purely 'orthodox' voice, which the theory of the pious redactor must assume, is compromised.

The thematic link between orthodox and pessimistic material in these two examples poses a problem for the theory of orthodox interpolations in the book. The theory must assume that the pious voice can be excised leaving an original core of pessimistic material. Any indication otherwise compromises on the one assumption that motivates the proposition of the theory: that the two contradictory voices cannot be the product of a single mind-set. These two examples contradict such an assumption in the literary historical interpretation of the book and suggest that the two disparate views are coexistent and inseparably linked.

hermeneutic that elevates one thing over another. The reiteration of such a denial in 8:7 stands as a counterpoint to the affirmation of judgment in 8:5b-6.

The Contradiction of 8:12b-13: Robert Gordis' Theory of Quotations

Robert Gordis rejects the theory of a pious redactor for 8:12b-13 on the grounds that it is syntactically inseparable from 8:11-12a. He finds the immediate succession of גִּם־זֶה הָבֵל (this also is an absurdity) by יֵשׁ הָבֵל (there is an absurdity), which would be the result of the omission of 8:11-13, to be too harsh (Gordis 1968:293). Gordis resolves the tension by postulating that 8:12b-13 is a quotation of a conservative idea which Kohelet does not accept (Gordis 1968:297). J.A. Loader agrees with Gordis' assessment: according to him, Kohelet "quotes the *chokmatic* tradition ironically....thereby rejecting it" (Loader 1979:100).

The following is Robert Gordis' translation of 8:11-14:

Because judgment upon an evil deed is not executed speedily, men's hearts are encouraged to do wrong, for a sinner commits a hundred crimes and God is patient with him, though I know the answer that "it will be well in the end with those who revere God and fear him and it will be far from well with the sinner, who, like a shadow, will not long endure, because he does not fear God." Here is a vanity that takes place on the earth-there are righteous men who receive the recompense due the wicked, and wicked men who receive the recompense due the righteous. I say, this is indeed vanity (Gordis 1968:105).

Gordis interprets יָדַע אֲנִי (I know) in 8:12b as a verb of cognition introducing a view point which Kohelet does not share and consequently takes the liberty of injecting a disassociation between the author and the view-point of verses 12b-13 with the addition of quotation marks.

Michael Fox however cautions against the random identification of quotations for the sake of harmonizing the message of the book. In his opinion, it is vital, as part of the author's rhetoric, to clearly

identify as quotations viewpoints which one cites to refute (Fox 1980:419)³³. To leave words which do not represent the views of the author without clear indications of a quotation is to allow the possibility that they may be understood as being a part of the author's perspective. Kohelet could have introduced 8:12b-13 with an introductory phrase like "I have heard it being said that..." or "I know that there are those who think that...". With the availability of such clear indicators for quotations of views foreign to the thought of the author, it seems unlikely that an iconoclastic Kohelet should weaken his pessimistic rhetoric by failing to adequately disassociate himself from the optimism of orthodox wisdom with regard to divine judgment.

In the case of 8:12b, Robert Gordis identifies יָדַע אֲנִי אִשֶּׁר (I know that...) as an example of a verb of cognition introducing a conventional view-point that Kohelet rejects (Gordis 1968:297). However, there can be no function of disassociation between the author and the following statement in such a phrase for the following reasons:

³³In an article entitled "The Identification of Quotations in Biblical Literature", Michael Fox proposes 3 criteria for discerning attributed quotations.

- (a) There is another subject present in the immediate vicinity of the quotation so that the reader has no trouble knowing who the quoted speaker is.
- (b) There is a virtual *verbum dicendi*; a noun or a verb implying speech.
- (c) There is a switch in grammatical number or person indicating a change to the perspective of the quoted voice (Fox 1980:423).

All of these indicators are calculated to bring about 'distancing' between the author and the quoted voice. The deliberate setting of this 'distance' becomes crucial when the purpose of a quotation is to allude to a perspective that the author wishes to refute or to contend with. Without it, the choice of one of the contradictory view's to be the author's, and the other to belong to another would be arbitrary. In which case, the authorial intention to refute a certain view would not be served.

(i) יָדַע אֲנִי אֲשֶׁר (I know that...) does not 'dispossess' the object of the knowing as a perspective congenial to the author. As Michael Fox has pointed out, "to 'know that' something is so is to accept it as fact" (Fox 1989:27). Even if we accept Gordis' paraphrase for the first part of 8:12b, "though I know the answer that..." (Gordis 1968:184), there is still nothing intrinsic to the phrase to suggest a disassociation of the author from the following optimistic statement.

(ii) a similar phrase, וְיָדַעְתִּי נִסְאֵנִי (and yet I know that...), introduces a pessimistic view in 2:14; there in 2:14, the phrase introduces the fact that both the wise and the foolish meet the same end. It would therefore appear that the verb of cognition (I know) with its accompanying relative pronoun (that) introduces two contradictory perspectives (8:12b and 2:14). The contradiction negates the possibility of "I know that..." having the distinctive nuance of an introductory phrase for an orthodox view-point contrary to the author's unorthodox pessimism.³⁴

³⁴Gordis takes a similar approach with 2:13-14a by stating that וְרָאִיתִי אֲנִי (and I saw...) introduces a conservative view "couched in typical proverbial fashion" that Kohelet does not share (Gordis 1968:221). But the occurrence of a quoted proverb in itself cannot mean that we should immediately discount it as a perspective congenial to Kohelet. How should we decide which perspective truly belongs to Kohelet? There is nothing in the introductory phrase to suggest that the excellence of wisdom is a thought foreign to the author. In fact, the same verb of perception רָאִיתִי (I saw) introduces an example of injustice in 3:16. Likewise, וְרָאִיתִי אֲנִי (and I saw...) introduces the fact that human efforts at labour are the result of rivalry with one another (4:4). The absence of any obvious conservative ethic in 4:4 and the compatibility of 3:16 with a pessimistic outlook negate the possibility of וְרָאִיתִי אֲנִי having the distinctive function of marking a conservative view that is disagreeable to Kohelet. If, indeed, וְרָאִיתִי אֲנִי has such a function, then Gordis must admit that even the pessimistic aspects of the book are disagreeable to Kohelet.

When it becomes impossible to postulate a 'dispossessive' function in an introductory phrase for a conservative view-point, Gordis resorts to other devices to discern disagreement between the book's conservative perspectives and Kohelet. In the case of 3:17-18, the very same phrase introduces two contradictory views with regard to judgment.

אָמַרְתִּי אֲנִי בְלִבִּי
אֶתְהַצֵּדִיק וְאֶתְהַרְשֵׁעַ שְׁפָם הָאֱלֹהִים
כִּי־עַתָּה לְכָל־חַפֵּץ תֵּעַל כָּל־הַמַּעֲשֵׂה שָׁם:
אָמַרְתִּי אֲנִי בְלִבִּי עַל־דִּבְרַת בְּנֵי הָאָדָם
לִבְרָם הָאֱלֹהִים
וְלִרְאוֹת שֶׁהֵם־בְּהֵמָה הִמָּה לָהֶם:

I said in my heart, 'God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every desire and every deed there' (3:17).

I said in my heart concerning the sons of Adam, 'God is testing them to see that they are (but) animals' (3:18).

3:17 affirms that justice will be accomplished at the appropriate time. The following verse (3:18) introduces a counterpoint to the certainty of 3:17 in the statement that God has shown humans that they are but animals; all meet the same end (3:19). The universality of death reveals no distinction between the righteous and the wicked. The common introductory phrase, "I said in my heart", in the two contradictory statements (3:17 and 3:18) negate the possibility that that particular phrase functions to isolate the pessimistic perspective as the exclusive view for Kohelet in 3:17-18.

The similar introduction to two contradictory views is so blatant in 3:17-18 that Gordis makes no attempt to discern a 'quotation' of conservative wisdom by pointing to an introductory phrase which accomplishes such a task. Instead, he understands the reference to future judgment in 3:17 to refer to the Post-Exilic belief in an afterlife (Gordis 1968:235). According to him, the final position of שָׁם (there) indicates that Kohelet is employing a rhetoric of irony

(Gordis 1968:235). In Gordis' estimation, **צדק**³⁵ refers to the accomplishment of justice in the afterlife and Kohelet's mention of that theory here is shrouded in irony. But even the use of irony requires an indication of what the author considers to be the 'correct' view. If knowledge of the normative view is absent for the audience, then any statement of irony loses its ability to communicate the author's scepticism. Although an author's knowledge of popular assent to a certain perspective can exclude the necessity for a grammatical or syntactic 'indicator' of the dominant perspective in the text (Booth 1974:57-8), such common assent cannot be assumed for Kohelet's audience. Many psalms and proverbs testify to the belief in divine judgment (Pss 50; 37:18-20, 28-29; 34:16-18; Prov 2:21-22; 3:33; 12:2; 16:4-5) as a dominant view in Hebrew wisdom. Kohelet must have known that a large proportion of his audience ascribed to, or were at least governed by, a belief in divine justice. Within a cultural context which includes a consistent allusion to divine judgment in its scripture, the establishment of a counter perspective as the dominant view in the society cannot be assumed. The very proposal of the topic of justice and theodicy would inevitably recall scriptural affirmations of divine judgment in the Israelite mind. Consequently there can be no assumption on our part

³⁵In the excursus on the rhetorical strategy of contradiction in 3:16-17, I suggested an alternate function for **צדק**. My suggestion identified the antecedent of **צדק** to be the designated 'place' of 'righteousness' and 'justice' which had been usurped by 'wickedness' in the previous verse (3:16). The occurrence of **צדק** with reference to a previously designated place is attested elsewhere in the book (1:5, 7). Moreover, the correlation of the occurrence in 3:17 with the earlier attestations of **מקום צדק**, which designate the 'places' that 'wickedness' usurp, suggest a reoccupation by 'righteousness' and 'justice' at the envisioned advent of judgment (3:17).

of an established dominant anti-pietistic world-view on which Kohelet was relying for a rhetoric of irony.³⁶

The elevation of one view among two contradictory views to a dominant position requires an explicit indicator to designate either the inferior or the superior perspective in the author's eyes. Authors must distance themselves from one of the contradictory perspectives in order to promote an exclusive point of view. Such rhetorical manoeuvres are absent in the above discussed passages. None of the aforementioned 'introductory phrases' nor the claim to the use of irony can adequately function as 'disclaimers' to one of the contradictory perspectives in the book. In view of such, any attempt to identify one view as Kohelet's exclusive perspective is arbitrary.

³⁶This is not to say that scepticism did not exist, but that any sceptical statement without a qualifying indicator of the author's perspective regarding divine judgment would automatically stand in unresolved contention with orthodox wisdom. Kohelet's existence within Hebrew culture means that an indication must exist in his writings for an audience to recognize one of two contradictory perspectives regarding divine judgment as the dominant view (unless of course the author has no intention of embracing one of the conflicting perspectives). In dealing with contradictions, Wayne Booth recognizes the following general structure in many ironic essays:

- (i) a plausible but false voice is presented;
- (ii) contradictions of this voice are introduced;
- (iii) a correct voice is finally heard, repudiating all or most of what the ostensible speaker has said. (Booth 1974:62)

The 'false' voice is only identified in the light of the 'repudiating' voice which sets the reader straight on what the author means. The 'repudiation' must do more than merely restate one of the contending views; it must provide a third element to act as a 'standard' by which the 'false' voice is undermined and/or disavowed. This third 'element' may take the form of an explicit statement by the author to identify the 'correct' view. An alternative would be the introduction of a third hitherto unknown factor to tip the balance in the favour of one side. A restatement of one of the contradictory views will only heighten the tension between the opposite voices. According to Booth, the continual sustenance of contradiction without a 'repudiation' of one voice leads to the destabilization of the normative view in the author's rhetoric (Booth 1974:62); in such an atmosphere, irony ceases to be irony.

A Third Alternative: Judgment as a Possibility for Kohelet

The effort to identify statements which affirm divine justice (whether as the insertions of a pious redactor or as quotations of a more conservative tradition) as a foreign element in Kohelet's thought is quite unnecessary. There are several passages which confirm that Kohelet does entertain the possibility that God does judge the world.³⁷ These passages bear witness that Kohelet does envision God in the role of the 'righteous judge' who does intervene, from time to time, to exact the demands of justice. Given such evidence, the possibility of divine judgment cannot be completely discounted as integral to Kohelet's confused thinking.

Kohelet's view of God's preference for the righteous is demonstrated in 7:29. The verse presents the disparity between God's intended purpose for humans and their contrary intentions.

לבד האחדה מצאתי אשר
עשה האלהים את האדם ישר
והמה בקשו חשבנות רבים:

Look, only this have I found; God
made humans upright, but they seek
many devices (7:29).

