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THE MYSTERY OF QOHELET AND THE EPILOGUE: AN EXPLORATION OF THE
ROLE AND PLACE OF THE EPILOGUE IN ECCLESIASTES

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INTRODUCTION

Ecclesiastes is one of the most polarizing books of the Old Testament, when it comes to interpretation and understanding. Who is this mysterious Qohelet who is mentioned as the author of these proverbial sayings? Does the teaching of Qohelet fall within the bounds of orthodoxy, or is he pontificating on the burden of orthodoxy? How are the thoughts of Qohelet to be understood against the backdrop of the rest of Scripture? Theologians have spent considerable time and energy researching, theorizing, and debating the possible answers to these questions. All these questions, however, find their way into the debate over the epilogue at the end of the book. Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 represents a curious pericope where Qohelet is suddenly referred to in the third person. Is this a narrator butting into the work of Qohelet to either sign off on or distance himself from the teachings of Qohelet? Is this a different author, and, if so, what is this author's relationship to Qohelet? How does the Hebrew grammar aid in an understanding of what exactly is happening in these six verses? This paper will seek to answer these questions, explore various potential answers to these questions, and make a case that the third-person narrator seen in this concluding pericope is a different voice seeking to distance himself from the teachings of Qohelet to maintain orthodoxy against the backdrop of the rest of Scripture.

RELATIONSHIP TO THE REST OF THE BOOK

Ecclesiastes (Eccl.) 12:9 represents a shift in the chapter. Suddenly, Qohelet is being referred to in the third person. Eccl. 12:8 represents the end of the work of Qohelet, as it marks an inclusio from Eccl. 1:2, where the author first engages with the idea that all is vanity.¹ These few verses at the end of the chapter have been referred to as the epilogue,

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Preaching the Word; Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), chapter 26.

where final judgement is made on the work presented by Qohelet.² Conclusions are split on whether the epilogue speaks positively or negatively on Qohelet's work, but virtually all agree this pericope contains value judgements on Qohelet's teaching.³ Some theologians conclude that this is either Qohelet himself or another persona giving his stamp of approval for the preceding message detailed by Qohelet⁴. Others believe this is an insertion by a narrator or another persona representing a divergence from the prior teachings of Qohelet and a return to proper orthodoxy.⁵ Others, still, attempt to chart a middle path between the two, where the narrator or alternative persona affirms parts of Qohelet and his message, while not approving of all of it.⁶ Doug Ingram captures the ambiguity of it well: "Does he commend Qohelet's words to the reader; or defend them against criticism; or does he perhaps intend to guide the reader towards a 'proper' interpretation of Qohelet's words; or does he provide an

² James E. Shepherd, "Ecclesiastes," in *Proverbs – Isaiah* (REBC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), III.

³ Robert D. Holmstedt, John A. Cook, and Phillip S. Marshall, *Ecclesiastes: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Bible; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017), 303.

⁴ "The epilogue in Ecclesiastes affirms the journey Qohelet has gone through before coming to that place of remembering his Creator." See Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 371. Bartholomew is one among many who take the epilogue to be a positive assessment of the work put forward in the preceding chapters by Qohelet. For others who take this view, see John Gill, "Ecclesiastes 12," in *Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible* (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 1999), chapter 12, and Ronald E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1992).

⁵ "Over and against speculative wisdom as found in Qoheleth's experiment, the epilogue author advocates keeping the directive to fear God from traditional wisdom (e.g., Prov 1:7)." See Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Ecclesiastes*, 309. For others who take this view, see Richard P. Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, (EP Study Commentary; Grand Rapids: EP Books, 2014).

⁶ "As I said, I see 12:9-12 as entirely in line with the description of what Qoheleth is doing as a wise teacher in the main book, but 12:13-14 can arguably be seen as a variant on his approach - but I would still not use the word 'critique.'" From Katharine J. Dell, "A Wise Man Reflecting on Wisdom: Qoheleth/Ecclesiastes" *TynBul* 71, no. 1 (2020), 143. Michael Fox approximates a middle way forward in his 'frame-narrative' philosophy. While he is not quite as neutral about the wisdom of Qohelet as others who try to chart the middle course, he attempts to find more cohesion than those on the other two sides. See Michael V. Fox "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet" *Hebrew Union College Annual* 48 (1977): 83-106. For more.

orthodox conclusion to ease acceptance of Qohelet's words; or does he intentionally create tension between Qohelet's words and those of the frame narrator?"⁷ However, it seems that one's view of the first-person discourse will influence one's view of the third-person discourse.⁸ All of these views are inevitably tied to the way in which these theologians view the orthodoxy of Qohelet's wisdom (or lack thereof).

Those who take a positive approach to Ecclesiastes as a whole feel that the criticism of the book is overdone. They see Qohelet as showing the pains of finding meaning in life apart from God. Instead of being prescriptive for how to live blessedly or how to get wisdom, Ecclesiastes contains the description of the pursuit of the good life without God: "Yet what the Preacher mainly wants us to see is how meaningless life is without God, how little joy there is under the sun if we try to leave our Creator out of his universe."⁹ Ecclesiastes is the record of Qohelet's journey to finding wisdom that brings him back to remembering that wisdom is found in his Creator.¹⁰ The process of seeking to find and to write words of truth has brought Qohelet back to God as the source of wisdom and Scripture as sufficient for life.¹¹ As such, the epilogue can affirm the movement of Qohelet back to orthodoxy and back to God because of the progression towards truth. Some even take the progression of Qohelet

⁷ Doug Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 88.

⁸ "The relationship of the epilogue to the rest of the book raises a host of issues, partly centered on how one understands 12:11-12, but the focus here is on how 12:13-14 relates to 1:12-12:7." from Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 52.

⁹ Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, chapter 26. See, too, John D. Currid, *Ecclesiastes: A Quest for Meaning?* (Welwyn Commentary Series; Garden City: EP Books, 2016), 6.

¹⁰ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 371.

¹¹ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 369.

to be one of repentance.¹² As a result, these theologians view the epilogue as affirming of Qohelet's work and can claim with confidence Qohelet's call to orthodoxy: "... meaning what was written in this book, or in any other parts of Scripture, which the preacher sought out and inculcated; it was according to the mind and will of God, and to the rest of the sacred word; it was sincere, unmixed, and unadulterated with the doctrines and inventions of men."¹³ Rather than being at odds with what he has already written, the epilogue is a good summary of what Qohelet has taught and carries the Qohelet's orthodoxy to completion.¹⁴ Thus, the epilogue should be viewed in light of a positive view of the body of the book and in line with the positive message of Qohelet's work: "[T]he laudatory tone of v. 9-11 is unmistakable. The warning of 12:13 is to be seen as an approval of 'these'—namely the previous wisdom writings among which the book of Ecclesiastes is included."¹⁵ From this perspective, the epilogue affirms the orthodoxy of Qohelet's work and summarizes it in a concluding pericope. Fearing God is not at odds with Qohelet's work, but it is the result of it.¹⁶

In contrast, other theologians have found that the epilogue is distancing the narrator from Qohelet and his work. Qohelet's musings in the prior body of the book do not present

¹² Dennis Elliott, "Did Solomon Write Ecclesiastes in Repentance?" *The Testimony*, March 2003, 73-76. Clearly, Elliot ascribes authorship to Solomon and believes that the progression of the book is proof of Solomon's repentance.

¹³ Gill, "Ecclesiastes 12," chapter 12.

¹⁴ Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 338. There are some theologians who take Qohelet's work as both descriptive and prescriptive, meaning that in order for one to get wisdom, one should follow the words of Qohelet. This perspective certainly has its issues, as one must grapple with the overwhelming negativity throughout the work and the fact that there is an epilogue in the first place. This paper will not have sufficient time or space to examine this view, but this author did feel it necessary to at least mention it, despite not discussing it in more detail in the body of the paper.

¹⁵ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lxi.

¹⁶ Andrew G. Shead, "Reading Ecclesiastes 'Epilogically,'" *TynBul* 48, no. 1 (1997), 70.

movement towards orthodoxy, which calls into question the relationship between the first-person and third-person discourses in the book.¹⁷ There is almost a wallowing in life under the sun and in the vanity of life absent a spiritual understanding: “It is... doubtful whether Qohelet himself comes to the right conclusions within the first-person discourse.”¹⁸ Qohelet pontificates about various struggles in life, yet there never seems to be a movement toward an orthodox acknowledgement of God. There is no movement towards a right view of God. While there is an acknowledgement of the Creator, there is no movement towards trust in that Creator.¹⁹ There is no call to obedience – which is seen in the epilogue. The existence of the epilogue itself begs the question why one was needed in the first place. If Qohelet and his musings were orthodox in and of themselves, would there have been a need for a concluding epilogue? Yet, somehow in the providence of God, there is a concluding pericope functioning as an epilogue to bring the reader back to orthodoxy, lifting the reader’s eyes to a view above the sun: “[T]he epilogue goes beyond what Qohelet has said and even provides a critique of his empirical approach.”²⁰ The narrator comes back to a proper view of man’s responsibility before God in v. 13: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”²¹ Understanding v. 13 renders

¹⁷ Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Ecclesiastes*, 303.