7:29 is the last in a series of observations introduced by the verb of perception מצא in the first-person singular (7:26, 27, 29).³⁸ The first-

³⁷ emphasize these passages only to establish the view that divine judgment is a part of Kohelet's confused perspective. There is no intention here to marginalize the opposite pessimistic view. It is towards the end of arresting and balancing the tendency of some to portray the pessimistic view as the dominant and exclusive perspective in Ecclesiastes that this emphasis is directed. The inordinate amount of attention to Kohelet's optimistic views in this section should not distract the reader from the purpose of this thesis which is to establish the tension between the opposing views as the very fabric of Kohelet's thought.

³⁸ These three are the only specimens in the book where Kohelet introduces a discovery with some form of the verb מצא. The first one (verse 26) occurs in the form of a participle and the other two in the qal perfect. They seem to be part of a larger network of verbs which Kohelet uses to introduce his

person endings on these verbs of perception designate the observations and their accompanying opinions as belonging to the speaker; Kohelet. In the case of 7:27 and 29, he calls attention to his observation with an imperative: "look at this" (רִאּוּ-זֶה). In verse 29, Kohelet's observation is that God has made humans upright, but they seek out many devices. In describing God's intention for humans to be "upright" (יָשָׁר), Kohelet concurs with other parts of the Hebrew Bible which describe the nature of God and his deeds as being "upright" (Deut 32:4; Pss 33:4; 119:137). The psalmist asks God to preserve his/her "uprightness" (Ps 25:21), and with "uprightness" of heart, he/she keeps God's 'righteous' requirements (Ps 119:7). In employing the term יָשָׁר (upright, straight) in 7:29, Kohelet is affirming an already rich tradition which identifies 'uprightness' and 'integrity' with the nature of God and his preferences.

The fact that 7:29 is only an affirmation of God's preference for the righteous and not a staunch assertion that justice will certainly be accomplished makes it unlikely that the verse is the work of an orthodox redactor. 7:29 does nothing to contradict the pessimistic doubt that justice will ever prevail (3:16; 8:11-12a; 9:1-3); as a result, few would cite 7:29 as a gloss.³⁹ 7:29, however, does maintain the possibility of judgment without asserting its certainty. In

observations, discoveries and thoughts. These verbs include: "I saw" (2:13, 24; 3:10, 16, 22; 4:4, 15; 5:12, 18; 6:1; 8:10; 9:11; 10:5, 7), "I know" (3:14; 8:12) and "I said in my heart" (1:16; 2:15; 3:18). The series of 'discoveries' have a consequential relationship with 7:25 which states Kohelet's attempt to understand the evil in foolishness. There is nothing to indicate that anyone other than Kohelet is espousing their view here.

³⁹The exception is Morris Jastrow who adheres to a strict pessimistic code disallowing any vague reference to judgment or a just God. Jastrow's Kohelet would not have entertained an allusion to a God who intends for humans to be righteous; hence he deletes 7:29 as an interpolation by a pious redactor (Jastrow 1972:226).

Kohelet's view, God's intention is for humans to be upright and any action in discord with that intention cannot be guaranteed exemption from divine retribution. God may exact a penalty for the failure to keep a vow (5:5) or condemn a "sinner" to a lifetime of futile labour (2:26b). It is the very essence of uncertainty about divine judgment and the assumption of God's preference for the righteous that causes the prospect of possible judgment (3:17; 8:12b-13) to remain a viable option.

In contrast to 7:29, 8:6 is an overt affirmation of a time of judgment for humans:

כִּי לְכָל־חֲפֶז יֵשׁ עֵת וּמִשְׁפָּט
בִּירְעַת הָאָדָם רָבָה עָלָיו:

Indeed there is a time and judgment
for all desires, for a person's evil is
heavy upon him (8:6).

Verse 6 is an expansion on the final clause of verse 5; "and a wise heart knows the time and the judgment". 8:5b and 8:6a are a partially recovered use of 3:17b. In 3:17, the phrase "a time for every desire and every deed" is directly related to divine judgment:

אָמַרְתִּי אֲנִי בִלְבִי
אֶחָד־הַצְדִּיק וְאֶחָד־הָרָשָׁע שָׁפֵט הָאֱלֹהִים
בִּרְעַת לְכָל־חֲפֶז וְעַל כָּל־מַעֲשֵׂה שָׁם:

I said in my heart: 'God will judge the
righteous and the wicked, for there is
a time for every desire and for all
deeds there' (3:17).

In comparison to 3:17b, both 8:5 and 6 have the additional element of "judgment" incorporated into their statements about an elected 'time', whereas the former (3:17b) only maintains its link with divine judgment by its relationship with 3:17a as a subordinate clause. It would seem that 8:6 is a condensed version of 3:17. The

inadmissibility of 8:6 as a gloss has already been previously discussed in the section dealing with the theory of a pious redactor. The suggestion that 8:6 is a quotation of traditional wisdom that Kohelet refutes by denying any knowledge of future events in 8:7-8 is met by the question: can we identify 8:7 as a statement negating the possibility of future judgment? Although the statement of an unknown future does cancel out the certainty of a time of judgment in the future, the very admission of ignorance concerning the future allows judgment to remain a possibility.⁴⁰ Even if we should allow 8:7 to stand in absolute exclusion to the possibility of a future time of judgment, the question remains; how do we identify the statement that is foreign to Kohelet's thought? The absence of any 'distancing' device between the author and 8:5b-6 leaves ambiguity as to which view is dominant. Moreover, the final statement in 8:8 restates the precaution against wickedness in 8:5b-6: "but evil will not save them". The inclusion of such a statement in 8:7-8 denies the implied disavowal of any retribution in 8:7-8 any finality nor dominance in the rhetorical scheme of 8:5-8. In the final analysis, 8:5b-6 and the final line of 8:8 act as counterpoints to the scepticism of 8:7-8. In the absence of any indication that any one view is dominant, we must accord each perspective equal weight in 8:5-8. 8:6 directs the general

⁴⁰The similarity in content makes 8:7 part of a series of statements denying any human knowledge of the future (the other 'statements' being found in 3:22, 6:12, 9:1, and 10:14). This 'parade' of scepticism with regard to the future has been discussed at various points in this chapter. 3:22 and 9:1 have been shown to be parts of structures of contradiction displaying Kohelet's bi-polar conjectural attempts in his contemplation of the future. In both cases, 3:22 and 9:1 served to subsume the disparate views within the context of an unknown future; thereby placing both views within the realm of speculation. The occurrence of 8:7 does not demolish the claim of future judgment (8:6) so much as it does limit the certainty (or conversely, the uncertainty) of the claim.

statement about judgment in verse 5 to apply specifically to human desires and whims (לְכָל-חֲפֶז). Although the meaning of the second sentence is uncertain,⁴¹ it remains clear, from the use of the term מִשְׁפָּט (judgment) and the similarity with 3:17, that the verse refers to a judicial process (and hence, a theory of reward and retribution).

Within the context of 8:2-9, which deals with the topic of authority, 8:2-3 supplies part of the background which leads to the proclamation of a time of judgment in 8:5b-6. This short passage (8:2-3) introduces the subject of vows⁴²; Kohelet encourages the

⁴¹Christian Ginsburg identifies 3 possible interpretations for 8:6b (Ginsburg 1970:395):

- (i) The first takes רָעַת הָאָדָם to refer to the wickedness of an individual. The evil matter is therefore heavy on the sinner because judgment has brought the gravity of it on the individual.
- (ii) A second interpretation takes the line to mean that the evil which is inflicted on another is heavy upon an observer. It is hence a comment on the 'fullness' of iniquity at the moment of judgment.
- (iii) A third interpretation takes the evil to refer directly to the tyrant in 8:4, and the 'gravity' to refer to the severity of the oppression which he exerts on his subjects.

The first two interpretations understand רָעַת עָלָיו ([is] heavy upon him) to be the effect of a moral conscience reacting to the evil nature of the deed (הָאָדָם הָרָע); in both cases, the sinner or the observer is aware that the perpetrator of evil is deserving of punishment. The third interpretation understands the 'gravity' to be an effect of the tyrant's oppression; the sentence is therefore a comment on the intensity of the victim's suffering.

⁴²The precautionary advice to honour an oath first appears in 5:3-5. There the connection between the injunction to be faithful to a promise and divine overlordship of such a oath is much more defined.

כַּאֲשֶׁר תַּדַּר נֶדַר לֵאלֹהִים אַל-תִּתְּאֶחֱדָר לְשִׁלְמוֹ
כִּי אֵין חֲפֶז בְּכִסְיִים אֵת אֲשֶׁר-תַּדַּר שְׁלֹם:

טוֹב אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תַדַּר מִשְׁתַּדֵּר וְלֹא תִשְׁלֹם:

אַל-תִּתֵּן אֶת-פִּיךָ לְחַטִּיא אֶת-בִּשְׁרְךָ
וְאַל-תִּתְּאֶחֱדָר לִפְנֵי הַמַּלְאָךְ כִּי שִׁגְגָה הִיא
לָמָּה יִכְצַף הָאֱלֹהִים עַל-קוֹלֶךָ
וְחָבֵל אֶת-מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֶיךָ:

When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it, for (he has) no delight in fools. Fulfill what you vow (5:3).

It is better not to vow than to vow and not fulfill it (5:4).

Do not allow your mouth to cause your flesh to sin, and do not say to the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God become angry at your speech and destroy the work of your hands? (5:5)

keeping of an oath to the king, and considers the abandonment of a monarch to be an "evil matter".

אֲנִי פִּרְסֵלֶךָ שְׁמוֹר וְעַל דְּבַרְחָ שְׁבוּעַת אֱלֹהִים:

Keep the king's command because of the oath before God (8:2).

אַל תִּבְהַל מִסָּרִי פִּרְסֵלֶךָ אֶל־חַעֲמֹד בְּדָבָר רָע
כִּי כָל־אֲשֶׁר יִחְפֹּץ יַעֲשֶׂה:

Do not be in a hurry to leave him and do not dwell in an evil matter, for all that he pleases he will/can do (8:3).

Although the initial אֲנִי⁴³ (first-person, singular pronoun) constitutes a problem, there is no indication that 8:2-3 represents a view belonging to anyone other than Kohelet. A straight imperative, "keep" (שְׁמוֹר), and a prohibition, "do not abide" (אַל־חַעֲמֹד), without any modifying *verbum dicendi* designates the imperatives as coming

In this brief portion, three negative particles denoting prohibitions appear (5:3, 5a, 5b). Kohelet warns against being late in fulfilling a vow, sinful speech, and reneging on promises. The caution against the failure to fulfill a vow corresponds to Deuteronomy 23:22-24. Deuteronomy 23:22 declares that the delay in the fulfillment of a vow is synonymous with sin and that God is the one who compels people to keep their promises: "when you make a vow to YHWH your God, you shall not delay in fulfilling it, for YHWH your God will certainly require it of you, and it would be sin in you". For Kohelet, God is also the compelling force behind the keeping of vows. Two statements bear witness to this fact:

(1) For (he has) no delight in fools (5:3b).

(2) Why should God become angry at your speech and destroy the work of your hands (5:5c).

Both statements affirm Kohelet's belief that God is partial to the keeping of vows and that he may very well exact a penalty for non-compliance.

⁴³Various solutions to address this problem include rewriting it as the accusative object marker, אֲנִי. In the *New American Standard* version it is rendered as "I say"; this is a substitution of אֲנִי־לְךָ for the Masoretic אֲנִי. Charles Whitley proposes that the error is the mistaking of the Aramaism אֲנִי־לְךָ (in the presence of) for the Hebrew first-person singular pronoun (Whitley 1979:72). He thus renders the entire clause as, "take heed in the presence of the king". See James Crenshaw's commentary, *Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Westminster 1987) 150, for a summary of the solutions to this problem.

from Kohelet himself. God is represented as the guarantor of the oath.

Any attempt to consider 8:2-3 as an additive insertion must contend with the fact that the two verses introduce the topic of oaths given to the king and witnessed by God. It is this thematic introduction, together with the precautionary statement about monarchical ability to exact retaliation (8:4), which lead directly into 8:5. Verse 5 encourages adherence to the king's authority with the concession that a wise heart knows about the "proper time and judgment" (8:5b). We may thus regard 8:2-6 as a continual progression on the theme of obedience to the king with the comfort of the knowledge that even the king's whims come under the scope of divine judgment. With the demonstrated inseparability of verses 5b-6 and 7 in place,⁴⁴ we may also regard the implicit divine injunction to keep an oath in 8:2-3 as original.⁴⁵

⁴⁴The demonstration consisted of the identification of a thematic unity between 8:5b-6 and 8:7-8. The exclusion of verses 5b-6 would have left 8:7-8 as an 'island' without any situational context to raise the issue of 'time' and, especially, 'future time'. The more detailed exploration of this matter occurs earlier in this chapter under the heading, "The Contradiction of 8:12b-13: the Theory of an Orthodox Redactor".