¹⁸ Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 341.

¹⁹ Eccl. 12:1 makes mention of the Creator (“Remember also your Creator...”), yet it does not seem to be more than a passing mention.

²⁰ Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 350.

²¹ All Scripture is ESV, unless otherwise noted.

Qohelet's speculative wisdom of 1:2 – 12:8 unorthodox due to conspicuous absence of a call to obedience as seen in v. 13.²²

Still other theologians try to chart a middle path between wholesale approval of the epilogue as a continuation of Qohelet's work before it and the rejection of the Qohelet's teaching where the epilogue is used to distance the narrator from Qohelet's musings. Many theologians fall into this category, as they have sought to wade through the relationship between Qohelet's writings and the epilogue. The verbiage of the epilogue (to be explored later) has steered many away from wholesale affirmation or wholesale rejection of the work of Qohelet, as there seems to be a bit of both in play in the epilogue: "While showing respect for Koheleth, the epilogist keeps a certain distance from his teaching and from other recorded Wisdom as well: the words of the wise are fine and good, but they also must be handled gingerly (12:11-12). The epilogist by no means repudiates Koheleth, yet he cautions that wisdom holds certain dangers."²³ Because v. 9-11 seem to affirm the work of Qohelet, calling him wise, referring to him as a teacher to the people, and affirming his writing as truth, there is room for the epilogue and the epilogist to be taken positively with respect towards Qohelet. Even v. 11 can be taken to be affirmative, as goads are what steer an animal in the right direction and nails firmly fixed provide a solid foundation. There is a pivot,

²² A noteworthy hypothesis that should be mentioned in this section (though space and time will not allow for a more thorough exploration) is the notion that the epilogist wrote to discredit the wisdom movements happening in the ancient Near East during the time of Qohelet. While it would make sense given the context of Ecclesiastes and view that the epilogue distances the narrator from Qohelet's teaching, this speculation is hard to pin down given the uncertainty around the dating of Ecclesiastes. For more on this view see, Martin A. Shields "Ecclesiastes and the End of Wisdom." *TynBul* 50, no. 1 (1999): 117–39. For more on why this view presents more problems than solutions, see Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 340ff. Michael A. Eaton also discounts this view in Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary; Nottingham: Tyndale, 2009), chapter 4: "It is sometimes suggested that the Preacher was a member of a wisdom 'school', but this goes beyond the evidence."

²³ Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 83.

however, in v. 12. The rest of the epilogue is much more careful in assessing the work of Qohelet: “The main difference between Qohelet and the epilogist is the way the latter asserts the standard religious doctrines in a tone of dogmatic certitude, in sharp contrast to Qohelet’s insistence on the uncertainty of all knowledge.”²⁴ Here in the last three verses are a reminder of orthodoxy and a shield against any detractors who might seek to undermine confidence in Qohelet’s work: “[I]t defended the orthodoxy of the book, which no doubt the protagonists of a more tradition-oriented curriculum reform had questioned...”²⁵ In this view, this would be the narrator’s attempt to settle between Qohelet’s proposed views and traditional orthodoxy.²⁶

Because of this proposed dual purpose of the epilogue, some theologians have gone so far as to claim the potential for two epilogists providing their takes on Qohelet.²⁷ The first would have comprised v. 9 -11, affirming the work of Qohelet, while the other distancing from Qohelet in v. 12-14.²⁸ This speculation would help those who seek the middle ground between affirmation and rebuke, providing a helpful alternative upon which to rest. Those who end up in this middle want to affirm the work of Qohelet, while acknowledging that ultimately wisdom is from God: “The epilogue looks back and evaluates Koheleth from a more conventional and conservative standpoint, assuring the reader that he was a wise and eloquent teacher, but also warning that the words of the wise hold certain dangers. What is

²⁴ Fox, “Frame,” 103.