⁴⁵It would be futile to omit 8:2-3 while conceding that 8:5b-6 are original by virtue of its connection to the sceptical statement of 8:7. If we admit an affirmation of divine judgment as being congenial to Kohelet, then the inclusion of a divine injunction to keep an oath would seem minor in comparison. One may perhaps suggest that the entire unit of 8:2-6 be considered an interpolation. 8:1 may adequately serve as a statement against which the pessimism of 8:7 reacts. The question of whether anyone knows what is "good" for humans to do has elicited a similar response concerning the unknowability of the future in 6:12. A link may perhaps be drawn between a question which seeks "understanding" and the appropriate response that no one can know the future and any attempt to understand a matter is pure conjecture. The problem with such a suggestion is that 8:1 itself espouses a conservative viewpoint; the question assumes the excellence of the wise and the latter half of the verse says that wisdom brings light to the countenance of its practitioner. The imagery of the statement is strongly reminiscent of 2:13 which praises the excellence of wisdom over folly by likening the difference to that of light and darkness. The inclusion of 8:1 would compromise the

The one who would posit a foreign 'voice' to account for the various conservative elements in the book of Ecclesiastes must consider and account for all the factors that contradict such an interpretation of the book. Several factors indicate that an ambiguous tone is the final message of the book. There are those statements which indicate that Kohelet considers God to be righteous and disapproving of wickedness (7:29; 8:2-3); although falling short of a tacit affirmation of divine judgment, such statements leave the problem of justice and theodicy open to a final resolution in the hands of a just God. There are those portions of the book that employ a rhetoric of antithesis which is productive of ambiguity and reflective of an undecided mind-set with regard to divine justice (8:10-9:1; 3:16-22). Such evidence of a rhetoric of antithesis is an anathema to the proposition of a final document (with all its corrective glosses) where the orthodox voice emerges victorious; the dominance of orthodox wisdom which the theory of corrective pious interpolations assumes is absent in the text. There is the example of a conservative affirmation of justice in 8:6 which is inextricably linked to unorthodox material in 8:7-8. Pious redactors can hardly be expected to include unorthodox material in their corrective glosses. The intermixing of contradictory viewpoints on divine judgment in supposed pious interpolations undermines the reason for the postulation of such a theory; that the contradictory views cannot coexist in the same mind and one of them must thus be ascribed to a second hand. In view of the evidence for a unified, confused

assumption of a purely pessimistic original Kohelet; such a Kohelet would never have elevated wisdom upon such a pedestal (2:15-16).

document, it would seem that Kohelet is beckoning us to join in his contemplation of 'everything under the sun'.

In the absence of any literary rhetorical explanation for the contradictions in the book of Ecclesiastes, we can conclude that the 'tension' is part of the fabric of Kohelet's thought. In considering the tension between Kohelet's consistent affirmations of divine justice and his (even more consistent) denials of it, it becomes evident that the contradictions represent a clash between the reality of the world and an ingrained theory of reward and retribution which is a characteristic of Kohelet's world-view.

Returning to our example in 8:10-15, הֶבֶל (absurdity, vanity) in 8:14 designates a situation which fails to conform to Kohelet's sense of justice; the mismatch of consequences for the righteous and the wicked is an abomination. The unfeasibility of 8:12b-13 as a gloss and the absence of any quotation markers suggests that Kohelet intends for the reader to understand the view expressed to be his own. On the other hand, 8:14-15 affirms that justice is not always in operation and is, hence, unreliable; the only "good" is to eat, to drink and to make merry. In a world where the theory of reward and retribution is not fully operative, there is room for Kohelet to entertain two contradictory perspectives of the world. In exasperation, Kohelet gives his heart to entertain the possibility that there is no advantage for the wise and the just (3:19; 9:1-3; 9:11). Following this line of thought, he recommends the enjoyment of the few pleasures which the world has to offer (2:24; 3:22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:9b). But according to Kohelet, one should also remember the possibility that the time of judgment may come at any moment

(3:17; 8:12b-13; 9:11b) and the work of wicked hands may be destroyed (5:5). The tension between these two perspectives are never resolved in the course of the book; Kohelet's world is one that lives in the shadow of an edict (8:11) which shows no promise of fulfillment in the future. For Kohelet, this is absurd.

Chapter 3: Kohelet and Wisdom

Leo Perdue asserts that the Hebrew sages assume a certain order to the various elements of creation. They assume that an order permeates the universe and binds every element to a structure defining the form and function of all created entities (Perdue 1977:135). Sirach speaks of this cosmic order in 16:24-28:

The works of the Lord have existed from the beginning by his creation. And when he made them, he determined their divisions. He arranged his works in an eternal order, and their dominion for all generations; they neither hunger nor grow weary, and they do not cease from their labours. They do not crowd one another aside, and they will never disobey his word.

The task of the wise man is to observe this complex relationship of phenomena which comprises the order of the universe. The Hebrew sages believe that the source of this complex order is the ingenious action of God in creation (Prov 3:19-20). According to Proverbs 3:19-20, wisdom is the instrument of creation and, therefore, also the key to knowledge of the order in creation. The possessors of wisdom would have the means to understand the interrelationship between all the elements of the cosmos (Perdue 1977:137). It is therefore no surprise that Israel came to see wisdom as a synonym for the ability to perceive reality; the discernment of truth is the central task of the wisdom enterprise (Prov 3:3; 8:7). The call to Israel in the writings of the sages is the call to be attentive to the words of wisdom which give understanding: "Make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your

heart to understanding" (Prov 2:2). The Hebrew sages consider wisdom to be closely intertwined with knowledge of reality; for them, the call to wisdom is the call to truth.

Kohelet and Traditional Didactic Wisdom

According to Gerhard von Rad, the assumption of a cosmic order is an assumption of a set of orders which sustain and restrict the human will (von Rad 1972:63); these orders regulate and sustain the nature of the relationships between the various components of creation. Von Rad remarks that the Israelites thought these orders so unassailable that they were able to speak of them in secular terms (von Rad 1972:63). The sages' claim of a natural order in the physical world assumes a recognizable set of inherent 'laws'. Israel was no different from the rest of humanity in its bid to recognize these inherent 'laws' which were all a part of daily experience. These 'laws' govern the act-consequence relationship between all components of the created order. Any physical state in the natural world can be traced to a cause which produced that effect in accordance with the outlines of the inherent 'laws' in creation. It becomes the task of wisdom to recognize and record these inherent 'laws' and to roll back the boundaries of all "contingent events"¹(von Rad 1972:124).

¹Gerhard von Rad uses the term "contingent" to signify "all those events which cannot be understood by humans purely on the basis of necessity with which they are familiar" (von Rad 1972:124). All events in nature are products of causes which are in turn products of other causes. The "natural order" is the parameter of possibility within which one element may affect another. The category of the "contingent" describes any event that occurs outside of these parameters of possibility; that event would be without any discernible cause because the parameters of the natural order exclude the possibility. Such an event, element or value would thus appear to be *sui generis*. Since the task of

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Wisdom has by nature an affinity for order and structure in its view of life; with all the powers of keen observation, it strives to understand the way in which these inherent 'laws' of nature affect the course of events in life.

The perception of a boundary of order in the natural world led the sages to formulate maxims based on their keen observation. This can be seen in their sayings regarding the accumulation of wealth:

Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich (Prov 10:4).

He who tills the land will have plenty of bread, but he who pursues vain things lacks sense (Prov 12:11).

There is, inherent to these sayings, an assumption of an ontological structure of order; this order governs the structure of cause and effect on which the sayings depend as an anchor in reality. The fact that someone else, other than the owner of the field, may intercede and do the work on behalf of the owner, thus undermining the didactic value of the sayings, does not nullify the sage's keen observation of the natural order.² Many of these maxims are formulated with attention to the fact that their validity is within specific spheres of circumstance and that there are exceptions to the

wisdom is to discern the natural order in creation, it seeks an explanation for every event in the world against the backdrop of the observable range of possibilities. But even wisdom must succumb when the pursuit along the chain of causality leads to an irreducible set of 'laws'.

²The sages of ancient Israel did not see a difference between the natural order of the physical world and morality. For them, the principles of morality were themselves a part of the created order. In the eyes of the sages, the wise person is also the righteous person. It is therefore also the role of wisdom to uncover the nature of the moral order which the sages attributed to the divine will. Several verses equate 'wisdom' to 'righteousness' (Prov 8:12-16; 9:9; 14:16; 17:2) and regard 'the wise' to be in opposition to the morally depraved (Prov 8:7; 10:23; 20:26). The synonymity of 'righteousness' and 'wisdom' in Hebrew wisdom is unmistakable. Together, they constitute the foundation of all creation (Prov 8:22-36).

rule (von Rad 1972:311). The confinement of such maxims within specific conditions does not in any way negate the perception of a fixed order in nature; it merely reflects the variety of circumstances through which the inherent 'laws' of nature may find expression. It therefore becomes the task of the reader to recognize correctly the specific circumstances in which the maxim is true or in which it is false (von Rad 1972:311).

As much as the sages emphasize the created order in their writings, they also demonstrate an acute awareness of the dimension beyond the natural order; this is the realm where only God can exist. Wisdom is unable to penetrate the mystery of God (Prov 21:30). The sages of Israel express the mystery of God and life in their writings and they know that any attempt to impose their knowledge of reality beyond the established order of creation is an impossible task. Indeed, this is the sober realization of Job:

Can you discover the depths of God?
Can you discover the limits of the Almighty?
They are as high as the heavens, what can you do?
Deeper than Sheol, what can you know? (Job 11:7-8)

For Israel, the ways of God are above human knowledge and no amount of wisdom will reveal them.

On this point of divine mystery, Kohelet is in agreement with the traditional sages; he emphasizes the limits of 'wisdom' with regard to knowledge of divine will (8:16-17). Many interpreters who imply that the book of Ecclesiastes is a polemic against traditional

wisdom misunderstand the message of the book.³ The object of Kohelet's attempt at comprehension, with the assistance of wisdom, is the divine will. Hence, when he complains about the inadequacy of wisdom, it is in reference to its inability to reveal divine purpose. For Kohelet, the unknowability of divine purpose in creation within the specific context of wisdom translates into the absence of any palpable reason for the practice of wisdom. The absence of such an ultimate purpose for the efforts of the wise attacks the very foundations of a hermeneutic that values wisdom over folly; hence Kohelet asks, "why have I been so very wise?" (2:15). Kohelet's quest, with regard to wisdom, is to seek the 'boon' which both motivates wisdom and justifies its excellence; the result is not triumphant success over ignorance, but abject failure (1:17-18; 2:16-17).

Michael Fox suggests that Kohelet considers the pursuit of knowledge a divine injunction. As he (Fox) sees it, the pursuit of wisdom is not an option (Fox 1989:117); the compulsion to seek the truth of wisdom is so strong in Kohelet that it must be obliged even if it leads to knowledge which is displeasing. There are several statements in the book that seem to support Fox's theory. In 7:3, Kohelet judges the knowledge that brings sorrow to be better than the ignorance that brings mirth. Kohelet's approval of wisdom also

³Some interpreters of Ecclesiastes have implied that the book is a polemic against traditional wisdom. J.A. Loader concludes that Kohelet is constantly turning the topoi of general wisdom against itself and polemizing against the very heart of wisdom (Loader 1979:117). J. Fichtner finds in Kohelet's writings a radical criticism of traditional wisdom (Fichtner 1933:8). Michael Fox disagrees; for him, "Didactic Wisdom Literature does not attempt the kind of investigation that Qohelet criticizes" (Fox 1989:109). Kohelet's exposition on the limitations of wisdom is in union with the voices of traditional wisdom. It is a statement about the barriers placed around the human faculty of reason (Fox 1989:108).

comes across in statements that protest the mistreatment of the wise and the desecration of their art (2:21; 10:5-6). The underlying feeling in such statements is that there ought to be ample recognition for the wisdom enterprise. Elsewhere, Kohelet praises wisdom for its obvious superiority to folly (10:2) and encourages the living to embrace it (9:10). Such statements seem misplaced alongside others which observe wisdom's futility (2:16) and the common position of the wise and the foolish under the cloak of time and chance (9:11). It is obvious enough that the pessimistic perspective of wisdom comes from the empirical observation of events in the world (2:12-17); but the 'praises' for wisdom seem to be spontaneous and without reason (2:13-14a; 2:26; 9:10).

1:12-18 as a Representative Passage for Kohelet's Views on Wisdom

In this chapter, I wish to shed light on the source of the book's various opinions on the subject of wisdom with close attention to certain selected passages. I have chosen Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 as the primary passage from which the investigation embarks. The passage focuses on the failure of wisdom to reveal the 'works of God'. The selection of this passage from among several which deal with wisdom and its related topoi proved difficult; many of the passages which are concerned with wisdom are brief and sporadically interspersed throughout the book. My choice is based both on quantity and the specific focus of this passage; I am interested in Kohelet's definition and description of wisdom's nature. I wish to explore the possibility

that his ambivalence over wisdom's merit is the product of a conflict between the absence of any reward for wisdom in the world and an on-going hermeneutic which elevates the value of wisdom in his eyes. Whereas the last chapter established a rhetoric of contradiction leading to ambiguity in the area of 'justice', this one goes one step further by exploring the motivation for one of the 'poles'⁴ in the on-going tension between orthodox and pessimistic views within the particular topic of 'wisdom'.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18: Verses 12-14

אֲנִי קֹהֵלֶת הָיִיתִי מֶלֶךְ
עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל בִּירוּשָׁלַם:

I am Kohelet, king over Israel in
Jerusalem (1:12).

תָּתַתִּי אֶת־לְבִי לְדַרְשׁ
וְלַחְוֹר בְּחִקְמָה עַל
כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם
הוּא עֵינֵי רַע נָתַן אֱלֹהִים
לְבִנֵי הָאָדָם לַעֲנוֹת בּוֹ:
רָאִיתִי אֶת־כָּל־דְּמַעְשֵׁים
שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ
וְהִנֵּה הַכֹּל הִבֵּל וְרַעוּת רִיחַ:

I gave my heart to seek
and to explore by wisdom everything
which is done under
the heavens. That is the evil toil God
gave to the sons of Adam to labour
with (1:13).
I saw all the deeds which were done
under the sun and behold,
everything is a chasing of the wind
(1:14).

In 1:12-14, Kohelet identifies himself (1:12) and then proceeds to elaborate on the task to which he has "given his heart". He evokes 'wisdom' as the standard for his investigation (1:13) and then, within a frame depicting the arena of his investigation (everything done under the heavens/sun), he expresses his weariness over the nature of the task. In his final clause he elaborates on the reason for his

⁴The investigation need only concern itself with the pious perspective. As already stated, the reasons for the pessimistic outlook are obvious in the book.

weariness; the goal is intangible or, at best, fleeting (1:14b). There is heavy rhetorical emphasis on Kohelet as the first-hand perceiver of all reality. This is evident from the first-person endings in the two verbs which denote investigation (*I gave my heart to seek...*) and perception (*I saw*). The heart (לֵב) which is the seat of understanding in biblical Hebrew (Prov 15:32; 19:8) is given over to the task of investigating all that is done under the heavens (Gordis 1968:209). According to James G. Williams, Kohelet's repeated use of verbs in the first-person stakes his claim to the authority for knowledge; it is the voice of individual experience (Williams 1981:28).

The object of investigation is "everything which is done under the heavens" (1:13). This is rephrased in 1:14 as "all deeds which were done under the sun". Kohelet equates "everything done under the heavens" with divine activity; this is evident from 8:17 where Kohelet equates the two (Fox 1989:175).⁵ Furthermore, 3:11 concurs with 8:17 by designating the comprehension of divine activity as the toil (עֲמָלָה) given to humans. The comprehension of divine activity as designated by "everything which is done under the sun" is therefore the principal preoccupation of Kohelet's quest.

⁵Michael Fox points out that when Kohelet looks back to the programmatic statement of 1:13-14 in 8:17, he identifies "the deeds which are done under the sun" (8:17) with "all the works of God" (8:17). Since the former phrase cannot be distinguished from "all the deeds which have been done under the sun" in 1:14, it would follow that the "deeds...done under the sun" in 1:14 do not only designate human deeds. Moreover, "all the works of God" (8:17) is a direct syntactic substitution for "all the deeds which are done under the sun" in 1:14. Both 8:17 and 1:13-14 are also similar in context; both passages comment on the failure of 'wisdom' to reveal the meaning behind divine 'works'. It therefore seems that Kohelet uses both phrases, "all the deeds which have been done under the sun" and "everything which is done under the heavens", interchangeably with "all the works of God".

The almost synonymous repetition of "everything which is done under the heavens/sun" forms an inclusio that encloses a statement expressing Kohelet's vexation over the divinely appointed task; **הוא ענין רע נתן אלהים** (that is the evil toil God gave...).

תתתי את־לבי לדרוש
ולחפור בחכמה על־
כל־אשר נעשה תחת השמים

I gave my heart to seek
and to explore by wisdom
*everything which is done under
the heavens.*

הוא ענין רע נתן אלהים
לבני האדם לענות בו:

That is the evil toil God gave
to the sons of Adam to labour
with.

ראיתי את־כל־המעשים
שנעשו תחת השמש

*I saw all the deeds which were done
under the sun*

The vexatious quality of the task, in Kohelet's view, is indicated by his choice of **רע** (evil) to qualify it. The multiple shades of meaning in the term are listed below⁶:

- (i) Evil or bad in appearance, displeasing to the eyes (Gen 41:3).
- (ii) Unhappy or unfortunate with regard to a person (Isa 3:11; Jer 7:6).
- (iii) Sad with respect to the heart or countenance (Prov 25:20; Gen 40:7).
- (iv) Wicked or evil as a moral category (Gen 6:5; 8:21; 1 Sam 25:3).

The term is not always used to designate a moral category; it is often simply used to describe anything displeasing (Gen 38:7). In fact, the quality of displeasure is the common denominator in all the above listings for **רע**. Kohelet's usage of the term displays the breadth in the

⁶See BDB (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907) 948.

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implications of the term. Kohelet uses the term to designate a negative moral quality in deeds (8:11) and in people (8:13). He also describes the pointless nature of human toil as an "evil" (2:7; 4:8; 5:16). The bestowal of wealth on a fool who has not worked for it is considered to be an "evil" (2:21) as is the failure of human labour to satisfy the human appetite (6:17). Kohelet's description of the divinely appointed task in 1:13 as רע includes the 'task' in his 'list' of undesirables.

The choice of the infinitive לענות (to labour) in verse 13, which denotes the tiresome strife involved in the task (Gordis 1968:210), complements Kohelet's qualification of the task as a tedious one. Robert Gordis points to the occurrence of the root ענה with the nuance of tedious monotony (Pss 116:10; 119:67; Isa 52:7; 58:10); hence he elects to translate the sentence as "a sorry business it is that God has given men *to be afflicted* with" (Gordis 1968:148). Such a nuance in the meaning of לענות is supported by the metaphor in the final clause of verse 14; Gordis' understanding of the term is an apt description of the pointless exertion involved in קעות רוח (chasing the wind).

The overall structure of 1:12-14 focuses the reader on the fact that God has given Kohelet a tiresome task. The lexical enclosure of this statement in the repetition of "everything/every deed which is done under heaven/the sun" defines the arena of Kohelet's search. The repeated occurrence of first-person verbs foregrounds the subjective nature of Kohelet's perceptive consciousness in the evaluation of all activity "under the heavens". At the same time, his identification of the "evil task" as a divinely appointed assignment

for the "sons of Adam" indicates that Kohelet considers his affliction to be a condition common to humanity (1:13c).

At this juncture, many questions remain unanswered. What is the nature of the 'task' given by God? Are the 'deeds of the world' only a definition of Kohelet's parameters for his search or are they also a part of the 'problem'? The answer to the latter question would clarify the precise relationship of "everything which is done under heaven" to the God-given task.

Verse 15

מִעֲוָה לֹא יִשְׁתָּרֵם
וְחֶסֶד לֹא יִמְנוּעַ:

The crooked cannot be straightened,
and the deficit cannot be numbered
(1:15).

In contrast to the former verses with their emphasis on the first-person, verse 15 lacks any such emphasis; the focus is solely on the nature of Kohelet's tiresome task. The verse consists of two parallel lines. They are syntactically similar:

Pual participle acting as noun: negative particle + verb: infinitive construct. // Noun: negative particle + verb: infinitive construct.

The repetition of לֹא יִשְׁתָּרֵם (cannot...) emphasizes Kohelet's inability to rectify, manipulate or affect the subject of each line. Semantically, the subjects of both lines suggest the need for some form of rectification; for the first, it is correction (מִעֲוָה), and the second, it is completion (חֶסֶד). This deficiency is picked up by the infinitive

construct in each line. The overall suggestion of the two parallel lines is a need for an effective rectifying addition of some sort which the author feels unable to accomplish.⁷ Roland Murphy remarks that the meaning of 1:15b is obscure; "if a thing is absent, one simply cannot claim that it is present" (Murphy 1992:13). James Crenshaw makes a similar observation; "how can anyone count the missing elements in a missing thing?" (Crenshaw 1987:74).⁸ The obscurity of 1:15 stems from the fact that it is an abstract saying that loses its significance when interpreted apart from its context. The presence of such an

⁷In summarizing J. Derrida's position on the interrelationship of semantic signifiers in language, Jonathan Culler speaks of the importance of recognizing the specific significance of a word/sound within the complex matrix which is the conceptual universe (Culler's essay is part of a collection entitled *Structuralism and Since*, ed. John Sturrock). According to Culler, "signification depends on difference: contrasts" (Sturrock 1979:164). He offers the example of 'food' whose conceptual delineation depends on the existence of an other category which comprises 'non-food' items. Each conceptual element in language is therefore part of a complex mass of "syntheses" and "referrals" which both link each element and sustain their boundaries (Sturrock 1979:164). In a similar way, the "crooked" (מָעֻרָה) and the "deficient" (חֲסֵרָה) in 1:15 are defined with reference respectively to the 'straight' and the 'complete'. Kohelet does not allow this veiled reference to the 'straight' and the 'complete' to pass unnoticed; he indicates the presence of both as idealic projections of his perceptive consciousness by mentioning his futile efforts "to straighten" (לְיִתְקֵן) the "crooked" and "to number" (לְהִסְנוֹר) the "deficient" (1:15). Like cross-referencing entities in a unit of thought, the adjective and its accompanying infinitive construct in each parallel unit in the couplet (1:15) represent the polarity between present reality and Kohelet's idealism.

⁸Kohelet's perception of "the deficit" in 1:15 is similar to his perception of עֶלְמָה (eternity) in 3:11 (which, interestingly, is also about the unknowable divine agenda) In 3:11, the obscurity of עֶלְמָה does not exclude it from Kohelet's perception. 1:12-15 and 3:10-11 share two common denominators; they are both concerned with the unknowable divine activity and, as 1:15b suggests, they both evaluate divine activity with reference to a distant idealistic element which is absent in the present. Both 1:15b and 3:11 seem to implicitly claim some perception of this distant and obscure entity. The similarities between 1:12-15 and 3:10-11 suggest that an unattainable but yet perceptible element is Kohelet's goal in his quest to understand all "activity" in the world. The general rhetorical purpose of the proverb (1:15) is therefore to signify that the totality of the world and wisdom are insufficient to appease Kohelet's need for an explanation. Having examined the totality of life and wisdom, Kohelet finds them "crooked" and lacking. A precise example of the world's deficiencies will be sought in the situational context of 1:16-18 + 2:12-17.

ambiguous saying requires a given set of semantic entities with which the interpretative frame of the proverb may interact to produce meaning. Simply put, the situational context must supply a subject that is "crooked", and another that has a "deficit".

It is with the aforementioned requirements in mind that we turn to the surrounding textual material to answer the question; to what does Kohelet mean to apply the proverb of 1:15? Christian Ginsburg thinks "the crooked" refers to the inability of human effort to secure a lasting remembrance. In support of his hypothesis, he points to 1:4 and 1:11 (Ginsburg 1970:272). According to Ginsburg, the point of the proverb is that no amount of wisdom can remove the depression produced by the pointless cycle of the world's events as expressed in 1:2-11 (Ginsburg 1970:271). K. Galling thinks that the crookedness originally referred to the twisted back of an old man; consequently, "the deficit" (1:15b) was the lack of height (Galling 1969:88). James Crenshaw understands the proverb to refer to the permanence of God's decrees (Crenshaw 1987:74). According to him, Kohelet's advice is to accept things as they are; "the twisted will remain that way, and the missing will resist human calculation" (Crenshaw 1987:74). I think that the proverb has a double reference to the divinely appointed tasks of discovering the work which has been done under heaven (1:13) and to the quest to understand wisdom, madness, and folly (1:17). I believe this to be true for two reasons:

(i) the proverb is enclosed by thematic inclusio; the common elements of Kohelet's two parallel tasks form a 'border' around the

proverb. The prominence of 'wisdom' is expressed in 1:13 and emphasized by hyperbolic exaggeration in 1:16b; "I said in my heart, behold I magnified and multiplied wisdom more than all who were before me in Jerusalem". The descriptions of both tasks also end with a similar conclusion that "wisdom" is insufficient for either task; similar phrases are employed as analogies for both tasks (רוח/ורעות רוח). 1:13-14 begins with a statement of what the task is and then goes on to narrate Kohelet's involvement in it (1:14). This order is reversed in 1:16-17; Kohelet first describes the rigours of multiplying wisdom and then states his intention "to know wisdom" (1:17a). When 1:13-14 and 1:16-17 are placed together, the lexical sequence forms a chiasmus:

תתתי אהדלבי לרוח
ולחור בחכמה על
כל אשר נעשה תחת השמים
הוא ענין רע נתן אלהים
לבני האדם לענות בו: (1:13)

Kohelet states the task,

ראיתי אהדכל המעשים
שנעשו תחת השמש
והנה הכל תבל ורעות רוח: (1:14)

and then proceeds to describe part of its process.