²⁵ Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, (A Continental Commentary; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 13.

²⁶ Shepherd, “Ecclesiastes,” III.

²⁷ Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, chapter 26.

²⁸ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 85. Fox proposes this as a potential solution the dilemma of understanding the epilogue, though he is hesitant to throw all his weight behind it.

most important? Fearing God, obeying His commandments, and living in awareness of God's ultimate judgment.”²⁹

As evidence has shown, all of these are possible conclusions to be taken regarding the relationship between the epilogue and the body of the book. While it is clear one's view of the book influences the view of the epilogue, not all the views are equal. Sure, positive views of Qohelet's work lead to positive views of the epilogue, and negative views of Qohelet's work lead to negative views of the epilogue. However, not all the three views detailed above are equally plausible. The first view – the view that the epilogue reflects positively on Qohelet's teaching – rests entirely on a positive view of Qohelet and his teaching. While Eccl. 1:16 does chronicle Qohelet saying that he has acquired great wisdom, that wisdom is not reflected in the rest of the book.³⁰ In fact, quite the opposite is true: “... Koheleth was a consistently radical, pessimistic, and skeptical thinker.”³¹ Pessimism and negative permeate all Qohelet writes.³² It is a tough claim to make that Qohelet progressed, repented, or represented biblical wisdom given that he begins and ends with the same conclusion: “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.”³³ Thus, it would seem tough for a positive rendering of the epilogue to rest entirely on the perceived tone of Qohelet's teaching. Regarding the middle view – that the epilogue is both positive and negative regarding Qohelet's teaching, a non-committal opinion about the aim of the epilogue shows a non-

²⁹ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, XXXIII.

³⁰ Eccl. 1:16 “I said in my heart, ‘I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.’”

³¹ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, XVII.

³² Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 37.

³³ Eccl. 12:8

commitment about the book. The fact that there is an epilogue in the first place shows that there is more clarity needed concerning Qohelet's teachings.³⁴ Surely, it would have made more literary sense to end the book with the end of the inclusio in v. 8. Yet, the epilogue is there preserved in the Canon, so it demands our attention and our critical study. Would it not be odd for the ambiguity of Qohelet to be continued in and through the epilogue? If the epilogue were noncommittal, how would one take the message of the book? It seems apparent that the ambiguity of Qohelet is clarified when the epilogist addresses the idea of keeping commandments. Prior to this, Qohelet had not mentioned this, but the insertion of the commandments and keeping the commandments represents movement away from the teaching of Qohelet and towards clear orthodoxy.³⁵ Thus, the best view is one of an epilogist who points the reader away from the speculative wisdom of Qohelet and towards the orthodoxy of fearing God and keeping His commandments.

RELATIONSHIP TO THE AUTHOR

Like most parts of Ecclesiastes, the possible author has provided another ground for theologians to propose ideas and debate. For most of the history of Christianity, it had been assumed that Solomon was the author of the book due to the mentions of Solomon-related identifiers in chapters 1 and 2: "Koheleth was traditionally identified with Solomon on the basis of 1:1 and 1:12, though in the book he is not given that name. Solomon was the epitome of the wise and wealthy king... Further, Solomon was the only 'son of David' to have ruled over all Israel (1:12) ... Koheleth's activities and self-description also fit Solomon..."³⁶ While

³⁴ Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 339: "If Qohelet is orthodox, why is an epilogue needed? The work of an orthodox Qohelet could stand on its own two feet."

³⁵ Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 52.

³⁶ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, X.

there are still conservative scholars who maintain Solomonic authorship, the majority opinion has shifted.³⁷

Recent scholarship has taken the stance that the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes would not have meshed with the Hebrew employed during the time of Solomon. This has been the main driver away from Solomonic authorship: “Probably the majority position through much of the last century has been that an Israelite sage wrote the book as a skeptical, pessimistic, wisdom treatise and adopted a Solomonic persona to give it a measure of authority.”³⁸ As a result of this shift, there are even more hypotheses about the relationship of Qohelet and the epilogist: “Once we read Ecclesiastes as a text in its totality... the relationship between the narrator/epilogist and Qohelet becomes more interesting and important for grasping Ecclesiastes as a whole.”³⁹ Is there one cohesive author for the whole of the book? Is Qohelet a persona created by the epilogist? Is the epilogist seeking to address issues or inconsistencies in Qohelet? Put plainly, who wrote the epilogue? If theologians are agreed upon the cohesion of Qohelet’s work – that only one author wrote the proverbs of Qohelet – , “[W]hat attitude does he cause the frame narrator (whether or not the frame narrator is the same as the implied author, or even the author) to take towards Qohelet, and to what effect?”⁴⁰ Some theologians have claimed that there was one author for the entire book – both the first- and third-person dialogues.⁴¹ Others have claimed there to be two (sometimes

³⁷ See, Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 37ff. for a case for Solomonic authorship from a conservative perspective.