דברתי אני עסלבי לאמר
אני הנה הגדלתי והוספתי חכמה
על כל אשר היה לפני על ירושלים
ולבי ראה הרבה חכמה ודעת: (1:16)

He describes his accomplishment of multiplying wisdom through the process of the task,

ואתנה לבי לדעת חכמה ודעת
הוללות ושכלות
ידעתי שנפודה הוא רעיון רוח: (1:17)

and then restates the task with a narrowing of its focus to the contemplation of wisdom, madness, and folly. He concludes that the task is a chasing of the wind.

The movement from verse 13 to verse 14 is a movement from a statement of a task to a description of it. The order is reversed from

verse 16 to verse 17. As the focus of the chiastic structure of 1:13-17, one may expect to find a detailed description entailing the quintessence of both tasks (perhaps an elaboration on the nature of the problem[s] which they seek to solve). The proverb of 1:15 fulfills such a projected function for the focus of the structure in 1:13-17.

(ii) A partial repetition of the proverb of 1:15 in 7:13 unambiguously refers to the "work of God" which, as shown in 8:17, is synonymous to "everything that has been done under the sun". 7:13 therefore makes a clear association between the proverb and, at least, one of the tasks described in 1:12-18.

At this point in the close reading of 1:12-18, the precise meaning of the proverb in 1:15 is still unclear. Although the existing structure supplies the task of understanding the deeds of the world (1:13-14) as the situational context for the application of the proverb, it is unclear how the deeds of the world are crooked and deficient. The inadequacy of 1:13-14 in supplying an explanatory context for the proverb stems from its own ambiguity: what precisely are the 'deeds of the world' and how are they in need of an understanding? As long as these inexplicated exigencies (mentioned here and at the end of the last section on 1:12-14) remain outstanding, the problem intrinsic to Kohelet's task remains unclear. It is with these outstanding issues in mind that we now turn to the other situational context which 1:12-18 provides.

Verses 16-18

דברתי אני עִם־לְבִי לֵאמֹר
אֲנִי הִנֵּה הִגְדַּלְתִּי וְהוֹסַפְתִּי חֲכָמָה
עַל כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־הָיָה לִפְנֵי עַל־יְרוּשָׁלַם
וְלִבִּי רָאָה הִרְבֵּה חֲכָמָה וְדַעַת:

I said in my heart, "behold, I have magnified and multiplied wisdom (more than) all who were before me in Jerusalem. And my heart has seen much wisdom and knowledge (1:16).

וְאֶתַּנֵּה לִבִּי לָדַעַת חֲכָמָה
וְדַעַת הוֹלָלוֹת וְשִׁכְלוֹת
יָדַעְתִּי שֶׁגַּם־זֶה הוּא רָעִיץ רֶחַח:

I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly. I realized that this also is a chasing of the wind (1:17).

כִּי בִרְבִּי חֲכָמָה רַב־כָּעֶס
וְיֹסִיף דַּעַת יוֹסִיף מְכָאֹב:

For in much wisdom is much sorrow, and to multiply knowledge is to multiply pain (1:18).

In 1:16-18 Kohelet's gaze relapses within. This relapse is evident from the return to the abundant usage of first-person verbs: דִּבַּרְתִּי (I said); הִגְדַּלְתִּי (I magnified); וְהוֹסַפְתִּי (I multiplied); יָדַעְתִּי (I realized/ came to know); וְאֶתַּנֵּה (I gave). The emphasis on Kohelet as the subject of experience is also reinforced by the emphatic use of the first-person pronoun (אֲנִי)⁹ in 1:16. The use of the verbs "I magnified" and "I multiplied" to depict Kohelet's quest for wisdom lends exaggeration to his efforts. The adjective הִרְבֵּה (much) which qualifies the wisdom and the knowledge that Kohelet came to see draws the attention of the reader to the large amount of 'wisdom' that Kohelet has come to observe. Altogether, 1:16 constitutes a substantial increment in the intensity of Kohelet's efforts over the simple statement of intent in 1:13; "I gave my heart to seek and to investigate by wisdom everything which is done under the sun".

⁹T. Muraoka states that most of the verbal phrases that incorporate the use of the pronoun are those of "meditating", "reflecting", and "perceiving" (Muraoka 1985:49). The recurring "I" in Ecclesiastes is symbolic of the "introspective meditation" which Kohelet undertakes as he observes the world around him (Muraoka 1985:49).

Along side the intensification of Kohelet's effort is a change in the object of his investigation. There is a shift from the observation of external phenomena (1:13; 1:14a) to the investigation of Kohelet's epistemological premises. In 1:13, 'wisdom' is the instrument of investigation; but in 1:17, the pursuit of 'wisdom' has become one of the primary objectives of Kohelet's task. This shift in focus becomes clear when we compare the two verses:

<p>I gave my heart to seek and to explore by wisdom everything which is done under the heavens. (1:13a)</p>	<p>I gave my heart <i>to know wisdom</i> (לדעת חכמה), and to know (ידעת) madness and folly...(1:17a).¹⁰</p>
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In 1:13a, Kohelet applies his mind "to seek" (לדרוש) and "to explore" (ולחורר) all activity "under the heavens". In 1:17a, the acquisition of 'wisdom' (חכמה)¹¹ replaces the exploration of "everything which is done under the heavens" as the preoccupation of Kohelet's inquiry. The shift in focus to "wisdom" is also amplified in his statements that he "magnified" and "multiplied" wisdom (1:16a); his mind came to see "much wisdom" (1:16b). Kohelet's premise for his investigation is itself under scrutiny in 1:16-17.

The repetition of the phrase רעיון רוח (chasing the wind) in 1:17b is reminiscent of 1:14b. Likewise, שגשגה (...that this also...) looks back to 1:14 which designates "everything done under the sun" as a

¹⁰The emphases in italics are mine.

¹¹The phrase לדעת חכמה refers to the acquisition of wisdom. M. Fox argues for this fact with reference to Proverbs 1:2, 24:14, 17:27, and Daniel 1:4 (Fox 1989:177). As such, Kohelet's consideration of 'wisdom', 'folly', and 'madness' constitutes the immersion of himself in the activities associated with the aforementioned qualities.

"chasing of the wind". The particle **וְ** (also/too)¹² creates a second category of action that also fits the analogy of a "chasing of the wind"; in 1:17, the phrase refers to the attempt to understand wisdom, madness and folly. It is therefore clear that 1:12-18 outlines a dual nature to Kohelet's inquiry; the first is to understand divine activity, and the second is to know wisdom, madness and folly.¹³

The passage draws to a close with a synonymously parallel couplet describing the failure of 'wisdom':

For in much wisdom is much	and to increase knowledge is to
sorrow,	increase pain.

"Wisdom" and its counterpart, "knowledge", bring no relief. In fact, they seem to be the source of discomfort for Kohelet. The choice of **צָעַם** (sorrow) and **מִכָּאֵיב** (pain) echo Kohelet's displeasure at his inability to understand divine activity by his description of the task as an "evil" (**רַע**) one (1:13). **כִּי** functions here as a relative causal particle equivalent to the English "because".¹⁴ 1:18 therefore elaborates and explains Kohelet's pronouncement of futility on his attempt "to know wisdom, madness and folly".

Hitherto, the investigation into "wisdom", "madness", and "folly" has cast little light on the nature of Kohelet's task. What sort of a problem do the above three qualities present to Kohelet and why

¹²See T. Muraoka's *Emphatic Words and Structures in Biblical Hebrew* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1985), 143-6, for a full treatment of the additive function in **וְ**.

¹³The following excursus will show that the two 'tasks' of 1:12-18 are related; the latter (1:16-18) is a specific variant of 'divine activity' for which Kohelet seeks understanding.

¹⁴For the causal/explicative function of **כִּי**, see BDB, 473-4.

does the multiplication of knowledge lead only to more sorrow? The expanded description of Kohelet's task to understand wisdom and folly in 2:12-17 provides an answer to these outstanding questions.

Excursus: The quest to Know Wisdom and Folly and the Link with 2:12-17

The exact nature of Kohelet's contemplation of "wisdom, madness and folly" comes into focus in 2:12-17. The relation between 1:17-18 and 2:12-17 is witnessed by two factors.

(i) As noted by J. Crenshaw (Crenshaw 1987:83), R. Murphy (Murphy 1992:21), and H.W. Hertzberg (Hertzberg 1963:89), the programmatic statement of 2:12a is reminiscent of 1:17. There is an almost identical repetition of the phraseology of 1:17a in 2:12a:

וְאֶתֵּן לִבִּי לְדַעַת חִכְמָה
וְדַעַת הוֹלָלוֹת וְשִׁכְלוֹת

I gave my heart to know wisdom, and
to know madness and folly (1:17a).

וְפָנִיתִי אֲנִי לְרֹאוֹת הַכֶּמֶה וְהוֹלָלוֹת וְשִׁכְלוֹת

I turned to consider wisdom, madness,
and folly (2:12a).

2:12a maintains the sequence of "wisdom, madness, and folly". On the other hand, Kohelet replaces "I gave my heart to know" (1:17a) with "I turned to consider (look upon)" in 2:12a. However the general meaning of a surrender of the contemplative attention to the consideration of "wisdom, madness and folly" remains constant in both verses. The similarity between 1:17a and 2:12a is quite unmistakable.

(ii) The concluding comment of 2:17 echos Kohelet's sentiments in 1:17b and 1:18.

ידעתי שנפודה הוא רעיון רוח:
כי ברב חכמה רב-דאגה
ויוסף דעת יוסף מכאוב:

I realized that this also is a chasing of the wind. For in much wisdom is much sorrow, and to multiply knowledge is to multiply pain (1:17b-18).

שנאתי אחריהם כי רע עלי המעשה
שנעשה תחת השמש
כיהכל הכל ורעות רוח:

I hated life, for the deeds which were done under the sun were troublesome to me; for everything was futility and a chasing of the wind (2:17).

Besides the repetition of the phrase "a chasing of the wind" to qualify both the deeds of the world (2:17) and the nature of the attempt at understanding wisdom and folly (1:17), both passages emphasize the quality of vexation. In 1:18, "wisdom" and "knowledge" bring "sorrow" and "pain". Similarly, the consideration of wisdom in 2:12-17 only reaps the conclusion that the deeds of the world¹⁵ are futile and troublesome to Kohelet.

¹⁵The conclusion of the attempt to find an advantage to being wise with the remark that the "deeds which were done under the sun" are odious clarifies the relationship between the two parallel tasks of 1:12-17. In 2:17, the 'deeds under the sun' are hateful because they yield no benefit for the wise. Thus the examination of "everything which is done under the sun" (1:13) may be understood as a search for a reward for the wise. But the implications in the use of this phrase are wider. In 2:18-23, the particular 'deed' under scrutiny is the accumulation of profit from labour. Consequently, an attempt to understand the 'deeds under the sun' within the context of 2:18-23 constitutes a search for a lasting benefit for physical toil. In the case of 3:16, the 'deed' which Kohelet qualifies as an activity "under the sun" is injustice; within that context, the quest would entail an attempt to find a reward for righteousness and an ultimate punishment for the wicked. The quest to explore "everything which is done under the sun" in 1:13 is a general programmatic statement which would have various implications in the various situations in the book. The other task of 1:12-18 which is to understand wisdom and folly is a particular expression of Kohelet's broader undertaking. Therefore, the movement from the 'task' of 1:13-14 to the task of 1:16-18 is a movement from the general to the specific. The reversal of this 'movement' may be seen between 2:12-16 and 2:17; there, the consideration of wisdom and folly

1:17-18 encapsulates the introduction and the conclusion of the task in 2:12-17. The similarities suggest that 2:12-17 is a larger unit expanding on the description of the task mentioned in 1:17-18 (the quest to know "wisdom, madness, and folly"). In 2:12-17, the consideration of "wisdom, madness, and folly" meets with the problem that one fate befalls both the wise and the foolish (2:13-14a). 2:13-14a raises the problem by assuming wisdom's excellence which 2:14b challenges with the counterpoint that the commonality of death cancels any certain advantage the wise may claim. The clash is evident in the choice of the connecting phrase between the two contending views of 2:14: וְיָדַעְתִּי כִּי־אֵין¹⁶ (but I also know...). Two opposite perspectives on the value of wisdom contend for Kohelet's allegiance. Kohelet's inability to find any advantage for the wise over the foolish leads to the removal of any reason to practice wisdom; in response to his findings, he questions the efficacy of wisdom (2:15). The observation that the wise and the foolish meet the same end (2:16b) leads directly into Kohelet's statement of disgust and futility (2:17), which, as already shown, is similar to his concluding remarks

concludes with the observation that the deeds of the world are grievous to look at.

¹⁶The evidence of contention lies in the presence of the adverbial particle כִּי (also). T. Muraoka states that the primary function of the particle is additive (Muraoka 1985:143); כִּי has the effect of an additional nuance in Genesis 27:33, 31:15, 46:4, Deuteronomy 2:15, Psalm 132:12, and Job 2:10 *inter alia* (Muraoka 1985:145). The particle's presence in an introductory phrase for a contradictory view in 2:14b indicates an 'other' perspective that shares Kohelet's attention; "but I *also* know...". The very force of the particle (which may also be seen in the English equivalent, 'also') in 2:14 is to, at once, indicate separation between one point of view and another, and their inclusion within the sphere of the subject's hermeneutical consciousness. When a 'new' addition contradicts a previous perspective, the result is a torn perspective awaiting resolution.

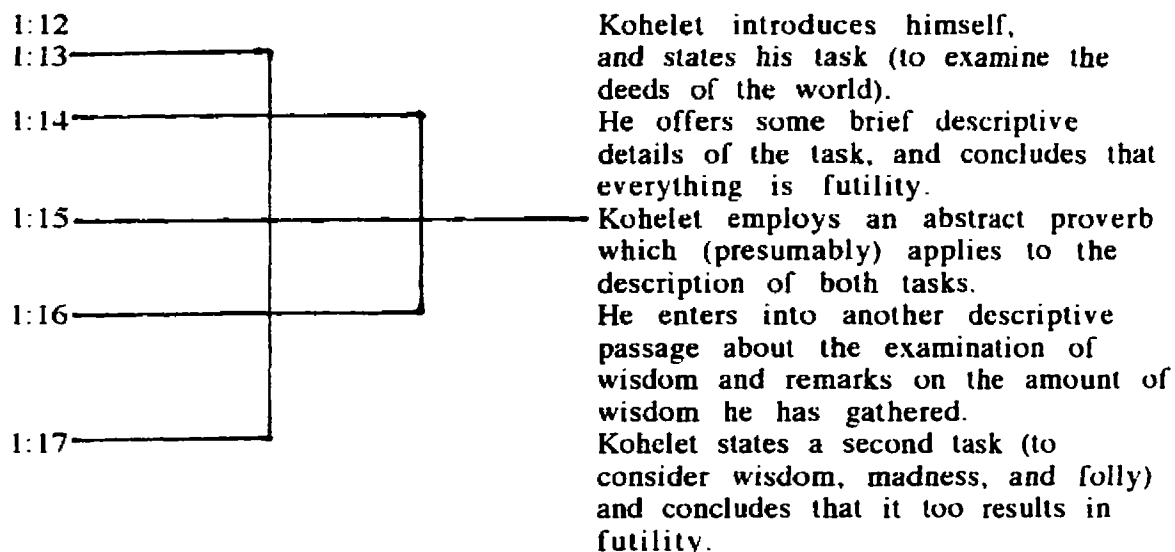
about the quest to know wisdom, madness, and folly in 1:17b-18. We may conclude that the quest to find an advantage to being wise (2:14b-16) constitutes the task mentioned in 2:12 and 1:17. Consequently, the failure of the task is the cause of grief and futility for Kohelet (2:17; 1:17b-18).

At last, we find a suitable situational context in 1:16-18 (with its longer thematic expansion in 2:12-17) to fit the interpretative construction of the proverb in 1:15. The "crooked", which cannot be straightened, may refer to the events under the sun that fail to yield any advantage for the wise (2:17). Consequently, the reward which Kohelet so desperately seeks in 2:15-16 is the "deficit" that escapes his calculation (1:15). The repetition of **לֹא-יִכָּל** (cannot) in 1:15 aptly emphasizes Kohelet's inability to redress the problem of the breakdown in the mechanism of justice which leads to feelings of futility and vexation (1:17b-18; 2:17).

The thematic expansion of 1:16-18 in 2:12-17 explains the nature of the quest to know "wisdom, madness, and folly". It is a task which seeks to explain the distinction between the wise and the foolish by discerning the different consequences for each party. In clearly defining the task and describing its failure, 2:12-17 provides the necessary situational context for the abstract proverb of 1:15 to operate in a meaningful manner.

Overall Structure and Meaning in 1:12-18

The overall structure in the presentation of Kohelet's quest(s) in 1:12-18 is as follows¹⁷:



The organization of the presentation creates chiasmus with the proverb of 1:15 as an axis dividing the presentation of the two parallel tasks. In both halves, there is a preponderance of first-person verb endings and first-person possessive suffixes. The overall impression is an emphasis on the subjective consciousness of Kohelet in the investigations that he undertakes. For Kohelet, the task of deciphering divine intention in all that happens beneath the sun is not just impossible, but loathsome; he calls it the "evil" (unfortunate) task that God gave (1:13b). His conclusion, after having viewed all activity in the world, is that everything is vain and a chasing after the wind (1:14b).

¹⁷The following presentation is a brief recapitulation of an earlier point. I had previously argued for the relevance of this structure with greater detail in the section on verse 15 (pp. 90-2).

The passages consisting of 1:12-14 and 1:16-18 are similar in many ways. Both units (1:12-14 and 1:16-18) contain explicit statements defining the tasks which Kohelet chooses to undertake. He maintains an almost similar syntactic structure and word-choice in these statements:

I gave my heart to seek and to explore by wisdom....(1:13a)	I gave my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly (1:17a).
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Both specimens begin with "I gave my heart..." and are followed by an infinitive construct. The statements define the various foci of Kohelet's investigation and then go on to conclude his findings with a similar phrase: רָעִין רוּחַ / וְקָעַת רוּחַ (a chasing of the wind). The latter specimen (1:17b) is followed by a statement expressing the failure of wisdom to eliminate the sorrow which stems from the inability to accomplish the tasks on which Kohelet embarks (1:18). The two units also contain brief descriptive portions on the process of their various tasks. For the former unit (1:12-14), the descriptive element is in 1:14; in the latter unit (1:16-18), it is in 1:16. As illustrated in the above diagram (and with greater detail in the section on verse 15), the narrative arrangement of both tasks reveals a chiasmic structure when the two units are combined. The focus of the chiasmus is the proverb of 1:15.

The Contribution of 1:15 to Overall Meaning in 1:12-18

It has been demonstrated how the situational context of 1:16-18 (with further illumination from the thematic expansion in 2:12-

17) provides the prerequisite environment for the interpretative proverbial construction of 1:15 to operate and to produce meaning. What remains unexamined is the semantic increment that the proverb offers to our understanding of Kohelet's quests in 1:16-18 and 1:13-14. If the situational context of 1:16-18 provides the situational environment for the proverb to operate within, then how, in turn, does the proverb enhance Kohelet's description of his task?

An implication in the word-choices of 1:15, "the crooked" (מָעֻתָּה) and "the deficit" (הַחֲסָרִין), together with their accompanying infinitive constructs is that Kohelet yearns for some restitutive measure to effect the imbalances he perceives. The implication in his evaluation of things being "crooked" and deficient is that there exists, in his mind, an ideal state (real or conceptual) where these imbalances are addressed. The deficiencies in the events of the world are suggested by the proverb of 1:15 and are only visible through the interpretative 'grid' which is Kohelet's consciousness. It is through such an observation of the latent reference to an idealistic state that leads Michael Fox to conclude that Kohelet does not merely observe phenomena and report what he sees; his own preconceptions are in constant interaction with the data that comes through his senses (Fox 1989:141). The identification of such *a priori* preconceptions within Kohelet's hermeneutic explains the various assumptions in the book that lack any appeal to the empirical observation of the world's phenomena. In the case of 1:12-14 and 1:16-17, the emphasis on Kohelet's perceptive/interactive consciousness finds its function within the hermeneutical construction suggested by 1:15. Together with the overt expressions of outrage (1:13, 14, 18; 2:17), the

preponderance of first-person verb-endings and first-person possessive suffixes affirm that Kohelet's epistemological preconceptions are an essential part of the investigative process. Without the inclusion of his epistemological preconceptions, the perjorative nuance in every judgmental exclamation (and as the close reading has shown, there are many) loses its experiential subjective source.

The 'seriousness' of Kohelet's *a priori* preconceptions comes across in exhortative statements for the practice of wisdom in spite of the absence of any tangible reward for the wise. In 1:11, Michael Fox perceives an underlying assumption that it is good to know that there is nothing new under the sun even though that truth may be disturbing (Fox 1989:117). Along similar lines, Roland Murphy finds an "implicit positive evaluation" of wisdom in Kohelet's lament that both the wise and the foolish meet the same end in 2:16 (Murphy 1979:237). It is in Kohelet's imperatives to achieve wisdom in the face of futility that the assumption of wisdom's excellence moves from being mere subjective preference to the 'seriousness' of a mandatory requirement for humanity.

The Pursuit of Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Imperative; the Cases of 7:1-6, 9:10, and 10:12-14

The following passages unite an implicit assumption of wisdom's excellence with expressions of doubt concerning the efficacy of wise behaviour. These passages suggest the existence of a

persistent epistemological structure that exalts the status of wisdom despite its ambiguous value in the world.

טוב שם משמן טוב

יום המות מיום הולדו:

טוב ללכת אל־בית־אבל מלכת אל־בית־משתה

באשר הוא סוף כל־האדם והחיי יתן אל־לבו:

טוב כעס משחק כירבע פנים ייטב לב:

לב חכמים בבית־אבל ולב כסילים בבית־שמחה:

טוב לשמע נערה חכם מאיש שמע שיר כסילים:

כי כקול הסירים תחת הסיר כן שחק הכסיל

ונסוזה רבל:

Better a good name than perfume, and the day of death than the day of birth (7:1).

Better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of revelry; there is the end for all humans and the living take it to heart (7:2).

Better is sorrow than merriment; with a despondent face, the heart is made good (7:3).

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of revelry (7:4).

Better to listen to the reproof of the wise one than to hear the song of fools (7:5).

For like the sound of thorn bushes under a pot, so is the laughter of fools; this also is an absurdity (7:6).

The first half of verse 1 introduces Kohelet's preference for the day of death over the day of birth through comparison with a popular saying (Eaton 1994:292).¹⁸ Verse 2a keeps the structure of a 'better than' saying and continues the praise for the day of death. Although 2a and 1b are thematically parallel, the semantic increment in ללכת אל־בית־אבל (to go to a house of mourning) and its antonymic parallel (to go to a house of revelry) opens up the possibility of a shift in thematic focus to the contemplation of death instead of death itself. The semantic increment in verse 2a adds to the image of a funeral or a birth those who gather to mourn the former and to celebrate the latter. Indeed, verse 2b seizes the additional 'element'

¹⁸The reference is to an essay which is a partial reprint of Michael Eaton's *Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983). The essay appears as part of a collection in *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994) 291-300.

in 2a and explains the advantage of the mourners as their ability to take the inevitable ultimate destiny of every person to heart. The sorrow that comes from such a bleak realization is, according to Kohelet, better than blissful ignorance (7:3a).

Verse 4 is reminiscent of verse 2 due to the recurrence of the antonymic pair, "house of mourning" and "house of revelry". 7:4 identifies the wise and the foolish respectively with those that go to a house of mourning and those that go to a house of revelry (7:4). Returning to the form of a 'better than' saying, Kohelet praises the rebuke of the wise in 7:5. 7:6 likens the laughter of the fool to short-lived flames¹⁹ which subsist on thorn bushes (Murphy 1992:64). Within the imagery supplied by the analogy of verse 6a, the term **הָבֵל** (which literally means vaporous) becomes an apt descriptive metaphor for the merry-making of the fool who will eventually stumble upon death (7:6b).