³⁸ Shepherd, “Ecclesiastes,” 3.

³⁹ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 362.

⁴⁰ Ingram, *Ambiguity*, 87-88.

⁴¹ Currid, *Ecclesiastes*, 150 takes this approach.

three) authors: Qohelet himself and a epilogist (or two).⁴² Still others have claimed there to be one primary author (the narrator) with two personas: Qohelet and the epilogist.⁴³

The least probable view is that Qohelet himself wrote the epilogue. Though Currid makes a decent case from other ancient Near Eastern literature, he is certainly in the minority.⁴⁴ Currid takes the view that Solomon is the author of both Qohelet's teaching and the epilogue. He references other ancient Near Eastern literature as almost giving permission for Solomon to refer to himself in third person as Qohelet: "[I]t appears to be common in ancient Near Eastern literature for a writer to speak of himself in the third person."⁴⁵ While the parallels to other ancient Near Eastern literature are noteworthy, this evidence alone is not enough to make sense of the connection between the first-person and third-person discourses. Fox points to the fact that there is no other point in the book where Qohelet would speak in third person, and, even more, there would be no need to do so: "[E]lsewhere Qohelet does not use the third person of himself; that is to say, alteration of voice does not seem to be a deliberate stylistic device in Qohelet's speech. Even if we allow the third person in 1:2 as a self-introduction, such a switch of voice would be quite useless in 7:27 and 12:8."⁴⁶ Even if the precedent of ancient Near Eastern literature makes the author's third-person usage acceptable, that still does not answer the question of why there are new concepts addressed in the epilogue. Even if the epilogue is the place where the full theme of

⁴² Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 339 and Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, Intro, take this view.

⁴³ Fox, "Frame," 91 takes this view.

⁴⁴ Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 337: "... only a few modern commentators argue that these verses were written by Qohelet himself."

⁴⁵ Currid, *Ecclesiastes*, 151.

⁴⁶ Fox, "Frame," 84.

the book is stated, as some claim, why would there be no other movement towards keeping the commandments of God in the rest of the book?⁴⁷ Since these new ideas are introduced, there would have to be another author (or persona) making the claims in the epilogue.

Either the option of two authors (Qohelet and an epilogist at the end) or the option of two personas (the author creates the persona of Qohelet to discredit speculative wisdom and returns to orthodoxy in the epilogue) is much more probable. Considering the view expounded above where the third-person epilogue attempts to distance from the first-person teachings of Qohelet, either of these would be acceptable, so long as the epilogue is viewed in the way established above. While some have claimed the appearance of a second voice could be affirming of the work of Qohelet, this view does not follow. Dell tries to clarify her view:

Even if it is another hand here (or maybe even two, in 12:9-12 and 13-14), I believe this is a summary and it is one that links back to Proverbs 1-9 and looks forward to Ben Sira, but without being contradictory to Qoheleth's basic ideas. It loses any sense of ambiguity and has a pious tone, but when summarizing the thought of another that is hardly unsurprising. I do not see any essential contradiction here, nor any undermining of Qoheleth's own position. It is almost as if the Epilogist is saying 'This book needs rounding off, otherwise we are in danger of "making many books" and "wearying the flesh", and that would never do!'⁴⁸

Her statement in and of itself is contradictory. She claims there is no contradiction yet relents that the book needed 'rounding off.' Certainly, a book with a cohesive and accepted theme would not need such 'rounding off' as what is found in the epilogue. Thus, the proper conclusion would be that there is contradiction introduced in the epilogue from the second author or persona, and either view would be acceptable.

⁴⁷ Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 338-339: "Kaiser writes that the epilogue is where the real theme of the book is stated... Garrett notes that the epilogue affirms what has already been stated in the book, namely, that the meaninglessness of life is an incentive to piety."