In at least two places (7:2 and 7:4-5), Kohelet links the praise for knowledge of truth and wisdom with a somber reminder of the day of death. There are those who would delete portions of 7:1-6 as later additions by an editorial hand seeking to 'soften' Kohelet's unorthodox statements about wisdom. G.A. Barton deletes verses 3 and 5-9 (Barton 1908:46) and A.H. McNeile eliminates verses 4-8 (McNeile 1904:23). Morris Jastrow detects the work of a pious redactor in 7:2b-3 and in 7:5-6a and omits them in his re-creation of the 'original' Ecclesiastes (Jastrow 1972:223). The postulation of a

¹⁹In Psalm 58:10, the wicked are swept away as their pots sit over the crackling of burning thorns. Roland Murphy suggests that the laughter of the fool is like the burning thistles which make a lot of noise but generate little heat (Murphy 1992:64). Likewise, the fool's merry-making is loud with laughter which will soon be extinguished by death.

pious redactor for the above portions of 7:1-6 is, in my opinion, very improbable for the following reasons:

- (i) The deleted praise for wisdom in verses 4-6 (as suggested by Barton and McNeile) is already intrinsic to the content of verse 2. The latter half of the verse explains Kohelet's predilection for the "house of mourning" by stating that death is a pending reality for all; "there is the end for all humans" (7:2b). The final statement of verse 2 compounds the emphasis on the knowledge of truth as the reason for the advantage in attendance at the "house of mourning"; "the living take it (death) to heart". In his exhortation to seek knowledge, Kohelet praises a traditional counterpart of wisdom: 'knowledge'. Hebrew wisdom often portrays the acquirement of knowledge as one of the activities of the wise (Prov 1:4, 7; 2:6; 8:12). The introduction to the proverbs of wisdom literature expresses the acquirement of knowledge (חָכְמָה) as one of the purposes for the compilation of the collection (Prov 1:4). According to wisdom, the acquirement of an understanding of reality is foundational for the wise (Prov 4:7) and it is the foolish who despise knowledge (Prov 1:22). In encouraging the reader to understand the truth in 7:2, Kohelet espouses an established aspect of wisdom. In view of such, the deletion of verses 4-6 (which explicitly mention wisdom's excellence) cannot constitute an elimination of the praise of wisdom in 7:1-6.
- (ii) To those who would understand the exhortation to wisdom in 7:1-6 as an orthodox insertion, the question must be posed: can we expect a pious redactor to include an established symbol (death) in the book for the common fate of all humans as part of an exhortation

to be wise? In 2:15, Kohelet questions the feasibility of being wise in view of the common fate for all. The fact that death is a common denominator for all living creatures raises doubts about the certainty of an advantage for anything one may prescribe (3:19-20; 5:15-16), and even the wise cannot expect any exemption from the enigma which is death (9:1-2). No pious redactor seeking to redress the pessimism of the book would include a reference to the common lot of the wise and the foolish, the righteous and the wicked.

7:1-6 combines an exhortation to be wise with a reminder of the day of death, which creates doubt about any advantage for the wise. Kohelet is no stranger to the vexation that may come from an increase in wisdom and knowledge (2:18), but he continues to praise and to encourage the practice of wisdom in spite of the absence of any advantage or reason for doing so. The tension between the two opposite contentions which produces the paradox in Kohelet's thinking continues in 9:10.

כל אשר תמצא ידך לעשות בכחך עשה
כי אין מעשה וחשבון ודעת וחקמה בשאול
אשר אתה הולך שמה:

Everything which your hand finds to do, do with your ability; there is neither activity, planning, knowledge, nor wisdom in Sheol, where you are going (9:10).

The idiomatic expression in the first part of 9:10a means "whatever you are able to do" as it does in 1 Samuel 10:7. The urgency in Kohelet's exhortation is evident in the second half of the line; "do with your ability (strength)". כח has the general meaning of resource (BDB 1907:470); it can have the particular nuances of

'strength' (Judg 16:6; Job 26:2), or 'wealth' (Job 6:22; Prov 5:10). Here in 9:10, בְּכֹחֶךָ (with your ability) almost has the effect of an adverb, as it does in Judges 16:30; וַיִּשָּׁבֶךְ בְּכֹחַ וַיִּפֹּל הַבַּיִת (and he bent with [his] strength and the house fell...). In 9:10, the implication is that one should spare no effort in pursuing the tasks at hand. The latter half of 9:10 supplies the reason for Kohelet's encouragement to seize the activities of the day; there is no activity, planning, knowledge, or wisdom in the place of the dead. He associates the above qualities with the living and their demise is abhorrent to him.²⁰ The participle הֹלֵךְ (going) signifies humanity's on-going trudge toward death (Crenshaw 1987:163), which, for Kohelet, is the negation of any guarantee of benefit for the wise (2:16; 9:1-3). Once again, the call to cherish wisdom and knowledge is linked with the subject of death and the controversy of Kohelet's paradoxical thinking persists²¹.

In the case of 10:12-14, Kohelet praises wisdom while acknowledging the unknowability of the future:

²⁰The positive evaluation of wisdom and knowledge are implicit in Kohelet's command to seize those entities as long as the opportunity presents itself. Elsewhere, he considers the pair to be a gift from God as a gesture of divine favour (2:26). Within the context of wisdom and knowledge as positive elements which Kohelet's perspective affords, the gradual march toward Sheol assumes a doleful quality.

²¹How different is Kohelet's response to the inevitability of death! In the Babylonian *Dialogue of Pessimism* (Pritchard 1969:601), the slave counsels the master to avoid an action for the common good by urging him to see the lack of distinction between the good and the evil in a heap of skulls (70-8). Although Kohelet recognizes the reality of death's commonality, he urges the embracement of life's pleasures (12:1-8; 11:8-10) and the wisdom and the knowledge which it offers (9:10). Where the parameters of empirical deduction offer no reason to identify anything as being 'good' (6:12), Kohelet stands and affirms the goodness of wisdom and knowledge for all the living.

דְּבַר־פִּי־חָכָם חַן וְשִׁפְחוֹת כְּסִיל תִּבְלַעֵנּוּ:

תְּחִלָּה דְּבַר־פִּיהוּ סָבְלוֹחַ
וְאַחֲרָיִת פִּיהוּ הוֹלִלּוֹת רָעָה:

וְהִסְכֵּל יִרְבֶּה דְּבָרָיו
לֹא יֵדַע מָה־שִׁיחֵהָ
וְאִשֶּׁר יִהְיֶה מֵאַחֲרָיו מִי יַגִּיד לּוֹ:

The words of the wise one (give) favour, but the lips of the fool swallow him (10:12).

The words of his mouth begin with folly and his mouth ends with wicked madness (10:13).

And the fool multiplies words. A human does not know what will be, and who will tell him what is after him? (10:14)

In verse 12, Kohelet repeats his praise for the wise and his criticism of foolish talk which surfaced in 7:5. The granting of favour (חַן) to the words of the wise is attested in traditional Hebrew wisdom (Prov 10:19-21, 32; 14:3) as is the rebuke for foolish speech. Verse 13 focuses on the destructive aspect of the fool's words and observes a gradual degeneration in the speech of the fool; "foolishness" qualifies the beginning of the speech and "wicked madness" is its end. While the qualitative content of the speech is synonymously parallel in the two clauses of verse 13, the latter supplies an additional adjective, רָעָה (evil/bad), to qualify the end of the fool's speech.

Verse 14 combines the continuing criticism of the fool with the observation of an unknowable future. The statement about the unknowability of the future explains the foolish quality of the fool's verbosity; the fool's babbling is oblivious to the fact that the future is obscured from the view of all (Hertzberg 1963:194). The statement about an unknowable future is a restatement of 3:22, 6:12, and 8:7. In 3:22, the statement follows an observation that everyone meets the same fate: death (3:19-21). Without any knowledge of the future, no one can assert a difference between the the righteous and the wicked. In 6:12, Kohelet denies that anyone can affirm anything to

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be "good" as long as the future remains hidden; the conversations which surround the possibility of an advantage in any course of action are futile (6:11).

In affirming the excellence of wisdom, Kohelet combines pious assertions with reminders of an unknowable future and the day of death. The resultant paradox in these exhortations to wisdom reveals a confused mind-set²²; one that continues to assert conservative axioms with the grim knowledge of the futility (or at least, the uncertainty) of doing so. By remaining adamant about the value of wisdom, Kohelet compels the reader to observe its inherent 'goodness' and, perhaps, to also experience the reluctance to relinquish the compulsion to be wise.

The Significance of Kohelet's Hermeneutical Biases for his Evaluation of the World

The general portrait of Kohelet in Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 is one of a man caught between a world filled with deeds that lack any

²²We should avoid understanding Kohelet's assertions of wisdom's excellence as assertions of a 'relative' advantage in wisdom. Such a method of interpretation resolves the paradox by confining Kohelet's appraisal of wisdom's value within confines beyond which lies the 'greater' truth of a universe void of any such hierarchical value structure. Kohelet's final assessment of wisdom and justice does not force such a conclusion that the hermeneutical construction which posits the theory of reward and retribution is a 'bubble' within a cosmic 'vacuum'. Kohelet's rhetoric of contradiction (3:16-22; 8:10-9:1) produces no such absolute cosmic structural formulation. For Kohelet, the human perspective of the future is obscured and anything can happen (3:22; 6:12; 8:7; 9:1; 10:14). Moreover, Kohelet's sense of justice demands an absolute advantage for the wise and the righteous; hence the prospect of a 'relative' advantage for the wise that is crushed by the commonality of death is hateful for Kohelet (2:16-17; 9:3). Within such a hermeneutical context, we can hardly expect Kohelet's visions of justice (3:17; 8:12b-13; 11:9b) and exhortations to wisdom (7:1-6; 8:1) to ultimately anticipate a featureless cosmic desert antagonistic to a positive evaluation of wisdom and justice.

ultimate significance and an overpowering need to see some meaning in all those deeds. It would appear that Kohelet is enslaved by the architecture of his own mind. His evaluation of wisdom reveals no lasting benefit for its practitioner; yet, he continues to recommend that all should seek wisdom and understanding of truth. Kohelet betrays his hermeneutical bias when he expresses his abhorrence at the fact that "there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man as with the fool" (2:16b). The sting in such a realization is that a quality as excellent as 'wisdom' (2:13) is relegated to the same class as its inferior counterpart, 'folly', by death. Kohelet's grief over the lack of any ample reward for the 'wise man' is evident as he surveys the world through the eyes of 'wisdom'. Indeed, the prerequisite assumption of wisdom's excellence in Kohelet's 'grief' comes not so much from his blatant statements which exalt 'wisdom' over 'folly', but from the sense of injustice that he communicates in his pondering over the absence of any reward for the wise. Of the fact that an individual may labour with 'wisdom', knowledge, and skill and yet hand over his portion to another who has not, Kohelet says that it is absurd (הַבִּל) and a great "evil" (2:21). The overall mood is one of exasperation over what he sees to be a grave injustice. In the case of 1:12-18, Kohelet's disappointment comes to expression in his comments on two separate tasks. First, he is upset that he cannot discover the meaning in all the deeds of the world (1:13-14), and second, that he can find no guarantee of profit for the wise (1:18; 2:16). Thus the task which God has set for humans is a 'troublesome' (רָע) one and also one fraught with pain from the disappointment of failure.

As shown in the close reading of 1:12-18, Kohelet's epistemological preconceptions indicate an idealistic affinity for a reason for all activity under the sun; within the particular situational context of 1:16-18, it is a desire to find a reward for the wise. This essential reliance on his interactive/perceptive consciousness for the evaluation of everything is evident in the choice of adjectives which allude to a 'deficiency' in Kohelet's perception of the world's activity (1:15). Moreover, the preponderance of first-person pronouns, verb endings and possessive suffixes which are spread throughout 1:12-18 remind the reader that Kohelet's experiential 'eye' is very much a part of his cognitive process. It would therefore appear that the excellence of 'wisdom' has been imposed on Kohelet's heart and it seeks an object to anchor its significance upon. According to James Crenshaw, the very nature of a belief in 'creation' or 'order' is the assumption of a purpose (Crenshaw 1974:34). Creation faith "undergirds the wise man's belief in order"; this is a belief that requires "purpose, intention and goal" (Crenshaw 1974:34). In the case of 1:12-18, the 'intricate design' of creation is the systematic prioritization of Kohelet's epistemological make-up which elevates wisdom over folly. In recognising this hierarchical construction in his mind, Kohelet turns to seek what seems to him to be the natural consequence; what is the premise for such a 'selection' of certain values over others in a world where death constitutes an anathema to any such affirmation of certainty with regard to the future?²³

²³The excellence of wisdom is an integral part of Kohelet's epistemology. In the light of that fact, Kohelet's attempt "to know wisdom" (1:17) and "to consider" it (2:12) is not merely an attempt to probe the possibility that there may (or may not) be an ultimate purpose or reward for wisdom. It is, more

Kohelet seeks an ultimate purpose to justify the wisdom enterprise. When confronted with the similar fate of all humans, he asks "why (למה) have I been so very wise?" (2:15) This is the only question that Kohelet asks in the short portion of 2:12-17 where he summarises his quest to know "wisdom, madness and folly" (2:12). The question about a reason for being wise in 2:15 is preceded by the observation of an hierarchical structure of order that exalts wisdom (2:13-14a) and the subsequent observation that no distinction exists between the wise and the foolish at death (2:14b). It would therefore seem that Kohelet's progression of thought in 2:13-15 is consistent with Crenshaw's theory of 'order' demanding 'purpose'/'meaning'. Within such a construction, the relationship between the proposition of wisdom's excellence over folly and the negation of any ultimate reward for the wise is one of mutual exclusion; the former exists at the expense of the latter and *vice versa*.

accurately, a response to the excellence of wisdom, which is already 'installed' in his heart, by seeking its purpose which, for Kohelet, must exist. The former position is uncertain whether such a purpose exists; the latter assumes its existence and seeks to know it completely (perhaps, by demonstration) albeit with no success. My preference is for the latter view because of the following reasons:

(i) Kohelet's application of the proverb in 1:15 to describe his attempt "to know wisdom" reveals his perception of a lacking entity who's absence impedes his knowledge of wisdom. It is significant that Kohelet assumes that there ought to be some component to constitute a 'reason' for wisdom. This is especially obvious in the second line of 1:15; "the deficit cannot be numbered". The vacancy left by this obscure element in Kohelet's mind precedes and defines the nature of his quest.

(ii) Kohelet's exasperation over the absence of an obvious purpose for wisdom (2:16-17, 21) can only be maintained by the tension between his commitment to the 'goodness' of wisdom and the fact that no obvious 'reason' for wisdom can be found. If we dislodge the preeminence of wisdom over folly in Kohelet's mind, then we dissolve the tension and rob him of the basic premise of his rage. If, on the other hand, we marginalize his observation that there is no discernible purpose (perhaps, in the form of a reward) for wisdom and attribute one to be within his grasp, then Kohelet ceases to have anything to be outraged about.

Kohelet's abstinence from neutrality on the absence of any obvious reward for 'wisdom' perpetuates the contradiction between some of his epistemological preconceptions and his observation of the world's events. The adherence to these preconceptions does not only sustain the contradiction, but also the uncompromising impetus to find a reward for wisdom to stand as a reason for being wise. The proposition that there is no reason for the preponderance of 'wisdom' over 'folly' is unacceptable to Kohelet and therein lies the source of all his vitriolic outbursts at the inequities which he observes. Locked in the clutches of contradiction, he searches the world to find a solution to break the impasse. Until he should succeed, Kohelet remains suspended in the paradox of his advice to be wise in the face of impending death.

Conclusion

Kohelet's Hermeneutical Imperatives and the Rhetoric of Contradiction

In his paradoxical statements about the excellence of wisdom in the face of death (7:1-6; 9:10; 10:14), Kohelet displays the tension between his epistemological preconceptions and the events of the world. He pits his evaluation of wisdom and folly (2:13-14a) against the world's treatment of the wise (2:14b-16) and recoils in disgust at the discrepancy (2:17). Although Kohelet's conclusions about the failure of the wise to secure a lasting reward usually come at the end of extensive observations coupled with empirical deduction (2:15-16; 2:18-21; 9:1-3), his implicit acknowledgments of wisdom's excellence often do not (2:13-14a; 8:1; 9:10; 10:5-6). He often assumes wisdom's excellence without any foundation in empirical deduction. A similar disparity is evident between the affirmations of divine judgment (3:17; 8:12b-13; 11:9b) and the observation of injustice; the former often lacks any account of an event which Kohelet may refer to in support of his statements. Yet, Kohelet places his affirmations of divine judgment in contention with his pessimistic comments on the perpetuation of injustice without recourse to any device to marginalize the former. Like his paradoxical statements about the value of wisdom, he leaves blatant contradictions about divine justice to stand unresolved.

The antithesis between the opposite word/concept groups and the relationship of mutual negation between the contradictory statements on judgment (3:16-17; 8:11-13) suggest the existence of a rhetorical strategy of contradiction. Without moving to marginalize either contention, Kohelet invites us to 'stew' in the contemplation of an unjust world and to speculate on divine intentions (1:13; 3:10) for a 'crooked' world in need of 'straightening'. Although the quest for an explanation remains a task for humans, Kohelet leaves it to God to restore the inadequacies and to address the inequities to which Kohelet bears witness (3:14; 6:10).

Roland Murphy has challenged the notion that the book of Ecclesiastes represents a 'crisis' for wisdom and that Kohelet is a 'revolutionary' in revolt against the wisdom tradition (Murphy 1979:235-245). The appellation of an iconoclast is unwarranted; it is a common tactic for psalms of lament to present discrepancies between ideals of justice and self-fulfillment, and the present unjust state of affairs. Murphy cites Psalm 89 as an example of wisdom's failure to resolve the injustices of human history (Murphy 1979:236). The psalm extols the "lovingkindness" and the "faithfulness" of God (Ps 89:2-3) which leads to a reminder of a divine promise to crush Israel's wicked adversaries (Ps 89:23-24) before substituting all of that for the portrayal of present turmoil (Ps 89:39-46). The rhetoric of antithesis then leads into a direct plea for YHWH to restore the Davidic monarchy (Ps 89:47-51). Psalms 10, 12, and 13 attempt a similar strategy of appeal; all 3 psalms bear witness to the present reality of injustice (Pss 10:1-11; 12:2-3 + 9; 13:2-3) while affirming the advent of judgment (Pss 10:16-18; 12:7-

8; 13:6). In between the two disparate pictures, the psalmist incorporates pleas for the restoration of justice in all 3 psalms (Pss 10:12-15; 12:4-6; 13:4-5); any denial of either opposite reality renders the hopeful pleas void of content.¹

Psalms 10, 12, and 13 present the discrepancy of a judicial collapse and a vision of justice that encapsulates a plea for God to restore the latter. Although Kohelet shares the psalmist's conviction that only God can restore justice, his observation of contradiction does not lead to a plea for restoration. Instead, he turns to ponder the inscrutable future in the hands of a mysterious deity (9:1) who continues to obscure human ability to discern the meaning of God's work in the world (3:11). It is an obscurity that perpetuates Kohelet's conflicting perspectives in an on-going search for that which is remote, and exceedingly deep.

The inability to verify the victory of justice or its opposite with reference to a demonstration of fact is intrinsic to the admission of an unknown future, which Kohelet purports (6:12b; 8:7; 9:1; 10:14).

¹Commenting on the theology of 'hope', Rolf Knierim identifies the juxtaposition of a people's ideals and present conditions as being essential for 'hope' to exist (Knierim 1995:251). The disparity sustains a tension which allows a people to stand opposed to the conditions at present (Knierim 1995:251). Of course, the attainment of the ideal must be a plausible reality in the future in the minds of the individuals, or else hope would cease to be hope and become despair. Similarly, the possibility of YHWH delivering the psalmist must be a reality for the psalmist; any appeal for help to YHWH must assume that possibility. Of course, the despicable conditions in the present must also be a reality; otherwise, what would the cry of distress be about? The disparity between present inequities and positive anticipation of restoration projects itself into the future; both the perpetuation of suffering and deliverance must remain contingencies for the hopeful. The domination of either 'possibility' would destroy the very state of tension that plagues the hearts of the hopeful. Although not pleading his case before the almighty, Kohelet displays this 'tension' in his remarks about the unknown future. The dominance of either perspective (optimistic or pessimistic) would destroy his contention of an unknowable future.

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In the absence of demonstrated *telos* for the drama of human history, the oscillation of individual allegiance to disparate conjectural projections remains possible. In this matter, Kohelet demonstrates a range of possible affiliations which come to conflict as he challenges one perspective with another. In his own assessment of the book, Carl Knopf sees several strands of philosophy in it and he cannot agree with those who posit a purely pessimistic outlook for Kohelet² (Knopf 1930:198). He sees an optimistic streak in Kohelet and identifies with his (Kohelet's) experience with the remark: "We are in a world of law and order, and that kind of world must have a focal point" (Knopf 1930:198). Kohelet's investigation has turned up no such focal point; but returning from the contemplation of the "deep" (7:23-25) which withholds an answer, Kohelet affirms the merit in righteousness (8:12b-13), wisdom (7:1-6; 9:10), and pleasure (5:18-20). Like Kohelet's affirmations of justice, Knopf's identification of the world as one of "law and order" stands in a relationship of mutual negation with the absence of a "focal point".

²The response that this thesis offers to those who would identify Kohelet as a pessimist is not so much that they are wrong, but that their assessment is incomplete. It only represents one of the perspectives in the book. We must not posit a resolution for the contradictions in the book; Kohelet has not left that option open to us. James Crenshaw finds consolation in Kohelet's scepticism; in the introduction to his commentary on Ecclesiastes, he remarks, "like him [Kohelet], I observe a discrepancy between the vision of a just word, which I refuse to relinquish, and reality as I perceive it" (Crenshaw 1987:53). In spite of his observations, Crenshaw still resists accepting the more positive affirmations of wisdom and righteousness as authentic (Crenshaw 1987:48). Unlike Crenshaw, Knopf sees the the conflict, which Crenshaw experiences on reading the book, in the book. He experiences the intertwining of different strands in the book which are not all pessimistic (Knopf 1930:195).

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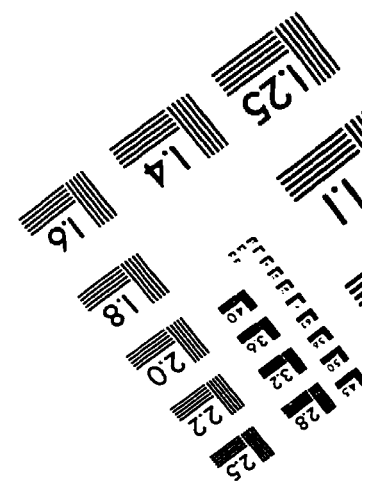
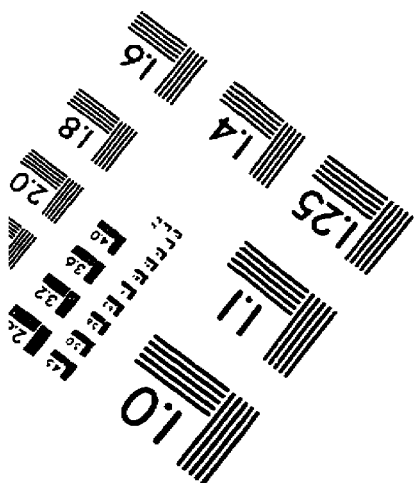
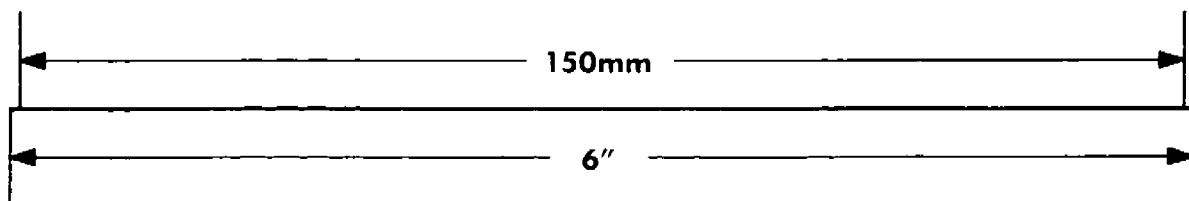
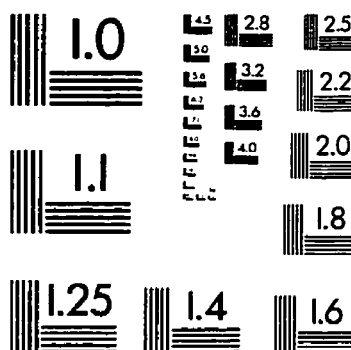
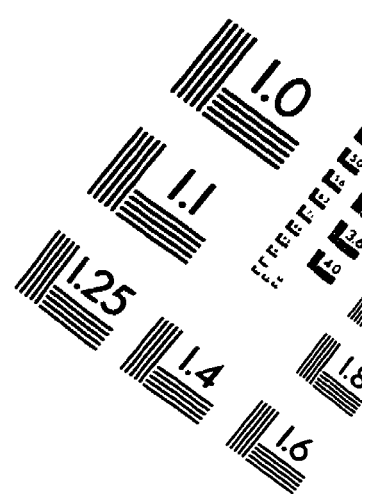
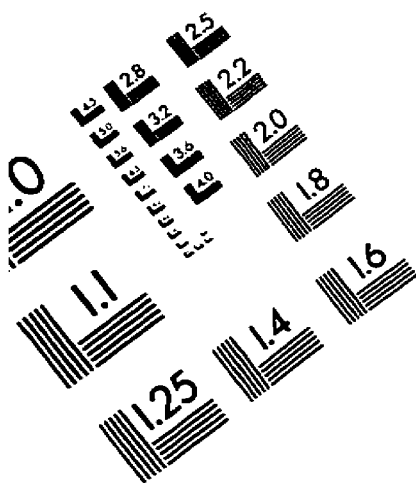
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