⁴⁸ Dell, "Qoheleth/Ecclesiastes," 152.

While the view of a second author as the epilogist might be a more believable view, the view of dueling personas is still compelling. This view, as introduced by the likes of Shepherd and Fox, takes the stance that the same hand penned the entirety of the book, but the author employed the persona of ‘Qohelet’ to make the point that orthodoxy is better than speculative wisdom: “I suggest that all... is by the same hand—not that the epilogue is by Qohelet, but that Qohelet is “by” the epilogist. In other words, the speaker we hear from time to time in the background saying “Qohelet said”—who comes to the fore only in the epilogue... is the teller of the tale, the external narrator of the “story” of Qohelet.”⁴⁹ Much of this view has to do with the overlapping vocabulary usage from the first-person dialogue to the third-person: “[T]he vocabulary of the epilogue is totally distinctive of and often peculiar to Ecclesiastes. With the epilogue's vocabulary one can write a third of the text of Ecclesiastes; 'favorite' and idiomatic words in Ecclesiastes make up almost half the words in the epilogue.”⁵⁰ So, clearly there are some connections between the two sections, and while the view of the personas is a viable option, would the view that another author (maybe a student of Qohelet) be equally (maybe more so) possible and compelling? Regardless, the only qualifier is that the other voice must be critical of Qohelet’s teaching, not merely putting space between, as some want to claim.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Fox, “Frame,” 91. Holmstedt, Coo, and Marshall, *Ecclesiastes*, 310 takes this view, as well. See, too, Shepherd, “Ecclesiastes,” 3.

⁵⁰ Shead, “Reading,” 75-76.

⁵¹ Fox is one of the main proponents of the idea that the second voice is not outright critical of Qohelet and is instead just creating some space to protect Qohelet from those who want to discredit his authority. See, Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 340-341 for more.

RELATIONSHIP TO THE HEBREW

Lastly, and maybe most controversially, is the issue of the original Hebrew of the epilogue. There are several Hebrew words and phrases whose understanding and translation matter a great deal for the message and tone of the epilogue. Invariably, however, the translation of these words and phrases is tied to one's overall view of Qohelet: "Whether one understands the message of Qohelet as positive or negative also affects how certain verses of the epilogue are translated, which leads the reader of the epilogue to a certain view of Qohelet and his message."⁵² Three places in the original Hebrew demand one's attention: 1) The word **מָכַח** in v. 9; 2) The word **שְׁקָבֵץ** which begins v. 10 and the subsequent verbs that follow; and 3) the comparisons made in v. 11.

The discrepancy over translation is apparent from the beginning of v. 9. There is not consensus in the more prominent English translations. While the ESV, NIV, and KJV all take **מָכַח** as meaning 'wise,' the NASB departs from this. Instead, the NASB translates **מָכַח**: 'wise man.'⁵³ BDB has an extended gloss for **מָכַח**, which includes both 'wise' and 'wise man.'⁵⁴ So, it is incumbent upon the reader to review the context and examine other uses of the word in Scripture. **מָכַח** is employed on several occasions in the whole of the Old Testament and in other places in Ecclesiastes.⁵⁵ Many of those references view **מָכַח** as a substantive adjective,

⁵² Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 344.

⁵³ The full translation from the NASB for v. 9 is as follows, "In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs."

⁵⁴ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, "**מָכַח**" *The Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Enhanced, (Oak Harbor, Washington: Logos, 2000).

⁵⁵ See, Brown, Driver, and Briggs, "**מָכַח**" in *Lexicon* for a fuller treatment of the other references in the Old Testament. Furthering the point can be seen in Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 345.

meaning it should be taken in v. 9 as ‘a wise man.’⁵⁶ It is possible for one to be ‘a wise man’ and not be ‘wise.’ This is the stance of those who view Qohelet negatively. Those who view Qohelet more positively view take the opposite view of Qohelet’s work reflecting true wisdom.⁵⁷ However, it would seem more consistent with the rest of Scripture to translate מְכַזֵּב as ‘a wise man.’

The second translation discrepancy revolves around how to understand שָׁקֵד in v. 10 and the verbs that follow. Are the verbs meant to be outcomes of the same action? Or are they expressing two different ideas about the work of Qohelet? Again, the difference between the English translations is noticeable. The NASB is different and takes the two subsequent verbs as part of the same action of ‘seeking.’⁵⁸ If the view is that the two following verbs (אָזַמֵּל and וְכִתֵּב) are both viewed in light of the lamed preposition, then the verse should be rendered as the NASB translates it.⁵⁹ However, if one has a positive view of Qohelet, an accompanying translation of v. 10 would not view וְכִתֵּב in light of the lamed preposition;⁶⁰ instead, the verse would be taken as “he wrote words of truth.”⁶¹ Here, one’s assessment of Qohelet is blatantly obvious. If one’s view of Qohelet is positive, then it would logically follow that Qohelet wrote words of truth. However, a more appropriate rendering in light of

⁵⁶ Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 345.

⁵⁷ This view can be found in Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, chapter 26, Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 363, and Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Ecclesiastes*, 304.

⁵⁸ Eccl. 12:10 “The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly.” NASB.

⁵⁹ Miller uses the term ‘double-duty’ prepositions. See, Cynthia L. Miller “A Reconsideration of ‘Double-Duty’ Prepositions in Biblical Poetry.” *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* (2008): 99–110 for more.

⁶⁰ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lxxxiv.

⁶¹ This is the translation the ESV uses. The NIV and KJV do something similar with the verse.

the biblical Hebrew, regardless of one's conclusions about Qohelet, involves applying the lamed preposition to both subsequent verbs.⁶² Therefore, the more accurate rendering would follow the NASB.

The final issue in the original Hebrew of the epilogue involves how one is to understand the comparisons made in v. 11 via the two metaphors. Are the two comparisons restating the same idea, or is there a progression throughout the verse? Once again, one's translation is influenced by one's view of Qohelet. A positive approach to Qohelet would lead to a positive understanding of the metaphors put forward by the epilogist: "I take this in an entirely positive way to mean that there is a fixity about the teachings of any one wise person, as collected in this short book, and that not every aspect of the teaching will be easy for the student to accept."⁶³ It is clear that the metaphor communicates something about how attaining wisdom can be painful; however, the translation question lies in whether the second metaphor is meant to be taken in the same way or if it is a positive reflection of the sturdiness of well-driven nails. Those who take a negative view of Qohelet see the verse as a chiasm, where the second line restates the idea of the first.⁶⁴ In other words, it is one metaphor stated two ways: "I suggest that the 'nails' are identical with the 'goads' and are 'implanted' either in the sense that they are stuck in the flesh or in the sense that they are fixed in the end of the staff."⁶⁵ The chiasm is a warning to the reader against speculative wisdom.⁶⁶ This is the better, more accurate translation given the biblical Hebrew.

⁶² Miller, "Double-Duty," 100.

⁶³ Dell, "Qohelet/Ecclesiastes," 140.

⁶⁴ Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 347-348.

⁶⁵ Fox, "Frame," 102. Here Fox even admits the parallel of the two! Unfortunately, he does not view the metaphor as negatively as he should.

Each of these discrepancies in the original Hebrew comes from the section of the epilogue that those who try to find the middle ground, as discussed above, take as more affirming of Qohelet. It is clear, however, that their argument does not hold up against the weight of the Hebrew grammar. Even v. 9-11 of the epilogue should be taken as critical of Qohelet and his work.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the analysis of the epilogue found in Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 that the relationship between Qohelet and the epilogue is both hotly debated and very confusing. This paper has sought to understand the epilogue in its relationship to the Biblical Hebrew, to the author, and to the rest of the book in such a way as to show that the most compelling understanding of the epilogue is a negative one that is critical of Qohelet's work. While presuppositions carried into the debate can predetermine the outcome, a hard look at the evidence should prove otherwise. It is in the epilogue that the narrator moves past the work of Qohelet and returns to orthodoxy: “[T]he epilogue stands as a warning not to get so caught up with analyzing life that one forgets the basic truths of Scripture. The simple answer is that one must submit to God by doing what is pleasing to him.”⁶⁷ Qohelet portrayed life as much more confusing and uncertain than the wisdom of the rest of the Bible. The whole duty man is to “[f]ear God and keep his commandments,” and the epilogue definitively and clearly returns the reader to a proper view of God and wisdom.

⁶⁶ Bernard M. Levinson “The Significance of Chiasm as a Structuring Device in the Hebrew Bible.” *Word & World* 40, no. 3 (2020): 272. Levinson gives a robust treatment on the nature of chiasms in the Hebrew Bible.

⁶⁷ Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 352.

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